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THE DEATH MOTIF IN THE LOVE POEMS
OF THEODORE ROETHKE

by
George Wendt

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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1980

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VITA

The author, George Frederick Wendt, is the son of William Henry Wendt, Jr., and Virginia Hauf Wendt. He was born on October 3, 1947, in Chicago, Illinois.

His elementary education was obtained at Saint Vincent Ferrer Grade School in River Forest, Illinois, and his secondary education at Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois, where he graduated in 1965.

In June, 1969, he graduated from the University of Minnesota and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in English. In June, 1973, he was awarded the Master of Arts in English from Loyola University of Chicago, and in 1978 he was granted a University Fellowship.

From 1969 to 1978, he taught English at Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois, serving as Department Chairman in his last four years there. Since January, 1979, he has held the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Literature and Communications at Illinois Benedictine College, Lisle, Illinois.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
LIFE	iii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. INCARNATION	28
III. TO FIND A BALANCE	56
IV. THE TWO EXTREMES	80
V. FAR FROM LOVE	99
VI. LOVE FOUND AND LOST	133
VII. A GIRL TOO YOUNG YET OLD ENOUGH	158
VIII. A WOMAN YOUNG AND A MAN OLD	185
IX. A DANCE OF THREE MYTHS	207
X. CONCLUSION	231
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	253

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Sex and death: the two things you must use and not abuse, my children."¹ When Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) jotted this observation in his poetry notebooks, he could well have been consciously echoing two of his spiritual ancestors. Walt Whitman had exclaimed "What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love."² And near the end of his life, Yeats had concluded, "I am still of opinion that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mood--sex and the dead."³ These themes fascinated and troubled Roethke. He once considered entitling his 1958 collection of poems not Words for the Wind but Poems of Love and Death.⁴ Writing Robert

¹Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke 1943-1963, ed. David Wagoner (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 191; hereafter referred to in the text as S.F.

²Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, ed. Sculley Bradley (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949), p. 98.

³Frank Touhy, Yeats (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1976), p. 196.

⁴James Richard McLeod, Theodore Roethke: A Manuscript Checklist (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 28.

Heilman, Roethke disclosed how he struggled to compose these poems: "Love and death, the two themes I seem to be occupied with, I find are exhausting: you can't fool around, or just be 'witty,' once you are playing for keeps."⁵ Roethke arranged two sequences of love poems--one in Words for the Wind (1958) and one in The Far Field (published posthumously in 1964). This dissertation will study the death motif in these love poems. By way of an introduction, I would like to develop several topics: Roethke's place in literary history, how his love poems fit in the Roethke canon, and critical approaches to these love poems.

Chronologically, Theodore Roethke can be grouped with those poets whose important work begins to appear just before the outbreak of World War II--Randall Jarrell, Richard Wilbur, Richard Eberhart, Karl Shapiro, Robert Lowell, John Frederick Nims.⁶ These poets wrote in a period which followed two phases in twentieth century poetry. The first is marked by the great revolutionaries: Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. The second stage can be divided into

⁵Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 208; hereafter referred to in the text as S.L.

⁶Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 5.

those poets who developed the work of their forerunners and those who reacted against this legacy. Included in the former group are Auden, Spender and Day Lewis; included in the latter group are Dylan Thomas, George Barker and David Gascoyne. Roethke and his contemporaries, then, found themselves with the freedom to be as traditional or experimental as they chose.⁷ Over the course of his career, Theodore Roethke chose a wide range of moods and styles, and--to a certain degree--the critical evaluation of his work often fluctuated radically in response to his changes in form.

Attempts to place Roethke in literary history on the basis of his general stature as a poet range from James Dickey's pronouncement that Roethke is the greatest American poet to M. L. Rosenthal's derogatory comments about all but a handful of Roethke's short traditional lyrics.⁸ This variety of critical assessment results,

⁷Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Toward a Condition of Joy: Patterns in Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Northwestern University Tri-Quarterly Review I (Fall 1958), pp. 25-26.

⁸James Dickey writes "There is no poetry anywhere that is so valuably conscious of the human body as Roethke's; no poetry that can place the body in an environment--wind, seascape, greenhouse, forest, desert, mountainside, among animals or insects or stones--so vividly and evocatively, waking unheard of exchanges between the place and human responsiveness at its most creative. He more than any other poet is the poet of pure being." "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic, 222 (November 1968), pp. 53-58. On the negative side, M. L. Rosenthal castigates Roethke for too little social concern,

at least partly, from the variety of Roethke's styles. Some critics like Roethke's traditional short lyrics; some like his most experimental longer poems; some like his ability to change styles--his ability to grow. If they find any flaws at all, critics most often fault Roethke for two weaknesses: his derivativeness and his lack of range. Particularly in some of the lyrics written in the middle of his career, Roethke is charged with an excessive indebtedness to Yeats. According to some critics, poems like "Four for Sir John Davies," "The Dying Man" and the sixteen "Love Poems" of Words for the Wind, all were written in a voice almost indistinguishable from Yeats.⁹ (In Chapter X I will discuss how well Roethke did or did not assimilate the Yeatsian influence.) The other

for his clichés and derivativeness, and for his failure to get beyond adolescent hysteria. The New Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 112-118; "The Couch and Poetic Insight," Reporter, 32 (March 25, 1965), pp. 52-53.

⁹W. D. Snodgrass complains that "Roethke, who had invented the most raw and original voice of all our period, was now writing in the voice of another man, and that, perhaps, the most formal and elegant voice of the period." "That Anguish of Concreteness" in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 82. And in "From the Middle and Senior Generations," American Scholar, 28 (Summer, 1959), pp. 384-385, John Berryman expresses his disappointment with Roethke's "literary" poems--those deriving from Yeats and Eliot--in Words for the Wind.

major flaw several critics cite is Roethke's excessive concern for the self to the neglect of almost all social concerns. Even granting that Roethke's self symbolizes a generic or universal self, these critics point out that the poet makes "so little reference direct or remote to the incredible experiences of the age."¹⁰ (This issue of the poet's range I will analyze and evaluate in Chapter IX.)

Despite what some critics call Roethke's weaknesses, the general critical opinion seems to afford Roethke a place as a major American poet. He has received most--if not all--of the major awards a contemporary poet can earn including a Pulitzer Prize (1954), a Bollingen Prize (1958) and two National Book Awards (1958, 1964). Two book-length bibliographies attest to the critical attention Roethke has received.¹¹ Moreover, a book-length study of his influence on other contemporary poets (notably, James Wright, Robert Bly, James Dickey, Sylvia Plath, and Ted

¹⁰M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 118. See also John Wain, "Theodore Roethke," Critical Quarterly, 6 (Winter 1964), p. 336; and Monroe K. Spears, Dionysus and the City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 248.

¹¹James Richard McLeod, Theodore Roethke: A Bibliography (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1973), and Keith R. Moul, Theodore Roethke's Career: An Annotated Bibliography (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1977).

Hughes) has already appeared.¹²

But I have not yet located Roethke in relation to a tradition or to other poets, past or present. Various critics have alternately grouped Roethke with the Confessional Poets;¹³ with the nineteenth century American transcendentalists, Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson--a visionary and mystical tradition which begins with Vaughan, Traherne, and Blake;¹⁴ with other explorers of the preconscious and unconscious like the young Dylan Thomas or Paul Eluard; with John Clare or Wordsworth in his response to the natural world.¹⁵ In a variety of places, Roethke himself acknowledges the influence of Blake, Smart, Clare, Marianne and Thomas Moore, Stevens, Yeats and Donne. In her book on Roethke's sources and influences, Jenijoy LaBelle writes of the group of poets he felt as his literary tradition:

¹²Harry Williams, "The Edge Is What I Have": Theodore Roethke and After (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977).

¹³M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 112, and A. Alvarez, The Shaping Spirit: Studies in Modern English and American Poets (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), p.186.

¹⁴Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritan to the Present (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968) p. 564.

¹⁵Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 7.

At first this group was limited mainly to a few women poets whom he admired, but the circle widened rapidly as he reached out to Wordsworth, Blake, and Smart, to several Renaissance poets, including Donne and Sir John Davies, to the great moderns, Whitman, Yeats, and Eliot, and finally even to a medieval poet, Dante. In spite of Roethke's apparent eclecticism, many important figures in English literature were never invited into his tradition. The Neo-classical poets of the Restoration and first half of the eighteenth century, Milton, Shelly, and the Victorians are all absent.¹⁶

Roethke, then, falls into several traditions, and I think it would be a healthy approach not to label him too early, but rather to read the poems first and then listen for the echoes.

Perhaps some other points relating to influences should be made now. For most of his adult life Roethke taught poetry and the writing of poetry. At several colleges and the University of Washington, Roethke's work as a poet was intimately complemented by his work as a teacher. He pursued and discussed his own poetry while teaching students to write poetry, while teaching and studying established poets. Evidence of all this can be found in the bountiful repository of Roethkeana at the University of Washington: the poet's teaching

¹⁶Jenijoy LaBelle, The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 165.

notes overlap with his notes for his own poetry.¹⁷

Another point is that based on Roethke's notes, critical and biographical information, and the list of his books (U.W., T. R. Books), Roethke's reading seems to concentrate in British and American literature, primarily modern poetry and its criticism. His studies also gravitate toward philosophy (the ancients and several existentialists such as Buber, Tillich and Kierkegaard), or toward religion (particularly Evelyn Hill's books on mysticism) and toward the wide range of para-literary interests his friend and mentor Kenneth Burke awoke in him.¹⁸

Last, without pretending that such a simplistic reduction could ever be adequate, I should mention a few biographical facts which pertain to Roethke's poetry. Roethke grew up around the large floral establishment his father built in Saginaw, Michigan. This life around

¹⁷References to the Theodore Roethke Collection at The University of Washington Suzzallo Library will be hereafter cited in the text as U.W. followed by the series (e.g., "Literary Manuscripts: Poems" or "Teaching") and the box and folder number.

¹⁸Alan Seager writes that more than any teacher, Burke increased Roethke's intellectual range. The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 136; hereafter referred to in the text as G.H. In a letter to Burke (February 8, 1949), Roethke writes "Wish I could go through the whole of mystical and philosophical literature for about 3 or 4 years, and then write a long poem (S.L., p. 149).

his father's greenhouses, coupled with the trauma of losing his father when Roethke was only fifteen, forms an important background--and often the foreground--for many of Roethke's poems... Also, throughout his adult life Roethke suffered from repeated mental breakdowns. He was diagnosed by his psychiatrists as a "manic-depressive psychotic, but not typical," as a "manic-depressive neurotic, but not typical," and as a "paranoid schizophrenic" (G.H., p. 101). At times, these attacks are referred to in the poetry. A final biographical point--although Roethke had had love affairs with a number of women during his adult life (G.H., pp. 75, 117-118, 142), he did not marry until he was forty-four. Then, some eight to ten years after he had taught her at Bennington, Theodore Roethke married Beatrice O'Connell. (If it seems relevant, I will supply other biographical information with my discussion of each love poem.)

If Roethke's entire corpus is difficult to place in literary history, his love poems also defy simple labeling. The first sequence of love poems does not appear until the poet's fifth book. His first book, Open House (1941), contains tightly constructed, short, traditional lyrics influenced by Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, Emily Dickinson, Rolfe Humphries and Stanley Kunitz (G.H., p. 124). In his review of this

book, Humphries complained that Roethke treated only his terrors and doubts and neglected his joys and loves.¹⁹ The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948) contains the famous semi-experimental lyrics which came to be called the "greenhouse poems" because they evoke Roethke's childhood world of hairy roots and grubs and orchids and glass. "The Lost Son" sequence itself presented something unique in contemporary poetry: a kind of interior monologue, a surrealistic landscape of a troubled mind, longer poems experimental in highly original rhythmic variations

Praise To The End! (1951) expands on this experimental method, develops the protagonist's struggle from the adolescent anxieties of "The Lost Son" to the joys, troubles, and loves of a more mature adult, and perhaps exhausts the very genre of Roethke seems to have invented. In The Waking: Poems 1933-1953 (1953), Roethke not only collects his past work but also includes some new poems. One of these, "Four for Sir John Davies, is the poem most often cited as exhibiting an inordinate, undigested Yeatsian influence. It is also Roethke's first poem to deal explicitly with love between man and woman.

¹⁹Rolfe Humphries, "Inside Story," New Republic, 105 (July 14, 1941), p. 62.

Since only one poem in Roethke's first four books clearly dealt with the carnal and spiritual love between a man and a woman, the sixteen "Love Poems" of Words for the Wind (1953) surprised several readers.²⁰ Some critics attribute this outburst of love lyrics to the fact that Roethke had just recently married.²¹ But, although marriage could have inspired the completion of a number of these love poems, the poet's notebooks give evidence that he was trying to write love poems at least as early as 1946 (U.W., Notes 47-20 contains lines like "Love knows/The nestling's sigh"). Besides these love poems, Words for the Wind also offers "Meditations of an Old Woman," a poem influenced by Eliot's "Four Quartets"; and "The Dying Man, In Memoriam: W. B. Yeats,"

²⁰Arnold Stein writes "The love poems which, so little time ago, seemed extraordinarily new, unlike anything on the literary horizon, a personal movement in another direction not yet clear, have begun to fall into place. They were unpredictable and astonishing, but from the perspective of the last poems the surprises appear to be in the grain." "Introduction" in Theodore Roethke: Essays on Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. xi. Robert Heilman, a colleague and friend of Roethke's at Washington, also told me of his surprise when Roethke's love poems appeared.

²¹Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 99; Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 11.

a poem which illustrates and expresses Roethke's indebtedness to the older master. A remarkable series of children's poems and nonsense poems is collected in I Am! Says The Lamb (1961). And finally, The Far Field (1964), published posthumously, provides new directions in its metaphysical and highly mystical sequence and in a new and different series of love poems.

Now that we have placed these two sequences of love poems chronologically within Roethke's work, we can view them from three other perspectives: by reference to his major themes, by reference to his different styles, and by reference to several traditions of love poetry.

The major theme of all of Roethke's work--and on this point most of the critics would probably agree--is the self. An overview of Roethke's work could be divided into the following themes: the identity of the self and its relation to nature, to the beloved, and to God.²² And in a very rough way these themes could be said to be chronological in two senses: they trace

²²Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Roethke's Last Poems," Poetry, 105 (November 1964), p. 122. In a similar manner, William Martz divides his essay into a consideration of Roethke as a nature poet, as a love poet, and as meditative poet. The Achievement of Theodore Roethke (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966) pp. 1-18.

various stages in the protagonist's childhood, adolescence, and maturity (all reflected upon by an adult); and they are written and published somewhat chronologically. A little more detailed outline of Roethke's preoccupations is provided by David Wagoner:

. . . love-hate for the full range of ambiguous womanhood; records of his thrashing metamorphoses as he attempted to become something other than his usually despised self; nostalgic evocations of the greenhouse Eden; the flabbergasted ecstasy of a man who has glimpsed the mystic's Oneness, knows it for truth, but fears he may never have it; his wars with God, beginning and sometimes ending in the pit; the death haunted man embracing his own death.
(S.F., pp. 13-14)

In Chapter IX, I will try to place the love poems more precisely in relation to the rest of Roethke's poetry. For now, it must suffice to say that the love poems as a group express one of the major themes in Roethke's work. But we should also try to locate the style of these love poems within all his work.

One critic, James Southworth, roughly traces four periods in Roethke's technical development: the traditional (Open House, 1941), the semi-traditional and the experimental (The Lost Son and Other Poems, 1948, and Praise to the End!, 1951), and mastery (The Waking, 1953, and Words for the Wind, 1958). For Southworth, then, the sixteen love poems of Words for the Wind (and most likely the thirteen love poems of The Far Field)

fall into Roethke's period of technical mastery.²³

Richard Eberhart divides Roethke's growth up to Words for the Wind into five periods: conventional verse, worms period, Yeats period, love poems and humorous poems, and meditations.²⁴ Furthermore, Eberhart's outline reveals that although the love poems are published in Roethke's later books, he is trying to write more traditional love lyrics at the same time he is writing his experimntal verses. As the love poems are published, however, they appear as part of a general return to traditional verse after an initial period of conventional verse and a subsequent period of very experimental poetry. Characterizing the two sequences further, Harry Williams identifies the love poems of Words for the Wind as examples of "Roethke's metaphysical, formal style" and the love poems of The Far Field as more personal, autobiographical love lyrics.²⁵ Further description of the style of these

²³James Southworth, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," College English, 21 (March 1960), p. 335. Based on Southworth's high estimation of The Far Field, I presume he would include that final book in the period of mastery. "Theodore Roethke's The Far Field," College English, 27 (February 1966), pp. 413-418.

²⁴Richard Eberhart, "Creative Splendor," New York Times Book Review, November 9, 1958, p. 34.

²⁵Williams, pp. 144, 147.

love lyrics brings us to the traditions within which they operate.

Critics have identified various precedents for Roethke's love poems: the Elizabethan love lyric, Sir John Davies, Donne, Drummond, Jonson, Marvell, Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence.²⁶ As I mentioned above, at least one critic believes that in the love poems of Words for the Wind, Roethke wrote in a voice almost indistinguishable from Yeats.²⁷ Yet along with Yeats's influence, many critics equally stress Donne's impact on the first sequence of love poems. Rosemary Sullivan seems to believe that Roethke borrows Yeats's stylistic devices and merges them with Donne's metaphysical concerns.²⁸ Another critic, Jenijoy LaBelle, writes, "Although we do not usually think of Yeats in the Donne tradition of love poetry, Roethke responds to him in a way that does point out the sympathies between the love poems of Yeats and the tradition of Donne." LaBelle finds the common ground for Donne, Yeats, and Roethke in the "drama of images, most often in the extended conceit, where the elements of mind and body are fused"; and in the "continual

²⁶LaBelle, p. 125; Sullivan, p. 101.

²⁷Snodgrass, p. 82.

²⁸Sullivan, pp. 98,101.

interplay between the mind and the body, between the thoughts of an inherently philosophical speaker, and his emotions that form the heart of the love experience."²⁹ And, as Karl Malkoff would argue, Roethke's philosophical speaker in these love poems has studied Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and writers on various aspects of mystic experience.³⁰

In this first sequence, Roethke transforms all these sources into something different and adds much of himself to the mixture. (In a later chapter I will be better able to demonstrate how Roethke alters the traditions of love poetry.) The sequence of poems in The Far Field, on the other hand, seems both more personal and autobiographical, and at the same time less influenced by other poets. Critics neglect to discuss the traditions within which this second sequence operates--indeed, sometimes they neglect to discuss the sequence at all. But this brings us to the question of the critical importance of the love poems.

Several poets and critics have spoken in superlatives about these love lyrics. Carol Kizer, who wrote in 1958 that Roethke's love poetry was his supreme

²⁹LaBelle pp. 123-124.

³⁰Malkoff, p. 124.

accomplishment, singles out "Words for the Wind" as "the greatest love poem of the twentieth century."³¹ Furthermore, at least according to Roethke, this group of poems ("Words for the Wind") was praised by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman as "the finest love poems of our time" (S.L., p. 202). Finally, John Crowe Ransom once wrote about Roethke's love poems, "In vain I think our imaginations will turn the pages of our sophisticated modern anthology for another set of love lyrics as fresh and utterly successful as this one. It is a great triumph."³² Despite such enthusiasm, less has been written about the love poems than about Roethke's "Lost Son" sequence, for example.

For some critics who rejoiced when Roethke broke new ground in his earlier experimental poems, the return to the more traditional forms of the love poems represented a falling off.³³ Perhaps critics tend to gravitate toward

³¹ Carolyn Kizer, "Poetry of the 'Fifties: In America," International Literary Annual, No. 1, ed. John Wain, (London: John Calder, 1958), pp. 83-85.

³² John Crowe Ransom, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston: Little Brown, 1964), p.29.

³³ As Richard Blessing writes, "Every reader has, I suppose, a sense of the poet's self to which he wants the poet to be true." Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 160.

more problematic poems, although some of the love poems can be obscure enough. If the love poems suffer by comparison to Roethke's most strikingly and startlingly original work, they also suffer from being associated with Roethke's Yeatsian period. Perhaps more than any other poem, "Four for Sir John Davies" (from The Waking, 1953) was castigated as being too derivative of Yeats--no doubt partly because Roethke writes in this very poem, "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats." It is possible that since this poem was the first major love poem, some critics' unhappiness with the turn Roethke had taken may have jaundiced their view of subsequent love poems. In any event, most critics do deal with the love poems in some way--they are not simply neglected as his nonsense poems and children's lyrics sometimes are. But the first sequence of love poems (Words for the Wind, 1958) enjoys much more critical attention and high praise than the second sequence of love poems (The Far Field, 1964). I would like to reserve my tentative judgements about the critical importance of all these love poems until my final chapters (although the fact that I am devoting an entire dissertation to them somewhat reveals my predilections.)

Let me now give a brief survey of the different critical methods that have been used to read Roethke's

love poems.

In Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (1966), Louis Malkoff takes a psychoanalytic approach to almost all of Roethke's work. Reading the symbols in Freudian and Jungian terms, Malkoff explicates almost every love poem and uses information gained from one poem to explain another. More than any other critic, Malkoff also perceives the strong philosophical dimension in Roethke's love poetry. Kierkegaard, Buber, Tillich, and writers on mysticism, all figure in the first sequence of love poems. The second sequence is analyzed not for its philosophical and psychological content, but rather for its songlike quality. Despite whatever flaws Malkoff's book might have, critics should feel indebted to him for his significant exploratory work.

In 1971 Coburn Freer published an article on Roethke's love poetry--both sequences and other love poems. Freer discusses the genesis of the love poems, their dominant pattern, and the end toward which they move--all in terms of the Lost Son motif. More specifically, Freer states that Roethke's essential theme is that of the Biblical Prodigal Son.³⁴ Although he has written

³⁴Coburn Freer, "Theodore Roethke's Love Poetry," Northwest Review, 11 (Summer, 1971), pp. 42-66.

a valuable article, Freer's viewpoint might be a little narrow and a little forced.

In 1974 Richard Blessing's Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision appeared. When I talked with him recently, he told me that he first tried to isolate those qualities Roethke himself wanted in poetry. Blessing not only studied Roethke's poetry and prose, but also the poet's notebooks, and teaching notes. He even interviewed students of Roethke to find out what Roethke stressed in class. Concluding that the poet valued motion or action in poetry, Blessing then reads all of Roethke's poetry with special attention given to images of dynamism. When he reaches the love poems, Blessing argues that for Roethke love is motion and motion is love. Blessing also attends to the sequential nature of the love poems while making many perceptive analyses.

Rosemary Sullivan's Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (1975) is basically a thematic study, but she traces the themes back to their source to study the evolution of the poet. In her analyses of the love poems, she stresses Roethke's concern over death, his psychological problems, and his debts to his poetic ancestors. Her method combines close readings, biographical materials, and Roethke's letters and notebooks.

In 1976, Jenijoy LaBelle published her influence

study of Roethke: The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke.

LaBelle surprised readers of Roethke by arguing that this highly original poet almost always wrote within a tradition. But Roethke related his poems to specific works rather than to abstract concepts of style.

Providing very useful information for several of Roethke's love poems, LaBelle sometimes seems to neglect other love poems that would seem to have an obvious source. (In Chapter V, I will compare Roethke's "Love's Progress" with Donne's poem of the same title--a relationship LaBelle chose not to write about.)

Harry Williams in "The Edge Is What I Have": Theodore Roethke and After (1977) tries to define the Roethkean mode and then studies Roethke's influence on five modern poets. Unfortunately, Williams excludes the love poems from his definition of the Roethkean mode and then--somewhat unfairly--judges them by the criteria he developed by analyzing only Roethke's long poems. (Again, Blessing's point seems pertinent: we all probably have a sense of the poet's self to which we want him to be true.) Perhaps the most severe critic of the love poems, Williams is also unique in his valuing the second sequence of love poems higher than the first.³⁵

³⁵Williams, p. 147.

With this brief survey of some of the criticism of Roethke's love poems as a background, let me now describe the purpose and method of my dissertation. The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke includes almost all his published poetry. Organized according to the separate books Roethke had published, The Collected Poems also retains the subdivisions of each book. Words for the Wind and The Far Field, two of these books, contain sections entitled "Love Poems," and these twenty-nine lyrics comprise the core of my dissertation.

Reading these poems I was struck by the repetition of many images of death in poems which Roethke had called "love poems" and which do deal primarily with love between a man and a woman. (My own simplistic notion had been that "love poems" typically would tend to emphasize life or even procreation.) Finding that no critic had done a thorough study of this death-in-love motif,³⁶ I analyzed the poems further and discovered that this was indeed a rich vein to mine. The problem for my dissertation, then, is to examine how and why

³⁶Frederick J. Hoffman traces the idea of death in Roethke's poetry, but when he considers the love poems, is superficial (almost by necessity), and, I believe inaccurate. "Theodore Roethke: The Poetic Shape of Death" in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein, pp. 94-114.

Roethke uses the death motif in his love poetry. Such a study should prove rewarding for several reasons:

- 1) it will provide a key to the understanding and appreciation of these difficult and beautiful poems;
- 2) it will reveal Roethke's rhetorical invention--how he develops the topic of death in love in literary, physiological, psychological, metaphysical, and ethical senses;
- 3) it will help unravel Roethke's complex view of the relationship between body and soul, matter and spirit;
- 4) it will help relate these poems to each other, to the rest of Roethke's poetry, and to the work of his poetic ancestors and contemporaries.

If my thesis is that a death motif serves several important functions in Roethke's love poems, some definitions are in order. First, these love poems characteristically deal with carnal and spiritual love between a man and a woman. Second, by "death image," I mean a) uses of the word "death" or variants of it like "die," "dead," or "dying"; b) images of the after-life, loss of identity, and transcendence; c) images of mortality. Third, by "motif," I mean a recurrent word, phrase, situation, object, or idea. My method, simply stated, is to gather material from various sources and use the relevant information to support my own close study of Roethke's love poetry. This relevant information

includes Roethke's other poetry, prose, letters, and unpublished materials; other criticism; and information gained from friends, colleagues, and relatives of Roethke. Although all these materials should buttress my own close reading of the poems themselves, I believe my explications can, nevertheless, stand on their own.

In order to clarify my method and my expository procedure, I would like to make a few more points. First, the expository method will reflect somewhat my own method of reading Roethke's poems. I would study the poems themselves intensely and then try to reach some tentative conclusions as I worked my way through the sequence. From the start, then, this "new criticism" approach was inductive. Due to the nature of the sequence, however, as I moved through the initial poems, I found that certain hypotheses or tentative conclusions about earlier poems were confirmed by later poems. Therefore, since I had arrived at some generalizations before I ended a close reading of the whole sequence, the method became increasingly deductive. Before I had reached the end of the sequence, I thought I knew what themes Roethke usually worked with and how he developed them--in a word, I discovered Roethke's own poetics. When I read later poems, then, I found I could evaluate them according to what I thought Roethke himself was trying to accomplish.

Although aesthetic criteria external to the poems themselves must ultimately be used, we certainly must first judge a poem according to what it tries to do.

The expository procedure, then, will somewhat imitate my method. When I consider the first six poems in my Chapters II and III, I will be working through the poems trying to establish certain patterns, modes of operation, ideas, tones, structures, etc. Although I will give special attention to death imagery, I will simultaneously try to receive all the signals these poems emit and attempt to decode them. With my antennae fully extended, I will proceed through the sequence, alert to new signals and continually making and testing hypotheses about the poems. Of course, like a novelist, by now I know the ending before I begin, but this expository method has some virtues. First, it allows the reader to see how I arrived--step by step--at my conclusions (and, of course, to note any missteps I make). Second, it allows the reader to experience the development of the sequence in a more dramatic way than if I were completely deductive. And, third, it shows the way I arrived at my conclusions--from the poems themselves. I did not start with a preconceived idea for them and then try to find evidence to conform to my idea. Nor did I begin with an idea gleaned from Roethke's prose or from criticism on Roethke.

No, this last may not be entirely true. I had read almost everything by or about Roethke before my writing. But afterwards--when I dived into these poems--I tried to swim entirely on my own, without any thought of external data. When I checked my results against other critics' work, I found I had a different approach and arrived at different conclusions. Nevertheless, when my points concur with another critic's opinion, I cite his work in a footnote. In most cases, however, I differ in significant ways from previous criticism. Often I try not only to prove my point, but also to refute another critic's view when it contradicts mine. Also, other critics' work is sometimes introduced because I found it enlightening and pertinent to the discussion. Similarly, after the first two chapters, which necessarily have few external references, I begin introducing supplemental biographical and critical information which supports my perspectives on the poems, but which, I believe, is not necessary to prove my thesis. The biographical information, in particular, adds new dimensions to the poetry, and, I hope, is interesting to the reader.

In summary, my method is initially as inductive as I can make it (considering that I have already read Roethke's poetry and prose, and the criticism on him).

Then, as tentative conclusions are confirmed, the method becomes more deductive--while at the same time I try to approach each poem afresh. In other words, as each poem is read, it becomes part of the background for each new poem. As the background is pieced together, we begin to perceive the total picture Roethke is painting. Then we can make tentative aesthetic judgements about the rightness or wrongness of individual pieces within the whole picture. Once the portrait is completed, we will know the pattern, we will know the poetics.

CHAPTER II

INCARNATION

The sixteen-poem sequence comprising the "Love Poems" of Words for the Wind opens with "The Dream." As we read this poem, we might consider what difficulties and pleasures it affords.

The Dream

1

I met her as a blossom on a stem
Before she ever breathed, and in that dream
The mind remembers from a deeper sleep:
Eye learned from eye, cold lip from sensual lip.
My dream divided on a point of fire;
Light hardened on the water where we were;
A bird sang low; the moonlight sifted in;
The water rippled, and she rippled on.

2

She came toward me in the flowing air,
A shape of change encircled by its fire.
I watched her there, between me and the moon;
The bushes and the stones danced on and on;
I touched her shadow when the light delayed;
I turned my face away, and yet she stayed.
A bird sang from the center of the tree;
She loved the wind because the wind loved me.

3

Love is not love until love's vulnerable.
She slowed to sigh, in that long interval.
A small bird flew in circles where we stood;
The deer came down, out of the dappled wood.
All who remember doubt. Who calls that strange?
I tossed a stone, and listened to its plunge.
She knew the grammar of least motion, she
Lent me one virtue, and I live thereby.

4

She held her body steady in the wind;
 Our shadows met, and slowly swung around;
 She turned the field into a glittering sea;
 I played in flame and water like a boy
 And I swayed out beyond the white sea foam;
 Like a wet log, I sang within a flame.
 In that last while, eternity's confine,
 I came to love, I came into my own.¹

We might first notice the sound of this poem. The speaker, as if entranced, utters one-line loose (not periodic), declarative sentences. A varied and stately iambic pentameter with considerable slant rhyme reminds us of the formal, elegant cadences of Yeats's most serious and philosophical poetry. Even more, the aphorisms and convoluted repetition of words and phrases ("Love is not love until love's vulnerable.") evoke the manner of the older dreamer. We hear a man carefully, quietly and solemnly reciting each particular of his cherished dream in simple, repetitive, incantatory language. The hypnotic music of this poem tempts us to ignore its meaning--more accurately, this music is part of the meaning and seems intended to bring us to a dream-like state. At times, however, the speaker teases us into thought with a perplexing line like "She knew the grammar of least motion," and we begin

¹All quotations from Roethke's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), hereafter referred to in the text as C.P.

to wonder what all this means.

Perhaps if we study the movement of the lady of his dream, we can gain some clues. In the first stanza, all is quiet, calm, still; she is rooted as a flower. Ever so slowly she begins to move, first rippling in a reflection on the water. By the second stanza, everything--the lady, bushes, stones, wind--is flowing. Located between the speaker and the moon, she seems to be changing to a warmer Diana as she approaches this world. In the third stanza, she slows to "least motion" and stands with the speaker. He "meets" his lady and they slowly swing around in the last section of the poem--I imagine a rotation of the standing couple to a recumbent position. Because "the grammar of least motion" "loaned" to the speaker by the lady is the "one virtue" that gives him life, we might connect her motion to her changing nature.

She is first a "blossom on a stem" that hasn't breathed; next she is a "shape of change." When she "slows to sigh" in the third section we perceive a breathing, feeling creature. By the fourth stanza she has assumed a "body." Increasingly substantial, corporeal, our dream lady is transformed into a woman in a beautifully delicate incarnation. And this incarnation parallels our treatise on movement.

Associated with her eternal, timeless nature is that stillness of the first stanza; her motion makes her more real (without motion there is no time, is there?). If we stress the oxymoric quality of the expression "least motion," we can conclude that she teaches the speaker how to live both temporally and eternally. Likewise, the circular motion of stanza four combines temporal movement with eternal rest. I believe this particular metaphysical interpretation is made more plausible by the oxymorons near the end of the poem: "last while" and "eternity's confine." But, of course, I need to "flesh out" these abstractions.

No doubt we sense that the language becomes more erotic as the poem progresses. We might marvel at how Roethke achieves this. When he turns to Orchestra as a model for his poem "Four for Sir John Davies" (C.P., pp. 105-107), Roethke learns--if he did not already know--that love organizes all the elements of the universe in a harmonious dance:

"Dancing, bright lady, then began to be,
 When the first seeds whereof the world did spring,
 The fire, air, earth, and water, did agree
 By love's persuasion, nature's mighty King,
 To leave their first discorded combating,
 And in a dance such measure to observe
 As all the world their motion should preserve."²

²Sir John Davies, Orchestra or a Poem of Dancing, ed. E. M. W. Tillyard (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), p. 19.

In "The Dream," Roethke repeatedly blends the four elements of the universe--at first in almost mystical flames and water which later overlap with sexual flames and water. In a word, Roethke sensualizes Davies. For example, Roethke uses bawdy puns to remind us that sexual rhythms also join in Davies' dance of the universe: "The bushes and the stones danced on and on." And near the end of the poem, Roethke captures the paradoxes of sexual and spiritual consummation in an image worthy of Donne: "Like a wet log, I sang within a flame." Fueled by the air, the fire consumes the phallic "wet log" and evaporates the water; simultaneously, the water extinguishes the fire while creating a sputtering music. This whole process of consummation and extinction leads us to the master of poetry at once spiritual and sensual--John Donne.

Roethke apparently borrows the title and some images and ideas from Donne's poem, "The Dream."³ In Donne's poem, the speaker dreams about embracing his beloved and upon awakening invites her to "act the rest." As he coaxes her to join him in bed, he ponders whether the lady he sees is indeed his beloved or an

³Donne, Poetical Works, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 33-34.

angel: "rising makes me doubt." Roethke more readily accepts the ambiguity: "All who remember doubt. Who calls that strange?" (An early draft of "The Dream" read, "Was she a body, or a body's ghost?"⁴) Both speakers try to verify the reality of their experience: Donne through audacious and flattering logic that "proves" his beloved is not an angel because of her God-like omniscience; Roethke through the more empirical method of seeking sense data--pinching himself, as it were. In the second stanza, Roethke's speaker visually locates his beloved between two fixed objects, he touches her shadow, and he redirects his glance to determine if she is merely a projection of his imagination. He receives more substantial tactile, visual, and auditory data in the third stanza: "I tossed a stone and listened to its plunge."

Both poets conclude their poems with a similar phallic symbol and a pun on sexual climax:

Perchance as torches which must ready bee,
Men light and put out, so thou dealst with me,
Thou cam'st to kindle, goest to come; Then I
Will dream that hope again, but else would die.⁵

Like a wet log, I sang within a flame.
In that last while, eternity's confine,
I came to love, I came into my own.
(C.P., p. 120)

⁴U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 19-15.

⁵Donne, p. 34.



The word play in both poems suggests some disturbing possibilities. Both of our libertine lovers, of course, long for sexual fulfillment in love. Denied by his beloved, Donne prays that her visit portends greater pleasures in the future. He will escape his present disappointment by reverting to dreams which will keep him ready for love. However, like a Petrarchan lover, fear of another rejection also causes him to long for the grave. Similarly, the ambiguity of "my own" in Roethke's poem signifies both sexual fulfillment and a tantalizing yet destructive illusion.

Roethke's speaker unites with "his own," his own kind, a fully human creature. "Love is not love until love's vulnerable" suggests that love is for mortals, earthly angels. And yet the ecstasy of love brings our speaker into his own, into a new sense of identity, of personal fulfillment, of inherited wealth that transcends his quotidian existence. And perhaps the "least motion" of this sexually satisfying woman prolongs the speaker's potency so that he can "live" to the fullest--a "virtue" of the religion of love. On the other hand, if coming to love brings him only to himself, a "wet dream" of sorts, the speaker has perhaps encountered a femme fatale who leaves him "alone and palely loitering." Actually, neither poem closes on

that dismal note: both Donne and Roethke stress the pleasure of the dream while muting the tragic loss. One critic's perceptive account of Donne's poem could equally apply to Roethke's:

In a world where fair ladies excel in their beauty the idealized angels of their lover's dreams, and men can continue in sleep those dreams frustrated in the waking world, the distinctions between fantasy and fact become mercifully blurred.⁶

Furthermore, Roethke knows the psychological value of dreams in the emotional development of an individual.

As I intend to prove in a subsequent chapter, Roethke draws upon Maud Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry to develop his poem "Four for Sir John Davies," especially the section entitled "The Vigil." Drafts of "The Vigil" contain lines which are deleted from the final version but which reappear in "The Dream":

"Eye learns from eye; cold lip from sensual lip;/Light hardened on the water where we were."⁷ If we consider still other drafts of "The Vigil," we can understand how "The Dream" readily lends itself to psychological and archetypal interpretation:

I'm he and she at once, or so it seems
I pay a doctor to record my dream.

⁶Murray Roston, The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 147.

⁷U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 24-48.

.
 I have an animus an anima
 And that's the he and she of it, ha-ha.⁸

Although not especially exquisite, these lines might suffice to indicate that Roethke was acquainted with Jung's anima, the woman "within" the man. Without attempting an exhaustive psychoanalytic reading, I nevertheless feel justified in identifying the speaker's lady as his anima, and in reading "Eye learned from eye" as "I learned from I." Also, we might gloss "cold lip from sensual lip" with Bodkin's application of Jung's theory to the Dante/Beatrice relationship.

As I understand the process described by Jung and Bodkin, a dream or vision of a woman in divine form indicates a repressed erotic wish which "actuates the latent primordial image of the goddess." Is Roethke's speaker sublimating his sexual desire when he says, "I met her as a blossom on a stem"? I believe so because this archetypal symbol of beauty contains a submerged sexual metaphor and because the dream lady of the beginning stanzas does appear in divine form. According to Jung, however, unless a man recognizes and consciously serves the forces represented by the erotic wish, he will remain in a state of "secret bondage." What visions

⁸Ibid.

or dreams like Dante's or Roethke's represent is the process by which the soul-image or ideal "acquires the sensual libido which has hitherto adhered to the concrete object." As difficult as this psychology is, I think we can at least understand that in our poem sublimated erotic feelings within the speaker are gradually accepted and incorporated into his idealized woman.

This psychological reading demonstrates how erotic and spiritual love in Donne and Roethke relates to "a process in some manner necessary and inwardly determined." More accurately, Roethke's poem suggests that we view Donne's "The Dreame" from Jung's and Bodkin's perspective, namely, that the tensions between Donne's erotic wishes and his idealizing tendencies also represent unresolved inner conflicts. Critics pass over the impressive synthesis of psychology and literature that Roethke achieves in "The Dream"; we will return to this topic later.

A final note on the gentle transformations of this poem involves the allegorical use of animal imagery. In section one, "A bird sang low." "A bird sang from the center of the tree" in section two. But in section three, the bird appears to the eye: "A small bird flew in circles where we stood." Similarly, the deer, whose physical form--like the bird's--was camouflaged by the

foliage ("the dappled wood") now first appears. I take all these to be images of incarnation. We might speculate that Roethke stresses the upward movement of the bird (another phallic image?) more than the descent of the deer (dear?) to reverse the traditional notion that a spirit's assuming a physical form effects a metaphysical decrease in value.

Turning now to the next poem in the sequence, we should see if what we have learned about "The Dream" helps us to appreciate "All the Earth, All the Air." The title immediately reminds us of the four elements, but why does Roethke mention only two?

All the Earth, All the Air

1
 I stand with standing stones.
 The stones stay where they are.
 The tiny winders wind;
 The little fishes move.
 A ripple wakes the pond.

2
 This joy's my fall. I am!--
 A man rich as a cat,
 A cat in the fork of a tree,
 When she shakes out her hair.
 I think of that and laugh.

3
 All innocence and wit,
 She keeps my wishes warm;
 When, easy as a beast,
 She steps along the street,
 I start to leave myself.

4

The truly beautiful,
 Their bodies cannot lie:
 The blossom stings the bee.
 The ground needs the abyss,
 Say the stones, say the fish.

5

A field recedes in sleep.
 Where are the dead? Before me
 Floats a single star.
 A tree glides with the moon.
 The field is mine! Is mine!

6

In a lurking place, I lurk,
 One with the sullen dark.
 What's hell but a cold heart?
 But who, faced with her face,
 Would not rejoice?

(C.P., pp. 121-122)

As in "The Dream," we hear a man uttering alternately simplistic statements and obscure aphorisms. The hypnotic effect is intensified by the shorter three-beat line, by excessive repetition, and by fewer logical connections between the meaning of one line and the next. Considerable internal rhyme, assonance, and consonance ("The twiny winders wind") substitute for the end rhyme of "The Dream." The speaker earns our attention because he utters his oracular pronouncements with such solemn tones. But how can we become initiated into an understanding of this evocative language?

Perhaps by turning for a moment to Roethke's essay, "Some Remarks on Rhythm," we will learn something

of his technique:

It's nonsense, of course, to think that memorableness in poetry comes solely from rhetorical devices, or the following of certain sound patterns, or contrapuntal rhythmical effects. We all know that poetry is shot through with appeals to the unconsciousness, to the fears and desires that go far back into our childhood, into the imagination of the race. And we know that some words, like hill, plow, mother, window, bird, fish, are so drenched with human association, they sometimes can make even bad poems evocative.⁹

We have seen that "The Dream" relates to Jung's theories of personal development and archetypes, and that such diction fills that poem (as it fills "All the Earth, All the Air"). The erotic desires that trace back to childhood are consciously served and accepted at the end of "The Dream": "I played in flame and water like a boy." Similarly, the childlike fascination with little fishes and nursery rhyme repetition in "All the Earth, All the Air" brings us back to simple but profound joys.

The diction of the first stanza seems calculated to be "drenched with human association," both personal and universal. Redundancy abounds: for example, "winders" are twining plants, so the adjective and verb, "twiny" and "wind" re-emphasize that particular motion. A "fishie-in-the-brook" nursery rhyme innocence masks

⁹On The Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed., Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 80; hereafter referred to in the text as S.P.

the sexual meaning of these lines. I believe Roethke wants us to associate "stones" with testicles, "fishes" (and maybe "winders") with sperm. The puns in "The Dream" and other sexual language in this poem convince me that such a reading is plausible. The stanza comes to mean that the sperm wind their way through the male reproductive organs and the "little fishes move" into the female reproductive organs, the "pond." The speaker again seems fascinated with stillness and motion in the sexual act. Although not quite as herculean as Whitman's "pent up arching rivers," the terse, tense rhythms of the first stanza are released in the second: "This joy's my fall. I am!"

Apparently, "stand" and "fall" function in Roethke's poem as in Romeo and Juliet: there the servant Sampson boasts, "Me they [the maidens] shall feel while I am able to stand./And 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh" (Ii 34-35), and later Mercutio comments "'Twould anger him/To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle/Of some strange nature, letting it there stand/Till she had laid it and conjured it down." (II i 23-26). The image of the Cheshire cat makes the language appear innocent, but his laugh betrays bawdy meanings concerning the woman's forked nature and the shaking out of her

hair. Like his beloved, Roethke is "All innocence and wit"--the innocence of Mother Goose and the wit of John Donne. Let's consider the innuendo in the third stanza.

We understand that the speaker would like to walk beside this warm and innocent creature. On second glance, we wonder whether her provocative, easy, virtued strutting has not understandably caused a premature sexual release.¹⁰ Also suggested is the ecstasy she brings him to--an ec-stasis, a standing outside of one's self. Perhaps in this transport, he is relocated in his lover--he has psychologically identified himself with her and feels physically one with her. If we can digress for a moment, I can develop this question of identity which fully absorbs Roethke's attention.

By my estimation, the most revealing prose essay of Roethke's is "Of Identity," where he explains how knowledge of another being increases one's own sense of identity.

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances even an inanimate thing--brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. Both feelings are not always present, I'm aware,

¹⁰Blessing p. 182.

but either can be an occasion for gratitude. And both can be induced. The first by the intensity of the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are part of it and it is part of you--Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours, for instance. If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee. . . the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitably accompanied by a loss of the "I," the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence (S.P., pp. 25-26).

To return to the poem with this illumination, we can explicate "This joy's my fall. I am!" The speaker's intense study of nature and sexual motion in the first stanza leads to a "break from self-involvement," a "loss of the purely human ego to another center," the woman. The subsequent heightened sense of identity is wonderfully expressed in the simple "I am." And with reference to the Fall of our original parents we might include a religious interpretation with our psychological and physiological meanings. Biblical readings of these lines are best seen from the perspective of a charming "Nonsense Poem" of Roethke's:

The Lamb

The Lamb just says, I AM!
 He frisks and whisks, He can.
 He jumps all over. Who
 Are you? You're jumping too.
 (C.P., p. 182)

This poem joins the innocent joy of the nursery rhyme with the religious connotations of the Lamb of God;

Blake's poem with the sublime "I am who am." And partly through the frisky rhythms of the poem, we all are jumping for joy. Breaking "from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee" allows the speaker of "All the Earth, All the Air" to escape the effects of the Fall and "return to a state of innocency." As we read the fourth stanza, we might think of Blake and his statement that "Without contraries there is no progression."

The truly beautiful,
 Their bodies cannot lie:
 The blossom stings the bee.
 The ground needs the abyss,
 Say the stones, say the fish.

Now these aphorisms are cryptic enough unless we discern a general pattern of reconciled opposites. One draft of this poem included a line which reappears in "The Swan": "Lost opposites bend down."¹¹ We might hunt out which particular opposites are joined, and notice how they are synthesized. Perhaps the first two lines suggest that abstractions like Truth and Beauty can only be known through concrete manifestations, the bodies of truly beautiful women (a theme of "The Dream"). Also, a truly beautiful woman, although delicate and rooted like a blossom, cannot recline in a passive manner but rather chooses to sting with sensual desire

¹¹U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 18-16.

the bee that penetrates her petals. Roethke carries this concept of contraries to a spectacular paradox: "The ground needs the abyss."

Through lexical ambiguity, Roethke suggests that the earth--all existence--needs the Void; that the true foundation of anything must plumb a bottomless gulf; that the logical basis of a conclusion must admit the primeval great deep or chaos. With Miltonic grandeur, Roethke's lowly stones and fish, emblems of stillness and motion, proclaim that every thing in the universe requires--for its existence and fulfillment--its opposite.

Even with my method of hunting out reconciled opposites, I confess difficulties with the fifth and sixth stanzas. I suppose that when the "field recedes in sleep," reality withdraws into dream and thus the speaker mentally owns the field. The earthly, rooted, concrete tree "glides" with the ethereal, floating other-worldly moon to fit the synthesizing pattern of the title, "All the Earth, All the Air." But why does the speaker ask "Where are the dead?" Perplexing lines like this have lead me to this dissertation, and not one of my answers completely satisfies me. Does he expect to meet the dead in a dream or through his inherited racial memory--a beneficial process as we learned in "The Dream"? Does he seek the dead to find life because

all opposites are united? Like a champion who has won the field, the speaker exults in his triumph. Are the dead his conquered foes, or ghosts of warriors past who inspire him? Or, like Donne, grieving over his departed lover in "The Dreame," does Roethke hope to escape into death-like sleep, or even to join the dead in their grave? Seen from the perspective of the next stanza, the "single star" does sound like a projection of his loneliness.

I presume that the speaker's depression in the sixth stanza results either from the absence of his beloved or from her cold heart. Face-to-face in the act of love, the speaker rejoices. Reminiscent of the identity paradox of love, "faced with her face" also hints that he has put on her face, accepted her identity. Donne coped with his disappointment in love with paradoxical language like "Thou. . . goest to come"; Roethke's fourth stanza contains philosophical advice to "accept the bitter with the sweet." At the end of the poem, the recollection or dream of their loving union relieves his hellish, gloomy loneliness.

The first two poems, then, are companion meeting and parting poems. "The Dream" unites the lovers in a climactic final stanza; "All the Earth, All the Air" unites the lovers in the initial stanza and then traces

the effects of their parting. Both poems blend dream with reality, but with the second poem we are beginning to sense the dangerous aspects in love that were latent in the first. And with the explicit reference to the dead we have met the most obvious evidence of a death motif. I intend to develop this reference and others with the aid of the remaining poems. The length of the next poem, "Words for the Wind," precludes incorporating it into my text, but when we read this joyful lyric we might notice another explicit reference to the dead. In his introduction to this poem, Roethke confesses that his ecstasy in love sometimes almost annihilates him.

For those who are interested in such matters: the poem is an epithalamion to a bride seventeen years younger. W. H. Auden had given us his house, in Forio, Ischia, for several months, as a wedding present. It was my first trip to Europe. A real provincial, I was frightened by Italy, but within a few days, the sun, the Mediterranean, the serenity of the house changed everything. I was able to move outside myself--for me sometimes a violent dislocation--and express a joy in another, in others: I mean Beatrice O'Connell, and the Italian people, their world, their Mediterranean.¹²

Before we discuss this "violent dislocation," we should enjoy Roethke's joy.

How different the three beat line of "Words for the Wind" is from that of "All the Earth, All the Air:

¹²As quoted in Poet's Choice, ed. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), p. 99.

Love, love, a lily's my care,
 She's sweeter than a tree.
 Loving, I use the air
 Most lovingly: I breathe;
 Mad in the wind I wear
 Myself as I should be,
 All's even with the odd,
 My brother the vine is glad.

Gone is the bare, hypnotic, redundant pronouncement. Here, we find some strong enjambment, some mildly periodic sentences, some relaxation: an easier, freer, flowing music. Here, the repetition of word and phrase sounds more like a merry refrain than a convoluted aphorism. The rhyme scheme consists of ottava rima and variations of that traditional form; hence, we hear more musical echoes than in the two previous poems.¹³ Finally, we sense greater variation and speed in this three beat line than in the last poem: more anapests and more unaccented syllables in general contribute to this effect.

If the rhythms differ from the previous poems, so does the organization of "Words for the Wind." Without too much trouble we recognize that a lady comes and joins a man in "The Dream" and that she departs in "All the Earth, All the Air." These movements provide a quickly discernable structure to the poems. But what holds all one hundred and five lines of "Words for the

¹³In Chapter VII, I will compare Roethke's prosody to Yeats's.

Wind" together? Beyond the rhythm and a general sense or repeated nature imagery, nothing clearly links the stanzas, much less the four sections. Despite the fact that all the critics pass over this question, I believe the problem of the larger structure overshadows the difficulties of particular lines. Although we might struggle with some knotty lines, by now we can unravel many with some proficiency. Attention to broad shifts in tone, like those between the third and sixth stanzas of the last poem, might provide a broader perspective on the four sections of this poem.

The last stanza of the first section of "Words for the Wind" differs markedly in tone and content from the previous three stanzas. The first three stanzas show the already familiar union of contraries to symbolize a successful, loving union of the speaker and his woman: "Loving, I use the air most lovingly: I breathe" (a quite intimate fusion of body and spirit); "Motion can keep me still" (a clever combination of repose and movement through the pun on "still" meaning both "devoid of movement" and "tranquil"); "She kissed me out of thought/As a lovely substance will" (a swooning union of idea and thing); "a garden stone/Slowly became the moon" (a marriage of earth and the heavens). The syntheses in this poem dazzle me with their variety,

wit and suggestiveness. The speaker exudes joy and confidence. But the images of the fourth stanza suggest a weakened, trembling, almost helpless condition. The speaker's inability to answer the "tremulous cry" of the nestling contrasts sharply with "I cried and the birds came down/And made my song their own." That the speaker is now unsuccessful in love, unable to unite with his beloved, is underscored by the last words of the section, "I walk alone."

The remaining three sections of the poem follow the pattern: two or three stanzas celebrating the successful union of the lovers followed by a final stanza which at least hints at some problem or flaw in love. The successful union of the lovers is repeatedly symbolized by opposites linked together and by the speaker's heightened awareness of his own identity. But section two ends with "I bear, but not alone,/The burden of this joy." The "burden" here is perhaps "to give shape to a random joy"--a spatial problem. Section three, it turns out, concerns the limitations of time: "I cherish what I have had of the temporal:/I am no longer young." In the fourth and last section, the flaw in the union appears in the word "suffer": "And see and suffer myself in another being at last." The woman helps the

speaker in solving these problems in love by continually reaffirming his worth. For Roethke, to solve the problem of identity is to solve the problem of love.

In section one, although the speaker is "alone" when he walks, the woman "keeps pace" with him--she "sways whenever I sway." We note in the second section that she shares the burden with him: "I bear, but not alone,/The burden of this joy." She alleviates spatial limitations because "She likes wherever I am." In the third section, the speaker is consoled for the temporal limitations of love by the "song tied to a tree" that says "Whatever was still is" (still another pun on "still.") If the speaker is not part of the eternally rejuvenating elements of nature (the "winds and waters" are "young"), he seems content to cherish the time he has had, and not to worry about the limited time he has left ("what falls away will fall"). He will let all things bring him to love. Thus in the fourth section, the speaker can "sing the soul's immediate joy." Making the most of the moment lessens the limitations of time--carpe diem! That time has been lost is suggested in "see and suffer myself/In another being, at last." Nevertheless, we witness yet another triumphant union of speaker and woman.

As always, Roethke packs his final lines with meaning. The speaker has moved outside himself, has "located" himself in his beloved--"sometimes a violent dislocation"--which accounts for the word "suffer." He can finally permit or allow himself, "suffer" himself, to exist in another being. He can both see himself and experience himself in another person--another "ec-stasis." He simultaneously realizes and loses his identity, and his suffering, as well as his identity, is shared by another person. And the speaker feels the pleasurable pain of lovemaking. The lady, then, aids the speaker so that he can move outside himself to express joy in another, and she helps him solve his problems of loneliness, space, and time.

I have also searched for patterns in all the nature imagery in this poem. For example, each section of the poem contains animal, mineral, and vegetable images. I was happy to find that our woman contains qualities of all three kinds of elements:

"The breath of a long root,
 The shy perimeter
 Of the unfolding rose,
 The green, the altered leaf,
 The oyster's weeping foot,
 And the incipient star--
 Are part of what she is."
 (C.P., p. 125)

If we use this tripartite division of nature as our guide, we see that in section one her "mineral" qualities serve

to unite her with the speaker. The woman is referred to as "Phoebe" a goddess of the moon, and "that woman I saw in a stone." Furthermore, during a description of their love making, the speaker says "I stared, and a garden stone/Slowly became the moon." In section two, her "vegetable" qualities promote the speaker beyond the mineral stage:

A fair thing grows more fair;
 The green, the springing green
 Makes an intenser day
 Under the rising moon;
 I smile, no mineral man;
 I bear, but not alone,
 The burden of this joy.
 (C.P., p. 124)

In the third or "animal" section, the speaker and the woman walk together "In rivery air," a fusion of the habitats of the fishes and birds in the section. Nature, then, in all its aspects--mineral, vegetable, and animal--serves as a common ground or vehicle for the lovers' union.

My final concern centers on the explicit death images in the first section: "Are flower and seed the same?/What do the great dead say?" Given the action of the poem--the woman's aiding the speaker in his moving outside himself to union with her--the question resonates with meaning and possible answers. A fully matured "flower" herself, the woman moves the speaker from potential life as an inert "seed" to become a flower:

she "wakes the ends of life" (section four). Just as a seed is at one end of life, the "great dead" are at the other end. In one sense, the great dead--be they artists, thinkers, men of action, or our own parents--are not dead if they can say anything.¹⁴ The paradoxes of dead seeds becoming living flowers, and dead men speaking to the living are variations on the idea that opposites require each other, "The ground needs the abyss." But these are "happier" paradoxes because the creative contribution of the dead is stressed. From another perspective, the seed becomes part of the "neophyte" imagery which reflects the speaker's maturing to love. Again, the poem provides nascent elements in all aspects of nature: mineral--"the incipient star," vegetable--"seed," "the shy perimeter of the unfolding rose," and animal--"the nestling." Lastly, since the woman mourns the death of anything--"She wakes the ends of life"--and consequently both awakens new life in the seed and rejuvenates the dying, she brings the speaker who is

¹⁴Later, I will expand on this idea of turning to the dead for help; for the moment, let us remember that Roethke turns to Davies, Donne, Blake, and Yeats for help in his love poems.

"no longer young"(section three) back to a nascent state in life and love--"a return to a state of innocence."

(S.P., p. 26)

With the first three poems of the sequence entitled "Love Poems" in Words for the Wind, Roethke displays considerable inventiveness with a death motif. The topic of death in love has been developed in the following ways: 1) A sine qua non for love is mortality. Although love may have an ideal origin, it is grounded in the real. Love is for mortals. 2) A loss of identity, a death of the self, is a prerequisite for love. 3) Death serves as the counterpart of the extraordinary sense of identity and being acquired through love. 4) The dead can help in one's search for identity. 5) Death, one measure of man's temporal and spatial limits, is overcome to the extent that love can overcome these limits. 6) The death motif is related to: a) a carefully structured image pattern that unites the ideal with the real, stillness with motion, the temporal with the eternal; b) a complex system of nature imagery; and c) a rich use of diction to develop simultaneously the characteristics of--and relations between--physical and metaphysical love.

CHAPTER III

TO FIND A BALANCE

I Knew A Woman

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
Coming behind her for her pretty sake
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
She played it quick, she played it light and loose;
My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

(C.P., p. 127)

The many ingenious and humorous puns in "I Knew a Woman" contribute to its well deserved fame: "Love likes a gander and adores a goose." A peek or a prod

to the backside might lead our lucky protagonist to discover her hip quivering around his "mobile nose," that more sizable and "seizable" proboscis. Like a mobile herself, "She moved in circles, and those circles moved"--a rather pleasing hula. As in the dance, reciprocal motion dominates. John Davies, one of the "English poets who grew up on Greek," answers Roethke's invocation by telling how LOVE teaches the dance:

Then, first of all, he doth demonstrate plain;
The motions seven that are in nature found;
Upward and downward, forth and back again,
To this side, and to that, and turning round.¹

Roethke organizes his diverse imagery primarily through these motions, but as in "The Dream" he sensualizes Davies: "Ah, when she moved she moved more ways than one." The rake-hell's own rake-like thrusts, following close upon her sickle's sweeping strokes reaps a glorious harvest: "Let seed be grass and grass turn into hay." Roethke joins barnyard humor with pastoral pleasures all in a country dance--a "hay" as Davies calls it.

If the imagery dances, the rhythm is its partner. Two caesurae create a fitting triparte line for the following turning, rotating motion: "She taught me Turn, and Counterturn, and Stand." But most lines

¹Davies, p. 30.

balance on a single caesura which creates a two-part swaying music. Davies rhymes his seven-line stanzas, ABABBCC; Roethke his ABABCCC. In the two lines that do not join this pattern, Roethke substitutes internal rhyme: "The shapes a bright container can contain"; "She moved in circles and those circles moved."

I also enjoy the variety of poses our speaker assumes: as a Robert Herrick taken by her "brave vibrations" and "liquefaction"; as a choirmaster leading a burlesque chorus; as a rejuvenated jaded rake; as a boy exhilarated by a roller coaster ride. Moreover, Roethke's lady, not Davies' Antinous, functions as prime mover here, but unlike Penelope, Roethke's man readily follows her lead in the dance. Like a little bird, he "nibbled meekly from her proffered hand." Not only does this suggest his simple subservience to his beloved, it also hints at a mock gallantry worthy of W. C. Fields addressing Mae West. If so, the embarrassingly sentimental second line of the poem becomes seductive flattery disguised as innocence. Or does the small bird which grows into a goose indicate that he's "glad to see her"? Becoming a more philosophical libertine in the last stanza, he adopts the intellectualized sensuality of Donne.

Excellent studies, like those of William J. Martz, Nat Henry and Richard Blessing reward a reader with an appreciation of this poem which extends beyond my description of it.² However, all the critics either neglect--or deal inadequately with--the death imagery in the fourth stanza of the poem.

The critics agree that the woman teaches the speaker not only about physical love, but also about metaphysical love. I maintain that only because she personifies spiritual perfection can she illuminate our speaker so that he can "know eternity." Hence, the line "she cast a shadow white as stone" is not so much a gravestone image as one critic calls it,³ as it is an image of the ideal female figure first met in "The Dream." Because she is an "insubstantial" dream woman, she lacks a shadow. An early draft reads "I swear she cast a shadow white as stone/White on white, along a high sea wall" (U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 20-38). Her association with white also adds purity to her "wanton ways" (Cf. "The winds white with her name" in "Words for the Wind"). Finally, the line may contain

²Martz, pp. 8-12; Nat Henry, "Roethke's 'I Knew a Woman,'" Explicator, 27 (January 1969), item No. 31; Blessing, pp. 182-185.

³Helen T. Buttell, "'I Knew a Woman,'" Explicator, 24 (May 1966), item No. 78.

a submerged image of a shadowless sundial, another symbol of eternity.

But at the same time that she reveals a vision to our speaker, she teaches him her "wanton ways." Absolutely converted to her gospel of love, he dies a martyr not only by psychologically yielding his identity to her, but also by suffering the "little death" of sexual orgasm. Like a Petrarchan lover he dies overwhelmed by her radiant beauty; like a metaphysical lover, he dies sexually and spiritually in an ecstasy that transcends time and space.

No doubt, Roethke drew upon Davies' "Orchestra" for the conceit that links physical with metaphysical movement:

Kind Nature, first, doth cause all things to love;
Love makes them dance, and in just order move.⁴

Imitating "Kind Nature," Antinous entreats Penelope:

Let me the mover be, to turn about
Those glorious ornaments that Youth and Love
Have fixed in you, every part throughout:
Which if you will in timely measure move;
Not all those precious gems in heaven above
Shall yield a sight more pleasing to behold
With all their turns and tracings manifold.⁵

When Roethke writes "I measure time by how a body sways," he echoes Davies' line, "if you will in timely

⁴Davies, p. 28.

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

measure move." To measure time, then, suggests the courtly dance, the movement of the heavens which marks time, the beat of music and poetry, and particularly for Roethke, the study of the sexual motions of his lady. Jenijoy LaBelle cites Augustine as the source for Roethke's last line: "When a body is moved, I measure in time how long it is moved."⁶ I would add that Augustine, like Roethke, also specifically does not "count eternity in days." In fact, Augustine says that because we can measure the time a physical object stands still, "Time, therefore, is not the motion of a body." After discussing longer and shorter poetic measures, Augustine concludes that time is in the mind of a created being.⁷ If time exists in Roethke's mind, his idea of "how a body sways" might indicate how he is free "to know eternity" while also knowing time. As he writes in a later poem, "I stay alive, both in and out of time" (C.P., p. 131). Let me explain further.

Roethke delights in the relations among the divine, time, love, and motion. In his book on the

⁶LaBelle, p. 122.

⁷Augustine, Confessions in Philosophic Classics: Thales to St. Thomas, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice, Hall, Inc., 1961), pp. 596-600.

dynamics of Roethke's poetry, Richard Blessing simply equates love with motion.⁸ But I think Roethke complicates this simple identification by also celebrating stillness. Every love poem contains moments where nothing moves and "I Knew a Woman" is no exception: "Her several parts could keep a pure repose." In order to understand the divine nature of this "pure repose," we might digress for a moment to consider a work Roethke read and annotated: Of Learned Ignorance by the 15th C. Cardinal of Brixen in the Tyrol, Nicholas Cusanus. Writing in paradoxical, mystical language, Cusanus says of God:

In fact, all life, movement and intelligence are from Him, in Him, and through Him; and with Him a revolution of the 8th sphere is not smaller than one of the infinite sphere, because He is the end of all movement and in Him all movement finally comes to rest; for he is infinite repose in which all movement is rest. Just as infinite straightness is the measure of all circumferences and the infinite present or eternity the measure of all time, so infinite repose is the measure of all movements.⁹

Roethke writes some revealing notes in the margin next to this text: "trad. Pl. stillness;. . . but Ren. emphasis on movement. . ." and he underlines "infinite repose" in the text. Apparently, he thinks that traditional philosophy or traditional Platonism

⁸Blessing, pp. 172-173.

⁹T.R. Books, C-8. Nicholas Cusanus, Of Learned Ignorance, trans. Germain Heron (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 52.

(trad. Pl.) attributes stillness to the divine, while Renaissance writers--like Davies--stress motion. Whether or not Roethke read this work before he composed "I Knew a Woman"--the dates of the poem's composition and the book's publication almost coincide¹⁰--the marginal notes reveal Roethke's mind on the relation between motion and God. To the extent that Roethke's woman partakes in the divine, she shares the "pure repose," the "infinite repose" of God in which "all movement is rest." When "she moved in circles, and those circles moved," she imitates the old astronomy of spheres within spheres. Like the Renaissance man of Davies' "Orchestra," Roethke's woman assumes the role of Prime Mover; like Cusanus' God she offers Roethke the "infinite repose in which all movement is rest."

Bringing Augustine, Davies, and perhaps Cusanus to bear on this sensual love lyric, Roethke has it both ways, that is, his carnal love is fully spiritualized, his spiritual love fully sexual. "Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay" because I want the temporal world of birth, growth and decay, says Roethke. In the sexual ecstasy of love, however, he transcends time

¹⁰McLeod, Manuscript Checklist, p. 31, indicates that Roethke dated his manuscript Oct. 24, 1953 and first published the poem in the spring of 1954.

either through the eternal circular motions of his lover or through an infinite and static moment of sublime sexual pleasure. If, as Augustine says, time is in the mind, the psychological time compressed in that orgasmic moment gives Roethke a glimpse of eternity despite his "old bones." Read as ars amatoria, this poem recommends a mixture of erotic movements and tingling rest; read as metaphysics, the poem means that love can mediate between--can actually fuse--the temporal and the eternal, the sensual and the spiritual.

The Voice

One feather is a bird,
I claim; one tree, a wood;
In her low voice I heard
More than a mortal should;
And so I stood apart,
Hidden in my own heart.

And yet I roamed out where
Those notes went, like the bird,
Whose thin song hung in air,
Diminished, yet still heard:
I lived with open sound,
Aloft, and on the ground.

That ghost was my own choice,
The shy cerulean bird;
It sang with her true voice,
And it was I who heard
A slight voice reply;
I heard; and only I.

Desire exults the ear:
Bird, girl, and ghostly tree,
The earth, the solid air--
Their slow song sang in me;
The long noon pulsed away,
Like any summer day.

(C.P., p. 128)

We immediately sense a return to the visionary world of "The Dream," that eerie, allegorical landscape of bird and wood and girl. Moreover, sensed only as a voice, symbolized by a ghost and the spiritual "shy cerulean bird," she certainly appears more as divine guide than human companion: "In her low voice I heard/ More than a mortal should." The considerable rhetorical and prosodic emphasis in the following lines suggests that her low voice comes from within him, and that he responds in an internal dialogue to Jung's archetypal woman, the soul-image or anima: "That ghost was my own choice"; "And it was I who heard/A slight voice reply;/ I heard and only I." Whether--as Jung would say it--a repressed erotic wish "actuates the latent primordial image of the goddess," I feel unqualified to say. But I will note that the bird is "shy," that the poem is almost entirely devoid of sexual overtones, and that the tree and feathery bird could conceivably represent repressed masculine and feminine images.

As an expansion of the divine nature of our woman, and of the internal vision she affords, this poem adds to the sequence. Technically, it succeeds less well. Another image of a union of the ideal and the real, the following lines fail to provide a vivid

visual effect: "I lived with open sound,/Aloft, and on the ground." We might consider, however, that Roethke is somehow referring to all the "notes" of his poem: his "open," full rhyme; his varied three-beat line; his more subtle assonance and consonance ("her," "heard," "hidden," "heart"; "song," "hung"; "slow song sang"). "Aloft and on the ground" might then suggest higher and lower vowels and/or rhythms that "skip." "Desire exults the ear," and the woman as heavenly muse inspires our poet speaker. Unfortunately, the tidy, mechanical conclusion that unites the three images within the speaker does not inspire me. Nor do the unsuggestive oxymoronic "Ghostly tree" and "solid air." Nor do I feel the mystical union of the one and the many that Roethke no doubt intends in his first two lines. The last two lines do fascinate however: "The long noon pulsed away,/Like any summer day." Does the fact that common life goes on during this vision lend it credence? Does the noon "pulse" on calmly in contrast to his throbbing ecstasy? Or is his vision indeed a temperate, "cerulean," daytime, extended moment? All seems pleasant enough for our speaker; we only note some trepidation initially when he wants to stay "hidden in his own heart." Perhaps the next poem, "She," will help us understand "The Voice."

She

I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?--
 My lady laughs, delighting in what is.
 If she but sighs, a bird puts out its tongue.
 She makes space lonely with a lovely song.
 She lilts a low soft language, and I hear
 Down long sea-chambers of the inner ear.

We sing together; we sing mouth to mouth.
 The garden is a river flowing south.
 She cries out loud the soul's own secret joy;
 She dances, and ground bears her away.
 She knows the speech of light, and makes it plain
 A lively thing can come to life again.

I feel her presence in the common day,
 In that slow dark that widens every eye.
 She moves as water moves, and comes to me,
 Stayed by what was, and pulled by what would be.
 (C.P., p. 129)

Again, we meet the dream woman although here she manifests a sensual nature that was absent in "The Voice." That she retains her power as divine guide and heavenly muse seems apparent in "She lilts a low soft language," "She cries out loud the soul's own secret joy" and "She knows the speech of light." I admire the image of "long sea-chambers of the inner ear" because it is anatomically accurate, because it suggests the profundity of the lesson, and because it again points to the question of whether this woman exists inside or outside the speaker, "We sing together; we sing mouth to mouth./The garden is a river flowing south." Mildly erotic like the last stanza of "The Dream," these lines

"work" better than those in "The Voice" because the imagery is vivid, specific, startling, and full of suggestive ambiguities. For example, sexual rivers and gardens symbolize yet another union of stillness and motion--always a sign of harmonious love in Roethke. If this middle stanza celebrates sensual/spiritual love, what about the others?

No critic comments on the grotesque opening of this poem: "I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?" Conjuring up an image of soft corpses would seem an unpromising strategy for any speaker seeking a kiss from his lady. Or with his macabre humor, is our speaker posing as a sardonic libertine? In any event, she "laughs, delighting in what is" which reveals that she is concerned only with the present. As I read this poem, the key to the first line--indeed to all the poem--can be found in this question of time. The last line of the poem, which I take to modify the speaker, shows him entrapped by time--torn between the known past and the undetermined future. Similarly, in the first line, our speaker first thinks of the past "dead" and then considers the future: "Shall we kiss?" But his beloved laughs at his concern with the past and the future: she exists entirely (eternally?) in the present, "delighting in what is." Appropriately,

all the verbs and even the verbals modifying her are in the present tense.

If we can think of the first and last lines of the poem as temporal "brackets," we might appreciate how the speaker joins her song and gradually loses all temporal worries in her eternal present and then slowly becomes conscious of time again. He seems most grateful for her "presence in the common day," that time when the ideal and the real overlap, when dreams and reality merge. This is the time in "The Voice": "Their slow song sang in me;/The long noon pulsed away,/ Like any summer day." Love extends the brightest moment of the day and imbues it with life, with blood. That such mystical times can occur in the common day validates their reality.

In the last six lines of the poem, however, the woman becomes less a physical and emotional "lady" and more a spiritual or metaphysical "presence": "She knows the speech of light." Her ideal nature is again signified by light as it was in "The wind's white with her name" ("Words for the Wind," C.P., p. 124) and in "I swear she cast a shadow white as stone" ("I Knew a Woman," C.P., p. 127). As she becomes more ideal, the speaker fears being "pulled" too far toward the ideal. Nevertheless, he is grateful for her illuminating

presence as long as he does not have to break entirely from the temporal, real world.

Given this reading of the poem, we can further explicate the first line. "I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?" has several meanings. Because the speaker is a mortal, one in the temporal sequence of past, present, and future, he is one of "the dead." The dead are "tender" or gentle because only mortals can love as was learned in "The Dream": "Love is not love until love's vulnerable" (C.P., p. 120). The speaker's fear, then, of being pulled too far toward the ideal accounts for the extreme rhetoric of the opening line. A second reading of the line also gives positive connotations to "the dead": those who have literally died teach the speaker to love. The speaker is again invoking the "great dead" for answers as he did in "Words for the Wind" (C.P., p. 123). My final reading of the opening of this poem is somewhat more negative. The speaker is dead sexually, emotionally, spiritually--every way except literally in the grave. Nevertheless, he "thinks" that he is still "tender," potentially sensitive to life--as a seed is--and that her "kiss" can raise him from the dead. Loving her, the speaker can both experience the eternal in the temporal and

remedy the imperfections of mortality: "A lively thing can come to life again."

A final consideration of "She" will focus on the meaning-laden lines, "I feel her presence in the common day,/In the slow dark that widens every eye." Day and night, whether alive or dead--in every sense possible--the speaker is grateful for her presence. "The slow dark that widens every eye" is "the dark night of the soul," a death, the counterpart to the everyday existence of "the common day." This dark, enlarges the pupils of the eyes and provides eye-opening revelations derived from her "speech of light" or from the experience itself. Furthermore, this darkness expands every "I," every identity he has. And finally, in order to consider "every" eye, the meaning of the sexual eye of the woman is catalogued in Eric Partridge's Shakespeare's Bawdy.¹¹

Our next poem, "The Other," explores the question of the nature of this dream woman.

The Other

What is she, while I live?--
 Who plagues me with her Shape,
 Lifting a nether Lip
 Lightly: so buds unleave;
 But if I move too close,
 Who busks me on the Nose?

Is she what I become?
 Is this my final Face?
 I find her every place;
 She happens, time on time--
 My Nose feels for my Toe;
 Nature's too much to know.

Who can surprise a thing
 Or come to love alone?
 A lazy natural man,
 I loll, I loll, all Tongue.
 She moves, and I adore:
 Motion can do no more.

A child stares past a fire
 With the same absent gaze:
 I know her careless ways!--
 Desire hides from desire.
 Aging, I sometimes weep,
 Yet still laugh in my sleep.

(C.P., p. 130)

By now we recognize the familiar pattern of imagery describing alternately the ideal and the real nature of this woman. I do like the simple intransitive verb which expresses her eternally present nature: "she happens." She is also omnipresent: "I find her every place." An earlier draft of this poem reveals that Roethke wants this woman to evoke both an external and an internal woman.

She happens, time on time,
 Alive, in her white skin
 At once outside and in;
 Is she what I become?
 Her shape cries from a cloud,
 Cries to my flesh out loud.¹²

Furthermore, Roethke ends his poem with the same irony

¹²U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 22-38.

that concludes "The Dreame" by Donne (cf. pp. 32-55). We sense a cruel mistress who carelessly denies an adoring speaker; he dreams in order to escape the frustration of her tantalizing ways.

Something bothers me about the tone here.

Apparently, Roethke hopes to charm us with this pathetic clown weeping with his tongue hanging out. But he does not. And if we read "Lip" and "Nose" with bawdy meanings, the "busking" slapstick of the first stanza pains more than pleases, and her sexual teasing repels us. But at least we do gain a clear exposition of the sad disparity in their natures: she is young, careless, unfeeling; he is aging, adoring, lusty. "Plagued" by her shape, haunted by thoughts of her, reduced to a salivating fool, he despairs because she is too much "other," too ideal. "Desire hides from desire" recalls Jung's "repressed erotic wish" which in this poem actuates two psychological monsters. The sequence appears to be heading toward some excesses. Because of its length I will not include "The Sententious Man" here (C.P., p.131). But may I suggest even now that we read this poem with the excesses of sensual or spiritual love in mind.

I believe that the structure of "The Sententious Man" reveals its theme: "My indirection found direction out" (C.P., p. 131). In each of the seven sections

of the poem, the speaker repeatedly corrects his direction in order to steer a middle course between the extremes of the ideal and the extremes of the real. Our knowledge of how Roethke uses polarities in previous poems can help us understand the cryptic aphorisms here.

"Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone"--not only states that body soul are united in man, but also illustrates the point in the word "breast-bone." Two examples of the extremes immediately follow: the virgin, rejecting the flesh, is too spiritual; the "loveless stone," without a spirit, is too physical. Both are associated with the serpent since the virgin is "writhing" and the "loveless stone" is given sustenance by the "serpent's heart." Satanic imagery occurs infrequently in Roethke's work, but "All the Earth, All the Air" helps us identify the "serpent's heart": "What's hell but a cold heart?" (C.P., p. 122). The speaker learns direction by avoiding the two extremes--the overly spiritual virgin, too proud of her "fine lineaments," and the loveless stone, entirely physical like "true lechers" who "love the flesh, and that is all."

The middle way in section two is between the "rage" of the flesh ("We did not fly the flesh" as the virgin did) and that of the spirit which "knows the

flesh it must consume." The right mixture is all important: "Did I rage too long?" The extreme oscillations inherent in love, especially "young" love--"she changed me ice to fire, and fire to ice"--challenge our speaker's best judgment.

The third section has the speaker going the right "direction." The "mind's slow sensual play" shows a harmonious union of spirit and nature. Furthermore, the speaker lives "both in and out of time," the clearest statement yet of Roethke's way of symbolizing perfected love. In this union, the speaker "stays alive . . . By listening to the spirit's smallest cry." Whether the cry is his own (like the "slight voice" of "The Voice") or the woman's or nature's (the rose is "astonished"), one point can be made--"the spirit's smallest cry" suggests a delicate balance between the ideal and the real. Always sensitive to "minimals," Roethke avoids an excess of spirituality by limiting his exposure to the overly-spiritual. The final evocative image of section three unites a potentially violent, physical lion with a passive, static, archetypal, ideal rose. Not only is the lion transformed into a spritual creature signified by its kneeling and kissing, but the flower is also wonderfully transformed into a more physical "astonished" and "passionate" creature.

Listen to the kissing sound of the line.

The extremes found in section four are too much change and onanism. When the speaker says, "Though all's in motion, who is passing by?/The after image never stays the same," he clearly desires that the person stop and that the "after image stay the same." When violent motion slows to stillness, he again finds the right course: "But my least motion changed into a song,/ And all dimensions quivered to one thing." Learned first from the woman in "The Dream," this "grammar of least motion" symbolizes the unity of love. In his notebooks Roethke wrote, "Our need is oneness. The error onanism."¹³ The onanistic mistake is apparent in the following lines: "There was a thicket where I went to die,/And there I thrashed, my thighs and face aflame." A new use of the death motif, "die" here signifies onanism. In "Open Letter" Roethke states that "onanism equals death" (S.P., p. 40). Karl Malkoff explains this idea further: "Onanism, for Roethke, is a violation of the natural order, a kind of death; it is a rejection of one's individuality, since it is a retreat from the establishment of one's personality in the real world." ¹⁴

¹³Notebooks, 7-97; available on microfilm from the Roethke Collection, University of Washington Library. Hereafter cited in the text as Notebooks.

¹⁴Malkoff, p.88.

The extremes of section five are being pulled too far from the real world ("an exultation takes us outside life") and being too grossly physical ("A drunkard drinks, and belches in his drink"). The speaker himself is unsure ("I think") whether such vulgar "ardor tames eternity." Probably more appropriate are other aspects of his "hardihood": "I drink good liquor when my luck is good" and "I taste my sister when I kiss my wife" (an indication that "all is one and one is all" S.P., p. 26; and an example of the statement in section six-- "Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone.")

Alternately hopeful and despairing, the speaker has been "schooled in pain" and in promise in section six. The indirection of being "alone/In the deep center of the voice and fire" probably taught the speaker the "motion of the deepest stone"--a union of stillness and motion. The correct vision is to know "Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone."

And finally, in section seven, the speaker tries to alleviate his overconcern with his "neighbor's soul" by belittling his friends' Christianity. Initially, "Small waters run toward a miry hole" is said "with a sneer." The converse of "still waters run deep," the speaker's statement suggests that his friends' Christianity is shallow and weak, and deserves to "go

down the drain" into a mucky "miry hole." But then he takes the "sneer" back: "For water moves until it's purified,/And the weak bridegroom strengthens in his bride." The filtering effect of the mire purifies the water--a pattern familiar in Roethke's "Lost Son" sequence (C.P., pp. 53-58) and in his own description of those poems: "each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress" (S.P., p. 37). At a sexual level, the weakness of the "small waters" is made potent by a "miry hole" when a "weak bridegroom strengthens in his bride." Marriage, then--even a conventional Christian marriage--unites lovers on a physical and a spiritual level strengthening not only the lovers but also, in turn, the religion in which the union occurs. The "small waters" of religion run toward the "miry hole" of sexuality and--paradoxically enough--are "purified." Obviously, the speaker has been embarrassingly preachy here and excessive in his language and images, but by the end of the poem, he seems to have spent that pomposity and to be able to temper and qualify his rash judgements.

A study of these five poems confirms the readings given for the three poems of Chapter II. All the uses

of the death motif listed at the end of Chapter II recur in the poems of Chapter III (cf. pp. 23-24 above). Furthermore, in all eight poems, Roethke has consistently and repeatedly symbolized perfected love as a union of contraries, particularly of the ideal and the real and of motion and stillness. When love fails or falters or is impossible, an imbalance of these elements is evident. The negative aspects of the death motif become more obvious in the poems of this chapter because of this imbalance. In "The Voice" and "She," the speaker clutches at his identity as a mortal so he will not be pulled too far toward the ideal. The speaker's aging and mortality surface in "The Other" as he discovers the disparity between his nature and the woman's. And a new variation of the death motif, also associated with an excess, appears in the onanism of "The Sententious Man." Only in "I Knew a Woman" is there a happy balance of the ideal and the real, and there the death imagery is generally positive in its connotations.

CHAPTER IV

THE TWO EXTREMES

The Pure Fury

1

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

2

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

3

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

4

Dream of a woman, and a dream of death:
The light air takes my being's breath away;
I look on white and it turns into gray--
When will that creature give me back my breath?
I live near the abyss. I hope to stay
Until my eyes look at a brighter sun
As the thick shade of the long night comes on.

(C.P., pp. 133-134)

In the first stanza, the speaker recalls that he once experienced a mystical illumination of the world. Commenting on a similar experience recorded in "A Field of Light (C.P., pp. 62-63), Roethke writes

True, I'm speaking in these lines of a heightened consciousness. In the early part of that poem, nature was "dead," ambiguous, ominous. But the "angel," an emissary of the "other," was invoked: there was some kind of ritualistic, even penitential, act: "Was it dust I was kissing? . . . Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone."--the inanimate itself becomes alive before the final euphoria of this piece.

The second part of this feeling, the "oneness" is, of course, the first stage in mystical illumination. . . the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitably accompanied by a loss of the "I," the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence (S.P., pp. 25-26).

In "The Pure Fury," then, reading "nothing" (the philosophy of nonbeing discussed in the second stanza, the "stupor of knowledge lacking inwardness," or an actual refusal to consult philosophy) "through a fearful night" is perhaps the "penitential act" that brings the speaker from death and meaninglessness to resurrection and a point where "I touch the stones, and they had my own skin"--the inanimate becomes alive and the speaker has the feeling of the oneness of the universe and the absurdity of death. Although this mystical illumination is less intense than that in "The Field of Light,"

it still provides the speaker with some hope in the concluding stanza: "I hope to stay/Until my eyes look at a brighter sun/As the thick shade of the long night comes on." But in the first stanza, he appears to achieve his mystical illumination alone, as did the speaker in "The Field of Light." By the time of the fourth stanza of "The Pure Fury," however, the complicating disparity between the speaker's nature and the nature of the woman he loves thwarts his ability to see that all is one and one is all.

I believe Karl Malkoff's perceptive reading of "The Pure Fury" to be conclusive in identifying Paul Tillich's second chapter of The Courage to Be as the source for the second stanza of the poem.¹ Tillich writes:

Nonbeing is one of the most difficult and most discussed concepts. Parmenides tried to remove it as a concept. But to do so he had to sacrifice life. . . . Plato used the concept of nonbeing because without it the contrast of existence with the pure essences is beyond understanding. It is implied in Aristotle's distinction between matter and form. . . . Jacob Boehme, the Protestant mystic and philosopher of life, made the classical statement that all things are rooted in a Yes and a No.²

¹Malkoff, Theodore Roethke, p. 131.

²Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 32-33.

Using Tillich's survey, Roethke groups his woman with these philosophers of nonbeing. Malkoff's view of the woman's role in this poem can perhaps be made more accurate:

The beloved's dual nature, which has been carefully developed throughout the sequence of love poems can now be used for maximum effect: she is body, she is of the transcendent world of the senses, and so she refutes Parmenides' denial of nonbeing; but she is also spirit, capable of the Platonic "squeak" of undying essences. She is both aspects of the poet's reality; in her empty face he sees both salvation and extinction.³

Malkoff is right about the beloved's dual nature, but in this poem, it is her ideal nature alone that is stressed. Furthermore, "salvation" for the speaker can be more precisely defined as a balance of the ideal and the real.

Again, it is the woman's ideal nature that is stressed throughout the poem. She is non-physical ("a woman with an empty face"), non-rational ("She tries to think, and it flies loose again"), and one in whom the Platonic undying essences are immanent ("At times my darling squeaks in pure Plato"). Richard Blessing also errs in seeing in her "a kind of Goldie Hawn as La Belle Dame Sans Merci. . . vacuity personified, the apotheosis of mindlessness."⁴ The satire intended

³Malkoff, p. 133.

⁴Blessing, pp. 189-190.

in a word like "squeak" might derive from the contrast between her easy, high-pitched, almost non-verbal expression and the herculean struggles of the great philosophers in attempting to deal with nonbeing. Just as Plato's philosophy requires "Nothingness," the speaker's confrontation with her ideal nature, her association with Plato's "pure essences," re-establishes the concept of nonbeing. And for Plato, nonbeing is found in existence, the realm of the speaker. Thus, if in her ideal form she is the ultimate reality, the speaker himself becomes nothing. Hence his fear in stanza four: "The light air takes my being's breath away. . . .When will that creature give me back my breath." His breath is his physical existence and not so much "his spirit of life" as Malkoff has it.

The all-important philosophical placement of nonbeing, then, mirrors the dramatic dilemma of the speaker: within the Platonic paradigm, his physical existence is made nothing; however, if nonbeing is equated with Plato's pure essences, not only is his ideal woman annihilated, but the speaker is deprived of any saving spiritual nature. This deprivation results in his self-cannibalistic, solitary condition in the third stanza: "A man's a beast prowling in his own house, /A beast with fangs, and out for his own

blood." (If anybody's physicality or desire for physicality is going to refute Parmenides, it is the speaker's and not the woman's.) The speaker is in a situation similar to Yank's in the play The Hairy Ape, a situation O'Neill said we are all in:

I ain't on oath and I ain't in heaven, get me?
I'm in de middle tryin' to separate 'em, taking all
de woist punches from bot'of 'em. Maybe dat's what
dey call hell, huh?⁵

"De woist punches" for Roethke result from the too rapid commuting between extreme states of the ideal and the real. Roethke describes this "pure fury" in his essay on "In a Dark Time": "The danger to the human condition lies in excessive acceleration either way. The way up and the way down may be the same, but the pace often varies, sometimes disastrously."⁶ The rapid shift from the self-destructive animal in the third stanza to the near annihilation by the ideal woman in the fourth stanza is quickly summarized in a pivotal line: "Dream of a woman, and a dream of death." The abyss the speaker lives near, then, contains the double threat of the absolute temporal world and the absolute eternal realm. Or, if this is the abyss

⁵Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays (New York: The Modern Library, 1952), p. 86.

⁶Theodore Roethke, "On 'In a Dark Time'" in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, Anthony Ostroff, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965), p. 50.

of the absolute ideal, the speaker needs the "ground" of the real (cf. "The ground needs the abyss," C.P., p.121., and "I lived with open sound,/Aloft and on the ground," C.P., p. 128). His only hope is that he can endure another cycle of dark and light. It seems, however, that if the "excessive acceleration" does not kill him, these long fearful nights might.

The metaphysics of various philosophers provide the frameworks with which the speaker can describe his dilemma, but they somehow fall short of his existential experience. Perhaps this is why he turns to Tillich whose philosophy offers not only an ontology but also an ethical stance, both of which accomodate the speaker's experience: "The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation."⁷ It is clear to me that for Roethke, self-affirmation will require coping with nonbeing and meaninglessness in both ideal and real love.

In Notebook 103 dated January 8, 1944; August 25, 1946; and July 6, 1949 (the first date usually indicates the initial entry and later dates reviews or additions),

⁷Tillich, p. 3.

where Roethke is making notes on philosophy, composing lines for love poems, and recoding poets' views on love and death--in this same notebook Roethke writes a difficult but revealing passage:

The Platonic heirarchy mounting up to and subsumed under the Form of Good inevitably appeals to anyone whose childhood has been fed on Christianity and his [sic] adolescence upon Shelly. The form of the Good, the One may be food or it may be dope but it stops the hunger of the waifs of Here and Now.

Aristotle the biologist was anxious to avoid the gulf between Being established by Plato the mathematician. His concept of energia--significant and so, in a sense, eternal movement exemplified in the time-world--was an antidote to the static and self-contained heaven of Plato's transcendent Forms. But when you look into him you find he does not go far enough; reality, rescued from the One, is traced back to the infima species but not to the individual unit, while his distinction between energia (significant and absolute movement) and kinesis (movement which is merely relative) restores the Platonic gulf that he has just been trying to fill in. (Notebooks, 7-103)

I find this notebook entry instructive for several reasons. First, it is made during a time that Roethke was formulating ideas for his own love poetry, but probably before any love poem took final form. Second, if the passage derives entirely from another writer, nevertheless Roethke thought it important enough to write down--he seldom records philosophical passages as long as this one. (I suspect that if the ideas are not at least partially Roethke's own, they would have appeal for him, especially in the idiom and dramatic

conflict of "It may be dope but it stops the hunger of the waifs of Here and Now," and words like "antidote," "rescued," and "gulf.") Third, the passage supports the idea found in the love poetry that Roethke wanted to unite the ideal and the real--to "fill in" the Platonic gulf. Man needs the ideal to "stop the hunger of the waifs of Here and Now," but he also needs the real as "an antidote to the static and self-contained heaven of Plato's transcendent Forms." Fourth, the ideal and the real are represented in terms of stillness and motion; likewise, Roethke symbolizes the ideal and the real in love as stillness and motion. On the page after the notebook passage above, Roethke records a quotation from MacNeice: "'Metaphysics for me was not something cold and abstract; it was an account of reality but an artistic account, not a scientific one for me.'" The same could be said of Roethke's use of metaphysics in the love poems.

The Renewal

1

What glories would we? Motions of the soul?
 The centaur and sibyl romp and sing
 Within the reach of my imagining:
 Such affirmations are perpetual.
 I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs,
 Yet, like a tree, endure the shift of things.

2

The night wind rises. Does my father live?
 Dark hangs upon the waters of the soul;
 My flesh is breathing slower than a wall.
 Love alters all. Unblood my instinct, love.
 These waters drowse me into sleep so kind
 I walk as if my face would kiss the wind.

3

Sudden renewal of the self--from where?
 A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine;
 I know I love, yet know not where I am;
 I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.
 Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?
 I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.

4

Dry Bones! Dry Bones! I find my loving heart,
 Illumination brought to such a pitch
 I see the rubblestones begin to stretch
 As if reality had split apart
 And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
 I find that love, and I am everywhere.
 (C.P., p. 135)

In the first stanza, we rejoice as Roethke harmonizes the physical centaur with the spiritual prophetess, the physical romping with the spiritual singing. Physical sighs are lengthened into spiritual songs. "Yet, like a tree," the speaker endures the shift of things: not only will he be flexible to endure the shifts of the spiritual and physical winds, but he will be firmly rooted in the physical. Moreover, the tree represents the concrete sensuous world that is the counterpart to the world of the imagination. Writing about his poem "In a Dark Time," Roethke identifies the

tree as "a growing thing, which as a primitive man, he can touch and feel and understand."⁸ Happy to have motion in the ideal realm and stillness in the real world, the speaker balances the sensuous world of nature with the imaginative world of myth. But if we study the remaining three stanzas, we find that he progresses toward an increasingly precarious overly-spiritual condition where he is no longer rooted in reality.

Malkoff correctly identifies the allusion to Genesis in the second stanza, but I would not agree that the imagery "announces the re-creation of life."⁹ More accurate is the idea that there is a regression to the time before creation, to the void when only spirit existed. The speaker wants to be rid of his physical nature: "Unblood my instinct, love." Whether "love" here is a term of endearment or the abstract concept itself, it is clear that she/it has an ideal nature that can sublimate his physical nature. Just as fast breathing is associated with overly physical love (cf. "and breathing hard, as that man rode between those lovely tits"--"The Sensualists," C.P., p. 136), slow breathing is associated with a thinning of the air,

⁸Theodore Roethke, "On 'In a Dark Time,'" p. 50.

⁹Malkoff, p. 137.

a vacuum, and spirituality: "My flesh is breathing slower than a wall." The speaker wonders whether his dead father, now a spirit, has life. As the speaker himself becomes more spiritual, he becomes more like his dead father. Furthermore, the speaker's renunciation of the physical seems inspired by the guilt--here probably sexual guilt--a son inherits from a father. Ironically, when the speaker "unbloods his instinct" and moves toward physical disintegration, he also attains an identity independent of and undominated by his father. Finally, the speaker's face "kisses" or loves images of the ideal: the ethereal wind, the amorphous water, and the dreamy undefined world of drowsy sleep.

In the third stanza, the speaker knows he has been "renewed," but his renewal is actually the destructive state of becoming too spiritual: "A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine." The loss of a sense of spatiality accompanies the loss of physicality: "Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?"-- "form" here appears to be physical form. Frightened, the speaker tries to keep his "five wits" or five senses warm, but cold spirituality (cf. the "cold lip" of "The Dream" and the "cold heart" of "All the Earth,

All the Air") dominates the fourth stanza.

Unblooded, drained of spinal fluid, left with Ezekial's dead "dry bones," the speaker's "loving heart" is brought to a point of disintegration and annihilation. Even the most physical, inanimate objects like the rubblestones are exposed to the hazards of the excessively spiritual. If reality is splitting apart as the physical and the spiritual are separated, the speaker sides with the spiritual and therefore is now "everywhere," just as the ideal woman in "The Other" was found "every place" (C.P., p. 130). "That love" is the love of the ideal which results in an airy expansion to the point of annihilation. A question remains, however, in what actually happens when the "loving heart" is brought to this point--is it completely "split apart" from the soul or does it just "begin to stretch"? "The stones begin to stretch/As if reality had split apart/And the whole motion of the soul lay bare." The ending is somewhat ambiguous. A "stretching" toward the ideal yields "illumination"; but a complete break to the ideal results in annihilation.

Despite the illumination gained, Roethke himself does not desire the condition of the speaker in the fourth stanza of "The Renewal": it is too removed from the physical. What he did desire is stated clearly

in a notebook entry: "rampant, triumphant, fleshly mysticism, the full spasm of the human, not simply beauty and darkness" (Notebooks, 14-197). Perhaps "The Sensualists" can achieve this "fleshly mysticism."

The Sensualists

"There is no place to turn," she said,
 "You have me pinned so close;
 My hair's all tangled on your head,
 My back is just one bruise;
 I feel we're breathing with the dead;
 O angel, let me loose!"

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

"My shoulder's bitten from your teeth;
 What's that peculiar smell?
 No matter which one is beneath,
 Each is an animal,"--
 The ghostly figure sucked its breath,
 And shuddered toward the wall;
 Wrapped in the tattered robe of death,
 It tiptoed down the hall.

"The bed itself begins to quake,
 I hate this sensual pen;
 My neck, if not my heart, will break
 If we do this again,"--
 Then each fell back, limp as a sack,
 Into the world of men.
 (C.P., p. 136.)

We immediately notice that in style as well as well as in subject matter "The Sensualists" differs from "The Renewal." Dialogue and the elimination of the "I" by using the third person distance the speaker

(and his beloved) from the undersirable coarseness of this poem. A similar use of the third person is also found in the other grossly physical sections of previous love poems: "A drunkard drinks and belches in his drink" ("The Sententious man," C.P., p. 132) and "A man's a beast prowling in his own house, a beast with fangs" ("The Pure Fury," C.P., p. 133). Furthermore, while "The Renewal" has almost no explicit or implicit sexual diction, "The Sensualists" employs sexual language devoid of any spiritual connotations. For example, the word "tits" (line 12) lacks the emotional and spiritual connotations of the word "breast" used in the line "Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone" ("The Sententious Man," C.P., p. 131). The concrete, realistic diction of "gin," "cigarettes," "teeth," and "sack" contrasts sharply with the ethereal, amorphous imagery pointed out in "The Renewal." Perhaps, Roethke chooses a variation of ballad stanza to evoke other ballads of the supernatural in the life of "common people."

If "The Renewal" reveals the dangers of an excessively spiritual state, "The Sensualists" defines the twofold terrors of an excessively physical state. First, the couple's lovemaking is reduced to mutual physical injury: "'My back is just one bruise;'"

"My shoulder's bitten from your teeth;" and "My neck, if not my heart, will break/If we do this again." Second, and ultimately more destructive, their lovemaking results in a dissociation of body and soul. In the second stanza the woman's soul stands apart from her body which is lying beneath the man. "Affrighted from her wits" (the same five senses the speaker longs for in "The Renewal"), the woman's soul leaves her body: "The ghostly figure sucked its breath,/And shuddered toward the wall;/Wrapped in the tattered robe of death,/It tiptoed down the hall" (stanza three). At the same time, her body--"pinned so close"--is "breathing hard, as that man rode/Between those lovely tits." Now entirely "an animal," only her "neck" and not her "heart" can break if they "do this again." Absolute physicality is "breathing with the dead" because it reduces the lovers to mutually destructive beasts.

Just as in "The Renewal," there are other possibilities for the "ghostly figure." An appropriately neuter "it," the ghost also suggests parental disapproval as well as the departure of the man's spiritual nature. Earlier drafts by Roethke include the lines "I swear there's someone else around/I think we're getting close to hell," and "The ghostly woman sucked her breath"

which was changed to "The ghostly figure sucked its breath." The revisions suggest Roethke desired a rich ambiguity.¹⁰ The ghost's freedom to move is contrasted with the woman's cry of "let me loose": too much physicality results in confinement ("I hate this sensual pen")--the opposite of the extreme expansion of "The Renewal" ("I am everywhere"). In both poems the heart (an image--unlike "tits"--with both spiritual and physical denotations) is either annihilated by excessive spirituality or broken by brutal physicality. Likewise, breath (also simultaneously a spiritual and physical image) is either slowed or "sucked" to nothingness or increased to the panting that results in collapse.

A final point on "The Sensualists" involves the hierarchy Roethke provides in the images of "animal" (line 16), "men" (line 26), and "angel" (line 6). This traditional hierarchy operates in such statements as Pascal's: "Man is neither angel nor beast; and the misfortune is that he who would act the angel acts the beast" (Pensees, No. 358). The "angel" in Roethke is first, of course, simply a term of endearment, but it is also more than this. Praying to her spirit to free

¹⁰U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 23-32.

her from the entanglement in the overly-physical, the woman does not regain a balance of the physical and the spiritual but rather suffers a rupture of her spirit from her body. And her spirit is not an "angel" but a terrified "ghostly figure." When "each fell back, limp as a sack, / Into the world of men," the lovers have actually improved their ontological position by reuniting body and soul, and thereby escaping the terrors of the beast and the ghost. But the "world of men" should also be contrasted with the dancing, frolicking, romping, singing world of children which is used repeatedly as the setting for perfected love: "I played in flame and water like a boy" ("The Dream," C.P., p. 120).

The three poems discussed in this chapter, then, further develop the death motif. Terrifying images of destruction reflect the increasing threat of a severance of body from soul. Furthermore, the theme of the ideal and the real in love is expanded by the philosophy of nonbeing. Combining an ontology--to "fill in" the "Platonic gulf"--with an ethical stance--Tillich's courage to be--the speaker endures long meaningless nights, extreme sublimation of his physical nature, and a descent into gross sensuality. It is

unclear whether such penitential acts will result in illumination or annihilation, salvation or extinction.

CHAPTER V

FAR FROM LOVE

At this point in the sequence, we realize that these love poems tell a story: how a vision of sublime love inspires an ordinary man to set out on an increasingly desperate quest to gain that love. After experiencing this vision, which he fears may have been only a dream after all, the speaker rejoices to discover that the vision is real: he holds an angel incarnate in his very arms and loves her passionately. Singing in only joyful, ebullient tones, the speaker--as well as all nature--celebrates this coming of heaven to earth. What ecstasy he feels as he finds himself in his woman! Innocence, virtue, goodness, joy, love--with only the slightest hints of how tenuous a hold he has on this woman. But then things start to go wrong. Disturbed by discrepancies in their natures, he has little idea of what is to come. Love will mend these differences--he's sure. But his very search for love draws him to dizzy precipices and a degrading pit. What has gone wrong? Is he over-reacting or unresponsive to love? He fears that his beloved may

exist beyond mortal reach, that if he follows her he will lose his foothold in reality, that he will suffocate at her rarefied heights. Even when he hates his flesh most, he can not reject it, or deny it, or abandon it for her--that would be death. Then, gasping for life at the summit of ideal love, he loses his balance and plummets to the pit of sensuality. Wounded, exhausted, dissipated, confused, he can not endure all this much longer. Can anyone help him? Who else has known sublime erotic love and has also sunk to these disgusting sensual depths? He turns to John Donne--not the John Donne who usually idealizes love, but John Donne in this same pit.

The title of Roethke's poem, "Love's Progress," invites the reader to wonder how the speaker "progresses" from the celebratory first stanza to the fearful last stanza (C.P., pp. 137-138).¹ Roethke undoubtedly welcomes a comparison of his poem with John Donne's poem of the same title,² but such a project threatens

¹Other meanings of "progress" also function ironically: a "progress" is a "journey" and a "royal tour marked by pomp and pageant," but Roethke's speaker laments, "I have gone nowhere" (Section 4).

²Donne, pp. 103-106. All line references are to this edition. Donne also plays with all the ironies of the ambiguous "progress."

to engulf a critic.³ Both poems are elusive: Donne's primarily so because his persona seems radically different from Donne himself; Roethke's primarily so because lexical and syntactic ambiguities combine with seemingly unconnected shifts in tone and associational leaps. My purpose in comparing these two poems will be to show to some degree how even a limited understanding of Donne's poem can clarify and enrich Roethke's.

First, some general comments on Roethke's relation to Donne. References to Donne abound in Roethke's teaching notes, in his poetry notebooks, and in other loose notes.⁴ Roethke copied out many of Donne's poems in his own hand and annotated criticism written about Donne.⁵ And in many ways he absorbed Donne in his own poetry as critics have pointed out,⁶ and as

³Coburn Freer only superficially relates the two poems, pp. 55-56; and in her source study, LaBelle establishes Donne's influence in several love poems, but surprisingly neglects "Love's Progress," pp. 117-119, 123-125

⁴To cite just a few references, U.W. Teaching Notes, 72-12; Notebook 105, Reels 7-8; Notes 68-3.

⁵U.W. Other Poets in T.R.'S Hand, 15-16 (35 pages of Donne's poems); Ephemera, Box 31 contains an annotated copy of Arnold Stein, "Donne and Satiric Spirit" reprinted from ELH, A Journal of English Literary History, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December, 1944).

⁶LaBelle, pp. 117-119, 123-25; Sullivan, p. 101; Freer, pp. 55-56.

we have noted in "The Dream" (cf. Chapter II, pp. 5-8). Acknowledging this debt, Roethke writes in "The Swan," another poem in this sequence, "I am my father's son I am John Donne/Whenever I see her with nothing on" (C.P., p. 140). An earlier unpublished draft of these lines read, "I am a florist's son. I am John Donne. . . ." (U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 24-14). Roethke deliberately makes the published line ambiguous because for him Otto Roethke, the florist, and John Donne, the poet, are both his father. In his important essay, "On Identity," Roethke writes,

In any quest for identity today--or any day--we run up inevitably against this problem: What to do with out ancestors? I mean it as an ambiguity: both the literal or blood, and the spiritual ancestors. Both, as we know can overwhelm us. The devouring mother, the furious papa. And if we're trying to write, the Supreme Masters. In this same harried period, I wrote, in a not very good poem:

Corruption reaps the young. You dread
The menace of ancestral eyes
Recoiling from the serpent head
Of fate, you blubber in surprise. . . .

And so on. . . in the last stanza,

You meditate upon the nerves,
Inflame with hate. This ancient feud
Is seldom won. The sprit starves
Until the dead have been subdued.

I remember the late John Peale Bishop, that fine neglected poet, reading this and saying, "You're impassioned, but wrong. The dead can help us." And he was right; but it took me some years to learn that. (S.P., p. 23)

For Ted Roethke, then, Donne was--like Otto Roethke--both an overwhelming Supreme Master and one of the helpful, guiding dead.⁷

Assured that Roethke's relationship to Donne is neither simple nor superficial, we might expect that the correspondences between their poems will be deep and rather complex. Therefore, for discussion purposes, I will begin by establishing as simply as I can, one clear, albeit limited, reading of Donne's poem.

For me, the crucial question in reading Donne's poem is how we take the speaker. I believe Donne has created a speaker whose argument we are to reject and whose character is designed to evoke both revulsion and pity. The speaker's character and his argument become a kind of reductio ad absurdum of the proposition that love should be physical and only physical. Hence, the speaker argues first that the "right true end of love" is a woman's "centrique part" (line 36), her

⁷Nelson Bentley, who for many years taught one section of Verse Writing at the University of Washington while Roethke taught the other, told me that Roethke once asked his class to write an essay on what impact a writer's ancestors had on his writing. When a student asked which ancestors Roethke meant, his literal or his literary ancestors, Roethke growled back, "Just answer the question," as if both types of ancestors were one and the same.

"desired place" (line 39), her "lower" "mouth" (lines 92-93), and, second, that the surest, safest, and quickest route to these private parts is from the foot upward rather than from the face down. Commenting on the speaker's argument, Helen Gardner writes, "This outrageous poem is a paradox, arguing that since the beauty of a woman is not what a lover desires in her, the foot should be studied rather than the face."⁸

Another perceptive critic, Murray Roston captures Donne's feelings about the character of this speaker:

When the pagan Eros surfaces momentarily from the dark recesses of Donne's mind, woman represents neither virtue nor beauty, but shrinks to a genital orifice constructed to supply man's lustful needs:

Rich nature hath in woman wisely made
 Two purses, and there mouthes aversely laid;
 They then which to the lower tribute owe
 That way which that Exchequer lookes must goe.
 Hee which doth not, his error is as greate
 As who by Clyster gave the stomach meate.
 [ll. 91-96; Clyster: enema; Meate: food.
 Gardner, p. 135]

His own disgust is patent in the nauseating image with which the passage concludes--an image which retains its emetic effect despite the worldly pose of unshockable bravado.⁹

Furthermore, the route from the face down--the route the speaker tells us not to travel--is, despite

⁸Helen Gardner, ed. John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 133.

⁹Roston, p. 138.

its real or fanciful dangers, the more appealing to us and to Donne precisely because it reveals the woman's virtue and beauty while at the same time leading to the "desired part." When the speaker argues "Perfection is in unitie" (line 9), in a sense he is right: love is simpler and less troublesome when reduced to a biological organ. But only a coarse, disordered man would choose this limited kind of love. We pity--Donne pities--the speaker for his perverted view--a fear of any emotional or spiritual involvement in love. In this admittedly limited reading, the poem becomes more than a mock-heroic dissertation on where to stick whatever in the sexual act. Donne rejects his own speaker's overly-physical view of love and opts for the more dangerous physical and spiritual approach. With this theme in mind--the two ways of love--let us now look at Roethke's poem.

At first glance, Roethke's poem seems to share nothing with Donne's except a title. The manner and matter of each poem appear radically different: Donne has written an outrageous, satiric elegy, blatantly vulgar and full of obscene innuendo; Roethke has written a comparatively quiet, short lyric which lacks even Roethke's usual degree of sexual suggestiveness.

Nor has Roethke echoed much of Donne's imagery or metrics. But, if we carefully keep Donne's theme fully in mind as we read Roethke, we should discover that Roethke's speaker at each precarious step turns to Donne as a guide in the two ways of love. We, too, will rely on Donne to guide us through Roethke's hazardous poem.

Roethke's first stanza, as well as his title, steers us to Donne's poem:

The possibles we dare!
 O rare propinquity!--
 I have considered and found
 A mouth I cannot leave.
 The great gods arch my bones.

The antiquated "possibles" and the Latinate "propinquity," diction highly uncharacteristic of Roethke, appear intended to evoke the spirit of Donne.¹⁰ Furthermore, the whole stanza itself seems to be as much about the modern poet's relationship with the older master as it is about the speaker's relationship with his beloved. But let us discuss the latter case first. Roethke can not be unaware of the two mouths Donne refers to:

"Rich nature hath in women wisely made/Two purses,
 and their mouths aversely laid" (ll. 91-92). Which

¹⁰ Roethke puns with archaic, antiquated, or obsolete meanings but almost always uses the modern word in his poetry. After Open House, his first book, Roethke, for the most part, abandons Latinate diction.

mouth can Roethke's speaker not leave? The question may seem silly in Roethke's poem, but is a crucial one in Donne's poem. The perilous voyage from the face to the "desired part" passes

Her swelling lips; To which when wee are come,
 We anchor there, and think ourselves at home,
 For they seem all: there Syrens songs, and there
 Wise Delphick Oracles do fill the ear;
 There in a Creek where chosen pearls do swell,
 The Remora, her cleaving tongue doth dwell.
 These, and the glorious Promontory, her Chin
 Ore past. . . (ll. 53-60). 11

If this is the mouth Roethke's speaker has considered and found and cannot leave, then he is seen to be enchanted and enlightened by the "Wise Delphick Oracles" and simultaneously lured to destruction by the "Syrens songs"; enriched by "chosen pearls" but destroyed by the "Remora." Perhaps this description is only hyperbolic and comic in Donne, but nonetheless, this is the mouth passed on the route that Donne prefers, and this mouth is threatening even if only in the fact that it stops progress to the "desired part." (Ultimately, this "upper mouth" symbolizes for both poets an approach to love that is both physical

¹¹"The remora, or sucking fish, was believed to stop any ship to which it attached itself, as a woman's tongue will delay her lover's progress to the desired port." Gardner, p. 135.

and spiritual--and an approach that is more dangerous.) If, on the other hand, Roethke's speaker has chosen Donne's speaker's preferred route from the foot upward, and now cannot leave the "lower mouth," then he is doomed to purely physical approach to love that is simple and safe but devoid of beauty and virtue. In the line "The great gods arch my bones," Roethke hits Donne's mock-heroic tone and suggests his bawdy innuendo, while at the same time hinting on a serious level that such a spiritual "arching" of his physical bones can be both glorious and destructive. Roethke probably intends both playful and serious ambiguities, and wants us to consider several "possibles" in relation to Donne's poem.

The second stanza opens with two lovely images of a journey, a "progress": "The long veins of the vine/Journey around a tree;/Light strides the rose." If these "greenhouse" images are to parallel respectively Donne's slower, circuitous, ship's journey from the face down, and his quicker "empty and Aetherial way" from the foot up, Roethke's speaker certainly shows little preference here for one route over the other. Indeed, if these do correspond to Donne's routes, Roethke has made them both more pleasant: he has

removed the dangers from the first route and has added spiritual "light" to the second. Perhaps with the musical vowels of "veins of the vine," Roethke wants to continue the celebratory hopeful tone of the first stanza. But beginning with the last two lines of the second stanza the speaker is confronted with Donne's two routes.

Donne's route from the foot upward, the purely physical approach of his vulgar, confused speaker is more modestly represented in Roethke's mildly erotic lines, "A woman's naked in water/And I know where she is." An earlier, unpublished draft of this stanza makes this point clearer than the final poem does:

Your still, recumbent forms,
 You monsters, fear me now,
 A coarse disordered man:
 A woman's naked in water
 And I know where she is.
 (U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 21-30)

Donne's speaker twice describes any love beyond the physical as a monster (ll. 4-8); Donne's speaker also is aptly described as "a coarse disordered man"; and Donne's speaker also knows where what he wants is.

Donne's route from the face down, the dangerous approach combining the physical and spiritual qualities of the woman is represented in Roethke's third stanza.

The clue that Roethke is moving from Donne's speaker's viewpoint toward that of Donne himself is provided in the word "True": Roethke's speaker concedes (to Donne, to Otto Roethke, to us, to himself?) that his woman possesses virtue and beauty beyond the physical-- "She can think a bird/Until it broods in her eyes." The counterpart to Donne's "Wise Delphick Oracles," this woman not only possesses warm, quiet, tender motherly eyes but also the wonderful imagination of a metaphysical poet. In another context, Roethke-- borrowing some from T. S. Eliott--writes, "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" (S.P., p. 27). And in Roethke's exquisite images his woman also thinks with her body and makes an idea real. Furthermore, like Donne's oracles, she provides access to the divine: "Light of my spirit, light/Beyond the look of love." But when Roethke's speaker chooses this route to love which combines the physical and the spiritual, he also risks encountering Donne's destructive "syrens." It is possible that Roethke's expression, "my violence," is nothing more than a fanciful term of endearment. But, as with Donne, we suspect that the comic tone masks a fearful interpretation, and

this suspicion is confirmed in Roethke's last two stanzas. But even before we arrive at those stanzas, we have some indication that Roethke's speaker fears this "higher" approach to love when he relegates the spiritual "light" to a realm "Beyond the look of love." If so, he's returned once again to Donne's speaker's position: "So we her ayres contemplate, words and heart,/And virtues; but we love the Centrique part" (ll. 35-36). But in the very same sentence, Roethke's speaker paradoxically commands the "Light of my spirit" to love him. When Roethke's speaker wavers between loving this light and contemplating it, he is wavering between identifying with Donne and identifying with Donne's speaker.

Much of the fourth stanza derives solely from Roethke's own symbolism. Once this is said, we immediately are amazed at how much similarity there has been between Roethke's own idiom, which has been developed over the course of all his poetry, and the symbolism he chooses from Donne's "Love's Progress." Except for the words "possibles" and "propinquity," both used to direct us to Donne, the rest of Roethke's poem functions effectively in consonance with his previous poems. I believe Roethke achieved this marvelous effect of reincarnating Donne in his own

likeness by thinking upon Donne's poetry until it "brooded" in his own eyes and images. But the fourth stanza opens by evoking not Donne but the Roethke of "The Lost Son": "It's midnight on the mouse,/The rabbit, and the wren." Roethke's well known profound feeling for nursery rhyme rhythms and small animals--evident in "The Lost Son" (C.P., pp. 53-58) and elsewhere--in turn evokes the fearful and joyful childhood world described in "The Lost Son." The link with adult love is provided in "A log sings in its flame" which echoes the lines from "The Dream," "I played in flame and water like a boy. . .Like a wet log, I sang within a flame" (C.P., p. 120). After this progression from childhood to maturity, the allusions to the childhood world that is uniquely Roethke's combine with the adult world that Roethke shares intimately with Donne to form two of the most powerful lines Roethke ever wrote: "Father, I'm far from home,/And I have gone nowhere."

The pathos of these lines derives partly from the mild paradox, partly from the lingering mournful "a" and "o" sounds, and partly from the consonance which joins "Father," "far" and "nowhere." Ambiguity causes a combined sense of movement without progress, of maturity without achievement, of being lost without

going anywhere. The lines are at once a plea for parental guidance, and an acceptance of parental judgment. The "lost son" cries out to his father, John Donne, to steer him to his true home and not to a false mouth "To which when wee are come,/We anchor there, and think our selves at home,/For they seem all" (ll. 53-55). And he cries out to Otto Roethke. No one can know fully what Otto Roethke meant to Ted, but his biographer, Alan Seager, gives us some feeling for the relationship:

For a while every boy's father is a god to him. Then, slowly, as the boy makes his own discoveries, he dwindles into a man. For better or worse, Ted was spared this gloomy declension. Otto Roethke died when he was still the untainted source of power, love, and the lightnings of his anger. Once the numbness of shock had worn away, it must have seemed to Ted that the stays and props of his whole life were broken. In the space of three months, the greenhouse was gone, his uncle was gone, his father was gone. The stage where he had played out his childhood was no longer his. . . and what he lost when the dirt fell in his father's grave was going to take him the rest of his life to learn (G.H., p. 43)¹²

In the context of the poem, then, the fourth stanza is a retreat into childhood for guidance from his literal father and a simultaneous turning to his literary father for help in choosing the "right true end" of

¹²For Roethke's own idealized portrait of his father see "Otto," C.P., pp. 224-25.

love. By this point in Roethke's poem, the question of the right path home has lost its comic, mock-heroic overtones, and is as profoundly serious as any question in a man's life.

In the final stanza of Roethke's poem, the dangers which were perhaps fanciful before are now real:

The close dark hugs me hard,
 And all the birds are stone.
 I fear for my own joy;
 I fear my self in the field,
 For I would drown in fire.

Syntactic and lexical ambiguity are rampant, but however the lines are read, no one can dismiss the speaker's fear of annihilation here. And the conjunction in various ways of annihilation and joy. Furthermore, still playing his poem off Donne's, Roethke highlights the real dangers inherent in both of Donne's routes. By bringing these dangers to the foreground, Roethke reveals that whether or not Donne considers these threats of destruction fanciful, Roethke certainly feels them as real. In sharp contrast to the hope of embracing a warm woman whom the speaker calls "light of my spirit" in section three, all that "hugs" the speaker now is the close dark.

Theodore Roethke's widow, Mrs. Stephen Lushington has written me that she thinks she may have inspired

the lines, "True, she can think a bird. . ." (section three).¹³ If this is so, then a special poignancy is felt in the last stanza when "all the birds are stone," as if Ted Roethke has lost his young wife and her life-giving soul and warmth. When inanimate stones come alive in Roethke, he rejoices; when birds become stone, he despairs. Therefore, despite its safety and guarantee of at least physical love, Roethke knows that Donne's speaker's "lower" route is the way of death: "For as free spheres move faster far then can/ Birds, whom the air resists, so may that man/ Which goes this empty an Aetherial way,/Then if at beauties elements he stay" (ll. 87-90). Although Donne's speaker believes this to be an argument for the "lower" approach, Donne and Roethke both would prefer to be the slower birds than the faster inanimate "Spheres." Unfortunately, the "higher" route offers worse perils.

Rejecting the purely physical approach, Roethke's speaker is left with the dangers of the spiritual and physical approach:

¹³Mrs. Lushington prefaced her remarks to me with "I think 'inspiration' is probably less important than is generally believed: otherwise every man who has ever been in love would have written beautiful love poems, the more in love the more beautiful the poems."

I fear for my own joy;
 I fear myself in the field,
 For I would drown in fire.

In these lines Roethke transforms the striking imagery Donne uses in his voyage from the face down. Donne's speaker sails a metaphorical ship over the treacherous waters of his beloved, and--strangely enough--twice fears a shipwreck in a forest (ll. 41-42, 68-70). Similarly, Roethke's woman is "naked in water" and he fears drowning in a field. (In an earlier unpublished draft, Roethke wrote, "the stubble breaks in flame" which supports the idea that the speaker's drowning in fire is also a drowning in the field.¹⁴) The ambivalence of the speaker in these lines is almost unbearably intense. Compared to the lower approach, the stakes gambled on this approach are increased a hundred fold. While gaining the chance of enlightenment and ecstasy, the speaker risks annihilation. The speaker's ambivalence manifests itself in the intense ambiguity of the lines. The speaker fears both losing his joy and losing himself in his joy; fears being in that combustible, drowning field and fears his own self-destructive tendencies; fears drowning in fire and wanting to drown in fire.

¹⁴U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 21-30.

At one level, Roethke's speaker wants to "drown in fire," i.e., lose himself in the sexuality of his beloved.

At this same level, he is no more troubled being in the field of his woman than Donne's speaker really minds being literally tangled in his beloved's hair.

But the tone in these lines is unmistakable: Roethke's speaker is terrified. In summary, his dilemma is to choose between a purely physical approach to love which because it is devoid of any emotional or spiritual dimensions is tantamount to death and an approach to love which offers both the reward of spiritual enlightenment and physical pleasure but incurs the risk of personal annihilation. Not choosing either approach eliminates any chance for joy. This brings us back to my initial reading of Donne.

In my limited reading of Donne's poem given at the beginning of this discussion, I argued that Donne rejects his own speaker and his argument. I believe it is more accurate to say that Donne recognizes in himself the vulgar persona he has created. Likewise, Roethke recognizes that he too, like Donne, can be "a coarse disordered man." Roethke turns to Donne because he recognizes himself in Donne and hopes that Donne can lead him from the "sensual pen" they both hate to

brave the "higher" way to love, the way which is both spiritual and physical. The whole poem, then, is a conversation with his literary father, a discussion of the "possibles" they both are willing to dare. At the level of bawdy innuendo, the mock-heroic level, Roethke's speaker is willing to dare any route. But as he realizes deeper levels of significance in Donne's poem, he becomes more fearful of the real dangers in love. Although Donne has not solved Roethke's dilemma, the older poet has helped Roethke define it.

A final consideration involves yet another example of how Roethke synthesizes the most personal experiences of his life with his response to Donne. Again, Alan Seager supplies the story:

If the green house was an Eden created and maintained by his father, there was for Ted another one untouched or touched very lightly beyond it. The word "field" occurs as often as any noun in Ted's work. It is part of the title of his last book, The Far Field, and there are lines in it where he seems almost to equate it with eternity. I asked his cousin, Mrs. Mortenson, if there were any place on the property that everone called, "the field." She said, "Oh, sure. Out behind the greenhouse. Ted and I used to play there. . . ."

"But everybody called it 'the field,'" I said.

"Yes. I want to tell you of a little experience, one of the few really mystical experiences I ever had. Ted and I must have been very young. And it must have been an oat field that year because we raised food for the delivery horses. The oats weren't that wonderful gray-green; they were ripe

and tall. And Ted and I went back there to play. We walked through into the oats and we couldn't see over the top so I think Ted must have been about four and I would have been six. I suppose the field held about five acres of oats and all we could see were the oats and blue, blue sky, a very hot day. Then we said to each other, 'We're lost and nobody knows where we are.' It was a wonderful happy feeling. I think this is when I first thought of Ted as somebody special because he was so little. We sort of played house there in the oats, talking, whispering really, what about I can't remember but we both thought it was so beautiful. And by this time, wandering around, we had tramped down a good piece of oats, about ten by ten. And, suddenly, like all kids, the play was over and we said, 'Gee, we'd better start home.' So we started but we couldn't find a way out. This seems silly but for two little kids who couldn't see over the top, it wasn't, and, all of a sudden, Ted began to cry. I wanted to cry, too, because I was scared but the thought came to me, 'No, I mustn't cry in front of Ted. He's so little.' I felt big, you see, two years older. 'I've got to get him out of here.' So I said, 'Now, Ted, don't cry. We'll get home all right.' And of course eventually we did. . . . So we got home and I don't suppose we said anything about getting lost in the field but the next day we really caught it because we'd tramped down so darned many oats." (G.H., pp. 22-23)

Roethke knows when he uses words like "field," "fear," "fire," and "joy" in his lines "I fear myself in the field,/For I would drown in fire," that he is using diction so "drenched with human association" that it can make even bad poems evocative (S.P., p.80). And he knows that such words will echo Donne's poem and Donne's anti-petrarchan style. But I believe that when Roethke wrote his poem he also had in mind this childhood

field. This is more evident in an earlier unpublished draft:

I'm happily bewitched
 Enough is not my fare;
 Alive in the high grain
 She sings the wind around
 I creep beneath the wind.
 (U.W. Literary Manuscripts 21-30)

A very personal symbol of mystical joy and beauty and loss, Roethke's myth of the field becomes something like one of Wordsworth's "spots of time." Roethke's myth brings together all the elements of his "Love's Progress": the girl, the field, the father, the fire, and of course, Roethke himself. And with an awareness of this childhood field we can appreciate a whole new dimension in the lines, "Father, I'm far from home, / And I have gone nowhere."

I hope I have shown that the poem should be read with close reference--"rare propinquity"--to Donne's "Love Progress" and to Roethke's previous poetry and life. Furthermore, when we read references to "the field" in other love poems, we should think of Roethke's childhood field. In section four of "The Dream" we read "She turned the field into a glittering sea" (C.P., p. 120). Section five of "All the Earth, All the Air" reads "A field recedes in sleep./Where are the dead?. . . The field is mine! Is mine!" (C.P., p. 122). And in "Words for the Wind," section two,

"A field breaks like the sea." In earlier love poems, then, Roethke usually rejoices at this transformation of the static earth into the undulating sea, a transformation which is both sexual and supernatural. But in "Love's Progress," he fears being drowned in these waters, being hopelessly lost in this field, and being consumed by fire--not "playing in flame and water like a boy," but suffering from love that has lost its innocence.

After the intense complexity of "Love's Progress," "The Surly One" comes as a welcome relief. It acquires its greatest charm--simplicity--not so much on its own, but rather by serving as a contrast to the twelve difficult poems which precede it. The speaker drops the mask he has so long hid behind, a mask of tortuous complexity and ambiguity, and we finally know him as a person we can recognize:

When true love broke my heart in half,
 I took the whiskey from the shelf,
 And told my neighbors when to laugh.
 I keep a dog, and bark myself.

We all have practical knowledge of the hurt lover who drowns his sorrows in booze and takes it out on whoever happens to be near. Although the first two lines are trite enough--probably intentionally trite to reflect the speaker's simple, stock response--we

might perversely admire the speaker's humorous arrogance in the second two lines. He boasts that he commands his neighbors in what can least be commanded--laughing. Drunk and despondent, he doesn't give a damn about social interaction. He has his dog, after all, and he proves his own ill-tempered gruffness by barking himself. But this self-proclaimed tyrant of laughter also mocks himself, and behind the boasting and behind the self-mocking lies a pathetic tone: he really does not have anyone to comfort him. Only his dog and his booze. Too sore and insecure, he could not endure rejection by his neighbors too, so he rejects them and thereby precludes the possibility of their laughing at him.

In the second stanza, the bravado quickly modulates into an open admission of fear, fulfilling our suspicion that the speaker's surliness indicated his inability to cope with the heartbreak:

Ghost cries out to ghost--
 But who's afraid of that?
 I fear those shadows most
 That start from my own feet.

The speaker admits that far from being someone to fear, he is "afraid of his own shadow." "Who's afraid of ghosts," he says; "I'm more afraid of my own pain and loneliness." Although this poem contains more nuances than I have described, we do feel that we have

gained rather quick access to at least one coherent reading of the poem--even granting that its brevity figures in the speed with which we apprehend this poem. It seems much "easier" than the previous love poems. As in Robert Frost's poetry, we are given some coherent "meaning" almost upon first inspection, but also as in Frost's poetry, the more we look, the more we see. But first, let us backtrack to consider our approach to these love poems.

When we read Roethke's love poems, we must attend to his polarities of body and soul. If we do, we discover that "broke my heart in half" perhaps contains a meaning beyond the trite one: love has caused a threatening dissociation of body from soul. As in "The Renewal," the heart, which partakes in both the physical and spiritual, is "stretched" and "split apart" when body is severed from spirit (C.P., p. 135, section 4). After the first line, the poem itself breaks in half leaving the speaker's physical attributes in stanza one severed from his spiritual qualities in stanza two. The concrete imagery of stanza one-- "whiskey," "shelf," "dog"--contrasts with the spiritual imagery of stanza two--"ghost" "shadows." Finally, the image of the dog (Roethke personally hated dogs) indicates the kind of sexuality that threatened the

speaker in "The Lost Son": "Dogs of the groin/Barked and howled" (C.P., p. 55). In the very structure of the poem, then, we find a broken man with little hope of reconciling his body with his soul. His feet become the tenuous nexus holding body and soul together.

In section two of this poem, Roethke plays with the trite saying, "he's afraid of his own shadow." After appreciating the irony of the "surly one" being so afraid, we find that Roethke has gained some nice ambiguities by rewording the trite saying. "Shadows" and "ghosts" indicate both spirits and our spiritual nature in Roethke's love poems (we have seen them flying all over this sequence). And "start" means both "to begin" and "to move suddenly and violently; to react with a sudden brief involuntary movement." Thus, if these shadows issue from the speaker and are jumping back, then he too must be jumping back and afraid--afraid of what he does to himself. Or can these shadows be his spirit which runs from his "feet," his body, so that he does become some kind of barking animal after all? Or is it the spiritual nature of his woman which flees the sound of his feet because he drinks and growls? Again, we feel his loneliness. He would settle for the worst connotations of "cries"

in "Ghost cries out to ghost," rather than have all the ghosts be frightened of him. He has no one even to communicate his pain to, except maybe his dog--so he barks.

We value this poem, finally, because it quickly establishes an immediately recognizable and appealing persona and because it plays with several levels of meaning simultaneously. And all this is done under a guise of simplicity. Therefore, we want to overlook the unremarkable "sound" of this poem and its failure to convince us that the speaker really feels fearful at the end of this poem. In the larger dramatic context of the sequence, the speaker's condition seems as unfortunate as ever. Whiskey and barking and false boasting do little to lessen his pain. She is gone, his neighbors can not help him, and he is afraid.

When we first read the next poem, "Plaint," we might question why Roethke even included it in his sequence of love poems (C.P., p. 139). This sequence has not been about the myriad kinds of love in the universe, but about the myriad kinds of love of a man for a woman--and she is not even in the poem! Nor is her absence mentioned. Instead, we seem to be left with a poem about the speaker's relationship with God: "Where is the knowledge that/Could bring me to my God?" (stanza two). Why this sudden--unprepared

for--break in the sequence? Roethke once wrote in his notebooks, "I'm sick of women, I want God" (S.F., p.112). If Roethke's harried speaker, thoroughly distressed and thwarted by love, had said this to us at this point in his story, we would know he was crying "sour grapes," and condemn him for it. Despite the sympathy we feel for his troubles, we could not accept his disparaging his beloved only because he failed to attain her. Furthermore, we would despise him for using a quest for God as a sham excuse for abandoning the human struggle that proved too much for him. Is Roethke's speaker in "Plaint," the hypocrite I have described? And if so, what circumstances would mitigate such a harsh judgment against him? Let us turn to the poem to find out.

Day after somber day,
 I think my neighbors strange;
 In hell there is no change.
 Where's my eternity
 Of inward blessedness?
 I lack plain tenderness.
 (C.P., p. 139)

The meter of the first three lines skillfully reflects the speaker's ennui. The initial spondee in a line where two thirds of the syllables are ponderously stressed reinforces the idea of creeping, monotonous "somber days": "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." Moreover, the third line gives us "no change" or

relief from the absolutely regular iambic trimeter of the second line. We admire the prosodic effects, but is the speaker's feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction justified or is he just beating his breast? Whom does he blame for his hellish life? His "neighbors" whom he labels "strange"? (Based on the speaker's canine behavior in "The Surly One," we gather the feeling is mutual.) He seems to think that he deserves an "eternity of inward blessedness" because of his purgatorial suffering from other people. When he says "I lack plain tenderness" is he admitting a personal fault that he will try to remedy or is he begging to be excused from any human involvement because, you see, he's unqualified for the struggle? Perhaps the second stanza will help us answer these questions.

Where is the knowledge that
 Could bring me to my God?
 Not on this dusty road
 Or afternoon of light
 Diminished by the haze
 Of late November days.

More disparaging remarks about his surroundings which, combined with the egocentric "my God" and "my eternity," reveal a speaker almost pompous in his suffering. I think this is the hypocritical speaker we despise when he says "I'm sick of women. I want God." Only this speaker also says, I'm sick of mankind and this grubby world; I want God and I deserve the

beautiful vision for all I've put up with. This speaker sorely lacks any humbling perspective on himself--he's lost the enlightenment that self-mockery provided in "The Surly One." There he could laugh at himself barking at his neighbors, who nevertheless perhaps really were "strange." The self-deprecatory remarks have been replaced with disparaging comments on his neighbors, mankind, the world, and even with a little impatience with God. This last appears in the demanding tone of "Where's my eternity of inward blessedness," "Where is the knowledge that could lead me to my God?" As an antidote to this impertinent tone, we need something like what Roethke wrote in "O, Thou Opening, O": "Who ever said God sang in your fat shape?" (C.P., p. 98). Will the speaker finally abandon this pompous, breast-beating pose in the third and last stanza?

I lived with deep roots once:
 Have I forgotten their ways--
 The gradual embrace
 Of lichen around stones?
 Death is a deeper sleep,
 And I delight in sleep.

We see the nostalgia for the greenhouse Eden, the hope that by returning home he can learn how not to get lost on the "dusty road." He will go back to the greenhouse as Wordsworth returned to Tintern Abbey. But, do we not find a hint of a disparaging remark

in "I lived with deep roots once"? Is he again bemoaning his shallow neighbors and the superficial, impenetrable, infertile "dusty road" where his seed lies barren? Could he be thinking, Since I flourished in the greenhouse Eden, my present failures must be due to my present dismal environment and not to any fault in me beyond my forgetfulness? "The gradual embrace of lichen around stones" does seem to us to be a profound lesson, but putting aside what it might mean for the moment, what does its recollection inspire the speaker to do? He is inspired to say something that clearly sounds like a death wish: since he "delights" in sleep, the implication is that he would delight in death. We can take this seemingly suicidal statement several ways. First, the speaker would seem to use death as he would use sleep--to escape the responsibilities of living with other human beings. And he does "delight" in evading those responsibilities. But "delight" also indicates his great love for self-pity. Fully in love with easeful death, he also savors each minor pain and makes rather beautiful music from the sorrows he loves: "Diminished by the haze/Of late November days." The meaning the speaker seems to draw from the profound lesson of the greenhouse Eden--"the gradual embrace

of lichen around stones"--appears to be that in death, this comfortable world of nature will embrace his bones. As in Bryant's "Thanatopsis," death will be a pleasant resting in nature's magnificent couch. If this suicidal threat sounds uncalled for, babyish, escapist, cowardly, what would we have him do?

We would have him relearn his lesson--"the gradual embrace of lichen around stones." We would like him to regain his deep tenderness; embrace his neighbors and his beloved--not death; slowly and humbly approach God without rejecting this world. We would rather have a real protest than this whining complaint. We sympathize with his self-destructive tendencies when they take the form of a risk incurred in the pursuit of human love. When in "Love's Progress," for example, the speaker fears for his own joy--"For I would drown in fire,"--he is actively pursuing something he would die struggling for--human love means that much to him--and he is afraid. Reading the faint hearted last lines of "Plaint," we worry about the speaker not because of any suicidal tendencies he might pretend to have, but because he has lost his will to find human love.

We dislike the turn the speaker has taken in "Plaint," not because we deny him the right to search for God, but because we do not want him to prostitute

his real search for God by using it to run from human love.¹⁵ We are disappointed to find the speaker not groping for love but wallowing in self-pity. But these disappointments do not diminish the value of the poem. Roethke wisely shows us our great capacities for self-delusion by portraying an attitude which we ourselves almost sympathize with but which we ultimately must reject. Like the speaker, we too are seduced by the beautiful sound of this poem; we too, at times, love our ennui; we too, at times, would love once and for all to escape responsibility; and we too can respond to a "higher calling" in order to neglect our true duties.

In the context of the sequence, "Plaint" could be seen as the nadir of the speaker's quest for human love. In no other poem in the sequence are self-delusion and a weakening of the will to love so pervasive. We felt the intensity and daring in "Love's Progress" as the speaker alternately sought out John Donne, his childhood Eden and his father for guidance on the most dangerous way to love. And we admire the fight in the speaker of "The Surly One" who despite all the whiskey

¹⁵In Roethke's last book, The Far Field, the speaker genuinely responds to an apocalyptic pull.

and ranting does arrive at some true knowledge of himself--as bleak as it is. Fortunately, our speaker never again surrenders to the timid, hypocritical stance he adopts in "Plaint."¹⁶

¹⁶Roethke himself was perhaps capable of adopting this stance--as we all are. But he probably would reject choosing death either to escape this world or to reach God. Nelson Bentley, Robert Heilman, and Roethke's widow all communicated to me that they thought Ted had no conscious suicidal tendencies. Nor does Seager's biography support the notion that Roethke would "delight" in death.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE FOUND AND LOST

We have arrived at the last two poems of the sequence. After experiencing sublime erotic love, our speaker has increasingly failed to strike a balance between spiritual and sensual love. Although there have been moments of ecstasy in this balancing act, the speaker has lost his nerve by the time of the poem "Plaint." Since the sequence seems so carefully constructed, we wonder what Roethke will try to accomplish now--in his last two poems. Let us turn to "The Swan" for some answers (C.P., p. 140).

We immediately notice that "The Swan" differs sharply from "Plaint." The speaker's woman is back, fully as attractive as ever; and he is once again heroically struggling to balance body and soul to achieve the fullest love of his woman. Since we know by now that these polarities are the best barometer of the speaker's state in love, we rejoice to read "In this light air,/Lost opposties bend down" (section two). And as we look more closely at this poem, we will consider not only how the speaker achieves this

reconciliation of opposites, but also how well Roethke expresses this union. The first stanza reads

I study out a dark similitude:
 Her image fades, yet does not disappear--
 Must I stay tangled in that lively hair?
 Is there no way out of that coursing blood?
 A dry soul's wisest. O, I am not dry!
 My darling does what I could never do:
 She sighs me white, a Socrates of snow.

We see the polarities of body (ll. 3-4) and spirit (ll. 5-7), but we can sense the tension as early as the first line: a "dark similitude" challenges even the most intense "studying out." Perhaps the colon after "similitude" indicates that "Her image" is this "similitude." In any event, we also feel a double pull in the second line, but the fact that she does not disappear should be felt as consolation for the fact that she is fading. We prefer this tension to the constant motion and change in "The Sententious Man": "Though all's in motion, who is passing by?/ The after-image never stays the same" (C.P., p. 132). And we much prefer the speaker's striving for love in "The Swan" to his abandoning the struggle in "Plaint." Is his entanglement in that "lively hair" keeping the speaker from following "her image"? If so, like the mariner in Donne's "Love's Progress," Roethke's speaker can not extricate himself from the woman's

purely physical nature ("that lively hair," "that coursing blood") and so he himself is deprived of the spiritual insight she can provide. But she can help him progress beyond her physical beauty: her "sighs"--consistently used as a symbol of the synthesis of body and soul--act as a medium to translate him into a spiritual man, "a Socrates of snow." Let us now consider how well Roethke has imaged his polarities of body and soul.

When Roethke images the ideal as a threat to the speaker's existence, he usually uses images of suffocation ("When will that creature give me back my breath" C.P., p. 134), or transport ("An exultation takes us outside life" C.P., p. 132), or disintegration ("I find that love, and I am everywhere" C.P., p. 135). In becoming a "Socrates of snow" has the speaker moved too far toward the ideal or is he within the limits of an acceptable imbalance of the ideal and the real? In the former case he could be destroyed; in the latter he gains enlightenment and lives. The perfect symbol for these situations, Socrates himself balanced the claims of the ideal with the claims of the real. On the one hand, by becoming Socrates the speaker becomes someone ultimately forced to sacrifice life for

the ideal. On the other hand, by becoming Socrates the speaker becomes someone who effectively merges the highest contemplative life with the noblest human actions. When the speaker says that "My darling does what I could never do," he means that she can both enlighten him to lead a fuller life and also make him more likely to reject life for the ideal. I believe we should push the Socrates analogy no further, but when we study how "a Socrates of snow" plays off "that coursing blood," we realize that Roethke has developed the ideal/real polarities with very evocative and vivid imagery-- imagery contrasting soul and body, dormancy and endless repetition, peace and desperate agitation, light and dark, lifeless and lively, frozen and flowing, dry and wet, cold and hot. In addition to being more sensuous, this imagery is particularly more tactile and kinetic than previous images of the opposites. In "The Swan," then, we feel the polarities better than ever before because the symbol for the ideal is improved. (The first four poems in the sequence contain exquisite images which synthesize these contraries better than other poems.) But can the speaker remain "a Socrates of snow"?

We think too long in terms of what to be;
 I live, alive and certain as a bull;
 A casual man, I keep my casual word,
 Yet whistle back at every whistling bird.
 A man alive, from all light I must fall.
 I am my father's son, I am John Donne
 Whenever I see her with nothing on.

Things have warmed up considerably and we immediately notice the relaxed, carefree tone. Only a stretching, pulling, "etherizing" could make the speaker more ideal; having attained the ideal heights in the first stanza, all the speaker need now do is casually float down to a proper balance of soul and body. And this is just what he does. Fully physical and sexual as a bull, he still retains his responsiveness to the spiritual bird. The ambiguity in "keep my casual word" suggests a balancing of a carefree lack of involvement with responsible concern. Furthermore, he can not endure "all light" but must balance light and dark, the ideal and the real. In the first stanza, the woman drew out the spiritual qualities of the man; here, her nakedness helps confirm the value of his sensuous nature. When the speaker reconciles body and soul, he also reconciles himself with his beloved, with his father, with John Donne, and with himself. A powerful sense of identity replaces the fractured relationship with his beloved, the sexual guilt and shame he felt before his father, and the intimidation of the "Supreme Master" Donne. These last two lines

with their almost boastful, yet playful tone exude joy, and this joy pervades the last stanza.

The moon draws back its waters from the shore.
 By the lake's edge, I see a silver swan,
 And she is what I would. In this light air,
 Lost opposites bend down--
 Sing of that nothing of which all is made,
 Or listen into silence like a god.

The whole stanza is a flurry of images synthesizing opposites in order to represent perfected love. The ethereal moon and its earthly tidal waters operate harmoniously (as in "The Dream": "the moonlight sifted in;/The water rippled" C.P., p. 119). Land and water meet at the "lake's edge" where the moon seems to have uncovered a "silver swan." This Yeatsian creature suggests a kind of spiritualized animal, a bird glazed by moonlight. "Silver" exquisitely blends the dark and light imagery paralleling body and soul. (For a less pleasant blending, cf. "The Pure Fury": "I look on white, and it turns into gray" C.P., p. 134.) When the speaker says "Lost opposites bend down," Roethke indicates most explicitly the polarities which inform the whole sequence. Where before, Roethke used obscure images like "The ground needs abyss" (C.P., p. 121), he now uses the abstract "opposites" to "explain" his notion that perfected love is a balanced union of contraries. The metaphorical "bend" figures with

"like a tree, endure the shift of things" and "stretch" (C.P., p. 135) and "pulling" (C.P., p. 129)--all to signify a productive, enlightening synthesis of ideal and real. And the counterparts to these metaphors-- "split apart" (C.P., p. 135) and "broke. . . in half" (C.P., p. 138)--indicate a severance of the ideal and real. (All stretching and bending--as with Donne's famous compass--is a union of stillness and motion.) Furthermore, "Lost opposites bend down" suggests the easiest, most graceful harmonizing of all the lost opposites in this sequence, including the speaker and his beloved, the son and the father, the modern poet and the older master. As a final consideration, let us think about some of the possibilities involved in the last two lines of the poem and, in turn, review some of the possibilities for the whole poem: "Sing of that nothing of which all is made,/Or listen into silence, like a god."

By using the imperative, the speaker invites us to join him in singing or listening--a nice touch. What is the "nothing of which all is made?" Our imagination? The ideal? The dream or image or "dark similitude" which means all to the speaker? The "nothing" of "whenever I see her with nothing on," i.e., her nakedness, the mother-womb from which all

life springs? All these are possibilities. Perhaps the whole third stanza is italicized and set off as section two to indicate that it is no more than a dream-- but then again dreams are also that nothing of which all is made. To "listen into silence, like a god" seems no less paradoxical, but I think has fewer possibilities. "Listening into silence" could suggest a longing for the unheard. We have two previous references to what only gods can hear: "In her low voice I heard/More than a mortal should" (C.P., p. 128); and in "Four for Sir John Davies," a love poem to be discussed later, Roethke plays with the idea of the music of the spheres (C.P., pp. 105-107). The final vision here echoes the harmony of the universe, the creation of the heavens and the earth--secrets which the speaker now celebrates and engages us in experiencing by the use of the imperative and by supplying ample silence in the comma and period of the last line of the poem.

To conclude, how did the speaker regain his balance in love--how does he get from "Plaint" (where he seemed utterly lost) to "Swan" (where he experiences perfected love)? His woman returns and seems to redress an imbalance in him, but her return is as unpredictable as it is fortuitous. It is as if the speaker has just

blessed the water snakes, the curse is lifted, and he is back enjoying good fortune. Although the speaker can enjoy the change, he must be frightened by how little control he has over his destiny. Even when he does seem to determine his course, he often oversteers or understeers. Therefore, he fears his inability to guide himself particularly in relation to seemingly arbitrary or capricious external forces. In any event, he now finds himself back where he began--with perfected love. But he may have regressed all the way to the beginning of the first poem of the sequence, "The Dream." There, love was only a mere mental image--which brings us to the next poem, "Memory."

In "The Swan" the speaker clearly has regained perfected love, but the whole poem moves toward a dream-like vision. "Memory" begins where "The Swan" left off: "in the slow world of dream" (C.P., p. 141). More so than in "The Swan," however, the speaker here seems to be dreaming of a perfect union of body and soul rather than experiencing it.

In the slow world of dream
 We breathe in unison.
 The outside dies within,
 And she knows all I am.

Again, the music of the lines reinforces the meaning. "Soft" consonants and echoing long vowels

effect a slow chanting, haunting, solemn mood. Moreover, when quicker short syllables form the prosodic environment for "slow world," the expression sounds even slower than it inherently is. Likewise, the sound of the other stanzas also celebrates perfected love. Since breathing is both physical and spiritual, "We breathe in unison" is exactly what the lovers desire. We note the reciprocity in "the outside dies within" which is both a metaphysical and a sexual statement. At a metaphysical level, what "dies" is the very distinction between within and without, soul and body, ideal and real. At a sexual level, external organs merge with internal organs and climax the sexual act. Therefore, the woman knows all the speaker is, just as he once knew his woman fully. If the first stanza, then, shows the consummation of love, what happens next?

She turns, as if to go,
 Half-bird, half-animal.
 The wind dies on the hill.
 Love's all. Love's all I know.

These lines could mean many things; as in other poems, we must seek out the links. "Half-bird, half-animal" appears in this, the last poem of the sequence, as the most explicit reference to the beloved's spiritual/physical nature. As in the penultimate poem, "The Swan," Roethke probably wants to make sure all his opposites

in the sequence have not been "lost" on us. When "The wind dies on the hill," it brings about a tranquil, peaceful, ominous silence. But in an almost allegorical fashion, "wind" and "hill" again symbolize a fusion of soul and body. Since the "wind" is "outside," what we have here is the converse of "The outside dies within" (line 3). This effects a fusing and confusing of "inner" soul with "outer" body: the outside dies inside--the inside dies outside. Unlike one critic, I do not think that "Love's all. Love's all I know" is entirely joyful.¹ Because love is his only "field," he is absolutely dependent on love. Therefore, when "She turns, as if to go" (line 5), he must panic knowing that he has invested all in her and without her he is bankrupt.

A doe drinks by a stream,
 A doe and its fawn.
 When I follow after them,
 The grass changes to stone.

There is no escaping the tragedy here, the pathos. As in "The Swan," a beautiful animal symbolizes the woman, with the emphasis here on her nurturing, mothering appeal. But then the imagery reverses the progression of the jubilant poem "Words for the Wind."

¹Sullivan, pp. 109-110.

There we moved from mineral to vegetable to animal imagery; here we move from the doe and its fawn to grass to stone. Moving from animate to inanimate causes despair in the speaker (as it did in "Plaint": "And all the birds are stone.") Furthermore, submerged imagery suggests climbing a mountain beyond the growth line to the rarefied atmosphere where an ideal woman could exist but not a mortal man. Although she can live as a stone or the moon (e.g., "a garden stone/ Slowly became the moon" C.P., p. 123), without her he cannot survive as a "mineral man" (C.P., p. 124). The devastating effect at the end of "Memory" can be compared to that of Keat's "La Belle Dame sans Merci": "And I awoke, and found me here/On the cold hill side."

We should compare this, the last poem in the sequence, with the first. "The Dream," it will be recalled, records the incarnation of an ideal female figure who ultimately unites with the speaker in consummate love. The events of "Memory" follow the reverse course: we move from union to parting to disappearance. The woman seems to have been spirited away, apotheosized, "excarnated." As in "The Dream," the appearance or disappearance of a bird and deer symbolizes a coming into or going out of the flesh. But unlike "The Dream,"

the emphasis here is not so much on her assumption-- that is hardly indicated--but rather on his being left with nothing. Not only has he lost his beloved, but he has also lost the ideal vision of "The Dream." He keeps only the memory of the loss. "The outside dies within" partly because he projects his grief onto nature and it turns into dead stone.

At this point, I would like to summarize briefly the uses of the death motif in the whole sequence and illustrate each use by reference to lines within the last two poems (C.P., p. 140-141). First, death images are used to indicate an imbalance or split between the ideal and the real in love. When the speaker is threatened by overly-physical love ("Is there no way out of that coursing blood," "Memory," line 4) or overly spiritual love ("She sighs me white, a Socrates of snow," "Memory," line 7) explicit or implicit death images indicate the danger. (Since "The Swan" hardly goes beyond an acceptable imbalance of body and spirit, these images only hint at danger.) In "Memory," however, Roethke cleverly uses "dies" twice (ll. 3, 7) to indicate the merging and subsequent "death" of ideal and real: the synthesis destroys the distinction between "outside" and "inside." And, at least with the first use of "dies," Roethke suggests sexual climax. Therefore, he

plays positive connotations of death off negative ones.

Second, death images are used to indicate the initially frightening loss of identity in love and the subsequent joyful increased sense of the self in love. The speaker is somewhat frightened when "The outside dies within/And she knows all I am" ("Memory," ll. 3-4): he "dies" within his woman sexually and psychologically, revealing everything he is to her and therefore risking her total rejection of him. And yet he gains a profound and euphoric sense of identity when he loves her so: "I am my father's son, I am John Donne/Whenever I see her with nothing on" ("The Swan," ll. 19-20). When we think of the effect the last three poems have on us, we realize that Roethke has really set us up for the extreme pathos at the end of "Memory." After reading "Plaint" we feared that the speaker had lost not only love but also the very will to love. We rejoiced to find him struggling to regain love in "The Swan." And we found that he did regain at least the vision of perfected love at the end of "The Swan" and at the beginning of "Memory." The climax of this drama occurs in section two of "Memory" when the rising action leading to perfected love starts falling and ends in catastrophe.

The final death image ("The grass changes to stone") is a third way that the death motif is used: death serves as the counterpart to the extraordinary sense of identity and being acquired through love. This final image also shows a fourth use of death images--when animate objects in nature (like "birds" or "grass") become inanimate objects (like "stone"), the effect on the speaker (and ultimately on us) is devastating. The opposite movement--when the inanimate becomes animate--results in euphoria, a mystical insight into nature. This last movement is the most illuminating for Roethke because--like Wordsworth--he sees the supernatural in the natural. Finally, death images are used to evoke ancestors--literal and literary--who can be alternately "tender" and guiding fathers or overwhelming Supreme Masters. They can inspire or inhibit the speaker. In "The Swan," he fully embraces John Donne and Otto, his dead fathers.

Before we leave these sixteen love poems, I would like to introduce some material which offers new perspectives on the ideal/real imagery and on the motion/stillness imagery of the sequence. Lastly, I would like to make some remarks on how we should read Roethke's love poems.

Throughout this paper, I have had trouble describing the ideal end of this rainbow. What is this ideal and what does it mean to say that Roethke's woman has an ideal nature. At least one critic, Harry Williams, thinks that the sequence is aesthetically flawed because the woman is so ill defined: "Woman as other is not developed enough by the poet to give a sense of definition between the poet and the woman; hence not a sense of the 'edge' between the two."² Perhaps, an ideal woman by her very nature can not be described (Milton achieved greater artistic glory when he described his fallen angel than when he attempted to describe God.) However, I believe that Williams should see the "edge" in the delicate balance of ideal and real required in perfected love. The drama derives from the fact that upsetting this balance often ends in disaster. Furthermore, the balance must be maintained both within the speaker and between the speaker and the beloved-- and these two balances are tied together. Probably the best image for this network of relationships comes from "I Knew a Woman": "or one hip quiver with a mobile nose." By "mobile" Roethke not only means

²Williams, p. 147.

"moving" but also "like a mobile." In a mobile, objects are balanced with other objects and the fulcrum for that balance itself becomes another object balanced. As we all know, a mobile can fascinate, but if one balanced object is upset, all the rest of the objects fly apart.

I think we can better see the "edge" between the speaker and the woman if we consider Roethke's relation to his wife. As was mentioned above, many of these love poems relate, at least partly, to Beatrice. In a recent letter to me, Beatrice Roethke (now Mrs. Stephen Lushington) wrote

I can't tell you why there was a death motif, if there was. My random guess might be that the Germans are a bit in love with death, though, frankly, I hadn't that feeling about Ted. I think that his poor health made him acutely aware of the likelihood of his dying fairly young. He had severe breakdowns and complications from the effects of drugs given him to calm him down. Also he drank heavily and drinking adversely affected his health. . . . He had bursitis in one shoulder and the cartilage was worn away on his knees from, he said, playing tennis on hard courts. In other words, he was in poor health. Also, he was middle aged and married to someone much younger, which is a constant reminder of one's age. However, Ted had something youthful about him: perhaps it was his great capacity for delight and enthusiasm. He was not, in any sense, jaded.³

³In a conversation with me, David Wagoner, a close friend of Roethke's, also mentioned that perhaps the disparity in the Roethkes' ages accounts some for the death motif. But he also thought all writers fear death because they want so much to continue writing.

When a man loves a woman, it is not unusual for him to idealize her. When a middle-aged Ted Roethke married Beatrice O'Connell, a young bright, extremely attractive woman, I believe he saw her at times just like the woman in "The Dream" or "Words for the Wind" or "I Knew a Woman."⁴ To Roethke, she must have appeared as eternally young, capable of oracular wisdom, absolutely beautiful spiritually and physically. As in his love poems, Roethke's fear for his own death is compounded by his fear of losing Beatrice.

When the speaker in the poems hears his woman's song, he often hears "more than a mortal should" (C.P., p. 128). We understand the part of love that is physical, but we are less certain about the knowledge that her ideal nature brings him. We have seen that at its best, love can allow the speaker to exist simultaneously "both in and out of time" (C.P., p. 131), "Aloft, and on the ground" (C.P., p. 128). In fact, love can make all the "Lost opposites bend down" (C.P., p. 140). I already have pointed out numerous levels at which such unions of opposites take place--metaphysical, psychological, ontological, sexual, ethical, and literary--

⁴Friends of Roethke in Washington still talk of her beauty. She had been a student of Roethke's at an excellent school, Bennington. (G.H., p. 205)

but I would like to speculate a little about Roethke's use of a motion/stasis synthesis. Roethke knew Kenneth Burke very well for several years. As Allan Seager has written, "Ted was often with him and, more than any teacher he ever had, Burke increased his intellectual range" (G.H., p. 136). Perhaps when Roethke uses images of motion and stillness, he consciously or unconsciously is experiencing a mystic state Burke describes in Permanence and Change, a book Roethke himself owned (U.W. Books--Significant Annotations, B-11):

It is at least a possibility that the profound sense of unity to which mystics habitually testify involves in the neurological plane some such condition of "pure action," wherein a kind of dissociation between impulse and movement is established and all the conflicting kinds of nervous impulse may "glow" at once since they do not lead to overt muscular response. Such a possibility would explain why we could choose either the words pure action or total passivity to describe the state. And it would explain why the sense of attainment that goes with it would be both complete and non-combative, suggesting a oneness with the universal texture as thorough as that which the organism must have experienced during its period of "larval feeding" in the womb.⁵

When Roethke hears "more than a mortal should," he might be experiencing something in love that is like the mystical experience Burke describes. I believe Roethke himself would like this analysis since it

⁵ Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change (New York: New Republic, Inc., 1935), p. 318.

establishes such a strong bond between the spiritual and the physical--the profound vision of unity is firmly rooted in the neurological system. Just as he hoped to "fill the gap" between Plato's static ideal forms and Aristotle's moving biological world, Roethke's ultimate vision of love unites all.

My last and ultimate concern is how we should read these beautiful poems. As with all poetry, we must attend to the sound of the poem. Roethke, himself, repeatedly stressed the importance of reading his poetry aloud, and he almost always read many of these love poems at his numerous public appearances.⁶ I have pointed out some aspects of the music of these poems, as well as some of the special prosodic effects Roethke achieves. To me, the greatest appeal of these poems--indeed, an absolute requirement of all great poetry--is their sound.⁷ Of course, intimately connected with the sound of these poems is their "content." My conclusions about some of Roethke's poems could be questioned and so could my methods, but I am convinced that if one reads these love poems in the following

⁶Cf. "Some Remarks on Rhythm" (S.P., pp. 71-84).

⁷Other critics have focused on Roethke's rhythms: Blessing, pp. 171-197; Williams, pp. 135-151; Sullivan, pp. 93-101.

ways, he gains an increased understanding and appreciation of these difficult and exquisite poems.

Special care should be given to how Roethke uses opposites in his love poetry--paradox, contrast, ambiguity, and image patterns often function to express the contraries Roethke hopes to synthesize. Many very difficult lines in the love poetry, some of which no critics seem willing to tackle, can be illuminated and appreciated by reference to these contraries. Moreover, the death motif harmonizes beautifully with these polarities.

A reader should try to place each poem within the dramatic context of the entire sequence, and--as much as possible--continually look backward and glance forward to appreciate this dramatic context. The sequence tells a story.

We must consider how one use of an image elucidates other uses of that image. Successive uses of a symbol usually complement earlier meanings rather than contradict them--in a word, Roethke is relatively consistent with a particular symbol, e.g., his use of "bird" or "moon" or "breath."

We should notice how Roethke not only revitalizes trite sayings (e.g., "I came into my own"), but also how he revitalizes a whole love tradition. Just

avoiding the clichés of popular contemporary love songs challenges any love poet's imagination. In particular, the death-in-love motif--so pervasive in Western culture--would seem an unpromising theme upon which to develop new variations. A moment's thought brings to mind the Bible ("Greater love hath no man. . ."), Romeo and Juliet, Carmen, and numerous songs and poems which express the truism of dying for love. Yet Roethke not only avoids these pitfall, but creates love poems which are built on the highest traditions of love poetry, but which are also ultimately stamped with Roethke's own unique image.

We should appreciate the fact that for all his different poses, we have but one persona and that this speaker might not be too distant from Roethke himself. Therefore, the interaction of Roethke's poetry and his life deserves some attention. Furthermore, we have some evidence that a purely personal symbol, like "the field" behind Otto Roethke's greenhouse, operates with consistent, though complex, meanings over several poems.

Care should be given to Roethke's process of composition. He assembles each poem into an artistic whole from lines which seem to float randomly throughout

his notebooks. If in earlier drafts, lines from two rather different poems--like "Four for Sir John Davies" and "The Dream"⁸--should mingle in one poem, a critic who employs the close reading approach should not be concerned at the seemingly random choices a poet makes. Roethke does seem to grab a line here and grab a line there from his notebooks, but he takes pains to mold the final poem into an organic whole--usually unifying the lines by movements in tone. Furthermore, this method of composition "works" when the symbols are fairly consistent with each other--e.g., a line about a bird will have some spiritual significance wherever Roethke positions the line. Consequently, we must learn to read his images not only within the context of a single poem, but also within the context of the sequence, and--in some cases--within the context of Roethke's entire corpus of poetry and prose.

For Roethke, a poet is "someone who is never satisfied with saying one thing at a time" (S.F., p. 170). He who can not appreciate ambiguity can not appreciate Roethke. He seems to delight in semantic "piling on." I believe that if we consider the ambiguity

⁸Cf. Chapter II, p. 8.

inherent in a line like "I touched the stones and they had my own skin" (C.P., p. 133),⁹ and then compound these ambiguities with relevant references to other poems of Roethke, and then multiply all these "meanings" by the connotations and denotations of words like "touch," "stones," and "skin"--all of which are "so drenched in human association as to make even bad poems evocative" (S.P., p. 80)--then the product of all these factors is so large that it is beyond our conscious mental capacity. And, perhaps this is what Roethke wants.

At times I only want to listen to the sound of the poems and let the sense seep in through the subconscious, if it is to come to me at all. In a recent letter to me, Mrs. Lushington suggested something like this approach:

Lines like "I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?" are perhaps not to be pondered but rather accepted as enigmatic and delightful, like the nonsense refrain in a folk song or a nursery rhyme. If you have read Jennijoy LaBelle's book, The Echoing Wood you may have got some idea of how Roethke worked. To put it very simply, he worked from his notes or from a line he discovered among his notes, intuitively and by ear. He was possibly more interested in the sound than in the philosophical concept or in the sense. This may be only partly true, but I am trying to counteract what seems to me a too literal approach to the poems' meaning.

⁹Partially explained in Chapter V, p. 49.

After studying Roethke's poetry, I remain convinced that these love poems will consistently yield up both exquisite music and profound meaning. At the end of his "Open Letter," an essay in which Roethke "explains" much of the obscure symbolism and strange technique of "The Lost Son" and "The Shape of the Fire," he offers sound advice about what to do after reading criticism on his poetry: "So, kind, throw all this away and read them aloud!" (S.P., p. 43). But Roethke, himself, did think it worthwhile to ponder the sense of his poetry.

CHAPTER VII

A GIRL TOO YOUNG YET OLD ENOUGH

As we turn to the second sequence of love poems, the sequence in The Far Field (C.P., p. 207-217), the methodological question arises as to whether we should start afresh in our analysis of this new sequence or whether we should base our analysis on conclusions reached at the end of the last sequence. I believe that the most efficient and fruitful approach would keep the previous sequence in mind but would not presume that this new sequence will work in the same ways as the last.

To begin with, this thirteen poem sequence does not necessarily represent Theodore Roethke's final plan for this section of love poems. His untimely and unexpected death occurred during a time when he was busy working on final drafts of The Far Field (G.H., p. 285). Left with the task of supervising the actual publication of the book, Mrs. Roethke generally followed her husband's plan of composition very closely.¹

¹Malkoff, p. 172.

However, she did add "Wish for a Young Wife" as the last poem in the sequence of love poems.² And, although there is no doubt that Roethke himself intended to publish a sequence of love poems,³ the grouping we find in The Far Field seems to lack both the coherence and organization we can find in his previous sequence of love poems and in his other poetry. We are left to speculate on what Roethke's plans might have been while we consider the evidence of the poems he did gather together.

As I hope to demonstrate, the first six or seven poems of this section have the unity we have come to expect from a Roethke sequence; the remaining poems--although each is valuable in itself--comprise a mixture whose variety competes with and detracts from the effect created by the initial poems. Since all of these poems had been published elsewhere before they were included in the "Love Poems" of The Far Field,⁴ we at least know

²See her note at the opening of The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke.

³McLeod, Theodore Roethke: A Manuscript Checklist, p. 46, indicates that the poet intended a section entitled "Love Poems." Also, in a letter to Rachel McKenzie on July 23, 1962, Roethke wrote, "I am putting together a sequence of love poems" (U.W. Correspondence).

⁴McLeod, A Manuscript Checklist, pp. 48-50.

that we are working with poems that Roethke felt were "finished products." But we are left to surmise from the clues Roethke leaves us what might have been the final selection and ordering of his sequence. This chapter will deal with the first seven poems which, as I said, do form a coherent sequence. The first six poems clearly have a similar theme--a young girl growing into an increased awareness of love. All but one of the first six are spoken by the girl; "Her Words" is a third-person account of the girl which does, nevertheless, include some of her dialogue. Furthermore, according to his biographer, Roethke began this series of six poems at the same time and place, during November, 1960, while he was in Ireland (G.H., p. 268). Written in June, 1961, the seventh poem, "Song" could be spoken by a man or a woman, but in either case, it acts as a suitable coda to the short sequence.

The fact that most of these poems were written in Ireland reminds us of the significant influence of Yeats on Roethke. In this chapter and in the remaining chapters, I will begin to relate Roethke's love poems to Yeats's love poetry. But first we should consider "The Young Girl," the opening poem of Roethke's sequence.

The Young Girl

What can the spirit believe?--
 It takes in the whole body;
 I, on coming to love,
 Make that my study.

We are one, and yet we are more,
 I am told by those who know,--
 At times content to be two.
 Today I skipped on the shore,
 My eyes neither here nor there,
 My thin arms to and fro,
 A bird my body,
 My bird-blood ready.

(C.P., p. 207)

Young, inquisitive, happy, feminine, this speaker is "coming to love," on the brink of loving, wondering about the familiar contraries of body and spirit, the one and the many, ignorance and knowledge, innocence and experience. Although ambiguous, the first two lines at least suggest that any belief of the spirit must be ratified or validated by the body. (As Yeats's Crazy Jane says "Love is all/Unsatisfied/That cannot take the whole/Body and soul."⁵) Another rather abstract and philosophical observation opens the second stanza: "We are one, and yet we are more. . . At times content to be two." Thanks to the ambiguity of "we"--meaning

⁵"Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment" in The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, Definitive Edition, With the Author's Final Revisions (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963), p. 252. All subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text as Yeats Definitive Ed.

mankind or lovers--the paradox can apply to the individual human being who is both body and soul and yet one entity, and to lovers who can maintain individual identities and a common identity. The poem then takes a surprising and welcome turn to a beautiful girlish image.

Apart from any symbolic import, the last five lines of this poem are memorable for the vivid and charming picture of the girl skipping down the beach. The iambs and anapests of lines 8 to 10 fit the metaphysical hopscotch of this poem as well as the physical rhythms of skipping. On the shore, the brink between all the contraries, she celebrates her freedom to be anything she wants to be: her "I's" "neither here nor there." The rhythm is then modulated in the second-to-last line where soul, symbolized by "bird," and body are grammatically juxtaposed without a predicate to indicate the impending, more intimate fusion in the hyphenated "bird-blood" of the last line. The three stresses of "bird-blood ready" marvelously accent the complete union of body and soul (while also indicating the strength of her confidence), just as the iambic skipping back and forth accented the dualism of body and soul. Here we see Roethke using his contraries for subtle effect, perfectly matching the prosody to

the sense.

One of "those who know"--perhaps even the one who told our young girl about love--is Yeats's Crazy Jane. Without a doubt, Theodore Roethke knew of Crazy Jane whose philosophy is not unlike the position stated in "The Young Girl." Yeats's Crazy Jane, however, is a much more experienced woman than Roethke's innocent girl, but in another poem Yeats did describe a child very similar to Roethke's

To A Child Dancing in the Wind

Dance there upon the shore;
 What need have you to care
 For wind or water's roar?
 And tumble out your hair
 That the salt drops have wet;
 Being young you have not known
 The fool's triumph, nor yet
 Love lost as soon as won,
 Nor the best labourer dead
 And all the sheaves to bind.
 What need have your to dread
 The monstrous crying of wind?
 (Yeats Definitive Ed. p. 120.)

Yeats's poem stresses the disparity between the adult speaker's experience and the child's innocence. What Roethke offers is the child's innocent words without the adult perspective. As mature readers, we know that Roethke's girl is ignorant of some of the more dismal aspects of life that Yeats's experienced speaker points out. Hence, the death motif that is explicit in Yeats's poem is implicit in Roethke's. As mature readers,

we fear for the girl's fragility, her "thin arms," and we are frightened by her ignorance of a threatening world especially when she seems so emphatically "ready" for anything.⁶ We will watch her development with some misgiving.

Given the number of obvious similarities between "The Young Girl" and "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," I think it is plausible that Roethke wanted us to think how his poem played off Yeats's. Given the larger relationship between Roethke and Yeats, there is no question but that a knowledge of Yeats's poetry will help us understand Roethke's.

Roethke openly acknowledges his indebtedness to Yeats's poetry. For example, in his poem "Four for Sir John Davies," Roethke writes "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;/I take it and I give it back again" (C.P., p. 105). And in composing this poem, Roethke reportedly experienced something like a vision of the master poet (S.P., p. 24). "The Dying Man, In Memoriam: W. B. Yeats" (C.P., pp. 153-156) is the sequence which comprises Roethke's most direct tribute to Yeats. Furthermore, we know that Roethke

⁶"Bird-blood ready" might also signify the onset of puberty, a state not yet matched by her mental and spiritual maturation.

studied Yeats's poetry, taught it in poetry-writing classes (G.H., p. 145, 149, 228, 263-64), and even responded to criticism that he was excessively influenced by Yeats (S.P., p. 70). Without debating this last point now, let it suffice to say that numerous poets and critics agree that Roethke was profoundly influenced--for better or for worse--by Yeats's poetry. But what all the critics seldom, if ever, comment on is the Yeatsian influence evident in the first seven love poems of The Far Field. As further evidence of the relationship, let us compare the next poem in the sequence, "Her Words," with Yeats's poem "Brown Penny."

Her Words

A young mouth laughs at a gift.
 She croons like a cat to its claws;
 Cries, 'I'm old enough to live
 And delight in a lover's praise,
 Yet keep to myself my own mind;
 I dance to the right, to the left;
 My luck raises the wind.'

'Write all my whispers down,'
 She cries to her true love.
 'I believe, I believe, in the moon!--
 What weather of heaven is this?'

'The storm, the storm of a kiss.'
 (C.P., p. 208)

Brown Penny

I whispered, 'I am too young,'
 And then, 'I am old enough';
 Wherefore I threw a penny
 To find out if I might love.
 'Go and love, go and love, young man,
 If the lady be young and fair.'

Ah, penny, brown penny, brown penny,
I am looped in the loops of her hair.

O love is the crooked thing,
There is nobody wise enough
To find out all that is in it,
For he would be thinking of love
Till the stars had run away
And the shadows eaten the moon.
Ah, penny, brown penny, brown penny,
One cannot begin it too soon.
(Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 96)

We might begin by noting some of the similarities: both poems are about young lovers; the two poems have some lines almost identical--"I am old enough" and "I'm old enough" (with a suggestion that both lovers also feel "too young"); both speakers "whisper"; both poems use dialogue; both poems incorporate the idea of luck; both poems contrast thinking with doing; both poems have images of the moon and the heavens; both poems repeat words and phrases in a song-like fashion; and both poems use a three-beat line and slant rhyme. My point in drawing our attention to these similarities is not to show that the genesis of "Her Words" is necessarily found in Yeats's "Brown Penny," but rather to demonstrate how each poet develops similar themes, images, prosody, and tone.

The two young lovers come to love with different attitudes--he's hesitant about further entanglement in "the loops of her hair" (as were Spenser's, Donne's, and Roethke's lovers in other poems); she's confident

that her youth exempts her from any responsibility in love while her age gives her the womanly charms that attract her lover's praise. A child, after all, is excused for laughing at a gift, for the self-centered relishing of her cat-like independence and power to scratch and hurt. But the speaker in Roethke's poem does not flatter this coquette when through synecdoche he reduces her to a "mouth" which is the source of her words, her laughing, her crooning, her crying, her whispers, and finally, her kiss. When her over-confidence is shaken by the storm of her lover's kiss, we feel that the mild shock treatment is both desirable and deserved.

Both speakers fear the element of luck or fate in love. Even with the unambiguous answer he gets from tossing the penny, the young man hesitates because "love is the crooked thing." Does the definite article suggest that love is the ultimate swindler because it cheats you out of the time to think about and prepare for it? Or is love the one goal that we cannot pursue in a straightforward manner? In any case, the speaker convinces himself through logic and through the emotional effect of the images of decay and destruction ("Till the stars had run away/And the shadows eaten the moon")

that he should brave the hazards of love now despite his necessarily incomplete knowledge.

Roethke's girl tries to avoid bad luck in love by permanently recording her transient, ephemeral whispers and, further, by identifying with the changeless, eternal, chaste moon. Fortunately, her luck "raises the wind" which develops into the "weather of heaven" and strikes as "the storm of a kiss." This last image nicely symbolizes a union of heaven and earth, ideal and real love, the threatening and life-giving aspects of love. Both poems describe the emotional wavering of the lovers much more delicately than I have been able to explain, and much of the effect of each poem is due to each poet's skillful use of prosody.

With grace and facility, both poets use a three-beat iambic and anapestic line--Roethke in line lengths of from six to nine syllables; Yeats in line lengths of from seven to nine. Also, both poets use slant rhyme to create a music that does not call attention to itself except in the perfect rhymes which signal the end of a stanza in Yeats, the end of the poem in Roethke. And almost every variation from the rising meter in both poems works to subtle effect. For example, in the opening line of "Her Words," stresses pile up to help create a suitably unlovely rhythm, especially

when contrasted with the appropriately smooth and regular second line. With the double stress on "too young," Yeats also employs prosodic emphasis to reinforce rhetorical emphasis in his first line. Consider how both poets skillfully use trochees: Yeats's "Wherefore" to indicate a reversal in the attitude of the boy/man; Roethke's "raises" to suggest shifting emotional winds. Another variation appears in the initial stress of the imperative sentences: "Go and love" in Yeats; "Write all my whispers down" in Roethke. Yet we also enjoy the echoic, incantatory anapests: "I am looped in the loops of her hair," "I believe, I believe, in the moon." Perhaps most effective is Yeats's exquisite refrain with its evocative amphibrachs rising and gently trailing off.

Hoping that I have begun to show at least a partial relationship between two of Yeats's poems and two of Roethke's, I would like to postpone further consideration of Yeats until the conclusion of this chapter. By then we should have a clearer sense of how Roethke is developing the next five poems in the sequence and his love/death motif.

The Apparition

My pillow won't tell me
 Where he has gone,
 The soft-footed one
 Who passed by, alone.

Who took my heart, whole,
 With a tilt of his eye.
 And with it, my soul,
 And it like to die.

I twist, and I turn,
 My breath but a sigh.
 Dare I grieve? Dare I mourn?
 He walks by. He walks by.
 (C.P., p. 208)

In the dramatic context of our sequence, the girl struck by the "storm of a kiss" in "Her Words" now has lost not only her true love but also her whole heart and soul. Ironically, the girl so confident that she could "keep to herself her own mind" has been conquered in such a frighteningly easy manner--with just a "tilt of his eye" (an expression which hints at the medieval "tilt," a contest, a thrust, a parry). Worse yet, continually haunted by his apparition, she also suffers his perpetual departure--"He walks by. He walks by." Thus death imagery in this poem operates in at least three ways: in the ghost imagery, the haunting memory of the lover; in the images of her suffering ("I twist and I turn," "It like to die," "My breath but a sigh"); and in the loss of her heart and soul to her lover.

Apart from sounding beautiful in their own right, the lilting rhythms of this lyric add to the meaning of this poem. For example, the grace and speed of the conquest of the "soft-footed one" is reflected in the anapests of "With a tilt of his eye." And the caesurae and anapests of the final stanza--while wonderfully musical--suggest a note of panic.

What also fascinates me is the complex emotion indicated in her questions, "Dare I grieve? Dare I mourn?" Is she afraid to reveal her vulnerability? Does she fear she would be less attractive if she did? Or, does she feel that these emotions might consume her? We hear her tentative answer in "Her Reticence."

Her Reticence

If I could send him only
 One sleeve with my hand in it,
 Disembodied, unbloody,
 For him to kiss or caress
 As he would or would not,--
 But never the full look of my eyes,
 Nor the whole heart of my thought,
 Nor the soul haunting my body,
 Nor my lips, my breasts, my thighs
 That shiver in the wind
 When the wind sighs.
 (C.P., p. 209)

Apparently, the pain of love has caused the speaker to withdraw to the extent that she would rather mangle her own body to give him part of it than yield her entire being to him. Fully "detached," she could

proffer her hand--modestly dressed in a sleeve--precisely because it is conveniently disconnected from her heart. Yet her avowed willingness to sever her hand from her arm does indicate the extent of the sacrifice she would make for him and illustrates yet another complex form of death imagery in these love poems. The desparate ambivalence evident in this imagery is less obvious in the last six lines. Despite the rhetorical emphasis of all these denials--or perhaps because of it--her rather full and explicit list unwittingly reveals her desire to be fulfilled in love through her spiritual and physical sexuality. Thus a word like "shiver" wonderfully suggests both the coolness of such a detached sort of loving and the contrast with a warmer "shudder in the loins."

Grammar and prosody also show her reticence. Note, for example, that this eleven line string of words is not a sentence, but only a fragment, a conditional clause; she is even reluctant to complete her thought. Likewise, the free verse has several lines which suggest her hesitancy by trailing off in unaccented syllables (see especially lines 1, 3, and 8). Also noteworthy is the delicate onomatopoeia of

"kiss or caress" and "shiver in the wind/When the winds sighs." And finally, we might notice the unobtrusive music of the rhyme and consonance: "Eyes," "thighs," "sighs"; "only," "unbloody," "body"; "it," "not," "thought."

As the fourth in the sequence, then, this poem expresses an ambivalent retreat from love after a confident sallying forth and a disturbing encounter. We sense the emotional lability of the young girl in the delicate modulations in each lyric and in the sensitive ebb and flow of the sequence. "Her Longing" further traces her development.

Her Longing

Before this longing,
 I lived serene as a fish,
 At one with the plants in the pond,
 The mare's tail, the floating frogbit,
 Among my eight-legged friends,
 Open like a pool, a lesser parsnip,
 Like a leech, looping myself along,
 A bug-eyed edible one,
 A mouth like a stickleback,--
 A thing quiescent!

But now--

The wild stream, the sea itself cannot contain me:
 I dive with the black hag, the cormorant,
 Or walk the pebbly shore with the humpbacked heron,
 Shaking out my catch in the morning sunlight,
 Or rise with the gar-eagle, the great winged condor.
 Floating over the mountains,
 Pitting my breast against the rushing air,
 A phoenix, sure of my body,
 Perpetually rising out of myself,
 My wings hovering over the shorebirds,
 Or beating against the black clouds of the storm,
 Protecting the sea cliffs.

(C.P., p. 209)

One thing interesting about the contrasting states in this poem is the tone of each stanza, her attitude toward her metamorphosis. Only now can she fully appreciate how humbly "quiescent" she was (the exclamation mark indicates her present incredulity), and with gentle, self-deprecatory humor she describes her former self as "a lesser parsnip" and "a bug-eyed edible one." In the second stanza, however, she adopts a rather serious, almost self-important tone: "the sea itself cannot contain me." Although her transformation seems less her own accomplishment and more something inherent in her nature (suggestions of a caterpillar/butterfly type of metamorphosis are found in the names of the plants--"The mare's tail, the floating frogbit"), she nevertheless exults in her newly discovered power and glory. Increasingly confident, proud, even boastful, she imagines herself as a predator, a glorious "great-winged condor" and ultimately as a phoenix. A similar escalation in images of power also occurs in her actions--while flying she floats over the mountains, pits her "breast against the rushing air," then strives to beat "against the black clouds of the storm,/Protecting the sea cliffs." This last image at once expresses the courage and noble intentions

the speaker feels while also hinting at a quixotic kind of fantasizing.

In a related manner, the love and death motif in this poem traces at least two kinds of naivety in our maturing girl. When she was "at one with the plants in the pond. . . among my eight-legged friends," no doubt she existed happily ignorant of her vulnerability as an "edible one" while also remaining lovingly "open like a pool" to her whole environment. Once aware of opposition, of struggle, of predators, she discovers her own power to survive in a world with death. But she then confuses her ability to survive with personal immortality and an ability to protect what she loves (as seen in the phoenix image and in her idea of protecting the sea-cliffs and the shorebirds). Her love here seems less a longing for a particular man and more a generic longing for a more active, conscious, participatory loving relationship with man and nature. Perhaps Roethke believes that it is only with such confidence--even if it is false confidence--that we even come to love at all. What remains a mystery for us and for Roethke is the impetus for this powerful longing, especially after "Her Reticence."

In terms of the sequence, then, "Her Longing"

is another account of the young girl's "coming to love," only this time with more confidence than ever before. Technical devices used to dramatize this feeling of power include the paralleling of the two sections and of elements in each to emphasize the contrast, the cataloguing for a cumulative effect, and the final sentence fragment loaded with present participles to imply on-going action. The mythological reference--something unusual in Roethke's poetry--perhaps implies that her fear of death in the two previous poems was unfounded. She now feels like "a phoenix, sure of my body/Perpetually rising out of myself." We might fear that such assurances could lead to more dangerous encounters--the subject of "Her Time."

Her Time

When all
 My waterfall
 Fancies sway away
 From me, in the sea's silence;
 In the time
 When the tide moves
 Neither forward nor back,
 And the small waves
 Begin rising whitely,
 And the quick winds
 Flick over the close whitecaps,
 And two scoters fly low,
 Their four wings beating together,
 And my salt-laden hair
 Flies away from my face
 Before the almost invisible
 Spray, and the small shapes

Of light on the far
 Cliff disappear in a last
 Glint of the sun, before
 The long surf of the storm booms
 Down on the near shore,
 When everything--birds, men, dogs--
 Runs to cover:
 I'm one to follow,
 To follow.
 (C.P., p. 210)

A suitable companion poem to "Her Longing," "Her Time" begins where the last poem left off--the girl is confronting an ominous storm at a rugged coastline--but her tone has modulated. Her earlier visions of protecting the sea-cliffs and shorebirds now seem like so many "waterfall fancies," pleasantly rhyming delusions vanishing before the reality of the storm. The final lines of the poem appear to indicate a hasty retreat to safety but, in fact, are quite ambiguous. "I'm one to follow" could mean that she will follow the storm or that she is one to be followed rather than "everything" else. Such ambiguity in the climax of the poem reveals her ambivalence toward the storm.

Her lovingly detailed observations, her lingering until the last possible moment, her luxuriating in and commingling with the elements ("My salt-laden hair/Flies away from my face/Before the almost invisible spray")--all point to a desire to stay and merge with the storm, to brave the danger. The extended periodic sentence increases the tension: precisely when there

is no time to hesitate, both girl and sentence structure delay. Rhythms are also slowed down even to the extent of separating--at least visually--adjectives from the nouns that immediately follow them ("invisible/Spray," "far/Cliff," "last/Glint.")

And all the imagery of the poem is calculated to mirror both her ambivalence and the pressure to make a decision: the tide is about to shift one way or the other, the last glint of the sun is about to go black, the storm is about to hit, and she is about to be left alone. At the edge, on the brink, at the threshold--this is precisely "her time" partly because the external setting matches her own psychological landscape; partly because when everything else runs away, she chooses to linger; partly because she now knows enough of a real storm to know how it differs from her "waterfall fancies"; and partly because this moment of decision mixes death and danger and love.

In "Her Time" the speaker's simultaneous attraction toward and fear of the storm are placed in sharp relief. The next poem, spoken by a mature adult, laments the loss of that sharply delineated vision.

Song

My wrath, where's the edge
Of the fine shapely thought
That I carried so long
When so young, when so young?

My rage, what's to be
 The soul's privilege?
 Will the heart eat the heart?
 What's to come? What's to come?

O love, you who hear
 The slow tick of time
 In your sea-buried ear
 Tell me now, tell me now.
 (C.P., p. 211)

The "edge of the fine shapely thought" has been blurred by age and time, and correspondingly the concrete imagery and free verse have been replaced by more abstract imagery and the more regular two-beat line. Adopting the lilting rhythms of "The Apparition," the speaker--for all her "wrath" and "rage"--sounds more nostalgic and disillusioned and fearful than angry, perhaps because her experience of love did not match the ideal celebrated in "The Young Girl." Accordingly, the expression "so young" seems to imply that she now realizes how naive she had been. She struggles to rouse her weary emotions which are now reduced to abstractions, apostrophes. Fearful of the "heart eating the heart," she doubts if even her soul will have the "privilege" to survive. Since the heart symbolizes a union of body and soul, what will happen to her when it is destroyed?

The last apostrophe, to love--her lover or abstract love--will somehow provide the answer. Like

the enlightened speaker in "She" (C.P., p. 129) who can "hear down long sea chambers of the inner ear," her love can also sound out the depths, dive beneath the surface agitation to hear "the slow tick of time." Love is to tell the meaning of the past (the first stanza) and the future (the second stanza) in the present (the third stanza).

And it is within this consideration of time that the love/death motif manifests itself. The mature woman's concern with time evident in the impatience of "Tell me now, tell me now" derives from her knowledge of decay, the heart eating the heart. When she was young and in love, time seemed endless, "so long." Likewise, love's "tick of time" is slow because it is in a timeless world, unaware of surface changes, "sea-buried" and therefore deathless. What the woman seeks is some assurance that something of her will be privileged to survive in love.

We can now return to our discussion of Roethke and Yeats. In Roethke's "Song" we discover the counterpart to the mature speaker in Yeats's "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," and our awareness of this adult perspective should color our reading of the six poems spoken by the girl. Furthermore, Yeats's poem provides

a key to the imagery of Roethke's sequence. For the child in Yeats's poem, the wind and water and salt drops are cause for dancing and jubilation. For the adult, given the "fool's triumph," "love lost," and the "best labourer dead," the wind becomes "monstrous crying"; the water, a roar to "care" about, the salt drops, tears for humanity's plight. Likewise, Roethke's seascape imagery operates at several levels: the external setting symbolizes her psychological condition, and images within that setting which seem relatively harmless from her perspective become rather threatening from an adult perspective. But since in Roethke's poems the adult perspective is only implicit, the death imagery more obvious in the first sequence becomes muted in the second.

Yeats's love poems operate more in the carpe diem tradition as is evident in his "Brown Penny" and more obvious in "Her Anxiety," the second stanza of which states,

Such body lovers have,
Such exacting breath
That they touch or sigh.
Every touch they give,
Love is nearer death.
Prove that I lie.
(Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 257)

Roethke's young girl, unaware of the constraints of time, is more concerned about whether or not to yield

herself up--body and soul--to love. Whereas Yeats's speaker in "Brown Penny" will avoid the entanglements of love by delaying, Roethke's will try to limit love to a purely spiritual encounter, or to a generic longing for man and nature, or even to an apocalyptic pull which would unite the girl with the elemental powers in nature--the storm, the eagle--or with the phoenix. Roethke's "Song," on the other hand, is more like Yeats's poems in its concern for time.

When Roethke's girl searches for love, we see death images different from those in the first sequence. Here, images of destruction, like the "storm," parallel the girl's inner turmoil. Images of nature feeding on nature, the devouring of one species by another, not only symbolize the girl's growing awareness of death in the world, but also provide for the possibility for her becoming a noble, courageous, loving protector (cf. the end of "Her Longing"). Her fear of the pain of love is imaged in her macabre willingness to mutilate her body or in her desire to merge with nature or to become a phoenix. As in the last sequence, we see the death motif woven in the contraries of ideal/real, soul/body, ignorance/knowledge, and innocence/experience. Although we notice the "ghost" imagery in "The Apparition,"

appropriately absent from this sequence is the more rakish use of "die" to suggest sexual climax. Nor do we encounter the dead ancestors in this speaker's consciousness or the use of animate and inanimate nature symbolism. What we do find are numerous images of delicacy to figure the physical and spiritual fragility of the young girl.

"Song," then, appears to be an appropriate coda to a sequence that has dealt with the chronological development of a young girl coming to love. Compared to the last sequence, this sequence is at once more delicate, more song-like, less aphoristic and less "philosophical," all of which befits a young female speaker. Whereas the first sequence traced sometimes wild vacillations in the man's loving, this sequence is more fine-tuned, more sensitive to delicate emotional lability of the young girl. Both sequences begin with a definition of ideal love--the first with "Dream," a vision the speaker seeks to recapture throughout that sequence; the second with "The Young Girl," a definition of love which remains to be tested but one which is symbolized in the girl's own perfect integration of body and soul. As each speaker experiences a variety of developmental stages, problems arise. The final poems in each sequence, "Memory," and "Song," both

lament the loss of an ideal vision of love.

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN YOUNG AND A MAN OLD

As I explained at the beginning of Chapter VII, the last six poems of the "Love Poems" in The Far Field comprise a mixture whose variety competes with and detracts from the unity of the first seven. Four of the last six poems, however, do have a common characteristic of being more obviously autobiographical than any of the other love poems. Since the remaining two exemplify two modes (and moods) that Roethke operates in throughout his Words for the Wind sequence, we can use them to define those modes further and to relate Yeats's poetry to Roethke's first sequence. After that, we will relate Roethke's four "autobiographical" poems to Yeats's poetry.

Light Listened

O what could be more nice
Than her ways with a man?
She kissed me more than twice
Once we were left alone.
Who'd look when he could feel?
She'd more sides than a seal.

The close air faintly stirred
Light deepened to a bell,
The love-beat of a bird.
She kept her body still
And watched the weather flow.
We live by what we do.

All's known, all, all around:
 The shape of things to be;
 A green thing loves the green
 And loves the living ground
 The deep shade gathers night;
 She changed with changing light.

We met to leave again
 The time we broke from time;
 A cold air brought its rain,
 The singing of a stem.
 She sang a final song;
 Light listened when she sang.
 (C.P., p. 212)

"Light Listened" reminds us more of the poems in the Words for the Wind sequence than the "Young Girl" poems of The Far Field. More specifically, like "I Knew a Woman" and "Words for the Wind," "Light Listened" celebrates perfected love. Again, we discover the familiar characteristics of this joyful mode: the playfully lusty tone ("She'd more sidesthan a seal"); the union of contraries ("She kept her body still/And watched the weather flow"); the death motif manifested in the lovers' ability to escape time ("We met to leave again/The time we broke from time"); the wisdom gained from loving ("All's known, all, all around:/The shape of things to be"). Noteworthy in this particular example of the celebratory mood are Roethke's shift to the present tense in the third stanza to imitate the effect of a revelation, his synesthesia to show sensory awareness ("Light deepened to a bell"), and his evocative light and dark imagery to suggest ever

darkening transformations until the final revelatory line, "Light listened when she sang." It seems that light itself, wisdom itself, listens as she sings her eschatological "final song."

When Roethke celebrates perfected love, he shares several themes and techniques with Yeats. In several of Yeats's poems we find the idea that through love all opposites can be reconciled, wisdom gained and time and death escaped. For example, when the speaker in "The Heart of the Woman" dares to leave the comfort and security of her "mother's care" to join her lover (a movement similar to Roethke's fear of a loss of identity in love), she discovers,

I am no more with life and death,
My heart upon his warm heart lies,
My breath is mixed into his breath.
(Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 58)

Likewise, when the speaker of Yeats's poem, "Chosen," is asked about "her utmost pleasure with a man," she replies

. . . I take
That stillness for a theme
Where his heart my heart did seem
And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where--wrote a learned astrologer--
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.
(Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 268)

Uniting stillness and motion, experiencing the wisdom of the astrologer, the lovers escape the temporal world when the two-dimensional measure of time, the Zodiac,

is transformed into a three-dimensional figure. These themes can also be found in "Young Man's Song" (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 256) and in Love Song.¹

In "The Lover's Song," as well as in many other of Yeats's love poems, we find techniques similar to Roethke's: the aphoristic line; body and soul symbolism; delicate, lyrical rhythms; simple, elemental diction; and considerable repetition.

The Lover's Song

Bird sighs for the air,
Thought for I know not where,
For the womb the seed sighs.
Now sinks the same rest
On mind, on nest,
On straining thighs.
(Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 298)

Writing about yet another of Yeats's love poems, "The Three Bushes," Edward Malins makes a point that applies to all the poems I have just discussed:

The union of body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, that union of opposites which need each other, here reaches fruition in both love and death. No other poet has so revealed in allegory that love is incomplete without purity of soul and intensity of passion.²

¹In The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 717. All subsequent references to this collection will be cited in the text as Yeats Variorum.

²Edward Malins, A Preface to Yeats (London: Longman, 1974), p. 100.

In contrast with Roethke's celebratory mode, we have "His Foreboding," a love poem in The Far Field which reminds us of some of the more troubled love lyrics of Words for the Wind.³

His Foreboding

The shoal rocks with the sea.
I, living, still abide
The incommensurate dread
Of being, being away
From one comely head.

Thought upon thought can be
A burden to the soul.
Who knows the end of it all?
When I pause to talk to a stone,
The dew draws near.

I sing the wind around
And hear myself return
To nothingness alone.
The loneliest thing I know
Is my own mind at play.

Is she the all of light?
I sniff the darkening air
And listen to my own feet.
A storm's increasing where
The winds and waters meet.
(C.P., p. 215)

The lonely angst of our speaker reminds us of similar tones in "Plaint," "The Sententious Man," "Love's Progress," and "The Pure Fury." As in these poems from the first sequence, "His Foreboding" presents a speaker

³We will postpone our discussion of "The Happy Three" for the moment in order to facilitate the present comparison.

attempting to redress an imbalance in love. Lacking the physical presence of his beloved, he sickens of his own mental play: "Thought upon thought can be/A burden to the soul." And his diction also manifests too much cerebration--note the latinized "incommensurate." As in the first sequence, elements in nature imitate perfected love--show a union of opposites--but in this poem such unions cruelly underscore the speaker's own isolation. The "living" speaker is deprived of what even inanimate nature accomplishes: the shoal and the sea (contraries of shallow and deep, earth and water) "rock" in a sympathetic union reminiscent of both the secure maternal bond of childhood and the happy sexual relationship of adults (cf. "I played in flame and water like a boy" in "The Dream" or "I measure time by how a body sways" in "I Knew a Woman," or "She moves as water moves" in "She," C.P., pp. 120, 127, 129).

In the second stanza, the speaker is excluded from another union of nature, that of the stone and the dew. We might recall that often in the first sequence a movement from inanimate to animate nature--or vice versa--figured the joy or despair of love respectively. Hence when this speaker seeks love by trying "to talk to a stone," to regain that animistic sense, he is again

reminded of what he has lost.⁴ Two more attempts to escape this intolerable loneliness, in the third and fourth stanzas, also end in failure. His struggle to get outside himself recalls a prayer the speaker made in a very early Roethke poem: "Deliver me, O Lord, from all activity centripetal" (C.P., p. 24). And unlike the girl in "Her Time," when he is confronted with the "meeting" of wind and water, he fails to merge with the elements despite all his sensuous "sniffing" and "listening." This "increasing storm" ominously bodes ill for a speaker suffering "the incommensurate dread of being." She must be the "all of light" because without her he is left with "nothingness alone."

Again, in Yeats we find themes and techniques similar to those used by Roethke when Roethke's speaker encounters trouble in love. Although more polemical in tone, Crazy Jane argues that an imbalance of the ideal and the real, soul and body, will result in failure in love: "'Love is all/Unsatisfied/That cannot take

⁴"It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances, even an inanimate thing--brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe" (S.P., p. 25). According to the notes of one of his students, Roethke cited "stones singing" and "leaves saying" as examples of animism (G.H., p. 184).

the whole/Body and soul" ("Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment," Yeats Definitive Ed., pp. 252-53). In this and in several other poems--notably "Crazy Jane and the Bishop" (p. 251) and "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" (p. 254)--Yeats's speaker argues vehemently and cogently against what she sees as the overly spiritual view of love advocated by the Bishop. She seeks to correct this imbalance and justify her own behavior by pointing to the undeniably physical basis of love: "Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement." Such earthy language is meant to offset the pietisms of the "coxcomb" Bishop. Furthermore, in "Crazy Jane on the Mountain" we sense a kind of animism in Yeats that is like Roethke's: "Thereupon,/Propped upon my two knees,/I kissed a stone." (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 335).

Another view of overly spiritual love appears in Yeats's poem "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead." The speaker justifies his wish because he imagines that once dead his beloved would be immortal, forgiving, and faithful to him always. The lines, "And you would murmur tender words,/Forgiving me, because you were dead" might help explain similar lines in Roethke's poem "She": "I think the dead are tender/ Shall we kiss?" (C.P., p. 129). Both poets acknowledge this paradoxical longing for the

permanence of death in love (as did Browning in "Porphyria's Lover").⁵ And in an untitled poem, Yeats wrote a passage that expresses the converse of the carpe diem attitude:

What's the merit in love-play,
 In the tumult of the limbs
 That dies out before 'tis day,
 Heart on heart, or mouth on mouth,
 All that mingling of our breath,
 When love-longing is but drouth
 For the things come after death.
 (Yeats Variorum, p. 777)

This poem also suggests an overly spiritual approach to love, an approach that attracts Roethke's speaker at times, notably in "The Voice," "The Other," "The Renewal," and "Plaint" (C.P., pp. 128, 130, 135, 139).

On the other hand, love without the spirit is also "all unsatisfied." Yeats's speaker in "A Last Confession" comments on how little she gave when she "loved bodily" only:

I gave what other women gave
 That stepped out of their clothes,
 But when this soul, its body off,
 Naked to naked goes,
 He that has found shall find therein
 What none other knows,

And give his own and take his own
 And rule in his own right;
 And though it loved in misery
 Close and cling so tight,
 There's not a bird of day that dare
 Extinguish that delight.
 (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 271)

⁵Browning: Poetical Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 358.

Bodily love is pleasurable but superficial; spiritual love is enlightening but possibly miserable. When John Kinsella loses his "old bawd" to death, he grieves not only because he has lost his source for "pretty girls" but also because he has lost one who

. . . had stories,
 Though not for the priest's ear,
 To keep the soul of man alive,
 Banish age and care. . .
 (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 330)

As far as John is concerned, his loss of Mrs. Mary Moore compares with mankind's loss of Eden incurred through "Adam's sin," a physical and spiritual loss in both cases. "Her Anxiety" reveals another kind of spiritual dearth in love:

Earth in beauty dressed
 Awaits returning spring.
 All true love must die,
 Alter at the best
 Into some lesser thing.
Prove that I lie.

Such body lovers have,
 Such exacting breath,
 That they touch or sigh.
 Every touch they give,
 Love is nearer death.
Prove that I lie.
 (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 257)

Her fear that love is only physical, and therefore absolutely mortal, transient, and impermanent, leads to her challenge of the last line. With her sexual puns on "lie" and "die," she identifies lovemaking with a physical and spiritual wasting, a use of the death motif

similar to Roethke's in "The Sensualists," "The Sententious Man" and "The Pure Fury" (C.P., pp. 136, 131, 133).

Through our analysis of troubled love in Roethke and Yeats, then, we have found more techniques common to the two poets: puns which linguistically relate physical and spiritual love, the themes of overly physical and overly spiritual love, and a variety of uses of a love/death motif. On this last point, we have seen both poets use what Yeats calls "all those antimonies/Of day and night" to symbolize harmony and discord in love.⁶ One "antimony" I haven't discussed is that involving wisdom and madness. The paradox that wisdom can come from a procuress or from a "crazy" woman or from a "lunatic" is found also in Roethke's poetry:

For other tunes and other wanton beats
Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain.
Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.
("Four for Sir John Davies," C.P., p. 105)

This last love poem has not been discussed yet, but we find enough of drunkards, beasts, lechers, rakes and other social misfits in Roethke's first sequence to know that for him too wisdom is not monopolized by philosophers and saints.

The remaining four poems in the "Love Poems" of

⁶In "Vacillation" (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 245).

The Far Field have a kind of unity from their all being more obviously autobiographical than any other love poems. "The Happy Three," for example, makes reference to an incident which occurred during the time that Theodore and Beatrice Roethke were renting the beautiful house of the artist Morris Graves (ca. 1954). Although the poem mentions only the goose named after Marianne Moore, they also kept another one named after Louise Bogan (G.H., p. 227; S.L., p. 226). Roethke knew and admired both these poets greatly, but the key to this poem is found in a reference to a third poet, John Betjeman. Variant titles for "The Happy Three" include "A Sentimental Interlude" and "The Happy Three (For John Betjeman.)"⁷ Although Allan Seager reports that Roethke "greatly admired" Betjeman's work (G.H., p. 252) and Roethke himself cited the English poet's work as exemplary of the tetrameter couplet (S.L., p. 106), Roethke disliked Betjeman's sentimentality.⁸ Roethke wrote individually to John

⁷McLeod, A Manuscript Checklist, p. 49.

⁸I find this sentimentality in a poem like "A Subaltern's Love Song" in John Betjeman, Collected Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 97.

Frederick Nims, Louis Untermeyer, and Stephen Spender that the vulgar pub songs he had enclosed--"Gob Music" and "Saginaw Song"--were "a reaction against the sugar-tit Betjeman," "a reaction against Betjeman's treacle," and "a reply to the . . . John Betjeman kind of sentimentality" (S.L., pp. 245, 248, 249). "The Happy Three" is perhaps another kind of reply to the Betjeman sentimentality.

The Happy Three

Inside, my darling wife
Sharpened a butcher knife;
Sighed out her pure relief
That I was gone.

When I had tried to clean
My papers up, between
Words skirting the obscene--
She frowned her frown.

Shelves have a special use;
And Why muddy shoes
In with your underclothes?
She asked, woman.

So I betook myself
With not one tiny laugh
To drink some half-and-half
On the back lawn.

Who should come up right then,
But our goose, Marianne,
Having escaped her pen,
Hunting the sun.

Named for a poetess,
(Whom I like none-the-less),
Her pure-white featheriness
She paused to preen;

But when she pecked my toe,
 My banked-up vertigo
 Vanished like April snow;
 All rage was gone.

Then a close towhee, a
 Phoebe not far away
 Sang audaciously
 Notes finely drawn.

Back to the house we ran,
 Me, and dear Marianne--
 Then we romped out again,
 Out again
 Out again
 Three in the sun.
 (C.P., p. 213)

As I see it, Roethke is trying to respond to the Betjeman treacle in two ways. First, when he was considering entitling the poem "A Sentimental Interlude," he was guarding against that very charge by admitting the sentimentality and writing, therefore, what becomes something of a parody.⁹ At the same time, however, he writes a poem which to the degree that it borders on but ultimately escapes sentimentality becomes a model for Betjeman to emulate. The funny double and triple rhymes, the threats implied by the butcher knife and his drinking, the satire of the sloppy ex-bachelor and compulsively neat and tidy housewife--these elements and more play against the sweet ending of this poem. But even in the

⁹A technique akin to Roethke's choosing the title "The Sententious Man" for that poem.

sugary resolution of this domestic squabble, we have some interesting multiple unions of elements formerly split up like his drink, "half and half." What brings the husband and wife together are the grossly physical goose and the spiritual Phoebe--both emblems of poetry--all in a wonderfully musical comic and cosmic union under the sun.

Roethke wrote three "pub songs," two of which I have already mentioned, "Gob Music" and "Saginaw Song." In a letter to John Frederick Nims, Roethke wrote, "It must be understood that the pub-song is a form where a degree of ribaldry is expected. It ain't for ladies" (S.L., p. 246). "The Shy Man," the third pub-song, does not have the earthy tone of the others, but it was, nevertheless, to have been included in a separate section of The Far Field entitled "Pub Songs." When Beatrice Roethke decided the vulgar pub songs were "pieces that did not seem appropriate in a last book of poems," "The Shy Man" found a home among the "Love Poems."¹⁰ According to Roethke, "all are written to be sung; all have tunes (airs, as the Irish say)" (S.L., p. 245).

¹⁰See her note at the beginning of C.P.

The Shy Man

The full moon was shining upon the broad sea;
 I sang to the one star that looked down at me;
 I sang to the white horse that grazed on the quay,--
 As I walked by the high sea-wall.

 But my lips they,
 My lips they,
 Said never a word,
 As I moped by the high sea-wall.

The curlew's slow night song came on the water.
 That tremble of sweet notes set my heart astir,
 As I walked beside her, the O'Connell's daughter,
 I knew that I did love her.

 But my lips they,
 My lips they,
 Said never a word,
 As we walked by the high sea-wall.

The full moon has fallen, the night wind is down
 And I lie here thinking in bleak Bofin town
 I lie here and thinking, 'I am not alone.'

 For here close beside me is O'Connell's daughter,
 And my lips they, my lips they,
 Say many a word,
 As we embrace by the high sea-wall.
 O! my lips they, my lips they,
 Say many a word,
 As we kiss by the high sea-wall.

(C.P., p. 216)

In this charming song, Roethke makes clever use of incremental repetition--a stock ballad feature--not only to create lilting rhythms but also to reflect on the hesitant speaker who can take only one step at a time toward his beloved. Likewise, a halting, almost stuttering refrain like "But my lips, they,/My lips they" mimics the shy speaker's attempts to speak his heart. But in the happy climax of this poem, the speaker conquers his loneliness in "bleak Bofin town" by talking to his loved

one with kisses. The speaker's struggle to get outside himself reminds us of many of Roethke's love poems and of the poet's own account of his epithalamion to a bride seventeen years younger, "Words for the Wind":

I was able to move outside myself--for me sometimes a violent dislocation--and express a joy in another, in others: I mean Beatrice O'Connell, and the Italian people, their world, their Mediterranean.¹¹

By actually naming "The O'Connell's daughter" in "The Shy Man" and other poems published in The Far Field, perhaps Roethke is progressing in his ability "to move outside himself." He must now feel secure enough to disclose that the word master and poet of love, seventeen years older than Beatrice, was once speechless, tongue-tied, dumbfounded in her presence. But there is more to this apparent "unmasking" of the poet as we see in "Her Wrath."

Her Wrath

Dante himself endured,
And purgatorial ire;
I, who renew the fire,
Shiver, and more than twice,
From another Beatrice.
(C.P., p. 216)

Beyond the comedy involved in comparing his wife's wrath with purgatorial fire, beyond the serendipity that Dante and Roethke both loved a Beatrice, and beyond the

¹¹As quoted in Poet's Choice, ed. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland, p. 49.

humorous rhymes, this poem signifies that Roethke is actually working in a tradition of love poetry where the poet idealizes an actual woman. By convention, the poet transforms the real woman into an ideal woman--ideal in two senses: she is presented without flaw and she becomes timeless art. Just as Dante Alighieri loved a real woman whom he called Beatrice (probably Bice Portinari) and then celebrated her in his "Vita Nuova" and the "Divina Commedia," so too Roethke--on an admittedly smaller scale (that is part of the modern poet's comedy)--celebrates his wife in many of these love poems as the instrument of his spiritual salvation. As Yeats writes in "The Tower,"

I have prepared my peace
 With the learned Italian things
 And the proud stones of Greece,
 Poet's imaginings
 And memories of love,
 Memories of the words of women,
 All those things whereof
 Man makes a superhuman
 Mirror-resembling dream.
 (Yeats Definitive Ed., p. 197)

The critic Edward Malins, writing about Yeats, comments on a process common to Dante and Yeats and Roethke:

Some of his friends, like Maud Gonne and Richard Gregory, are transformed into symbol and myth. These characters and actions are larger than life--heroic like the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology in the clarity of their affirmation of truth through experience: myths created by Yeats from his inner self and often becoming the anti-mask which he

constantly sought. . . . It is his realization of these ideal figures in their loneliness, courage, and pride which accounts for much of this verse.¹²

Beatrice Roethke has written me that her husband sometimes told her "with a hint of self-mockery, 'I've immortalized you.'" She also wrote "I think he considered that they [the love poems] were written with me in mind." In "A General Introduction for My Work," Yeats writes about his transformation of life to art:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. . . . He is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by doing so a part of our creative powers.¹³

For us and for the poets, this mythologizing at once celebrates the "heroic figures" we actually do encounter in life and gives credence to our highest dreams and visions. When Yeats reveals a Maud Gonne or Richard Gregory to us, he is "declaring his own belief in the Truth their lives embody."¹⁴ For Roethke, Beatrice's qualities provided evidence that the woman in poems like "The Dream," "Words for the Wind," or "I Knew a Woman"

¹²Malins, pp. 112-113.

¹³W. B. Yeats: Essays and Introductions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 509.

¹⁴Malins, p. 113.

was not pure fantasy. Justifiably so, he wished to immortalize her.

Wish for a Young Wife

My lizard, my lively writher,
 May your limbs never wither,
 May the eyes in your face
 Survive the green ice
 Of envy's mean gaze;
 May you live out your life
 Without hate, without grief,
 And your hair ever blaze,
 In the sun, in the sun,
 When I am undone,
 When I am no one.
 (C.P., p. 217)

With his endearing sobriquet, "my lizard," Roethke not only compliments his wife for her sensual "lively writhing" but also wishes for her the survivability that this timeless reptile represents for its species. (In "Lizard," Roethke refers to "this lizard,/Older than I, or the cockroach," C.P., p. 226.) Adopting the cautionary tone of one who has lived life, the speaker counsels his young wife to live on "Without hate/without grief." Are the last two lines full of self-pity or rather an admonition to her not to waste her life wallowing in grief over someone who is now "no one"? The way he refers to his death suggests an extinction not only of his personal identity but also of his poetic--there is a pun on unDonne, isn't there? She is not to suffer remorse for the end of his life as a poet or for any

diminution of his poetic reputation.

Concerning this last matter, I might point out that by the time of this last poem, Roethke had achieved some fame; he had become what his biographer called "a public figure": "among writers and serious readers all over the world, his name would be recognized" (G.H., p. 278). Given the public's knowledge of the older poet's marriage to a woman seventeen years younger, in "Wish for a Young Wife" Roethke could be revealing to the public one source of the death motif in his love poetry. Mrs. Roethke in a letter privately revealed to me that the disparity in their ages, among other things, might account for this motif.¹⁵ Moreover, she said, "I am quite sure that I was meant to be the speaker in those poems ["the series beginning with 'The Young Girl' in The Far Field"] and that the poet was putting himself in my place." Given this information and Yeats's autobiographical sequences entitled "A Woman Young and Old" and "A Man Young and Old," Roethke might have intended a sequence entitled "A Woman Young and a Man Old." Such a sequence would, of course, match the circumstances of his marriage, but it would allow him

¹⁵ Cf. Chapter VI, p. 113-114. David Wagoner, a close friend of Roethke's also mentioned to me that perhaps the disparity in the Roethkes' ages accounts some for the death motif.

also to work with those Yeatsian contraries of youth and age, innocence and experience, female and male. And to the extent that the sequence is autobiographical, Roethke could follow in a tradition of poets who celebrate their women because they have qualities which deserve to be idealized and immortalized in art. Conversely, these ideal figures in art gain credibility--for the artist and for us--by having real-life counterparts. When we explore the relation of Roethke's love poems to the rest of his corpus, we will be able to speculate further on what he intended in this second sequence.

CHAPTER IX

A DANCE OF THREE MYTHS

In my first chapter, I located Roethke's love poems generally in relation to his chronological, thematic and stylistic development. In this chapter, I will consider how my readings of these love poems affect the reading of his entire corpus. Then we can discuss the question of the poet's range--the breadth of his accomplishment.

To me--and to many critics--Roethke is a poet of the self, and almost all his poetry represents his search for identity. He writes in his key essay, "On 'Identity,'" "The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible" (S.P., p. 20). A careful reading of this essay reveals that Roethke discovers his identity in four ways: by tracing his physical and spiritual development, by confronting his literal and literary ancestors, by studying all forms of living things from the sub-human to the divine, and by writing lyric poetry. As I see it, in his quest for identity Roethke creates three interconnected myths which dominate his work:

a myth about his childhood, a myth about his love of a woman, and a myth about God. Each myth is developed through poetic sequences which involve different themes, symbols, images, attitudes, prosody and other literary devices.

The first myth we might call the "greenhouse" myth since it recounts the speaker's early life in and around the greenhouse lorded over by his "Papa." Fully developed in the poet's second book, The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), this myth--like the other two--originates in Open House (1941) and recurs throughout all of Roethke's poetry. According to the myth, the child's physical and spiritual development is like a flower growing in his father's greenhouse. The spirit "can grow gracefully and beautifully like a tendril, like a flower" and yet "the young often do have an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body" (S.P., pp. 21-22).

Weed Puller

Under the concrete benches,
 Hacking at the 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.
 (C.P., p. 39)

According to the myth Roethke develops, this descent into the slimy underworld of the lowest forms of life; this recognition of the bestial, the perverse, the sexually unclean; this "ritualistic, even penitential" labor can lead to salvation.

All living things, including the sub-human. . . can come to our aid in a quest for identity. This is not so much a naive as a primitive attitude: animistic, maybe. Why not? Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically: St. Thomas says, "God is above all things by the excellence of his nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things." Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God: "Snail, snail, glister me forward, / Bird, soft-sigh me home. / Worm, be with me. / This is my hard time." (S.P., pp. 24-25)

If this struggle for life in the slime, for the divine in the sub-human is God's work, it is also Papa's:

A florist does not woo the beautiful:
 He potted plants as if he hated them.
 What root of his ever denied its stem?
 When flowers grew, their bloom extended him.
 (C.P., p. 224)

Just so, the father plants his son in the following frightening poem:

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I hung on like death:
 Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother's countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.
 (C.P., p. 45)

This rough dance matches the florist's transplanting techniques: the light spray to inspire life into the boy/plant; the twisting of the plant in his thumbs to shake down extraneous, inessential matter; the turning and tamping into the flat box, the flower bed. (Cf. "Old Florist" and "Transplanting" for accounts of these movements. C.P., p. 42.) Within the myth, then, the Father--"the Papa on earth and heaven are blended" (S.P., p. 39)--pushes the child into the muck and commands him to thrive there.

The poetic techniques used with the greenhouse myth also contribute meaning. In the shorter lyrics, a short free-verse line often catalogues minute creatures

the speaker deems holy: "Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes,/Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds,/Squirmers in bogs,/And bacterial creepers" ("The Minimal," C.P., p. 50). To stress how the greenhouse is teeming with life, Roethke strews his verse with present participles. Seldom simply beautiful, flowers have not only life but emotions, often emotions the child projects: "The half grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers" ("Child on Top of a Greenhouse," C.P., p. 43). Furthermore, the greenhouse imagery often merges with Freudian sexual symbols: "I feel the slime of a wet nest/Beware Mother Mildew" ("The Pit," C.P., p. 55). "Mother Mildew" sounds a note not found in the short lyrics but abundant in the longer "Lost Son" sequences, namely the themes of German and English folk literature. In a sometimes frenetic counterpointing, the longer greenhouse poems combine the free verse of the shorter poems with the prosody of Mother Goose. "Rhythmically, it's the spring and rush of the child I'm after--and Gammer Gurton's concision: mutterkin's wisdom . . ." (S.P., p. 41). Through this varied prosody along with rapidly shifting metaphors, imperatives, rhetorical questions, and the elimination of connectives, Roethke strives to create a "psychic shorthand" which reveals the tension his protagonist suffers.

Tell me:

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

.

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

The shape of a rat?

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

(C.P., p. 54)

The poetic technique seems designed to make us experience how the mind works, namely, not in a logical syllogistic way but through obscure but significant associations, images of childhood which surface unexpectedly to become archetypal symbols. So, for example, the frenzied hunting of our speaker above is at once a literal search along the river, a longing for the nursery-rhyme maternal bond and womb, and a desire to understand his own sexual needs.

If the Papa and Mama of the greenhouse world are Roethke's literal ancestors, his literary ancestors-- at least for these longer poems--are "German and English folk literature, particularly Mother Goose; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially the songs and the rants; The Bible; Blake and Traherne; Durer" (S.P., p. 41).

Like Wordsworth's boy, Roethke's also has his "spots of time"--balancing on top of the greenhouse, facing death at the flower dump, dancing with papa--but unlike Wordsworth's account of his childhood, Roethke's boy lives a psychological drama which is at once more harried, more sexual, and more dominated by papa. Nature is more frightening in Roethke because it reminds him of his own sense of defilement. Often it is the bittersweet nursery rhymes and the bawdy rants which become euphemisms for those feelings.

The second myth that Roethke creates in his search for identity concerns his love for a woman. An interesting and often overlooked relationship between the love poems and the greenhouse poems involves their poetic techniques. Typically, critics refer to the greenhouse poems, especially the longer "Lost Son" sequence, as highly original and experimental in technique while they describe the love poems as a return to more traditional forms. In some ways this assessment is accurate, but both sets of poems use the same method of associational leaps. Roethke points this out in his essay, "An American Poet Introduces Himself":

Some of the technical devices characteristic of this sequence ["The Lost Son"]--the rapidly shifting metaphor, the rhetorical questions, and the like--reappear in more formal poems completed recently,

entitled "Four for Sir John Davies," which are, among other things, a tribute to the Elizabethan author of "Orchestra" and to the late W. B. Yeats. (S.P., pp. 12-13)

The second section of "Four for Sir John Davies" can serve to illustrate these techniques.

The Partner

Between such animal and human heat
I find myself perplexed. What is desire?--
The impulse to make someone else complete?
That woman would set sodden straw on fire.
Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?

We played a measure with commingled feet:
The lively dead had taught us to be fond.
Who can embrace the body of his fate?
Light altered light along the living ground.
She kissed me close, and then did something else.
My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse.

I'd say it to my horse: we live beyond
Our outer skin. Who's whistling up my sleeve?
I see a heron prancing in his pond;
I know a dance the elephants believe.
The living all assemble! What's the cue?--
Do what the clumsy partner wants to do !

Things loll and loiter. Who condones the lost?
This joy outleaps the dog. Who cares? Who cares?
I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost.
O what lewd music crept into our ears!
The body and the soul know how to play
In that dark world where gods have lost their way.
(C.P., p. 105)

"This joy outleaps the dog," for example, is one such "rapidly shifting metaphor" which is partly explained through the first line, i.e., fully human joy is greater than purely physical joy. A leap back to the "Lost Son"

sequence reveals that there, "dogs of the groin barked and howled" (C.P., p. 55) most often in the adolescent physical and spiritual death symbolized by masturbation.

Writing about the "Lost Son" sequence, Roethke says:

in a later piece, "Praise to the End!" a particular (erotic) act occurs, then is accounted for by nonsense songs out of the past. There are laments for lost powers and then a euphoric passage, a sublimation of the original impulse in an ecstasy; but--and this is the point--in this passage the protagonist, for all his joy, is still "alone," and only one line mentions anything human. . . . Equationally, the poem can be represented: onanism equals death, and even the old testament moralists can march out happily. . . . In terms of the whole sequence, he survives: this is a dead end explored. His self consciousness, his very will to live saves him from the annihilation of the ecstasy. (S.P., pp. 40-41).

In the love poems what the leaps most often accomplish--at least in the poems about perfected love like "Four for Sir John Davies"--is a surprising, astonishing reconciliation of opposites. "This joy outleaps the dog. Who cares? Who cares?" signifies the ecstasy, guilt, and death of onanism are reconciled with the ecstasy, innocence and vitalizing love between a man and a woman. "What is desire?/The impulse to make someone else complete." These lines recall Plato's myth that once male and female were joined in one body; after being split asunder each half is fated to wander until it finds the fulfilling partner. Perhaps through his study of Donne and Yeats, Roethke adopts for his love

poems the neoplatonic polarities of body and soul, the heavens and the earth, the temporal and the eternal, life and death. Using paradox ("we live beyond our outer skin"), oxymoron ("the lively dead"), puns ("Who can embrace the body of his fate"), and physical/spiritual symbolism (attributing faith to the grossly physical elephants, horse-like prancing to the spiritual heron), Roethke repeatedly fuses all opposites as "The living all assemble."

The key images in the love poems also are organized into opposites. "Dry and moist" imagery--developing the plant and sexual images of the greenhouse myth--operate sometimes as symbols of sterility and fertility ("Was I the . . . ladle rattling in an empty dish?"), sometimes in conjunction with soul and body, bone and blood imagery: "Is there no way out of that coursing blood?/A dry soul's wisest ("The Swan," C.P., p. 140). We discover a hierarchy in Roethke that progresses from stones to plants to animals to man and finally to God. This hierarchy is first used to show man's position between the inanimate and God, and is then complicated by Roethke's belief that God can be found in an inanimate thing. Within this hierarchy, animals such as the goose, the bull, the bear, the elephant and the dog often become symbols for purely physical love or sensuality.

The swan, the heron, the phoebe, the towhee, the eagle, the phoenix--all birds--combine with ghost and planetary imagery (except for the earth) to signify the spiritual. Considerable attention is given to motion, particularly the rocking, swaying, circling, oscillating movements of love making, of the dance, of poetry, and of the heavens. However, equally important is the imagery of stillness, quiet, and permanence.

In the poems about perfected love, the tone of the speaker is overwhelmingly joyous, playfully innocent, child-like. Sexual double entendre adds to the fun. However, when there is trouble in love, excesses prevail, one opposite dominates the other, one type of image--spiritual or physical--negates the other. Death imagery frightens: motion becomes uncontrollable acceleration, nourishing moisture becomes a threatening storm, love-making becomes exhaustion, and so on.

The prosody of the love poems also differs from the free verse and nursery rhyme effects of the greenhouse poems. Written most often in iambic trimeter or iambic tetrameter, the love poems of Words for the Wind usually have six-to-eight line stanzas with an interlocking rhyme scheme. The end rhyme usually has three groups of rhyming words with a final couplet (e.g., ABABCC in "The Voice" or AABBC in "She" C.P., pp. 128,129).

The resulting music can be formal, almost elegant, especially because many rhymes are muted and many rhythms varied. In The Far Field, the "young girl" poems have a three-beat line of iambs and anapests with alternating end rhyme--all of which adds to the song-like quality of this verse. In the later love poems of The Far Field, however, we find a return to the free verse of the greenhouse poems. "Her Longing," for example, marvelously recaptures the rhythms and imagery of the short greenhouse lyrics and merges this prosody with the newly discovered Pacific Northwest imagery of cliffs and cormorants and sea.

Almost all the key elements of Roethke's myth about love of a woman appear in "Four for Sir John Davies." Stated simply, through the harmonious union of body and soul in the love of a woman, a man can escape his isolated self--a "sometimes violent dislocation"--to attain a new and enlightening identity. The ecstasy of the love myth accords with that of the greenhouse myth in that formerly despised elements of the speaker's identity--the "dogs of the groin," for example--are affirmed, blessed, sanctified: "The flesh can make the spirit visible." Whereas Papa's waltz had planted the boy in the salvific slime, this woman's sexual dance

guides the man to a beautiful vision comparable to Donne's "Extasie" or Dante's Paradise.¹

Dante attained the purgatorial hill,
Trembled at hidden virtue without flaw,
Shook with a mighty power beyond his will.
(C.P., p. 107)

The sexual act symbolizes a transcending of time and space and death.

. . . . Behind, before,
Lay all the lonely pastures of the dead;
The spirit and the flesh cried out for more.
We two together, on a darkening day
Took arms against our own obscurity.
(C.P., p. 106)

Death, ever present at the flower dump, in the root cellar, under the cement benches of the greenhouse, also pervades the joy of the love poems. In "Four for Sir John Davies," for example, we again discover the psychological death of the self joined with the physical sexual "dying": "Alive at noon, I perished in her form." Having noted that the protagonist has "outleaped" the death of onanism, we see that he proceeds to "outleap" the temporal world itself in the climax of this poem: "The word outleaps the world, and light is all." Helping Beatrice lead him to salvation, Roethke's spiritual

¹Roethke's women in "The Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" also seem capable of oracular wisdom (C.P., pp. 27, 157).

ancestors--Papa, Yeats, Davies, Donne, even Mother Goose-- have all served the speaker well in love: "The lively dead had taught us to be fond," madly in love.² In one sense, since all these figures lead the protagonist to God, the love poems are pivotal between the greenhouse myth and the myth about God. But it is more accurate to say that the speaker can achieve the divine within each myth.

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, then a going forward; but there is some "progress" (S.P., p. 39).

In several poems, like "Love's Progress" for that matter, we discover the protagonist slipping back to find his roots--notice not only the ideas but also the return to the nursery rhyme effects of the greenhouse myth:

It's midnight on the mouse
The rabbit and the wren;
A log sings in its flame.
Father, I'm far from home,
And I have gone nowhere.
(C.P., p. 137)

Or in a poem more about attaining God with or without the spiritual guidance of a woman, we discover a Wordsworthian attempt to return to his childhood:

²The next chapter will deal with how Roethke's love poems relate to those of his poetic ancestors.

Where is the knowledge that
 Could bring me to my God

 I lived with deep roots once:
 Have I forgotten their ways--
 The gradual embrace
 Of lichen around stones?
 Death is a deeper sleep,
 And I delight in sleep.
 (C.P., "Plaint," p. 139)

All this brings us to Roethke's myth about God, to those poems which are related to Roethke's search for the divine in the greenhouse and in love, but which seek a more direct confrontation with Him. Found in "Sequence Sometimes Metaphysical" in The Far Field, poems like "In a Dark Time," "The Decision," and "The Marrow" (C.P., pp. 239, 245, 246) recount Roethke's myth that a sense of God can be earned only after a "dark night of the soul," an absolute renunciation of the self in a moment of pure despair. A descent into hell, comparable to the child's under the slimy greenhouse benches and to the fearful loss of identity in love, at once leads to a philosophical nihilism and a psychological anxiety close to madness. Somehow, this process purges the protagonist who then glows with the mystic's sense of unity. The best of these poems illustrates this myth:

In a Dark Time

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
 I hear my echo in the echoing wood--
 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
 I live between the heron and the wren,
 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
 At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
 I know the purity of pure despair,
 My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
 That place among the rocks--is it a cave,
 Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
 And in broad day the midnight come again!
 A man goes far to find out what he is--
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind.
 (C.P., p. 239)

Again, we experience something of a narrative through quick shifts in metaphor, aphorisms, rhetorical questions and puns. The prosody follows the more formal pattern of the love poems--iambic pentameter with terminal couplets. Also, we again notice the intensification achieved through repetition: "Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire." Dark and light imagery reveals the general pattern of paradoxical inversions: darkness

becomes the time to see, madness becomes nobility, the day becomes the night. All these inversions point the way to salvation--only by fully embracing his despair, by loving the despicable in himself, and by suffering the hellish anxiety of not knowing his way ("is it a cave, or winding path") or his identity ("Which I is I?), can the speaker merit the eternal vision, a kind of involution, a centripetal force that unites all.

The acknowledgment of his fall, and of the effects of the Fall of our original parents recurs in all three myths:

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

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

("Where Knock Is Open Wide," C.P., p. 73)

Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.
("Four for Sir John Davies," C.P., p. 107)

Paradise is regained only through a purgatorial experiencing of the Fall. This suffering is alternately St. John's dark night of the soul, Dante's purgatory, Blake's "Songs of Experience," the angst of existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, the persecution of "mad" poets like Christopher Smart, the fear of annihilation by Papa

himself--all can lead to redemption. So can the struggle of writing poetry: "And it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine--in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem" (S.P., p. 27).

For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time He is farther away--that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service, or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lowest forms of life, He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly. But it needs some practicing in Western society. (S.P., p. 27)

In many of Roethke's poems we find an indecisiveness about how to find his identity, which road to take to God. Technique imitates theme when Roethke shifts from the sound and the imagery of one myth to that of another. Often the leaps from one line to another are the protagonist's attempts to find himself or God through that particular myth. Thus in the lively opening of "Words for the Wind" we notice hints of all three myths:

Love, love, a lily's my care,
 She's sweeter than a tree.
 Loving, I use the air
 Most lovingly: I breathe;
 Mad in the wind I wear
 Myself as I should be,
 All's even with the odd,
 My brother the vine is glad.
 (C.P., p. 123)

The lily, the tree, the vine of the greenhouse, and the

happy madness of the myth about God join to celebrate love. This joyous mode reappears in "Once More, The Round," which also summarizes the myths.

Now I adore my life
 With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
 With the Fish, the questing Snail,
 And the Eye altering all;
 And I dance with William Blake
 For love, for Love's sake;
 And everything comes to One
 As we dance on, dance on, dance on.
 (C.P., p. 251)

The salvific greenhouse dance in "My Papa's Waltz," the enlightening sexual dance to the music of the spheres in "Four for Sir John Davies," becomes the dance uniting all three myths as "everything comes to One."

Having considered the dominant myths in Roethke's poetry, we can now turn to the question of the range of his art. Several critics have charged that he neglects almost all social concerns while excessively doting on the self. Even granting that Roethke's self symbolizes a generic or universal self, these critics find fault with a poet who makes "so little reference direct or remote to the incredible experiences of the age."³ This charge can be answered in several ways.

³M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 118. See also Wain, p. 336 and Spears, p. 248.

First, our poet shows considerable invention with his theme of the self: the greenhouse poems, the love poems, the poems about God, all develop a complex yet coherent mythology. Furthermore, Roethke celebrates the slimy aspects of nature, sanctifies the lust in love, purifies the despair of the soul--all with an exuberance that impresses. His variations on a theme--love and death, the dance, purgation and redemption--exhibit a life well examined. There is a depth that compensates for lack of breadth.

But it is true that Roethke neglects not only all international, national or local events but also all the daily social concerns--one's work, one's friends, one's home--that consume at least part of everybody's life. A handful of poems--"Highway: Michigan," "Dolor," "Saginaw Song" come to mind (C.P., pp. 33, 46, 267)--represent his total published output with some social concern. Roethke's is a society of one which struggles to become a society of two--with Papa, with his beloved, or with God. Apparently, he cannot join a larger group.⁴

From another point of view, this last is not true.

⁴In "The Surly One" and "The Geranium," loneliness for his beloved causes the speaker to become positively antisocial (C.P., pp. 138, 228).

Roethke's social circle includes Donne, Yeats, and Davies; Plato, Parmenides and Buber; St. Augustine, Christopher Smart and Marianne Moore--the whole pantheon of poets and philosophers who share Roethke's interior life. This college of artists and thinkers fills our poet's social calendar, as when he has "Supper with Lindsay":

"Who called me poet of the college yell
 We need a breed that mixes Blake and me,
 Heroes and bears, and old philosophers--
 John Ransom should be here, and Rene Char;
 Paul Bunyon is part Russian, did you know?--
 We're getting closer to it all the time."
 (C.P., p. 274)

By "it" I presume Lindsay is to mean a peaceful cooperation between great cultures, a resolution of external conflicts through an appreciation of common values. Although Roethke's "North American Sequence" is no more--and no less--than another "long journey out of the self" (C.P., p. 193), he seems to have intended a different sequence about America that would be more social and historical. When he applied for a Ford Foundation grant in 1959, he promised to complete:

A sequence of serious poems beginning with a long dirge which will express through suggestive and highly charged symbolical language the guilts we as Americans feel as a people for our mistakes and misdeeds in history and in time. I believe, in other words, that it behooves us to be humble before the eye of history.

Obviously such an attempt would, indeed, must bring into play great boldness of imagination, poetic and spiritual wisdom, in order to reveal

some of the secrets of our enigmatic, vast, shrill, confused and often childish nation. Obviously, this would not be chronological, yet would expose some of the lies of history; our triumphs of rage and cunning; our manias, our despairs; our furtive joys. And it would attempt to expiate some of our collective mistakes.

General Design of this Proposed Long Poem:

- I Three dirges of increasing line length
(two already partly written).
- II A lament and two songs (possibly more).
- III A sudden break into a kind of euphoric, pure joy.
(S.L., pp. 224-5)

We immediately recognize that his "history" of America will again follow the familiar pattern of guilt, atonement and redemption--the pattern of all three myths. Roethke never published such a poem--at least not in that form. According to Allan Seager, Roethke's last notes concerned another epic which would have dealt with injustices done to Indians. The speaker was to have made a pilgrimage by automobile to the location of each tribe's final defeat. Referring to this epic, Seager sums up Roethke's trouble with themes larger than the self.

If we think in terms of the growth of Ted's mind, it seems to have taken nearly his whole lifetime to come to terms emotionally and spiritually with the presences of the Saginaw Valley, his father, his mother, the greenhouse, the field and its creatures. Only on the eve of his unexpected death was he ready to leave home, and even then, the epic he had planned may have started from the memories of what he had heard there of the debasement of the Chippewas and the extinction of the Sauks.
(G.H., p. 279)

On the other hand, our poet has travelled much in the realms of gold. "Father, I'm far from home,/And I have gone nowhere," Roethke writes in his poem whose title he borrowed from Donne, "Love's Progress." The best case that can be made for Roethke's range is the variety of styles he incorporates in his work, styles he borrows, transforms, or invents.⁵

These styles range from the tightly compressed lyrics of Open House which are influenced by Emily Dickinson to the short greenhouse poems reminiscent of Blake or Christopher Smart; from the rants and nursery rhymes, the surrealist Freudian landscape of the "Lost Son" sequence to the elegant Yeatsian love poems in Words for the Wind; from the delicate girlish Far Field love poems to a vulgar pub song like "Gob Music"; from the delightful and frightening children's poems to the absolute despair of "The Pure Fury."⁶ Given the range of these styles, is our poet merely derivative or has he

⁵Jenijoy LaBelle makes a good case that Roethke--despite his great originality--is always working in a tradition.

⁶Two impressive children's poems, "Dinky" and "The Lamb," also seem to be archetypal accounts of the effects of original sin and religious salvation respectively. (C.P., pp. 114,182)

thoroughly assimilated all these influences? This is a topic for the next chapter where we will have a chance to develop the idea of Roethke's relation to his literary ancestors further.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

Writing about the first sequence of Roethke's love poems, John Crowe Ransom states, "In vain I think our imaginations will turn the pages of our sophisticated modern anthologies for another set of love lyrics as fresh and utterly successful as this one. It is a great triumph."¹ In this chapter I will offer my final assessment of Roethke's achievement in his love poems and compare these poems with the love poetry of his American contemporaries.

In this dissertation I have tried to demonstrate Roethke's wonderful inventiveness with the themes of love and death. He explores the topic of death in love in literary, psychological, physiological, metaphysical, and ethical senses, most frequently developing two or more levels of meaning simultaneously. Furthermore, each sequence provides an exciting drama in which a protagonist struggles to gain an appropriate orientation toward love and death.

¹Ransom, p. 29.

More specifically, Roethke develops the topic of death in love in the following ways: 1) A sine qua non for love is mortality. Although love may have an ideal origin, it is grounded in the real. 2) A loss of identity, a death of the self, is a prerequisite for love. 3) Death serves as the counterpart to the extraordinary sense of identity and being acquired through love. 4) The dead--one's literal and literary ancestors--can help in one's search for identity. 5) Death, one measure of man's temporal and spatial limits, is overcome to the extent that love can overcome these limits. 6) The death motif is related to: a) a carefully structured image pattern that balances the ideal with the real, stillness with motion, the temporal with the eternal; b) a complex hierarchy of nature imagery; and c) a rich use of diction to develop simultaneously the characteristics of--and relations between--physical and metaphysical love.

Like John Donne, Roethke is fascinated by the complex relationships among sensual and spiritual love, death, time, motion and illusion. Also like Donne, Roethke creates a complex speaker whose moods are volatile and whose tone is as elusive as it is rich in implications. Roethke's poems, "The Dream" and "Love's Progress," succeed in part by playing off Donne's poems with the

same titles. At his best, in poems like the two above and "Words for the Wind," "I Knew a Woman" and "Memory," Roethke's intellectualized sensibilities rival Donne's wit.

Roethke consciously adds a new psychological dimension to the tradition of Donne. In particular, Roethke joins Maud Bodkin's interpretation of Dante and Jung to Donne's concern with love, death and illusion as I have shown above (pp. 32-37, 46, 72-73). Roethke's impressive synthesis of literature and psychology in the love poems appears first in "Four for Sir John Davies":

Dante attained the purgatorial hill,
Trembled at hidden virute without flaw,
Shook with a mighty power beyond his will,--
Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?
All lovers live by longing, and endure:
Summon a vision and declare it pure.
(C.P., p. 107)

I will now attempt to establish that one source for this passage is the chapter "The Image of Woman" in Maud Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, a book Roethke owned (U.W. TR Books, B 6).²

There, Bodkin quotes what she calls "the most

²Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 169-184.

essential stanzas from Canto XXX of the Purgatorio," the very stanzas from which Roethke derives his diction, imagery and ideas for his stanza and for later poems. Bodkin introduces these stanzas by noting that Dante, who has "attained" the Earthly Paradise at the summit of the Mount of Purgatory, beholds Beatrice, who now appears in divine form. I will underline the words and phrases Roethke's stanza shares with the translation in Bodkin (her own, I presume):

And my spirit that now so long ago, trembling in her presence, had been broken down with awe, without further knowledge by the eyes, through hidden virtue which went out from her, felt the mighty power of ancient love. . . .³

Roethke asks, "Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?" According to Bodkin's reading of Dante, Beatrice denies nothing, but rather rebukes him for his past faithlessness. Bodkin then quotes a second passage:

When I was risen from flesh to spirit, and beauty and virtue were increased within me, I was less precious and less pleasing to him; and he turned his steps by a way not true, pursuing false unions of good that pay no promise in full. . . .⁴

A few lines after his reference to Dante, Roethke again echoes this translation: "Who rise from flesh to spirit

³Ibid., p. 173.

⁴Ibid., p. 174.

know the fall" (C.P., p. 107). Bodkin argues that Dante feels the power of his lover when she judges him: her present glory reveals to him his previous sinful desire. Early drafts of Roethke's poem also show this theme: "Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?/That lady charged him with a carnal wish,/Rose up in glory when he purged the flesh." (U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 24-48).

Bodkin extensively compares the Dante/Beatrice relationship to that of Hermas and his beloved lady as recorded in the Shepherd of Hermas, c. A.D. 140--the work Jung uses to illustrate his archetypal woman, his soul image or anima. In an earlier draft Roethke also writes about this fairly obscure work: "Herms the shepherd walked the barren sand,/Summoned a vision, and declared it pure."⁵ That Roethke hopes his allusion will evoke the archetypes described by Jung and Bodkin seems conclusive in still other drafts:

He saw the mother-image in the sun

.

I have an animus an anima

And that's the he and she of it, ha-ha

.

⁵U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 24-48. I believe Roethke made the change from Hermas to Beatrice shortly before he met again and married Beatrice O'Connell after not seeing her for some six or eight years--a case of life imitating art.

I'm he and she at once, or so it seems
 I pay a doctor to record my dreams

This whole being is a source of grief and trouble;
 I have a psyche, and it seems double.
 (U.W. Literary Manuscripts, 24-48)

Bodkin concludes her discussion of the image
 of woman as follows:

The sense of illumination and fulfillment that comes alike to the lover, the poet, the philosophic or religious mystic, seems to give the clue that makes intelligible to us the poet's representation of transition from joyful love, through pain and frustration, to spiritual ecstasy, as continuous-- a process in some manner necessary and inwardly determined.⁶

Roethke finds in Dante and Jung and Bodkin a literary, archetypal, and psychological account for his suffering and ecstasy in love. Roethke invites us to think of the woman in all his love poetry as both his beloved and his anima, a conception which he artistically merges with Donne's paradoxes of illusion and reality. This merger adds another layer of meaning to the multi-dimensional love poetry of Roethke and marks a significant contribution to the love tradition of Donne.

Roethke himself had a clear idea of the blend of imitation and creativity that makes for great art:

The paradoxical thing, as R. P. Blackmur said of the young in the '30's, is that the most original

⁶Ibid., p. 184.

poets are the most imitative. The remark is profound: if a writer has something to say, it will come through. The very fact he has the support of a tradition, or an older writer, will enable him to be more himself---or more than himself. . . . One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with Papa. In my own case, I should like to think I have over-acknowledged, in one way or another, my debt to Yeats. One simple device provides, I believe, an important technical difference: in the pentameter, I end-stop almost every line--a thing more usual when the resources of the language were more limited. This is not necessarily a virtue--indeed, from many points of view, a limitation. But it is part of an effort, however clumsy, to bring the language back to bare, hard, even terrible statement. All this Yeats himself, a bowerbird if there ever was one, would have understood, and possibly approved.
(S.P., pp. 69-70)

Since the question of Roethke's indebtedness to Yeats affects how we value these love poems, we should consider his point about the end-stopped line, the "terrible statement." A stanza from "The Renewal" can illustrate his point:

Sudden renewal of the self--from where?
A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine;
I know I love, yet know not where I am;
I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.
Will the self, lost, be found again. In form?
I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.
(C.P., p. 135)

Not only is every line end-stopped, but most lines have a strong caesura. Although Yeats and Roethke share a penchant for aphorisms, Roethke's lines nervously jump from one topic to another in a way that Yeats's never do. As I have written, the "associational leaps" evident in poems like the "Lost Son" sequence survive in a less

radical form in these love poems. When the short, halting rhythms combine with the jumps in thought, we hear a dissonant music that differs significantly from Yeats's.⁷

Like Yeats, Roethke often uses solemn philosophical tones, stately rhythms, rhetorical questions, polarities of body and soul. Roethke's prosody adapts Yeats's ottava rima, his slant rhyme, his three-beat and pentameter line--all to his own ends. In general, Roethke's speaker uses Yeats's voice partly in homage to the "Supreme Master"; partly as a foil to his own inelegant, harried tones; and partly to achieve the same dreamy, subtle music that Yeats achieves. Roethke's speaker differs from Yeats's most markedly in his nursery rhyme rhythms and diction, his associational leaps, his echoes of the greenhouse myth, and his panicky note of psychological distress.

The strongest evidence that Roethke has assimilated the Yeatsian influence is found in the tone of his love poems. Roethke's speaker is often clumsy, surly--a boorish bear. Where is the slapstick or the clowning or the sexual joke in Yeats? Crazy Jane's puns are

⁷For further discussion of this topic, cf. Blessing, p. 188.

more polemic. In his darker moods, Roethke's despair has more of a sense of personal defilement than Yeats's. Finally, Roethke's lover is more frank in his eroticism. But his double entendre avoids any pornographic tone because it is so playful, so boyish, so innocent. Where is the sheer fun of "I Knew a Woman" in Yeats? No doubt Yeats is the greater poet, but Roethke's own achievement is not tarnished by any excessive Yeatsian influence.

Roethke's voice is unique. To say that he borrows the voices of other poets is not to deny this fact. Roethke does borrow the solemnity of Dante, the conceits of Davies, the rakish tone of Donne, the elegance of Yeats--at times seriously, at other times playfully--but digested or undigested, the particular blend of prosody, tone, imagery, theme, etc. is Roethke's own. Furthermore, for all his "derivativeness," he adds much of himself to the mixture. From these varied sources, Roethke creates love poems which for depth and lyrical power are comparable to the love poems of Donne and Yeats and greater than those of any of his American contemporaries except E. E. Cummings.

Other of Roethke's contemporaries do compose love poems: Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Robert Creeley, Randall Jarrell, Stanley Kunitz, Delmore Schwartz,

James Wright--to name a few--all write at least a few love poems each. But none, I think, matches the the achievement of Roethke or Cummings. I found that the poets named above--for all their variety--share a distinct "confessional" tone absent in Roethke's and Cummings' love poems. By a "confessional" tone I mean their inclination to cite names, dates, and places; to confess in a realistic manner the personal details of their loves; to strive for universality through "personalization." So, for example, Jarrell writes, "Because, after all, it is my wife/In a new dress from Bergdorf's, walking toward the park."⁸ Lowell, for example, writes in "Man and Wife," "we lie on Mother's bed. . . the trees are green on Marlborough Street. . . I outdrank the Rahvs in the heat of Greenwich Village."⁹

Cummings and Roethke do not concentrate on these kinds of particulars; they strive for universality through the forms of traditional love lyrics and through the use of psychological archetypes. To a limited

⁸"A Man Meets A Woman on the Street" in Randall Jarrell, The Complete Poems (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1969), pp. 351-353.

⁹Robert Lowell, Selected Poems (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1969), p. 93.

degree, however, Roethke partakes of both worlds when he writes about a Beatrice who is at once his wife, Dante's beloved, and an archetypal human companion and divine guide. Cummings and Roethke write love poems in the tradition of John Donne. Their intellectualized sensuality generates more philosophical wit than autobiographical detail. However, like these "confessional" poets, neither Roethke nor Cummings shies away from a full expression of emotion. Their passion distinguishes their love poems from the ironic, detached perspective of poems like Ransom's "Blue Girls":

"Practice you beauty, blue girls, before it fail;/And I will cry with my loud lips and publish/Beauty which all our power shall never establish,/It is so frail."¹⁰

Many of Roethke's contemporaries sought to infuse poetry with passion--albeit not unrestrained--because they felt some earlier poets had all but sacrificed human feeling to avoid any hint of sentimentality.

But by my estimation, none of these love poems has the depth and lyrical intensity of the love poems of Roethke and Cummings.

¹⁰John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969), p. 11.

In the remaining pages of this dissertation, I would like to compare Roethke's love poetry with that of E. E. Cummings. I trust the poems of Cummings that I have chosen represent something of the variety and excellence of his work. In my stylistic analysis, I will try to describe and evaluate the achievement of each poet. In general, I believe that Cummings' achievement is different from but as great as Roethke's, and that no contemporary American poet can match the accomplishment of either of these love poets.

Cummings' conception of love is not unlike Roethke's: both poets believe in a powerful infusion of the spiritual and the physical in the love between a man and a woman. In fact, Cummings' style originates in what he calls "carnalized metaphysics; or abstractions raised to the power of the concrete."¹¹ We might recall that Roethke seeks a similar goal: "rampant, triumphant, fleshly mysticism, the full spasm of the human, not simply beauty and darkness" (Notebooks, 14-197). Similarly, both poets stress the primacy of the heart over the head. Roethke calls reason "that dreary

¹¹Norman Friedman, E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), p. 66.

shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys" (C.P., p. 92).¹²

Cummings tells us that "feeling is first" in a poem which captures some of the complexity of his thought on love and death:

since feeling is first
 who pays any attention
 to the syntax of things
 will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
 while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
 and kisses are a better fate
 than wisdom
 lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
 --the best gesture of my brain is less than
 your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
 laugh, leaning back in my arms
 for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis¹³

Reading this poem with Roethke's love poetry in mind, I am struck by the imperative "Don't cry" addressed to the beloved. In almost all of Cummings' love poetry, we have the sense of a man actually speaking to a woman and answering her response. Roethke

¹²In this line, Roethke echoes one of his earliest influences, Elinor Wylie: "Reason's a rabbit in a hutch." Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 218

¹³E. E. Cummings, Complete Poems: 1913-1962 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), p. 290.

almost never uses dramatic monologue ; instead we read of a man not--at the moment--focusing on his partner, but rather trying to organize his own, fluid, internal, emotional states. In Roethke, the beloved is "she," a woman spoken about; in Cummings the beloved is "you," a woman spoken to. The significance of Cummings' technique here is that he can ironically juxtapose a speaker who states that feeling is primary with the beloved who lives that truth. In other words, the statement that "feeling is first" is a metaphysical statement--by embodying that truth, the beloved "carnalizes" it. The rhetorical thrust of the whole poem derives from the fact that the speaker's expression--for all its wonderful wit--falls far short of her simple nonverbal act of crying.

Thus, we should measure the value of the work of both poets by how well they make us feel their thought. Do the techniques that each poet uses, albeit different, succeed in accomplishing this goal?

When Cummings tells us that he wants to raise abstractions to the power of the concrete, we probably think of his well known use of such terms as "anyone" and "noone" to represent actual individuals. But in another sense, in this last poem, the abstractions of

"feeling," "life," "death," are all raised to the power of the concrete by her emotional response and his sensitivity to her.

If Cummings writes dramatic monologues, Roethke writes interior monologues. Like Cummings, his poetry is filled with abstract statements which declare the joy of love, the primacy of feeling, and denounce paying attention to "the syntax of things" (an action which presupposes that life can be parsed or--to use another of Cummings' metaphors--that a kiss ought to be dissected). How does Roethke make us feel that "feeling is first"? The simple answer is through his prosody and through his multi-layered approach to meaning in his poems. Through semantic "piling on," syntactic and lexical ambiguity, Roethke never allows us to forget that a sensual, erotic persona lives and breathes beneath all the metaphysical reflections: "I measure time by how a body sways" (C.P., p. 127), "I came to love, I came into my own." (C.P., p. 120).

Both poets owe a debt to nursery rhyme rhythms and to nonsense verse for their ability to make us experience childlike joy--another technique for making us feel the thought. Nowhere in Cummings' love poetry do we find this effect better than in the poem beginning

"if everything happens that can't be done," the last stanzas of which read:

now i love you and you love me
 (and books are shuter
 than books
 can be)
 and deep in the high that does nothing but fall
 (with a shout
 each
 around we go all)
 there's somebody calling who's we

 we're anything brighter than even the sun
 (we're everything greater
 than books
 might mean)
 we're everything more than believe
 (with a spin
 leap
 alive we're alive)
 we're wonderful one times one¹⁴

Both poets can stir the blood with their strong rhythms--an achievement which contributes greatly to the lyric intensity of these poems. In Roethke's poetry, this effect is best seen in "Words for the Wind":

Love, love, a lily's my care,
 She's sweeter than a tree.
 Loving, I use the air
 Most lovingly: I breathe;
 Mad in the wind I wear
 Myself as I should be,
 All's even with the odd,
 My brother the vine is glad.
 (C.P., p. 123)

If the trick is to have us get caught up in their merry dance--as it were--Cummings has an additional

¹⁴Ibid., p. 594.

technique. Part of the effect of Cummings' using "you" is that at times we have the sense the speaker might be talking directly to us. Consequently, when he moves to the first person plural in the last poem (an organizing technique we see in several of his love poems), we actually "feel" alive. Reinforcing this effect is the fact that Cummings makes us feel like one of those "in the know," an initiate, one who is not the object of his satire in his social poems, not "mankind," but an individual like "anyone," the protagonist of "anyone lived in a pretty how town."¹⁵

As I read Cummings' famous lyric, anyone and noone, two married lovers, distinguish themselves from the crowd precisely because the couple love each other's individuality: "she laughed his joy she cried his grief" (italics are mine). On the other hand, "Women and men"--collective mankind--"cared for anyone not at all" and remain ignorant of the drama of anyone and noone--a drama Cummings suggests is the significant drama of life, one which he knows of, anyone and noone understand, and which children suspect. I believe that Cummings uses his unusual syntax and typography, at least in

¹⁵Ibid., p. 515.

part, to make us feel that we have been let in on a secret, to make us experience a revelation. The fact that what's revealed seems like an obvious truism magnifies its impact.

Whereas Roethke gains depth by adding levels of meaning to the speaker's understanding of his emotional states, Cummings gains range in his love poetry by connecting the personal love lyric to his larger theme of the individual in society. Actually, Cummings has published several dozen more love poems than Roethke has, and his variety is impressive: he has poems about prostitutes, fresh Petrarchan love poems praising the virtues of his lady, poems about the transcendent nature of love, poems about love as the creative force in the universe--and many of them succeed. If quantity can affect our final judgment of Cummings' love poetry--and I think it should--Cummings' has a greater range of subjects and a greater number of successful love poems than Roethke.

But let us return again to the qualitative differences. Both poets marvel at the identity paradox in love, but who expresses this theme better? Roethke writes, "We are one and yet we are more. . ./At times content to be two" (C.P., p. 207) and "I came to love, I came into my own." (C.P., p. 120).

And I dance round and round,
 A fond and foolish man,
 And see and suffer myself
 In another being, at last.
 (C.P., p. 126)

Cummings expresses the loss of the self in love with the following lyric:

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:
 which halves reintegrating, shall occur
 no death and any quantity; but than
 all numerable mosts the actual more

minds ignorant of stern miraculous
 this every truth--beware of heartless them
 (given the scalpel, they dissect a kiss;
 or, sold the reason, they undream a dream)

one is the song which fiends and angels sing:
 all murdering lies by mortals told make two.
 Let liars wilt, repaying life they're loaned;
 we (by a gift called dying born) must grow

deep in dark least ourselves remembering
 love only rides his year.

All lose, whole find¹⁶

Here, we have to my mind something close to the the quintessential Cummings' love poem. The speaker's tone is more argumentative and satiric than Roethke's. His metaphysical wit with arithmetic and the scalpel, the passion in his satire ("all murdering lies"), and again his flattering inclusion of the audience with the "immortal ones"--all these effects succeed. But more impressive--especially for me after writing

¹⁶Ibid., p. 556.

of Roethke's use of the death motif--is Cummings' skillful use of a love/death motif. Cummings calls the renunciation of the self in love "dying" and juxtaposes that immortal triumph with "death" which suggests the grave and the dead "heartless them." (For me, this word play is more effective than Cummings' personifications of death as in "Mr. Death.") In this poem Cummings would have us forget "ourselves," a pronoun which expresses a less intimate fusion of self and other than represented by the pronoun "we" in other poems. The stark, telegraphic, final aphorism makes us feel the identity paradox in love better than anything in Roethke. Furthermore, Cummings can write lines that are as evocative as they are obscure, for example, "love only rides his year." Perhaps making love--not death--the horseman suggests that love's power to transcend death is still limited to a finite period of time, i.e., only for the duration of one's life can we transcend death.

In conclusion, both poets express the profound nature of love better than any other contemporary American poets. They make us feel their joy--Roethke by generating energy through humor, strong rhythms, layers of meaning; Cummings through startling syntax, dramatic monologues, flattery of the audience, and satire. The drama of

Roethke's poems happens within the mind of the speaker. It's a drama recording the emotional states of an alternately ecstatic and distressed lover. Love for Roethke is a high-risk/high-reward venture. The risk in the first sequence is the psychic disintegration of the protagonist. In the second sequence, we feel the terrors of a young girl just coming to love. With her delicacy, her fragility, and her emotional lability, her less violent reactions are no less interesting to the reader. Cummings writes little of the trouble in love except by identifying unfeeling, uncaring individuals as objects of his satire; his own personal problems in love are not revealed. Roethke makes us feel the terrors of a harried, distressed lover who at times is on the brink of annihilation.

Finally, it is difficult to judge between Cummings and Roethke as to who is the better love poet. Both are consummate craftsmen, both are innovators within the Donne tradition. Cummings writes more love poems--even a greater quantity of successful love poems than Roethke--but Roethke's sequences have a synergistic effect that makes the group amount to more than the sum total of its members. (For example, "Plaint" gains importance by serving as a contrast to surrounding poems.) In

individual poems, Roethke has more depth and Cummings more verve. In general variety of topics, Cummings has the edge; in variations on a theme, Roethke shows greater invention as is manifest in his love/death motif. Through their artistic innovation within a grand tradition, both poets create love poetry with a depth and lyrical intensity unmatched in contemporary American literature. But no contemporary American love poetry whose lyrical intensity matches Roethke's lyrical intensity can also match his poetry for depth of meaning.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by George F. Wendt has been read and approved by the following committee:

Dr. Joseph J. Wolff, Director
Professor, English, Loyola

Dr. Anthony S. LaBranche
Associate Professor, English, Loyola

Dr. William R. Hiebel
Assistant Professor, English, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date

Joseph Hiebel

Director's Signature