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The psychological and spiritual quest for personal identity in the poetry of Theodore Roethke

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL QUEST FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a panel discussion on "Identity" at Northwestern University in February of 1963, Theodore Roethke listed the major themes of his poetry: (1) the multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) the way, the means of establishing a personal identity, a self, in the face of that chaos; (3) the nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) the nature of God Himself. The two major experimental sequences of poetry in Roethke's career, included in The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948) and Praise to the End! (1951) are particularly representative of the above themes. They may be read as a psychological and spiritual quest for personal identity, an identity, for Roethke, absolutely essential in the face of the chaos of modern life.

In an explanation of his method of establishing a personal identity today Roethke spoke of the necessity of having "a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being -- and in some instances, even an inanimate thing."[1] When this is accomplished it "brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe."[2]

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[1]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., ed., On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 25.

[2]Mills, p. 25.

For Roethke, even though both feelings are not always present, either of them can be cause for rejoicing. Furthermore, both states can be "induced, the first simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you."[3]

In identifying God with Unity-in-Separateness, Roethke's mystical experience may be defined as "extrovertive," a term used by W. T. Stace im his Teachings of the Mystics.

An extrovertive mystic experience involves the individual's perception of the unity of the world he sees, and of himself as part of that unity. This is distinctly different from introvertive mystic experience, which involves a similar paradoxical unity of the individual's consciousness with that which is greater than itself but includes a complete denial of itself. Stace points out that "the extrovertive mystic experience is sensory-intellectual insofar as it still perceives physical objects but is non-senuous and non-intellectual insofar as it perceives them as 'all One.'"[4]

Roethke's search for personal identity is made in the awareness of a need for God. In this same address Roethke affirms his belief in an immanent God; "For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time that He is further

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[3] Mills, p. 25.

[4] W. T. Stace, Teachings of the Mystics (New York, New American Library, 1960), p. 15.

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."[5]

Roethke feels that all living things, including the sub-human, can be an aid in the quest for personal identity. This is a primitive attitude, similar to the attitude found in William Blake's dictum that "all that lives is holy." St. Thomas Aquinas writes of this mystical awareness that God is in everything living: "God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things."[6] So that when Roethke calls upon the "minimal" in his poetry he is, in a sense, calling upon God. Roethke feels there must be a break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or from the self to God.

The greater part of Theodore Roethke's poetry can then be read as a kind of psychological and spiritual autobiography, a testament of one man's struggle for a meaningful existence. It speaks of the human condition of doubt and distress and of the search for meaning in the modern world. Roethke's spiritual and psychological strivings are firmly

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[5]Mills, p. 27.

[6]St. Thomas Aquinas, Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, ed. A. C. Pegis (New York, 1945), p. 57.

based on the need for "knowing oneself."

Beginning with traditional lyrics in his volume Open House (1941), Roethke seeks to establish, through the creative faculty, some semblance of order out of the overwhelming multiplicity of modern life. These early poems are, for the most part, written in the metaphysical manner. Intellectual in content, strict in form, but at times strained and awkward, they are mainly exercises which prepare the way for Roethke's real talent.

After a time of apprenticeship in these forms, Roethke moves into a more direct, sensuous, non-intellectual mode of perception in The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948) and Praise to the End! (1951). Here begins the poet's true psychological and spiritual exploration of the self.

Roethke is above all interested in his own experience, his own way of perceiving the world. This is where his artistic exploration begins. He strives to find the wellsprings of his own psychic life and, inductively, of all human life. He searches for a personal identity which is, for the most part, spiritual in character but also reaches into the realm of the psychological.

Beginning with the "greenhouse poems" in Part I of The Lost Son, in which Roethke examines the correspondences between human growth and the growth of plants, he seeks to trace, through his volume Praise to the End! and Part IV of The Lost Son, the growth of the child from birth to

adolescence to adulthood. Throughout this examination he seeks a personal identity, an identity with all creation and the God of that creation.

Through this exploration of the world of the child, Roethke seeks to trace that necessary process of the individuation of the self which leads to psychological and spiritual maturity. Individuation means here the quest for true individuality, in short, self-realization.

Dr. Carl Jung, the psychologist-philosopher and one-time student of Freud, defines the process of individuation as a psychological "growing up," the process of discovering those aspects of one's self that make one an individual different from other members of his species. It is primarily a process of self-recognition--finding out who you are and what your place is in the universe. This self-recognition requires extraordinary courage and honesty, but is absolutely essential if one is to find a meaning in one's life.

This psychological process is the path towards the knowledge of oneself and one's place in the universe. Through this process of individuation one may reach the goal of "integration of the self." This is the human psyche in its totality, including recognition of both the conscious and the unconscious and including the individual's awareness of his roots in the matrix of the collective unconscious.

This wholeness of personality is achieved when consciousness and the unconscious are linked together in a living

relation. However, the unconscious can never be made wholly conscious and therefore remains the greatest store of energy for the psychic growth of the individual. The wholeness is always relative so that the individual is constantly working at developing himself throughout his life. As Jung states: "Personality, as the complete realization of our whole being, is an unattainable idea. But unattainability is no argument against the ideal, for ideals are only signposts, never the goal."[7]

The development of the personality is at once both beneficial and harmful. The blossoming personality must pay for it dearly. The result is alienation from mass society. Jung explains it thus: "Its first fruit is the conscious and unavoidable segregation of the single individual from the undifferentiated and unconscious herd."[8] Above all, one must be faithful to one's own existence at this level, for as Jung states: "Only the man who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality."[9] Self-realization then becomes a moral decision, and in making this moral decision, energy is given to the process of self-fulfillment that Jung calls individuation.

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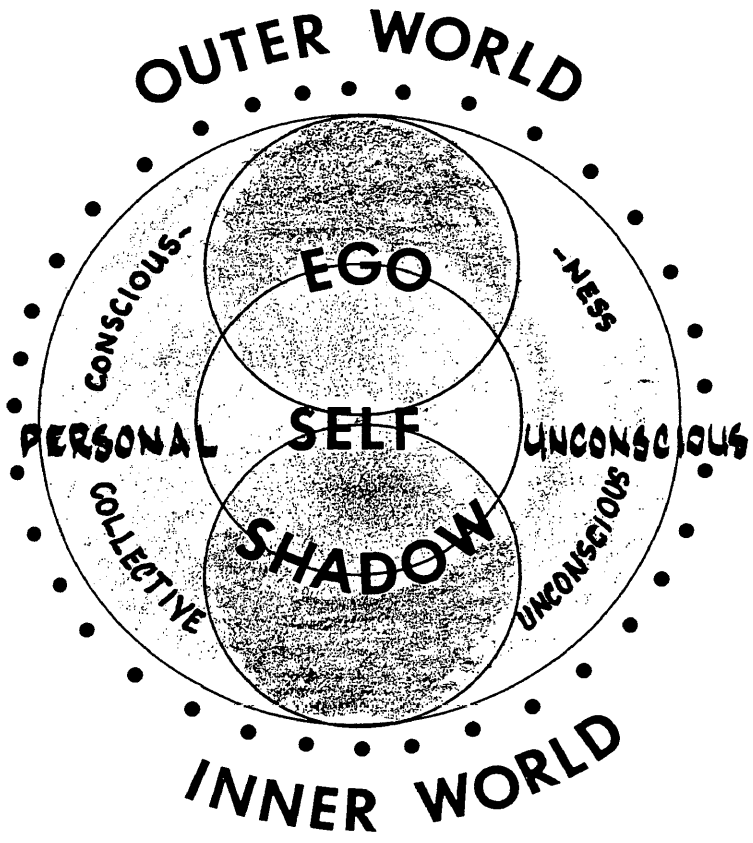
[7]Sir Herbert Read, Dr. Michael Fordham, and Dr. Gerhard Adler, eds., The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, trans. from German by R. F. C. Hull (New York, 1953-62), XVII, 172. Hereafter cited as Works.

[8]Works, XVII, 173.

[9]Works, XVII, 180.

Jung further defines individuation as "becoming a single, homogeneous being, and insofar as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self."[10] However, this individuation process does not mean individualism in the narrow, egocentric sense, but rather it makes a man realize his true individuality. He does not become selfish but rather he fulfills his own individual nature. He also becomes a member of a collectivity by making contact with the whole world through consciousness and the unconscious. He fulfills his own nature in relation to the whole of mankind.

The following diagram is an approximate representation of the total psyche:



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[10] Works, VII, 171.

The self is in the middle between consciousness and the unconscious, partaking of both but also encompassing them both in the sphere of its rays, for "the self is not only the center but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the center of this totality, just as the ego is the center of the conscious mind."[11]

The self is a goal to be realized, a "central fire," our individual share in God and the early Christian ideal of the kingdom of God that is "within" each one of us.

In his psychological and spiritual quest for this self, Roethke first explores the world of the child and the correspondence between human growth and the growth of plants. Roethke's first concern in the first sequence of The Lost Son is the struggle for birth, a birth from the greenhouse womb (the unconscious) into the light of day (consciousness).

Next in Praise to the End! and The Lost Son, the emphasis is upon the individuation process,

> the process of becoming the independent personality who is relatively free from the domination of the parental archetypes and independent of the supportive structures of the social environment . . . therefore establishing his own individual values and relationships which are valid because they are based on the reality of self-knowledge and not on a system of illusions and rationalizations. [Therefore] . . . individuation is its own goal, its own meaning and fulfillment and is at the same time a religious experience [Roethke's extrovertive mystical experience] and one might say, a religious way of life, because it means to live one's existence creatively in the awareness of its participation in the stream of an eternal Becoming.[12]

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[11] Works, XII, 41.

[12] C. G. Jung, Psyche and Symbol, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (New York, 1958), p. xxix.

Roethke's quest for personal identity can therefore be understood as the manifestation of a primordial archetypal urge or drive. In this light, his extrovertive mystic experience can be seen as an authentic part of his psychic existence and cannot be regarded as derivative.

Dr. Jung's theory of the racial memory and archetypes is an expansion of Freud's theories of the personal unconscious. It is an assertion that beneath this personal unconscious is a primeval, collective unconscious shared in the psychic inheritance of all members of the human family. Just as certain instincts are inherited by the lower animals, so are more complex psychic predispositions (racial memory) inherited by human beings.

Archetypes or primordial images are explained by Jung as follows: "Mind is not born a tabula rasa [contrary to eighteenth-century Lockean psychology]. Like the body, it has pre-established individual definiteness: namely, forms of behavior. They become manifest in the ever-recurring patterns of psychic functioning."[13]

Jung writes in further explanation that archetypes are not inherited ideas or patterns of thought but: "In reality they belong to the realm of activities of the instincts and in that sense they represent inherited forms of psychic behaviour."[14]

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[13]Jung, Psyche and Symbol, p. xv.

[14]Jung, Psyche and Symbol, p. xvi.

Archetypes not only manifest themselves in static form, as in primordial image, but also in a dynamic process such as the process of individuation. All human manifestations of life, whether biological, psychological or spiritual, rest on an archetypal base. They are instinctive reactions to particular situations confronted by man throughout the ages. They bypass consciousness and lead to modes of behavior that sometimes defy rationality. For as Jung says in his essay on The Psychology of the Child Archetype: "For the archetype is an element of our psychic structure and thus a vital and necessary component in our psychic economy. It represents or personifies certain instinctive data of the dark, primitive psyche, the real but invisible roots of consciousness."[15]

Art is one channel (others are dreams and myths) by which these archetypes become accessible to consciousness. The artist is the man who possesses "the primordial vision," a special sensitivity to archetypal patterns and a gift for speaking in primordial images, which enable him to transmit experiences of the "inner world" to the "outer world" through his art form. As Jung suggests, the artist "will resort to mythology [e.g. Roethke's use of the myth of the child-hero] in order to give his experience its most fitting expression."[16]

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[15] Jung, Psyche and Symbol, p. 123.

[16] Carl J. Jung, Modern Man in Search of His Soul, trans. from the German by C. F. Baynes and S. Dell (New York, 1955), p. 164.

However, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that the artist works with materials received at second-hand. "The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed, and, therefore, requires mythological imagery to give it form."[17] Because the artist is also "man" but in a larger sense -- "collective man," his work "comes to meet the spiritual need of the society in which he lives."[18]

Roethke's confusion as to his personal value in the face of modern existential meaninglessness provides him with a key ingredient for successful poetry--the recognition of his own suffering and, therefore, the suffering of all men. What he has attempted in Praise to the End! and The Lost Son and Other Poems is a courageous exploration of the inner workings of the self in order to eventually find mystical union with all creation and the God of that creation.

From the use of traditional metaphysical verse in his first book, Open House, he moves naturally toward the sensuous, the symbolic, the organic metaphor. In the first part of his second volume, The Lost Son and Other Poems, he enters, through an extension of the doctrine of correspondences (the theory that external physical objects mirror internal, subjective psychological states), the world of the preconscious and the prerational. He continues his exploration of the growth of the psyche, this time through the psychological "process of

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[17]Jung, Modern Man in Search of His Soul, p. 164.

[18]Jung, Modern Man in Search of His Soul, p. 171.

individuation" in Praise to the End! and the later sections of The Lost Son.

After gaining important insight into himself and the world around him, Roethke seeks to complete his quest in a mystical apprehension of God. However, he clearly rejects ascetic mysticism and its path to final and complete absorbtion into a transcendent God, a God of Being. Rather, he accepts the oneness with all creation and the God, the God of Becoming, of that creation.

Roethke here becomes aware of the hidden unity in the God of Becoming. It comes in an all-embracing act of heightened consciousness in which the poet, through love, realizes that all creatures are in God and God is in all creatures. It is a heightened awareness of "otherness" in natural things-- a paradoxical sense of a unity-in-separateness, the realization of true reality. The self becomes aware of this true reality of the world of Becoming, the Divine creativity, in which each single life is immersed.

This feeling of "oneness" with all creation 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 innocency."[19]

A full understanding of Roethke's mystical experience, however, must take into consideration the substructure of

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[19]Mills, p. 26.

Roethke's manic-depressive behavior at the time he was writing the experimental sequence, The Lost Son. Roethke's manic-depressive psychoses, also called alternating insanity, consisted of alternating periods of mania, with an exaggerated feeling of elation and well-being, and of melancholia, an equally exaggerated and groundless misery.

The term cyclical insanity has also been used because of the rhythmical nature of these states, which usually are separated by a relatively normal period. During the manic stage, the patient's energy seems boundless; he may dash about talking gaily and wildly for twenty-four hours at a time without rest or sleep. The term maniac is specifically applied to a person whose behavior is very wild at this stage of psychosis. In his depressed state he may sit or lie miserably, scarcely able to move or speak, wishing for death which he sometimes seeks very cleverly.

In Chapter Five of this thesis an examination of Part IV of The Lost Son will prove Roethke's ability to use this frightening experience to move beyond himself to a greater awareness of reality. The anxiety experienced during these episodes, the disassociation of personality, became for Roethke more than mental conditions peculiar to the insane, but rather more intense perceptions of the human condition as it is experienced by all men.

In this light, Roethke's extrovertive mystical union with creation can be seen as a fusion of psychological and spiritual transcendence to a higher reality.

While he was interned in Mercywood Hospital in December of 1935 he wrote out an examination of himself for the doctors there in which he included the following entry: "My chief interest as a teacher and writer is keeping in what I call the foreground of contemporary consciousness. Now this is not confined only to poetry or prose but it is related to all the sciences, arts, etc.--obviously, but it is especially the concern of the poet and the poetic sensibility. The poet is nothing if not aware. He has always had a toughness of spirit--the real poets, that is--Rimbaud, running to tropics, Corbiere and pig--spiritual toughness."[20]

In one of his final poems these lines appear: "What's madness, but nobility of soul / At odds with circumstance?" For Roethke, this nobility is the result of a heightened awareness. It is the tragic vision of life which heightens the mundane and seemingly meaningless sequence of events into something greater than itself.

In order to begin to trace Roethke's psychological and spiritual quest for personal identity, it will first be necessary to sketch his life and those circumstances which led to his "nobility of soul."

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[20] Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), p. 94.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUNDS: THE GREENHOUSE WORLD

Theodore Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan, on May 25, 1908. His father, Otto Roethke, was the son of a Prussian immigrant who had been chief forester on the estate of Bismarck's sister, the Gräfin von Arnim, near Pasewalk in East Prussia. Wilhelm Roethke came to the United States in 1872 so that his sons would not have to serve in the army. He chose Saginaw because his older brother, Karl, had already settled there.

In Saginaw, Wilhelm Roethke built a large greenhouse on his property and began raising flowers. The eldest son, Emil, who was next in line for ownership of the prosperous greenhouse took up other work and the two younger sons, Karl (later changed to Charles) and Otto bought out his inheritance and took over management of the property. Charles kept the books; Otto tended the flowers.

Theodore Roethke later wrote of his father and his greenhouse work:

> My father's chief interest was the growing of the flowers. When the firm was at its height, it took up twenty-five acres within the city of Saginaw with a quarter of a million feet under glass. We lived in a frame house which was in front of the greenhouse and my uncle Charlie lived in a stone house which was next door. At one time the firm had three retail outlets, but a good deal of business was wholesale. Its advertising created the slogan, "The largest and most complete floral establishment in Michigan" and undoubtedly it was, for it had its own icehouse, a small game preserve, and the last stand of virgin timber in the Saginaw Valley

> (mostly walnut and oak--not pine). In spite of the fact that it was a working commercial greenhouse, a good deal of space, time and money was spent in experiment. Not only in flowers but also in determining what kind of wild game could be stocked in the game preserve which was seven miles outside the city, a plot of only one hundred sixty acres but completely fenced and very good natural cover for pheasant and partridge.[21]

Roethke's relations with his florist father would be enviable to most young boys. He was with his father constantly and was an important member of the greenhouse crew. He pulled weeds in the greenhouse:

> Under the concrete benches,
> Hacking at black hairy roots,---
> Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes,--
> Digging into the soft rubble underneath,
> Webs and weeds,
> Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,
> Or yanking tough fern-shapes,
> Coiled green and thick, like dripping smilax,
> Tugging all day at perverse life:
> The indignity of it!-- (CP,39)*

But there was another side to this meaningful work with his father as overseer. The young Roethke feared and, at times, even hated his father. His father could be exceedingly stern and demanding and he had a quick temper which at times was turned on his son. Because of his father's behavior Roethke many times doubted his father's love and this doubt turned into bitterness and hate, which in turn caused feelings of guilt. Because of his exceptional sensitivity, Roethke's ambivalent feelings toward his father stayed with him

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*Citations from Roethke in my text are to Roethke: Collected Poems, New York, 1966.

[21]Seager, pp. 12-13.

throughout his life. These feelings toward his father are present in an early poem, "My Papa's Waltz," in which the frightened boy is waltzed off to bed by a tipsy father:

> 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. (CP,45)

In this poem the mixture of his father's tenderness and cruelty comes across clearly.

His father's death during Roethke's adolescence was to be the most important single event in his life. Roethke's childhood world revolved around his father and the greenhouse. Roethke identified his early happiness in the greenhouse and surrounding woods, fields, and streams with his father, who allowed him to work with him in tending the flowers and who took him fishing and on long walks in the surrounding woods.

Roethke's sensitivity, especially at age thirteen, made him feel guilt at the death of his father. His ambivalent relationship with his father, his love and fear, even hatred, made him feel that at one time he must have wished to see his father dead and now it had come too horribly true.

Throughout his childhood, Roethke's concept of God was understood in terms of his father. His father was the all-powerful greenhouse keeper, the bringer of light and warmth to the growing plants. He was the stern law-giver and the

benevolent benefactor. With the death of his father, Roethke at the same time lost his concept of God.

In the same way Roethke felt that he had been expelled from his Garden of Eden, the greenhouse world, because of his guilt feelings connected with his father's death. For Roethke considered his father's greenhouse "a symbol of the whole of life; a womb, a heaven-on-earth." [22]

In the poem, "The Lost Son," Roethke's father becomes the symbol of creation and order while his mother becomes the symbol of chaos, the protective, fertile womb of the greenhouse. This dual nature of the greenhouse becomes for the growing child the duality of his own material and spiritual being. However, by freeing himself from the domination of these parental archetypes, the Wise Old Man and the Magna Mater,[23] he resolves his duality of existence by fusing and therefore transcending them in order to reach mystical awareness of his participation in the stream of an eternal Becoming.

Roethke seeks his personal identity through the use of his poetry. He recaptures as best he can the feelings and thoughts of himself as a child growing up in a greenhouse world which was for him the center of the universe. His loss of identity upon the death of his father, at that time his

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[22]Mills, p. 39.

[23]The Wise Old Man archetype is the personification of the spiritual principle in man. The Magna Mater, the great earth mother represents the cold, impersonal truth of nature.

only realization of God, is faced squarely and finally resolved by escaping from the dominant archetype of his father and by an intense examination of the lowest forms of life and even of inanimate objects in order to eventually reach a state of mystical illumination.

The intensity of vision necessary for this mystical illumination is reflected in a story Roethke told to his biographer, Allan Seager, in connection with his commitment to Mercywood Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, while he was an instructor in English at Michigan State University:

> For no reason I started to feel very good. Suddenly I knew how to enter into the life of everything around me. I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, even a rabbit. I didn't sleep much. I just walked around with this wonderful feeling. One day I was passing a diner and all of a sudden I knew what it felt like to be a lion. I went into the diner and said to the counter-man, "Bring me a steak" and I started eating it. The other customers made like they were revolted, watching me. And I began to see that maybe it was a little strange. So I went to the Dean and said, "I feel too good. Get me down off this." So they put me into the tubs.[24]

In order to attain this level of visionary intensity, Roethke had to sacrifice mental stability. His first breakdown occurred in mid-November of 1935. After a short stay in Mercywood Hospital, he recovered rapidly and began to teach at Pennsylvania State College in the fall of 1936. During his term at Penn State, he published his first volume of poems, Open House. For the most part these poems are traditional in form and highly intellectual in content. His

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[24]Seager, p. 101.

influences at this time were those poets writing in the metaphysical fashion: W. H. Auden, Leonie Adams, Elinor Wylie, and others. However, in this same volume are found the beginnings of Roethke's exploration of the self as a search for personal identity. The major breakthrough in form and content came in the later volumes, Praise to the End! and The Lost Son and Other Poems.

In 1943, Roethke began teaching at Bennington College. Here he started work on the poems that were to be included in The Lost Son, which were published in 1948 while he was associate professor at the University of Washington. It included several lyrics in the mode of Open House but the "greenhouse poems" at the beginning, and the four long developmental poems at the end, were completely new, both for Roethke and for contemporary poetry.

It was at this time that Roethke broke away from being a good "minor" poet in the traditional vein to become a ground-breaker in both poetic technique and content.

It was also at this point that Roethke began his arduous quest for a meaningful identity. This quest may have precipitated his second major mental breakdown. He was going back, far back, into his childhood in order to find the roots, the beginnings of his quest. He would pace back and forth in his cottage on the campus of Bennington, shedding his clothes until naked and then dressing again, five or six times a day. It was as if he were shedding his skin, trying to find his inner core, his true self.

His second commitment to a mental institution was much different than the first. The first one (in 1935) seemed to be brought on by Roethke himself through his experiments in meditation. His states of ecstatic joy in mystical illumination were countered by periods of morbid depression. During his stay at Mercywood Hospital he lolled in the hydrotherapy tubs, where he could read and write letters and, more importantly, poetry. It was a time of needed rest after his tough schedule as teacher, coach (he taught tennis while at Penn State), and public relations man. But his second commitment, this time at Albany General Hospital, established his manic-depressive behavior pattern for the remainder of his life. It was now all too real. Here he was given shock treatments which terrified him. This period of commitment actually becomes the sub-structure of the experimental sequence, "The Lost Son." Its effect will be examined in Chapter Five of this thesis.

Taken altogether, The Lost Son traces the birth of the child (greenhouse poems), his early growth and awareness of the external world outside father and mother, the awakening of sexuality in early adolescence, the loss of the father, both earthly and heavenly, and the final mystical union with creation and the God of creation, the God of Becoming.

In the "greenhouse poems" of this volume, Roethke uses plants as correspondences to human growth, those same plants that played so important a part in his childhood. The long

experimental poems in Part IV of The Lost Son trace the process of individuation of the child through the imagery and symbolism of the natural world and, most importantly, through the dramatic enactment of the myth of the child-hero and the prerational consciousness from which it springs.

Although published later (1951), Praise to the End! is an additional series of developmental poems, part of which may be read most profitably as an introduction to Part IV of The Lost Son.

Throughout the experimental sequences, The Lost Son and Praise to the End!, Roethke wrote exclusively about himself and his own personal concerns. But rather than being an obstacle to his endeavors, it became an asset. He wrote about himself as universal man, not only in the Jungian sense of each man carrying within himself the history of the race deposited in the collective unconscious, but also that as a man of his age he was tormented by its characteristic anxieties, its existential anguish, its apparently widening gap between the material and the spiritual.

CHAPTER III

OPEN HOUSE AND THE "GREENHOUSE POEMS"

Open House, Roethke's first volume of poems, contains the clues to the themes of the experimental poems in his subsequent volumes, Praise to the End! and The Lost Son.

Roethke's emphasis on the inner force of memory in recalling the greenhouse and his father, who was the ruling principle of this childhood world, is seen in "The Premonition." In this poem, Roethke evokes the emotions he felt towards his father and the fact of his death:

> Walking in this field I remember
> Days of another summer.
> Oh that was long ago! I kept
> Close to the heels of my father,
> Matching his stride with half-steps
> Until we came to a river,
> He dipped his hand in the shallow:
> Water ran over and under
> Hair on a narrow wrist bone;
> His image kept following after,--
> Flashed with the sun in the ripple,
> But when he stood up, that face
> Was lost in a maze of water. (CP,6)

The strength of these memories can be seen in one of his late poems, "Otto," written by Roethke at the age of fifty-five. He still remembered vividly those early years centered around the figure of his father:

> In my mind's eye I see those fields of glass,
> As I looked out at them from the high house,
> Riding beneath the moon, hid from the moon,
> Then slowly breaking whiter in the dawn;
> When George the watchman's lantern dropped from sight
> The long pipes knocked: It was the end of night.
> I'd stand upon my bed, a sleepless child
> Watching the waking of my father's world.--
> O world so far away! O my lost world! (CP,225)

In another of these early poems, "Prognosis," are found the beginnings of the poet's "process of individuation," his extrication from the domination of the parental archetypes. In this poem the dark, mysterious side of the Magna Mater archetype is seen as the "devouring" womb of the greenhouse, the mother who cries "Escape me? Never --." Also in this same poem, the opposite side of the Wise Old Man archetype is seen in the father as spectre ruining marital happiness. But through the quest for an independent identity the spirit is "Flushed to a fever / The nightmare silence is broken" and the son is not "lost." (CP,5)

The child retains his individuality in spite of the desire to return to the "womb" of the greenhouse, symbol of the mother, and to appease the "ghost," symbol of the father. The process of individuation cannot begin "Until the dead have been subdued." (CP,4)

Throughout the "greenhouse poems," Roethke vacillates between two views of the greenhouse world. For the most part it is associated with the curative element of primeval slime, its protection and welcome. It is also associated with the Great Mother archetype (warmth, protection, fertility). At times, however, it is associated with the mire that can hold one a prisoner, sucking him into the bog of death and stagnation. In the later experimental sequences the greenhouse takes on this morbidity as a symbol of psychological regression. Because the son must escape the parental archetypes

in order to achieve psychological integration of the self, he eventually rejects its dark obscurity (unconsciousness) for the light of day (consciousness).

Roethke also holds two views of his florist father in mind throughout these poems: He is seen as creator and restorer of life and he is also seen as stern law-giver who imposes strict order on the fertile, chaotic greenhouse.

Roethke's use of the plant world of the greenhouse for correspondences to human growth and development in his "greenhouse poems" begins in a poem included in Open House entitled "The Light Comes Brighter" which concludes:

> The leafy mind that long was tightly furled,
> Will turn its private substance into green,
> And young shoots spread upon our inner world. (CP,11)

In this poem Roethke begins to exploit the correspondences between inner and outer reality. Here Roethke is announcing his commitment to a view of reality in which it is possible to move through the material world to the light of the highest spiritual truth.

The doctrine of correspondences is of the greatest importance in Roethke's poetry. Roethke's source for this theory of correspondences is the mystical literature that runs from Jacob Boehme, German mystic of the seventeenth century, through Emanuel Swedenborg, Swedish philospher and mystic of the eighteenth century, to William Blake, visionary poet and engraver of the same century. Boehme explains it thus: "The whole world, exterior and visible, with its essence, is but a

sign or an appearance of the world that is interior and spiritual; everything that is interior and latent has an exterior correspondent."[25] Also Boehme, like Roethke, used the plant world as the source of metaphor for the mysterious Becoming of the universe: "In this [mystical] light my Spirit saw through all things and into all natures and I recognized God in grass and plants . . . The self then becomes conscious of the living reality of that World of Becoming, the vast arena of Divine creativity, in which the little life is immersed."[26]

Emmanuel Swedenborg explains the doctrine of correspondences as follows: "The whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, and not merely the natural world in general, but also every particular of it."[27] William Blake expands this same definition: "This world of the Imagination is the world of Eternity . . . There exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Everything that we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature."[28] Most importantly of all, Boehme's extrovertive mysticism, based on the theosophical doctrine of correspondences, emphasizes

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[25]Jacob Boehme, The Signatures of All Things (London, 1912), III, 2.

[26]Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Consciousness (London, 1962), pp. 257-258.

[27]As quoted in Mark Schorer's William Blake: The Politics of Vision (New York, 1959), p. 95.

[28]William Blake: The Politics of Vision, p. 96.

the multiplicity as well as the unity of reality, the separateness as well as the oneness of things.

Roethke's exploration of the theory of correspondences begins in earnest in his next volume, The Lost Son and Other Poems. By this time he had discovered the true materials for his poetry in his memories of his father's greenhouse and subsequently he made an important breakthrough in style.

In the "greenhouse poems" of The Lost Son, Roethke returned to the place of his birth and to his experience in and around the greenhouse of his father. In these memories he found correspondences between his human life and that of the inhabitants of the plant kingdom which played so important a part in his youth. Although this is a similar technique to that used by Roethke in "The Light Comes Brighter" in Open House, the difference lies in the shift from emphasis upon visual perception to the direct appeal of all the senses. Also, there is a sense of dynamic growth in these "greenhouse poems" that is lacking in the more formal poems of the earlier volume.

Stanley Kunitz points out that this dynamism is one of the important characteristics differentiating the "greenhouse poems" from other close observations of plants: "What absorbs his [Roethke's] attention is not the intricate tracery of a leaf or the blazonry of the complete flower, but the stretching and reaching of a plant, its green force, its invincible Becoming."[29]

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[29]Stanley Kunitz, "News of the Root," Poetry, LXXIII (January, 1949), p. 223.

The first poem, "Cuttings," presents the plant's growth from seed analogous to the child's conception and beginning germinal stage--"The small cells bulge"--to the final process of gestation, birth itself:

> One nub of growth
> Nudges a sand-crumb loose
> Pokes through a musty sheath
> Its pale tendrilous horn. (CP,37)

Here is the vital struggle of a fledgling stem, severed from its parental stock. This imagistic figuring of a human situation in this poem views minutely the action of a new plant.

Again in "Cuttings (later)" the child's struggle for growth is compared to the "tight grains" of the new plant "parting at last." The conclusion of this poem epitomizes the theme of this first sequence:

> I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
> In my veins, in my bones I feel it,--
> The small waters seeping upward,
> The tight grains parting at last.
> When sprouts break out,
> Slippery as fish,
> I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet. (CP,37)

Here again the birth of the flower mirrors the poet's own birth. In these poems the experience of birth and growth is presented not in intellectual terms but directly in terms of sensory perception.

"Root Cellar," the next poem in the sequence, presents an image of the womb within a womb of Roethke's greenhouse where its fecundity did not allow "sleep" but instead" Bulbs "broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark." Shoots "lolled obscenely," roots were as "ripe as old bait"--creating

a veritable "congress of stinks." Here the life-force would not "give up life" for "even the dirt kept breathing a small breath."

In the "Forcing House," the steam pipes (associated by Roethke with the image of the father) bring life to the womb of the greenhouse:

> All pulse with the knocking pipes
> That drip and sweat,
> Sweat and drip,
> Swelling the roots with steam and stench,
> Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones. --
> Fifty summers in motion at once,
> As the live heat billows from pipes and pots, (CP,38)

In this same sequence, Roethke's father appears in the poem, "Old Florist," in the god-like position of tenderer of the greenhouse Eden:

> That hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums
> Or pinching-back asters, or planting azaleas,
> Tamping and stamping dirt into pots,--
> How he could flick and pick
> Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,
> Or scoop out a weed close to flourishing roots,
> Or make the dust buzz with a light spray.
> Or drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice,
> Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat,
> Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue
> in rubber boots. (CP,42)

And again in "Transplanting," the child helper is awed by the power of the florist giving life to young plants. In the conclusion of this poem there is yet another image of birth and early growth, that "green force," that "invincible Becoming":

> The underleaves, the smallest buds
> Breaking into nakedness,
> The blossoms extending
> Out into the sweet air,
> The whole flower extending outward,
> Stretching and reaching. (CP,42)

In "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" these same plants "[stare] up like accusers" at the boy who has left the greenhouse and now climbs upon its "streaked glass, flashing with sunlight." The child's early gropings beyond the darkness of the greenhouse womb can be compared to the extending flower which stretches and reaches for the light.

The "greenhouse" poems present through the theory of correspondences the birth of the child from the "womb" of the greenhouse into his first awareness of the external world outside its confines. From here the child begins the necessary process of individuation by leaving the archetypal mother (the greenhouse) and the archetypal father (the florist) to find his own identity. By delving into the preconscious, prerational mode of experience in Praise to the End! he begins to trace not only his individuation but also his spiritual history. Individuation is its own goal, its own meaning and fulfillment and is at the same time a religious experience. This process is examined in detail in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

In order to begin his spiritual progress, Roethke must make the regressive journey back to his beginnings, to his birthplace, the greenhouse. This return to beginnings in order for psychological and spiritual progress to begin is probably the most important justification for Roethke's experimental poems in Praise to the End! and in Part Four of The Lost Son. This journey is explained by Roethke in his

own words: "I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (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.'"[30]

The poems included in this chapter illustrate Roethke's ability to return to the very beginnings of existence, especially in his concentration on the life-process of plants. Here his imagination relates the laws of growth to the development of the self through the use of metaphor.

The next step in tracing the process of individuation begins with the earliest stages of life (Praise to the End!), continues through adolescent conflicts with both the inner and outer world, and ends with a mystical harmony of the self with all creation and the God of that creation (The Lost Son and Other Poems).

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[30]Mills, p. 39.

CHAPTER IV

PRAISE TO THE END!

In "Open Letter" an essay included in Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Craft, Roethke identifies the primary theme of the developmental poems of The Lost Son and Praise to the End!: "Each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later to become something more."[31]

There is in these poems a deliberate return to the beginnings of life and consciousness in order to trace the move toward a unity of self, a personal identity.

The fact that this regressive journey back to beginnings is necessary for spiritual progress to begin is probably the most important justification for Roethke's developmental poems. This journey is explained by Roethke in his own words: "I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (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.'"[32] This journey becomes a quest for his father, and, ultimately, since they become identified by Roethke as one, God the Father. Throughout his poetry there is a profound desire for a

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[31]Mills, p. 37.

[32]Mills, p. 39.

personal identity or wholeness, a desire for harmony with all creation, and, identified with his dead father, the God of that creation.

This struggle for spiritual illumination and psychological integration is the major theme of the developmental poems beginning with the sequence Praise to the End! (as rearranged in Roethke's preferred order; not following the Collected Poems edition). In order to accomplish full psychological integration of the self it is necessary to pass through a process of individuation.

This "process of individuation," at the heart of Roethke's search for the self, is, according to Jung, made conscious through the method of "active imagination" in the archetype of the child-hero:

> The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious. Day and light are synonyms for consciousness, night and dark for the unconscious. The coming of consciousness was probably the most tremendous experience of primeval times, for with it a world came into being whose existence no one had suspected before. "And God said: 'Let there be light!'" is the projection of that immemorial experience of the separation of the conscious from the unconscious. Even among primitives today the possession of a soul is a precarious thing and the "loss of soul" a typical psychic malady which drives primitive medicine to all sorts of psychotherapeutic measures. Hence the "child" distinguishes itself by deeds which point to the conquest of the dark.[33]

In his exploration of the world of the child, Roethke seeks to trace this "conquest of the dark" which leads to spiritual and psychological maturity.

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[33] Jung, Psyche and Symbol, pp. 130-131.

Before going on to the developmental poems that illustrate Roethke's theme of the quest for personal identity, it is necessary first to elucidate the techniques used throughout the sequence. "Open Letter" is again used for Roethke's own statement about these poems: "Much of the action is implied, or, particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered obliquely. The revelation of the identity of the speaker may itself be a part of the drama; or, in some instances, as in a dream sequence, his identity may merge with someone else's or be deliberately blurred. This struggle for spiritual identity is, of course, one of the perpetual recurrences."[34]

Even more specifically, Roethke is striving in this poetry for the "spring and rush of the child," and in order to accomplish this the poet uses a "short varied line" without the use of "allusion." The language must be "compelling and immediate" as opposed to "mysterious" or "loosely oracular." In these poems there is a definite telescoping of image and symbol without, at times, the obvious connectives. Roethke calls this method of presentation "psychic shorthand" for it is used when the "protagonist is under great stress." Along with this he must be able to "shift his rhythms rapidly" in order to create the necessary "tension." The poet relies on intuition and the feel of the line in order to make it imaginatively right. The intensity of the language, through

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[34]Mills, p. 41.

telescoping of image and symbol, creates possible obscurity, but for the "serious reader who can hear the language; the 'meaning' itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement."[35]

The first poem of the Praise to the End! sequence is entitled "Where Knock is Open Wide." The title of the poem is taken from Christopher Smart's "A Song to David," stanza LXXVI:

> ...in the seat to faith assigned
> Where ask is have, where seek is find,
> Where knock is open wide.

The world of the child is immediately invoked:

> A kitten can
> Bite with his feet
> Papa and Mama
> Have more teeth.
>
> Sit and play
> Under the rocker
> Until the cows
> All have puppies. (CP,71)

Roethke's lines become "intuitions of sensibility," movements of the mind recorded long before idea or concept. The first pieces deal with this happiest time of childhood; the time of innocence when the child feels that all other animate and inanimate things are but extensions of his own being. From this blissful period the child begins to move into an awareness of the separateness of things and eventually of death itself.

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[35]Mills, pp. 41-42.

The sequence Praise to the End! and The Lost Son covers the period from early childhood to late adolescence. Because of his use of an associational theme throughout these poems, Roethke is able to shift back and forth easily in tracing the growth of the spirit. The present sequence is concerned with the first years of life. This period is explored in part through the use of a combination of nonsense verse and nursery song:

> Once upon a tree
> I came across a time,
> It wasn't even as
> A ghoule in a dream.
>
> There was a mooly man
> Who had a rubber hat
> The funnier than that,--
> He kept it in a can. (CP,71)

Roethke's father is first presented in sexual terms: "What's the time, papa-seed?" And the process of regeneration from father to son becomes: "Everything has been twice / My father is a fish." (CP,72) The warmth of Roethke's mother is described by him through a small song:

> Winkie will yellow I sang,
> Her eyes went kissing away
> It was and it wasn't her there
> I sang I sang all day. (CP,72)

Roethke accompanies his father to the "river," where they fish from a boat. There are connotations of Christ as fisherman, saving "lost" souls. Here again Roethke's father is seen in his God-like aspect. This aspect is especially emphasized in Roethke's description of his father's sparing a caught fish:

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
Papa threw him back. (CP,73)

The power of Roethke's God-like father is seen in his work in the greenhouse which the child watched with awe:

He watered the roses.
His thumb had a rainbow.
The stems said, Thank you.
Dark came early. (CP,73)

This is Roethke's paradisal state of existence. He is with his father and, because they are interchangeable, he is at one with his God. His father in this small poem is compared to the creator of all life. The greenhouse becomes a microcosm of the world, the center of all life, and the father becomes not only its creator but also its sustainer; so that when he dies, Roethke's world is emptied of order and meaning. The child is filled with guilt and anxiety about his father's death because of his secret wish to usurp his father's place of power and to become himself the source of life: "That was before I fell! I fell! / The worm has moved away. My tears are tired." (CP, 73) His apparent loss of innocence is similar to the fall of Adam in the Garden of Paradise. Both lose the Father by an attempt to become like the Father. The loss of the father, therefore, is also a loss of God:

Kisses come back,
I said to Papa;
He was all whitey bones
And skin like paper.

God's somewhere else.
I said to Mama.
The evening came.
A long, long time. (CP, 73-4)

The last two lines look ahead to a long period of alienation and loneliness for Roethke.

In this first poem of Praise to the End! the child is born, thereby losing his heavenly Father, and his earthly father dies, leaving him a "lost son." His awareness of his new responsibilities that accompany his loss of both fathers causes him to feel that he now is "somebody else."

In the fifth section of this same poem, Roethke keeps his new spiritual awareness, his new spiritual identity from his "hands," Roethke's synecdoche for flesh. This establishes the beginnings of a struggle to transcend his dual nature (physical and spiritual) in order to relate to reality as a unified being (the psychological "process of individuation" leading to total "integration of the self").

The second poem of this sequence, "I Need, I Need," explores the child's early development right after birth. The child is completely dependent upon his mother for existence. The satisfaction of his hunger is the most important element in his life at this stage; he is in what Freudians call the "oral" stage of life. The poem begins, in fact, with the child's wish to "taste" his mother:

> A deep dish. Lumps in it.
> I can't taste my mother.
> Hoo. I know the spoon.
> Sit in my mouth. (CP,74)

Roethke's loneliness without his father is invoked in the following lines:

Went down cellar,
Talked to a faucet;
The drippy water
Had nothing to say. (CP,74)

From the child's feelings of abandonment there arises a conflict of identity: "The Trouble is with No and Yes." (CP,75) The child may affirm his growing consciousness with its attendant feelings of alienation or he may want to return to the womb, the unconscious, which would lead eventually to total disintegration of the personality.

This crisis in the child's development stems from the necessity of his overcoming the "monster of darkness," the unconscious, in order to achieve mature consciousness. The possession of his own soul is precarious at this point in his development because of the danger of a "loss of soul," a return to the realm of the subconscious.

With the full realization of his father's death and the subsequent loss of order and protection in his life, the child must begin to find his own personal identity through the arduous process of individuation.

The child still longs for maternal comfort and so turns to nature, to his symbolic mother, the earth. The world of nature still holds magical powers for the growing child. He talks with stones and flowers: "Hear me, soft ears and roundy stones! / It's a dear life I can touch." (CP,76) The young Roethke feels that he is part of this world of nature. However, at the same time he is becoming aware of his own sexuality, the "fire" of the loins and its roots in his emotions.

This new sexual awareness threatens to sever him from his Edenic state of blissful union with creation because of its relationship to adulthood and death. The process of individuation is beginning here and it presents the problem of separate identity versus unification with the natural world.

"Bring the Day," the third poem of this first experimental sequence, follows the difficult, yet rewarding, process of individuation. In this poem the sense of disillusionment increases; the sense of mystery in mother nature decreases: "Hardly any old angels are around any more." (CP,78) The child is becoming more and more aware of his expanding sexual capabilities in "Give Way Ye Gates":

> Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;
> I dream of nothing but boards;
> I could love a duck. (CP,79)

This stage of the child's development could be considered Freudian anal-agressive: "The mouth asks. The hand takes." (CP,80) One of Freud's theories of child development may also be detected in the fantasies of the child: "We're king and queen of the right ground. / I'll risk the winter for you." (CP,79) The Oedipus complex can be seen here in the child's willingness to accept deprivation, even death, in order to possess the mother. Later in this poem the child again addresses his sexual organ: "You tree beginning to know / You whisper of kidneys" (CP,79). This imagery also repeats that of the previous poem, "Bring the Day": "When I stand I'm almost a tree" (CP,78). The themes of adulthood, sexuality, (tied in with the guilt of wishing to usurp the father's

place), death, and the world of nature, are stated in the next five lines of this fourth poem of the sequence:

> And the ghost of some great howl
> Dead in a wall.
> In the high-noon of thighs,
> In the springtime of stones,
> We'll stretch with the great stems. (CP,79)

The ghost in this section of the poem is Roethke's symbol of the father and of his Oedipal sexual guilt. It is also a "wall" which prevents the child from progressing towards psychological maturity. However, from this type of conflict the self gradually emerges as "the instant ages."

In fear of encroaching consciousness associated with anxiety, guilt, and death, the child asks for his "beast's heart" back again so that he may become "a bird or a bear" and not an adult. But he must bid farewell to the world of nature; he must now inhabit "another body," his own.

Now the protagonist's budding sexuality becomes associated with the death of the body: "Touch and arouse. Suck and sob. Curse and mourn." There is a regression of the spirit: "It's a cold scrape in a low place / The dead crow dries on a pole." The ghost (symbol of the father) is watching: "Shapes in the shade / Watch." (CP,80)

The final four lines of this last section of the poem recall the now distant origins of the self, the still pond of the unconscious in the depths of the mind:

> The deep stream remembers:
> Once I was a pond.
> What slides away
> Provides. (CP,80)

In "Sensibility! O La!" the child once again addresses

his penis as that "round dog," old "jumping" . . . "John-of-the thumb." The child has now come into sexual maturity: "A shape comes to stay: / The long flesh" which is "a twig to touch" and "Pleased as a knife." (CP,81)

With his newly won awareness of the world around him, which includes sexuality and death, it is time for the child to leave the world of father and mother, with its warmth and security, in order to avoid regression to infantile levels of psychological development.

In the poem "O Lull Me, Lull Me," the last poem of this first experimental sequence, the child again begins to feel in harmony with all creation. He goes beyond his immediate experience in order to reach again for a time that earlier sense of oneness with all creation:

> I could say hello to things;
> I could talk to a snail;
> I see what sings!
> What sings! (CP,84)

At this point the child has "overcome the monster of darkness" in order to emerge into mature consciousness. He has escaped the "devouring womb" of the greenhouse and he has begun to make the distinction between his father and his concept of God. In the next sequence of poems, "The Lost Son," there is an emphasis, not on the struggle for the simple awareness of a separate identity, but for a meaningful personal identity.

CHAPTER V

THE LOST SON

The Lost Son sequence completes the child's extrication from the archetypes of father and mother in order that he may develop his own individual values and relationships which become valid because they are based on the reality of self-knowledge. In continuing to come to grips with external reality, he rises above the conflicts of his dual nature (physical and spiritual) in order to find harmony with all creation and the God of that creation.

This process of individuation is its own goal, its own meaning and is at the same time a religious experience. It becomes a religious way of life in that it means to live one's existence creatively in the awareness of its participation in the stream of an eternal Becoming. This is reflected at the close of "The Field of Light" when Roethke first experiences true mystical perception.

The point of view of this experimental sequence is that of an older person, past adolescence, exploring the nature and origins of the self by probing the past. The first experimental sequence, Praise to the End!, dealt with the process of individuation from the point of view of the child trying to understand his own growth rather than the adult trying to understand his past. However, because the purpose of The Lost Son is also the re-experiencing of the past, there are

frequent lapses back to the vocabulary of the child.

The first section of "The Lost Son" entitled "The Flight," opens with an image of death, the death of the father:

> At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
> I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
> A slow drip over stones,
> Toads brooding in wells,
> All the leaves stuck out their tongues. (CP,53)

The young man is still obsessed with his father's death and he cannot seem to escape his memory in order to move on in the process of individuation.

This image is followed by a plea to the "minimal" creatures to aid him in his search for some clues to a more meaningful existence:

> I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
> Saying,
> Snail, snail, glister me forward,
> Bird, soft-sigh me home,
> Worm, be with me.
> This is my hard time. (CP,53)

Later in the poem there are long periods of waiting for these clues:

> Sat in an empty house
> Watching shadows crawl,
> Scratching.
> There was one fly. (CP,53)

A "Voice," perhaps the voice of God the Father, is asked to "come out of the silence," to "say something," even to "Appear in the form of a spider / Or a moth beating the curtain." The father, as both father and God, then appears to the young man as a "beard in a cloud." However, the transcendent father as God cannot console the grieving boy.

His awareness of death and his own confused searching lead him to ask:

> Which is the way I take;
> Out of what door do I go,
> Where and to whom? (CP,54)

Roethke writes of this poem in "Open Letter", "'The Flight' is just what it says it is: a terrified running away--with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting (the voices, etc.); the protagonist so geared up, so over-alive that he is hunting, like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the sub-human."[36]

Stephen Spender writes of the relationship between Roethke's manic-depressive behavior and his poetry as follows:

> Entering into his world--indeed becoming it--his world là-bas where words become loam and roots and snails and slugs lying along some bright chips of jangles from nursery rhymes and gashed childhood memories-Roethke is forever on the edge of Rimbaud's goal of the systematic déreglement de tous les sens. One does not know whether to rejoice with the poems or sympathize with the poet: for the disintegration which bore strange and marvellous fruit in his poetry caused tragic breakdowns in his life.[37]

Returning to the poem at hand, the next section, "The Pit," shows the poet exploring the beginnings of life, which culminate in an image of the womb:

> Where do the roots go?
> Look down under the leaves.
> Who put the moss there?

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[36]Mills, p. 38.

[37]Stephen Spender, "The Objective Ego," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 9.

These stones have been here too long.
Who stunned the dirt into noise?
Ask the mole, he knows.
I feel the slime of a wet nest. (CP,55)

It is, in Roethke's words, "A slowed down section; a period of physical and psychic exhaustion. And other obsessions begin to appear (symbolized by mole, nest, fish)."[38]

This period of terrifying regression is continued in "The Gibber." The poet is now at the "wood's [symbol of the unconscious] mouth. / By the cave's door" listening to the nightmare sounds of regression:

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

The weeds whined,
The snakes cried,
The cows and briars
Said to me: Die. (CP,55)

There is a lapsing back into comparative serenity after these nightmarish obsessions that leaves the young man "cold.": "I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother." The Job-like alienation of the young man from his father as God is seen in the line: "Fear was my father. Father Fear. / His look drained the stones." (CP,56)

In the same section the protagonist asks if he is now at the "storm's heart," that center of complete regression to the control of the unconscious forces. Conscious order is

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[38]Mills, p. 38.

"instilling itself," and the young man's own veins are "running nowhere." Has the spirit left the body? Is there a "loss of soul?": "Do [these] bones cast out their fire?" "Is the seed [life-force] leaving the old bed?" The young man has regressed as far as he can without complete loss of self and he must now begin anew in order to progress to psychological and spiritual maturity. But before this happens the young man reaches his lowest moment in the form of a death-wish:

> These sweeps of light undo me.
> Look, look, the ditch is running white!
> I've more veins than a tree!
> Kiss me ashes, I'm falling through a dark swirl. (CP,57)

From this terrifying period the protagonist returns to memories of his father's greenhouse. With the coming of "papa" to these memories there is a return to conscious order:

> The light in the morning came slowly over the white
> Snow.
> There were many kinds of cool
> Air.
> Then came steam.
>
> Pipe-knock.
>
> Scurry of warm over small plants.
> Ordnung! ordnung!
> Papa is coming! (CP,57)

Roethke's own comment on this passage is useful in revealing his methods employed here and throughout the experimental sequences:

> Buried in the text are many little ambiguities, not all of which are absolutely essential to the central meaning of the poem. For instance, the "pipe-knock." With the coming of steam, the pipes begin knocking violently, in a greenhouse. But "Papa," or the florist,

> as he approached, often would knock the pipe he was smoking on the sides of the benches, or on the pipes. Then, with the coming of steam and "papa"--the papa on earth and heaven are blended--there is the sense of motion in the greenhouse, my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth.[39]

There is at this point a sense of renewal, of new growth--another progression of the spirit presented through a correspondence between the plant life of the greenhouse and human life:

> A fine haze moved off the leaves;
> Frost melted on far panes;
> The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.
> Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds
> Moved in a slow up-sway. (CP,57)

This section sums up the movement not only of this poem but of the entire sequence of "The Lost Son." There is a progression from darkness to light, from cold to warmth, from the unconscious to consciousness, from chaos to order (Ordnung!) through the father-figure (both earthly and heavenly), from symbolic death to renewal of life.

The final section of "The Lost Son" emphasizes spiritual growth which brings (for a limited time) to a culmination the protagonist's quest for psychological and spiritual identity. The tone is meditative. The theory of correspondence is again at work. The winter landscape, cold and stark but with a beauty all its own, reflects in its starkness the inner condition of the young man. The blazing white "light" from off the snow moves "slowly over the frozen field, / Over the dry

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[39]Mills, p. 39.

seed-crowns." This light of mystical illumination pierces the "bones of weeds / Swinging in the wind." The young man's mind moves but "not alone, / Through the clear air, in the silence." The poem closes with an affirmation that the spiritual presence felt by the child in the greenhouse world will again return:

> Was it light?
> Was it light within?
> Was it light within light?
> Stillness becoming alive,
> Yet still?
>
> A lively understandable spirit
> Once entertained you.
> It will come again.
> Be still.
> Wait. (CP,58)

Of the final untitled section Roethke writes: "The coming of light suggested at the end of the last passage occurs again, this time to the nearly-grown man. But the illumination is still only partly apprehended; he is still 'waiting'."[40]

In "The Lost Son," the young man has been seeking a way to regain his childhood sense of union with nature but without suffering the loss of his individuality as an adult. Threatened by complete annihilation in the absorbing embraces of maternal nature, as well as by complete isolation from his father, both earthly and heavenly, the son's survival lies in the vision of oneness--in-separateness of the father bringing

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[40]Mills, p. 39.

order to the chaotic womb of the greenhouse. The son is attempting to base his experience on the light of mystical perception.

The child has been seeking a reunion with nature lost through his feelings of guilt for breaking the natural order of things by wishing to usurp his father's place with his mother and by doing so precipitating his father's death. But he wishes to regain this Edenic state of existence without losing the individuality of his adult identity. He is threatened by total psychological regression to his previous life in the realm of the unconscious with the subsequent loss of opportunity to achieve union with paternal God. He therefore grounds his experience in the mystical vision of oneness-in-separateness of the father bringing order to the undifferentiated womb of the greenhouse.

This type of mystical experience may be considered extrovertive because it involves the individual's perception of the unity of the observed world, and of himself as part of that unity. This is to be distinguished from introvertive mystic experience which invokes the same kind of unity but is non-sensuous as well as non-intellectual.

"The Long Alley," the second poem in The Lost Son sequence, relates the gain of vision so joyously welcomed in the previous poem, "The Lost Son." The young man has re-established a sense of unity with creation. He communes with the flowers of his father's greenhouse and feels in ecstasy that he is a part of them:

Come littlest, come tenderest,
Come whispering over the small waters,
Reach me rose, sweet one, still moist in the loam,
Come, come out of the shade, the cool ways,
The long alleys of string and stem;
Bend down, small breathers, creepers and winders;
Lean from the tiers and benches,
Cyclamen dripping and lilies.
What fish-ways you have, littlest flowers,
Swaying over the walks, in the watery air,
Drowsing in soft light, petals pulsing.

Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!
The leaves, the leaves become me!
The tendrils have me! (CP,61)

The incantatory effect of the last lines conveys the joy of this mystical illumination. The "angels" that had disappeared in "Bring the Day!," included in the Praise to the End! sequence, are once more with the growing boy.

"A Field of Light," the third poem of the experimental sequence, The Lost Son, opens with the imagery of yet another psychological regression to the primeval slime, the depths of the unconscious:

Came to lakes; came to dead water,
Ponds with moss and leaves floating,
Planks sunk in the sand. (CP,62)

In these lines, nature is portrayed as dead, ambiguous, even ominous. But in the second section of the poem an "angel," a messenger of God, is invoked, who brings a realization of the need for a ritualistic, perhaps even penitential, act:

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, I danced in the sand. (CP,63)

The inanimate itself becomes alive before the final euphoria of the poem:

> The fat lark sang in the field;
> I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
> The salt laughed and the stones;
> The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
> And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
> The lovely diminutives. (CP,63)

The first complete extrovertive mystical experience comes in the final passage of "The Field of Light."

> I could watch! I could watch!
> I saw the separateness of all things!
> My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
> The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
> There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing
> a windbreak of cedars,
> And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
> The worms were delighted as wrens.
> And I walked, I walked through the light air;
> I moved with the morning. (CP,63)

The young man has had a vision--he sees, paradoxically, the unity-in-separateness of all things. As in "The Lost Son," the boy retains his separate identity, but feels at one with the world of nature. He clearly realizes an intimate relationship between himself and creation and the God of that creation. The young man has achieved his goal; the establishment of his personal identity, his self, and its relation to reality. He feels at one with all creation. His God is no longer transcendent, "a beard in a cloud," but immanent in his creation, in the smallest of creatures, in the smallest of inanimate objects. He has escaped the archetype of the father--stern law-giver and punisher watching his every move, and also that of the mother, the all-absorbing womb of the greenhouse.

Through these experimental sequences, Roethke has forged for himself a personal identity in the face of modern chaos. In tracing the arduous process of individuation throughout the remainder of his poetry, he builds on his first complete extrovertive mystical experience by living and writing in an awareness of his participation in the stream of an eternal Becoming, an eternal creativity.

Throughout these poems there has been an attempt to catch the movements of the mind itself, to trace the spiritual history of a growing child, not only Roethke's but that of all haunted and harried men.[41]

By tracing experience to its origins Roethke is able to convey both a psychological process of individuation and a process of spiritual development. His efforts to portray the reality of inner life by catching "the movements of the mind itself" are successful.

Roethke writes his own judgment of these sequences: "It is the longish pieces that really break ground--if any ground is broken. And it is these that I hope the younger readers, in particular, will come to cherish. I think of myself as a poet of love, a poet of praise."[42]

Roethke, above all, wanted a wholeness in everything, an observable unity in all physical reality, this unity being

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[41]Mills, p. 10.

[42]Mills, p. 60.

the soul of all things or God himself. Roethke was not interested in plumbing the depths of evil or creating a true Christian bond between all men, but rather he was, above all, interested in the nature of God, his own relation to Him, and his relationship to creation, the visible work of God.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Roethke began his career as a metaphysical poet, a poet highly involved with intellect and form. Roethke moved into writing the poetry of the whole man, which includes his senses, feelings, and intuitions, as well as his thoughts. His metaphors changed from those of a conventional nature to those that grow within the mind of the reader, there to connect and enrich his own personal creative resources. Most of these major changes in Roethke's poetic form begin in Open House Poems and in Praise to the End! Here Roethke enters the world of the preconscious, that dim twilight area of the human mind preceding the awakening of consciousness. His entrance is made through use of the doctrine of correspodences, the theory that all external physical objects may mirror internal, subjective psychological states. In this second volume of poems, Roethke delves into an exploration of the psyche through the process of individuation. Through the creative tracing of the child's journey from the state of the unconscious into consciousness, Roethke gains insight into himself and the external world so that he is able to complete the quest in a mystical apprehension of God. At this point in Roethke's (the child's) development, he rejects ascetic mysticism and

its final, complete absorption into a transcendent God, a God of Being, and accepts the oneness of all creation and the God of that creation, the God of Becoming.

Roethke's awareness ultimately centers in a mystical apprehension of the unity-in-separateness of all things, an extrovertive mystical experience rooted in an intuitive communion with Nature.

In recording his path towards complete fulfillment of the self in a mystical apprehension of God, his creation, and the order of things, Roethke did not deny the world and its observable reality, but rather he accepted the mystical paradox of unity-in-separateness of the visible creation. His search for God was not accomplished through purgation and self-denial but through a process of transformation, through the process of individuation.

Roethke found his personal identity, therefore, through his act of creation, the act of writing the poetry that would bring him an awareness of his place in the universe and his relationship to God. By tracing his origins, not only his origins alone, but the origins of all men, he was able to come to grips with his seemingly disordered life. Through the act of creation he produced order out of disorder, both in himself and in the world around him, and he found meaning in the midst of meaninglessness.

Throughout his poetry, Roethke sought to resolve the tensions between flesh and spirit which plagued him. Throughout his personal life Roethke wrote primarily about himself and those things that concerned him exclusively. However, he wrote as universal man, a man of his age, who was plagued by all of its doubts and anxieties and its widening gulf between the material and the spiritual without any hope of fusion and transcendence into a higher state of existence which is based on the knowledge of oneself.

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