THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN THE POETRY

OF THEODORE ROETHKE

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Abstract

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If any interpretation of Theodore Roethke's poetry is to be meaningful, it must be made in light of his life. The sense of psychological guilt and spiritual alienation that began in childhood after his father's death was intensified in early adulthood by his struggles with periodic insanity. Consequently, by the time he reached middle age, Theodore Roethke was embroiled in an internal conflict that had been developing over a number of years, and the ordering of this inner chaos became the primary goal in his life, a goal which he sought through the introspection within his poetry.

The Lost Son and Praise to the End! represent the conclusion of the initial phases of Theodore Roethke's spiritual journey. In most of the poetry in the former volume, he experiments with a system of imagery and symbols to be used in the Freudian and Jungian exploration of his inner being. In the latter volume he combines previous techniques and themes in an effort to attain a sense of internal peace, a peace attained by experiencing a spiritual illumination through the reliving of childhood memories. However, any illumination that Roethke experiences in the guise of his poetic protagonists is only temporary, because he has not yet found a

way to resolve his psychological and spiritual conflicts. A satisfactory resolution of his inner confusion is finally found in his last volume, The Far Field.

The Far Field is Roethke's most significant volume in terms of his spiritual journey. The book represents his conscious effort to perfect style and theme in order to reach a satisfactory answer to his questions about the self's relationship to the universal whole after death. Through the mystical experiences in the key sequences in this volume, Roethke is at last able to transcend the sensuality that has been threatening his inner being, yet at the same time he is able to retain the spiritual identity that he has been trying so desperately to establish throughout his spiritual journey.

Although other poems by Roethke deal with the journey theme, The Lost Son, Praise to the End!, and The Far Field respectively seem to provide the most meaningful explication of the progressive phases of Roethke's spiritual journey. The conclusions that Roethke reaches in his poetry before The Far Field reveal his dissatisfaction with the answers found in those poems. However, in the poem sequences of this final volume, particularly in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," Roethke at last appears to have discovered in mystical union the means by which he could unify the conflicting aspects of his inner being in order to cope with the problems of reality as well as the possibilities of eternity.

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

THESIS

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By

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CHAPTER I

THE POET, THE TEACHER, AND THE SELF

In the following paragraph Theodore Roethke described his life in a nutshell as he himself saw it:

> I might manage to write an anecdotal and perhaps even semi-engaging and mildly witty account of my life; but of what importance is it that I grew up in and around a beautiful greenhouse owned by my father and uncle; that I hated high school and Michigan and Harvard (in spite of fine teachers like Strauss, Campbell, Rice, I. A. Richards and others); that I have taught in various colleges and coached tennis, worked in a pickle factory for several seasons; have lived, alternately, very quietly and then foolishly and violently; that I have been called "as good a steak cook as Brancusi" by William Carlos Williams; and that the kids at Bennington in a burst of misdirected generosity called me "the best teacher we ever had"; that my books have been treated with astonishing generosity by good critics and poets and the young; that the English seem to like me even better; and that I mean almost nothing (except for a handful of personal friends) to the people of my own state, to the man in the street--and desire that regard most passionately; that I am much interested in oral presentation.[1]

Although it is interesting, this brief autobiographical sketch of Theodore Roethke's life does not satisfactorily reveal the complexity of the man, the poet, and the teacher.

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[1]Theodore Roethke, "Theodore Roethke," On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1965), pp. 14-15.

Roethke's grandfather came to America from Prussia in 1870 and settled in Saginaw, Michigan. The grandfather and his sons built there the Roethke greenhouses, which quickly became nationally known.[2] Theodore Roethke was born on May 25, 1908, into a Saginaw family whose primary interests in life centered around the plant world. His father and uncle not only owned greenhouses that covered almost twenty-five acres, but also the Sagniaw Valley's final section of virgin timber and an area of second-growth timber that became a small game preserve for the Roethkes.[3]

During his childhood Roethke spent much of his time watching and helping his father tend the greenhouse plants or exploring the swampy field nearby. As a young child he played in the darkness of the root cellar, and when he grew older he worked underneath the concrete benches of the greenhouses scraping roots or in the field near the forest gathering moss for greenhouse uses. The greenhouse represented the warmth of the womb to Roethke, but its subterranean earthiness also possessed threatening aspects. From the vantage point of later maturity, the greenhouse symbolized both creation and order imposed on chaos to Roethke.[4] In "An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Poems," Roethke

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[2]Roethke, "An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Poems," On the Poet and His Craft, pp. 7-8.

[3]Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York, 1966), pp. 1-2.

[4]Ibid., p. 2.

verbalized the ambiguity of his simultaneously secure and anxious attitude toward the greenhouse, an attitude which included his father Otto as well:

> They were to me, I realize now, both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan where austere German Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful.[5]

Roethke's relationship with his father had a different impact on the child and the man to come from that which his relationship with his mother had. His father was a source of both security and anxiety to him. Roethke seemed to admire his father's stern efficiency and ability to order the chaos of the plant life in the greenhouse, and yet his references to this man who was both tender and brutal conveyed a sense of awesome strength and godlike power that the father imparted to the child. Roethke's mother was a very domestic woman whose major concerns were her family and her home, which she cared for with respective amounts of concern and efficiency. Although Helen Roethke's influence on Roethke was less emphatic than that of his father Otto, she was mainly responsible for establishing the values in Theodore Roethke's life. Roethke's recollections of her were often more general than those of his father, but her position in the Oedipal

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[5]Roethke, "An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Poems," pp. 8-9.

triangle was significant in his adolescent memories and their sexual connotations in his poetry.[6]

Roethke's high school years were not atypical from those of most adolescents of his time. He rebelled against adult hypocrisy, cruelty, and insincerity. His heroes were the gangsters of the Saginaw community, whom he admired for the power they possessed. While attending Arthur Hill High School, he distinguished himself in the eyes of his peers and his teachers. He earned the admiration of his peers by qualifying for membership in the underground fraternity Beta Sigma Phi by virtue of his drinking ability, and he gained the respect of his teachers by writing a Junior Red Cross speech that was translated into twenty-six languages because it was selected to be part of an international campaign.[7]

When Roethke was fifteen, his father died of cancer. Since Roethke never saw his father from the perspective of a comparative maturity in which the parent became less godlike to the child, the loss of his father was a stupendously traumatic experience for him. The months just preceding Otto Roethke's death had been emotionally distressing for Theodore Roethke, as well as for the rest of the family, because his Uncle Charles, his father's brother and partner in the greenhouses, had died, and the greenhouses themselves had been sold. Consequently when his father died, Roethke lost the

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[6]Malkoff, pp. 2-4. [7]Ibid., pp. 4-5.

last vestige of his childhood, and only the disciplined habits acquired during the childhood years with his awesome father and in the greenhouses allowed him to function adequately after his father's death.[8]

After completing high school, Roethke wanted to attend Harvard, but his mother was unalterably opposed to an eastern school, insisting that he go to the University of Michigan. Although he was furious with her, in the end Roethke acquiesced to her demand and thus became the first member of his family to attend a university when he went to Ann Arbor in the fall of 1925.[9]

While attending the University of Michigan Roethke continued to compete both socially and academically. He became a good tennis player, and he encouraged a reputation as a good drinker by claiming membership in Kappa Beta Alpha, an illegal fraternity whose membership was based on an ability to handle the consumption of large quantities of alcohol. He was elected to honorary scholastic societies in both his junior and senior years, and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1929.[10]

Roethke's college days concluded the genesis of the ironic complexity that became his adult personality of two beings, the internal self and the external facade. The public figure composed of the poet and teacher was to represent the outer reality

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[8]Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York, 1968), p. 43.

[9]*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47. [10]*Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

behind a tough mask; however, the private man, composed of poetry, tenderness, fear, and occasional joy, was to represent the inner reality of his self which he hid from others. The opposites of the hell-raising drinker and the introspective student evolved into the more general opposites of the outwardly secure but inwardly anxious poet and teacher. Out of the ambiguity of the opposites of internal and external disappointments came the element of continuity that later dominated Roethke's poetry: the attempt to reconcile the series of oppositions that he perceived life to be.[11]

Although Roethke claimed that his interest in writing poetry began during his graduate studies at Harvard, the disillusionment he experienced from his unsatisfactory associations with prose writing at the University of Michigan and his desire to become successful in the eyes of others caused him to withdraw his basic tenderness behind a mask of toughness. Perhaps he began to write poetry at this time because he saw the poet like himself--a strange and unwelcome criminal who was betrayed and unjustly treated by his fellow human beings. Thus at first the inner man wrote verse out of a sense of his identification with rebellion, not as a career commitment, while the outer man strove for success in more material ways.[12]

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[11]Seager, p. 61. [12]Ibid., p. 60.

Roethke ultimately obtained his M.A. from the University of Michigan in 1936, but in the interim he attended Harvard for one semester. His choice of poetry as a career was crystallized by a meeting with Robert Hillyer while Roethke was at Harvard. Hillyer was very much impressed with Roethke's poetry, and his emphatic encouragement resulted in Roethke's decision to abandon the fields of law and advertising, and to make a career out of poetry instead.[13] Roethke described the meeting with Hillyer and its effects on him as follows:

> Ushered in by his secretary, he took the verse, started reading. Suddenly he wheeled in his chair. "Any editor who wouldn't buy these is a fool!" he said. I was overwhelmed (though I had thought so too!) . . . .
>
> I felt I had come to the end (really the beginning) of a trail. I had learned how to get high grades but that seemed meaningless. Now I didn't have to go into advertising . . . or the law. I wasn't just a spoiled, sad snow. I could write and people I respected printed the stuff.[14]

Hillyer's encouragement resulted in Roethke's submission of his poems to various periodicals which published some of them. Commonweal printed "The Conqueror" in October, 1931, and New Republic printed "Silence" in January, 1932. After these beginnings, Roethke was to contribute rather regularly to numerous periodicals during the thirties.[15]

In 1931 Roethke accepted a position at Lafayette College, where he remained until 1935. He taught English and also

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[13]Malkoff, p. 5. [14]Roethke, "Theodore Roethke," p. 16.

[15]Seager, p. 69.

coached the tennis teams. Tennis was an important part of Roethke's competitive personality, as well as a reflection of the ambiguity he saw in reality. The poet who wrote about the delicate world of nature and miniscule things was a physically imposing man standing six feet, three inches tall and weighing over two hundred pounds, and he became moody and furious when he felt defeated in any contest he set out to win.[16]

Roethke took the job at Lafayette primarily because the teaching position paid $1200 a year and offered him financial security. He probably was not aware that college teaching would later become a career second only to his poetry. Roethke's sincerity and enthusiasm about literature aroused interest and fascination in the students in his classes. Lafayette was a small college whose head of the English department usually retained young instructors for a maximum of two years, but Roethke's students managed to keep him on the faculty for four years by means of their petitions, an achievement that was a testament to his popularity and abilities as a teacher.[17]

While at Lafayette Roethke established other aspects of his teaching personality besides his sincerity and enthusiasm. He often missed early morning classes because he himself preferred to sleep late, an idiosyncrasy that endeared him to

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[16]Malkoff, p. 6. [17]Seager, pp. 71-72.

students. Nonetheless Roethke was not lazy where his students were concerned; he fraternized with them amicably after class hours, and sometimes all afternoon and well into the night. Although most faculty members drank, they did so privately, but Roethke did so openly and often in the company of students from the college.[18]

Roethke entered into the first of his several love affairs at Lafayette, this first time with Mary Kunkel, the artistic daughter of a biology professor. Although his letters to her from Saginaw during summer vacations indicated that he thought himself in love with her, they did not marry. Mary Kunkel later married another man, but she and Roethke were to remain close friends and to keep in touch with one another in later years.[19]

Roethke's poetic career continued to expand during his stay at Lafayette, and by 1934 he had published thirteen poems. Before leaving the college in 1935, Roethke met Rolfe Humphries, Stanley Kunitz, and Louise Bogan, three poets who later became his friends, critics, and advisers.[20]

Roethke received a job at Michigan State University in 1935, and he taught there from September until mid-November, when he suffered his first nervous breakdown. He spent approximately two and one-half months in a hospital and sanitarium, but upon recovery was not reinstated in his position

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[18] Ibid., p. 72. [19] Ibid., p. 75.

[20] Ibid., p. 76.

at the university.[21] Before his breakdown, however, Roethke enjoyed the work and friendships he found at Michigan State. He taught freshman English in his usual flamboyant manner, and made some close friends on the staff. John Clark, Peter De Vries, and A. J. M. Smith were his friends on the English faculty, and they noticed a peculiar change in him during early November. Roethke began consuming great quantities of alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, and he took aspirins by the handful. He took an all night walk November 11, and claimed to have had a mystical experience before returning to his room because of a chill. He cut his eight o'clock class on November 12, and then went to Dean Emmon's office to tell him about his experience of the previous night. By this time Roethke was in a delirium, and the dean had him taken to Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, where he stayed until his dismissal November 21.[22]

In January Roethke committed himself to Mercywood Sanitarium just outside Ann Arbor, hoping to resume teaching at Michigan State for the fall semester. However, in April he was notified that the university had not rehired him, and he began applying for another teaching position. Roethke already had a distrust of academic people, and this distrust

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[21]Theodore Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1968), p. xxi.

[22]Seager, pp. 88-91.

was no doubt greatly intensified by the fear of poverty, as well as the fear of a damaging blot on his record within the academic profession.[23]

Roethke's nervous breakdown completed the establishment of his life pattern as a poet and teacher. Following the initial attack at Michigan State, he had such breakdowns periodically as part of a broader psychological condition referred to as cyclical manic-depressive behavior. For several years his illness was a source of humiliation because it embarrassed him before the academic community in which he existed. Eventually, however, Roethke turned his psychological liability into one of his chief poetic assets, drawing upon the experiences it afforded him as positive sources of ideas to be explored, not negative events to be avoided.[24] One unique aspect of Roethke's illnesses was his productivity during those periods. He continued to write, and a number of his poems were written when he was hospitalized for nervous breakdowns.[25]

In 1936 Roethke became an instructor at Pennsylvania State, where he again taught English and coached tennis. He became an assistant professor in 1939, and stayed on the staff at Pennsylvania until 1943.[26] Roethke's life at Pennsylvania soon settled into a pattern much like his at Lafayette. He taught with unrestrained enthusiasm, became involved in

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[23] Ibid., p. 93.

[24] Malkoff, pp. 6-7.

[25] Seager, p. 106.

[26] Malkoff, p. 6.

coaching tennis, and made some close friends on the faculty. He also began another affair, this time with a circulation librarian, Kitty Stokes. She enjoyed his affectionate need for "mothering," liked to cook for him, and tolerated his public love-making to other women at parties.[27]

While Roethke was at Pennsylvania State he published his first volume of poetry, Open House, in 1941.[28] Stanley Kunitz had suggested the name of the book's title poem, and the whole volume was well received. The book contained forty-nine poems, barely one half of Roethke's published work; it was composed of poems whose content was intellectual instead of sensuous and whose forms were traditionally lyric, not experimental. Open House gave very little indication of the poems that were to follow it. In retrospect the origins of Roethke's major themes of fleshly and spiritual tension and the search for identity through the exploration of the self were present, but those origins were present in mere traces.[29]

Roethke did not consciously intend for the poems in Open House to foreshadow his later themes and developmental techniques. In fact, Stanley Kunitz arranged the poetry in the volume in the sequential order that some reviewers praised so highly. Roethke at this point was simply writing

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[27]Seager, pp. 115-117.

[28]Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, p. xxi.

[29]Malkoff, p. 29.

poems as they occurred to him; he was not purposefully exploring himself or trying to establish a unifying theme. Nevertheless, two of the poems in Open House contained definite hints of later themes. "Prognosis" utilized filial tensions as its subject matter, although in this early poem their after effects and ramifications were not explored in depth.[30] "The Premonition" was out of place in Open House if considered in light of the rest of the volume, as evidenced by Roethke's exclusion of it in later volumes which incorporated poems from Open House. Technically its form and devices were different, and its open revelation of feelings from Roethke's inner memories about his father foreshadowed the greenhouse sources to come in later pieces. Roethke tried to ignore the importance of "The Premonition" for many years, but its almost prophetic aspects were fulfilled in the poem "Otto," published in Roethke's final volume The Far Field.[31]

Roethke's poetry after his move to Bennington College in 1943 reflected the change in the life of the poet. The publication of and favorable reaction to Open House provided some of the self-confidence he needed, and he was in a different academic environment as well. Apparently while at Bennington, Roethke began to experiment with the inner life of childhood and the development of the self, which became the

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[30]Seager, pp. 127-128.

[31]Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, edited by Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 21.

inherent elements of the poems in his next two volumes, The Lost Son and Other Poems in 1948 and Praise to the End! in 1951.[32] In July of 1942 Roethke sent some poems to Stanley Kunitz for criticism. Two of those poems, "The Return" and "The Minimal," were part of The Lost Son and Other Poems when it was published. The fact that they were written as early as 1942, six years before publication of the volume that included them, indicated that Roethke was already beginning to delve into his own past for fresh and concrete poetic detail.[33]

Another poetic change that began while Roethke was at Bennington was his fascination with long sequences of developmental poems. According to Jim Jackson, one of Roethke's close friends at that time, the long poem was the equivalent to Roethke of an extended narrative for a prose fiction writer. In fact, Jackson felt that Roethke saw the long poem as the stages for a record of the poet's total living experience that would allow him to explore his self and its knowledge.[34]

Aside from the genesis of his poetic experimentations, during Roethke's stay at Bennington another circumstance occurred which later was to be of great significance to him. While teaching classes he had a student named Beatrice Heath O'Connell, whom Roethke married when they met again by chance several years later.[35]

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[32]Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, p. xv.

[33]Seager, p. 134. [34]Ibid., pp. 144-145. [35]Malkoff, p. 9.

At Bennington Roethke innovated a course of his own which he called "Verse Form," and as he taught it he developed confidence in his style of teaching. Teaching was an exhausting daily experience for Roethke, who, in his exact words, "knocked himself out" each time. However, he was typically brusque when expressing his feelings about his teaching, exemplifying the ambiguity of his personality. As a teacher Roethke gave of himself unreservedly for the benefit of his students, but as a man he masked his feelings behind contempt for their mentalities. Allan Seager once asked Roethke why he strained himself to such an extent for his classes, and got the following paradoxical response:

> He replied with a snarl, "Ah, I know it's lugging pork up Parnassus"--here his face brightened--"but you get'em up there once, they see what it is. They're better than they'll ever be again."[36]

Roethke became personally involved in his teaching. He prided himself on his ability to inspire his students and move them to write. In return for his frequently impassioned classroom stimulation, Roethke's students responded "with hard work, discipline, and love."[37]

In the winter of 1945 Roethke suffered another nervous breakdown. After a few weeks of hospital care at Albany General Hospital--where the shock treatments terrified

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[36]Seager, pp. 140-141.

[37]Stein, "Introduction," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, p. xii.

him--he spent January in a nursing home before being discharged to go home to Saginaw to complete his recovery.[38]

While Roethke was writing The Lost Son and Other Poems during 1946 and 1947, he established his method for writing poetry, and it changed very little from that time. When he first started writing poems, he began with the "germ" of the poem, which he developed into a total piece later; in this manner he composed his early poems one at a time. Next he revised and rewrote each poem until it was ready for his typist, and then he immediately submitted it for publication if he was pleased with it. If he felt uncertain about a particular piece, before submitting it he asked a friend like Stanley Kunitz, John Holmes, Louise Bogan, or Rolfe Humphries to criticize it for him. Roethke made such requests often about his early poetry because he lacked confidence in his work. Roethke's notebooks revealed the change in method started in the 1930's. He began to jot down large numbers of seemingly miscellaneous items in them, such as addresses, notes on abstract concepts, excerpts from books that were usually critical or philosophical works, observations about his daily existence, comments about himself, and partial letters. Nevertheless, poetry still dominated the notebooks, often evolving out of a phrase written down some years earlier. In the early forties, just previous to the beginning of the volume The Lost Son and Other Poems, the

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[38]Seager, pp. 146-147.

last dimension of Roethke's development of a poetic method became evident. The memories of childhood began to appear in the notebooks at about this time, and Roethke continued to write down phrases from events he remembered. As he looked at the phrases taken from the years of his life, he felt that his task was to make poems out of such a wealth of resource material. Thus his poetic practice changed from starting with a conception and composing lines to fill it out; by the forties his practice was to begin with the lines and evolve the conception out of them. Roethke's problem with this approach had become the necessity of grouping his myriad notations into coherent poems. As he said in one of his notebook entries, "What I want is themes."[39]

In 1947 Roethke received an appointment to a teaching position at the University of Washington in Seattle, and he was to remain on its faculty until his death.[40] Roethke was hired as an associate professor, but was promoted to full professor the next year. In 1948 The Lost Son and Other Poems was published, containing some lyrics reminiscent of Open House, but more importantly revealing the fruition of the changes begun at Bennington in the greenhouse poems at the beginning of the volume and the sequence of four developmental poems at its end.[41]

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[39]Seager, pp. 160-164.

[40]Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, p. xxi.

[41]Malkoff, p. 9.

During 1948 Roethke entered into a friendship with La Principessa Marguerite Caetani, an Italian noblewoman of American birth, who published and often subsidized good contemporary poets. Their friendship was to last for many years, and it was very important to Roethke because she represented both the cultural aspects of Roethke's European heritage and also the familiarity of his Americanism. The depth of his feeling toward La Principessa became evident in the poems "An Old Lady's Winter Words" and "Meditations of an Old Woman," because both she and his mother were parts of the suggestive background of those pieces.[42]

In 1949 Roethke suffered another attack of mental illness, one probably brought on in part by the frantic productivity that became Praise to the End! and also I Am! Says the Lamb, which was not published until 1961.[43] Praise to the End! was published in 1951. The book, whose title came from Wordsworth's "The Prelude," was eighty-nine pages long and contained thirteen poems. Although the reviews were favorable, critical reaction was not so enthuisastic as it had been toward the innovations of The Lost Son and Other Poems.[44] In Praise to the End! Roethke had written a sequence of long developmental poems which was based on the nucleus of the four closing poems in The Lost Son and Other Poems. In Praise to the End! Roethke

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[42]Seager, p. 177.

[43]Ibid., p. 190.

[44]Ibid., p. 197.

did such an excellent job of blending the technique and symbolism initiated in The Lost Son and Other Poems to convey his experiences during the poetic process of becoming an individual "that he found himself in the practically unique position of having instituted, perfected, and finally exhausted a genre."[45]

The year 1953 was significant in Theodore Roethke's life for two reasons. In January he married his former Bennington student Beatrice O'Connell, and later that same year The Waking: Poems 1933-1953 was published, a volume for which Roethke received the Pulitzer Prize in 1954.[46] The Waking contained poems Roethke had selected from Open House, most of those from The Lost Son and Other Poems, all of Praise to the End!, and quite a few new poems. The volume was important because it won the Pulitzer Prize for Roethke, a symbol of national popular acclaim. Such recognition was important to him because he had been striving all his life for it in every field of endeavor.[47]

Roethke and Beatrice O'Connell were re-acquainted in New York when he went there to give a reading of his poems. She confessed that she had loved him since being in his classes at Bennington, and they soon planned on marriage.[48]

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[45]Malkoff, p. 10.

[46]Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, pp. xxi-xxii.

[47]Malkoff, pp. 10-11.

[48]Seager, pp. 206-207.

Shortly after their marriage she learned that for Roethke a wife was asmuch mother as loved companion. She was patient with the man behind the mask who for years could not reveal the love that he felt for her. In December of 1953, toward the end of their first year of marriage, Roethke experienced a mild breakdown. Beatrice Roethke knew nothing about his illness because he always hid it from people who were important to him. Consequently, by the end of their first year of marriage, she had become acquainted with the pattern of his life, a pattern that established itself over their life together from that point on.[49]

Until his breakdown in December of 1953, Theodore Roethke had hoped each episode of mental illness would be the last. However, his attitude toward his condition began to change in 1954, and he began to realize that periodic breakdowns were inevitable for him. Entries in his notebooks after November of 1955 show that Roethke no longer considered his periodic illnesses as interruptions of his normal life, but instead accepted his mental imbalance as part of his daily life. He tried diligently to make the opposites of insanity and the routine of teaching and writing poetry function together adequately enough to suit the reality of daily living.[50]

Words for the Wind was published in the United States in 1958, and the volume included all of The Waking and over forty new poems. In Words for the Wind Roethke used religious

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[49]Seager, pp. 218-220. [50]Ibid., pp. 223-224.

and philosophical terms as he continued the psychological quest for his self. Among the most significant of the new poems were "Love Poems," "Voices and Creatures," "The Dying Man" sequence, and a group of five longer poems entitled "Meditations of an Old Woman."[51] Words for the Wind reinforced Roethke's stature as an important poetic figure. The volume was reviewed in England and America as the work of a major poet, and Roethke received numerous prizes and awards for it in 1959, including the Bollingen Award and the National Book Award.[52]

During the last years of his life Roethke published quite a few poems, poems which revealed a measure of self-confidence on the poet's part that had not been present in previous poetry. Between 1959 and Roethke's death in 1963 sixty-one poems were published by him, including the long poems "The Rose," "Meditations at Oyster River," "Journey to the Interior," and "The Far Field." According to Beatrice Roethke and Arnold Stein, Theodore Roethke was sure of himself with these four poems, and seemed to know exactly what he intended to say in them. Although Roethke continued to write and publish poetry prolifically during the final years of his life, he did not do so at the expense of his teaching career. Early in 1959, however, Roethke's job was jeopardized by some legislative grumblings about "some kind of a nut" at the University of Washington. As chairman of the English

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[51]Malkoff, pp. 13-14. [52]Seager, p. 250.

Department, Robert Heilman wrote a detailed letter to be presented before the legislature on Roethke's behalf, which concisely and fairly evaluated Roethke as both a poet and a member of the university's teaching staff. After listing a dozen awards and fellowships earned by Roethke for his writing achievements, Heilman then listed five objective effects of his teaching at the University of Washington. Roethke's effectiveness as a teacher and his stature as a poet were summed up in the final paragraph of Heilman's letter, which evaluated Roethke as an individual who was important for his contributions through "teaching, developing interest in a great literary form, training writers who themselves go on to become known, and doing his own distinguished writing. . . ."[53]

The Roethkes travelled quite a bit during the years 1959-1963. They visited Morris Graves in Ireland, and also spent some time in Italy. Between trips the Roethkes stayed at home in their house on Puget Sound, where he wrote or prepared to give readings of his poetry.[54]

Roethke worked hard daily preparing the poems to be included in The Far Field throughout the summer of 1963. In July he was close enough to completion of the volume for publication to request a large cash advance on it from Doubleday, although he did not receive the money. On August 1 of that summer Roethke went to visit some friends, the Bloedels, on Bainbridge Island, while Beatrice Roethke shopped

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[53]Seager, pp. 252-255. [54]Malkoff, pp. 15-16.

in downtown Seattle. In the course of the afternoon Roethke took a swim, suffered a coronary occlusion in the pool, and died. He was cremated and then buried by his mother and father in the Oakwood Cemetery in Saginaw.[55]

The Far Field was published posthumously in 1964, and won the National Book Award in 1965. In this volume Roethke was concerned with perfecting previous forms instead of with developing new ones. The volume was composed of four long poem sequences entitled "North American Sequence," "Love Poems," "Mixed Sequence," and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical." In retrospect "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" can be interpreted as the culmination of Roethke's career and the termination of his spiritual quest for self, as well as serving as the closing sequence in the last volume of poetry he wrote. The general format of the sequence is based on a description of a mystical experience which is followed by an exploration of the implications of the experience for the poet. The content of the sequence reveals that Roethke was aware of having passed "from platitudes to a full awareness of the complexities of the human condition . . . ." The Far Field in general, and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" in particular, delineate the close proximity of "/p/sychology and theology, madness and mysticism" that had been much a part of the man and poet throughout the long quest for his self, a self which he seemed to find and accept in The Far Field.[56]

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[55]Seager, pp. 285-286.

[56]Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, p. xxii.

The events in Roethke's childhood and early adulthood had a great influence on his poetry. The psychological guilt which followed his father's death gave rise later to a sense of spiritual alienation, and these feelings were intensified by Roethke's periodic attacks of insanity which began when he was a young adult. Consequently Roethke's poems provide a verse account of his inner struggles to unify the conflicting physical and spiritual aspects of his personality. In general the poem sequences in The Lost Son and Other Poems, Praise to the End!, and The Far Field represent the three major phases through which Roethke passed on his journey toward inner unity. Thus Roethke's poetry can relevantly be considered to compose a spiritual autobiography of the life of the poet, the teacher, and the self.

CHAPTER II

THE INITIAL PHASES OF ROETHKE'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

With the publication of The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), henceforth referred to as The Lost Son, Theodore Roethke was established as an important poet. Roethke's first volume of verse, Open House (1941), had been criticized for its use of traditional lyric verse and for his somewhat impersonal approach to the probing of the self. However, when The Lost Son appeared it was praised for its innovations in form and theme. Although the techniques utilized in Open House and The Lost Son appeared to be striking opposites, the change that produced them had been occurring gradually within the poet himself during the interim period between the publications of the two volumes. In fact, most of the poems that comprised The Lost Son were published separately between 1941 and 1948.[1]

The real difference in the poetry of Open House and that of The Lost Son is a shift in the emphasis in the poems. In the former volume Roethke's approach to the development of the self is one of intellectual analysis, while in the latter

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[1]Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York, 1966), pp. 44-45.

it is one of emotional response.[2] The basic change in Roethke's emphasis from relating observations to direct experiences is described by Kenneth Burke as follows: "The ideal formula might be stated thus: a minimum of 'ideas,' a maximum of 'intuitions.'"[3] Roethke himself was aware that his technique in representing reality was too intellectually analytic in his first volume of verse, and he decided to try to get away from such intellectual objectivity. In 1946 Roethke expressed the following opinion that poetry should be a more direct representation of experiences:

> The trouble probably lies in the age itself, in the unwillingness of poets to face their ultimate inner responsibilities, in their willingness to take refuge in words rather than transcend them. The language dictates; they are the used. The co-habitation of their images is, as it were, a mere fornication of residues.
>
> One can say that the poetry of the future will not come from such as these. Instead it will be, let us hope, lightly conscious, subtle and aware, yet not laboriously referential; eloquent but not heavily rhetorical; clear perhaps in the way that Dante is clear; sensuous but not simple-minded; above all, rooted deeply in life; passionate and perhaps even suffused, on occasion, with wisdom and light.[4]

In the poems of The Lost Son Roethke was attempting to write "the poetry of the future" he described. The volume is composed of four divisions: Part I contains thirteen poems in which Roethke uses language in a sensuous and suggestive

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[2] Ibid., p. 45.

[3] Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Winter 1950), 76.

[4] Roethke, "Reviews," On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke (Seattle, 1965), pp. 123-124.

manner to explore the greenhouse world of his childhood; Part II contains seven poems in which he employs traditional lyric forms reminiscent of Open House to relate certain aspects of the experiences and social observations connected with his late childhood and early adolescence; Part III contains five poems in which Roethke develops possibilities for a system of metaphors and symbols to relate his experiences during the development of his self; and Part IV contains four poems in which he utilizes various elements of content and technique from Parts I, II, and III to relate the process of the self's development, sometimes referred to as the process of individuation.[5] In the universe as Roethke transforms it in The Lost Son, the accepted mode of perception is synesthesia.[6] He views the world from a perspective in which it is transformed into a universe that does not make normal distinctions between the subjective and the objective, the conscious and the unconscious, or will and instinct.

In the "greenhouse poems" of Part I, Roethke's guiding principle is to relate experience directly by emphasizing sensory perceptions instead of intellectual analyses. One of his main goals in the greenhouse poems is to apprehend the experience of living as a complete whole rather than a piecemeal process.[7]

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[5]Malkoff, p. 44.

[6]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Theodore Roethke," Contemporary American Poetry (New York, 1965), p. 55.

[7]Malkoff, p. 47.

Also characteristic of these poems is Roethke's effort to emphasize naivete instead of sophistication, and the greenhouse world provides an excellent background for such an attempt. The greenhouse setting allows Roethke to deal with childhood, nature, the physical, and sexual perceptions, all concrete rather than abstract aspects of reality.[8]

Roethke's technique in the greenhouse poems is not drastically different from that in his early poetry; in these poems he simply extends some of his earlier poetic principles and experiments with various forms for directly expressing the realities of life as he perceives them. Roethke's greenhouse poetry is rooted in perceptions of sensory experiences, embodies the poet's search for modes of expression that are naively simple and sometimes even prerational, and reflects the change in his concept of the correspondence between the human and plant worlds.[9] Roethke's purpose for his technical variations in The Lost Son is explained by some comments in an essay published in 1960:

> We must permit poetry to extend consciousness as far, as deeply, as particularly as it can, to recapture, in Stanley Kunitz' phrase, what it has lost to some extent in prose. We must realize, I think, that the writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter than the poet who has the support of form.[10]

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[8] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

[9] Ibid., p. 50.

[10] Roethke, "Some Remarks on Rhythm," On the Poet and His Craft, p. 83.

Roethke was able to be especially faithful to his subject matter in the greenhouse poems since the greenhouse itself played a very important role in his childhood and was the scene of many youthful experiences that were highly significant to him at that time and later in life. The greenhouse was everything that life meant to Roethke as a child: it was "both fertile womb and rigid principle of order imposed on chaos, both heaven and hell; it was nature and society, mother and father."[11]

The first five poems of Part I deal with the struggle to be born, and this stress on the struggling aspect of birth foreshadows the extension of the struggle and its subsequent development in Part IV. In these first few greenhouse poems, Roethke is concerned with the struggle for survival that is a major part of reality encountered by members of both the human and plant worlds.[12]

The poems which follow the group of birth struggle poems are "Orchids," "Moss-Gathering," and "Big Wind." These three pieces continue to depict the development of the child protagonist as he becomes more conscious of his sexuality.

In "Moss-Gathering" the child experiences guilt feelings for his act of gathering moss to be used in the greenhouse.[13] Such sexual overtones are evident in the following lines:

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[11]Malkoff, p. 50.

[12]Ibid., pp. 50-52.

[13]Ibid., p. 53.

> And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging
> back over the road,
> As if I had broken the natural order of
> things in that swampland;
> Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast
> importance.
> By pulling off flesh from the living
> planet;
> As if I had committed, against the whole
> of life, a desecration.[14]

The sexual implication of the child's feeling of guilt about his masturbatory acts can be drawn from his sense of going against "the natural order of things" by "pulling off flesh," although the imagery itself can also be indicative of the uneasy emotions concomitant with sexual development in general. However, the pertinence of a sexual interpretation is reinforced by Roethke's own equating of onanism and death, in which the joys of masturbation are likened to "a dead-end explored." Although the sexual implications in "Moss-Gathering" are of minor importance, they are significant because they foreshadow the prominent role of onanism and its accompanying guilt feelings in Praise to the End!, where such sexual experiences and memories provide the central action in the title poem's first section.[15]

In the poem "Big Wind" the child completes the transition from childhood to early adolescence, and confronts the sexuality of young adulthood.[16] This poem particularly emphasizes the

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[14]Theodore Roethke, The Lost Son and Other Poems (New York, 1948), p. 17.

[15]Roethke, "Open Letter," On the Poet and His Craft, p. 40.

[16]Malkoff, pp. 53-54.

physical aspects of the greenhouse's strength and life-creating capabilities as it endures the external chaos of the storm and provides life for its internal world.[17] The imagery of the pipes "pumping the stale mixture"[18] into the greenhouse to give birth to some plants and to keep others alive, and also the use of the personal pronoun "she" to denote the greenhouse itself, can be interpreted as symbolic of the adolescent's expanding sexual knowledge of a world in which femininity and birth are respectively protected and engendered by masculine potency.[19]

Through various correspondences the closing poems in Part I utilize the imagery of growth and plant development in the greenhouse to depict the physical and spiritual growth in the life of the child protagonist. In poems like "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" and "Flower Dump," Roethke is concerned with the tension between the positive drive to be recognized as a total individual and the negative urge to be dead or inanimate. This ambiguity becomes the conflict between the desire for individuation and the fear of nonbeing in Roethke's later poetry.[20] The three greenhouse poems which conclude Part I of The Lost Son consider the victory and fear that the child experiences when he leaves the greenhouse world to enter the

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[17]Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, edited by Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 26.

[18]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 18.

[19]Malkoff, p. 54.

[20]Mills, p. 53.

outer world as an individual in his own right. The two poems just mentioned, as well as "Carnations," relate the experiences of a small child who attains some recognition for his semi-adult identity and faces the consequences of being responsible for his discoveries. In each of these poems the triumph and terror of his partial independence from the security of the greenhouse world are jointly experienced.[21] The final four lines of "Flower Dump" exemplify the ambiguity of the transitory aspects of adolescence for the protagonist, showing the correspondence between an experience of a young tulip and that of a young human being:

> Everything limp
> But one tulip on top,
> One swaggering head
> Over the dying, the newly dead.[22]

The victorious exultation of the "swaggering head" of the tulip who stands above the discarded flowers is modified by the flower's proximity to the condition of the recently deceased discards that it surveys.[23] The child above the greenhouse world is the equivalent of the tulip above the pile of dead flowers. Just as the tulip has struggled above the "dying" and "the newly dead" in the dump, so the child has struggled out of the "eternal" world of infancy into adulthood of a sort, only to become aware of mortality in the adult world as

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[21]Malkoff, p. 55. [22]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 23.

[23]Martz, p. 27.

he does in "Carnations"[24] with its death imagery such as "pale blossoms," "wet hemlocks," and "that clear autumnal weather of eternity."[25]

Two short sections composed of twelve miscellaneous poems follow the greenhouse poems of Part I, with Part II containing seven, and Part III five, poems. Part II begins with the poem "My Papa's Waltz" in which a drunken father romps with his young son. The next poem, "Pickle Belt," continues the chronological progression of Part II with the protagonist's experience while working in a pickle factory at age sixteen. The next poems, "Dolor" and "Double Feature," are concerned with the frustration and disappointment of the adult routine.

The final three poems in Part II deal with Roethke's conceptions of desolation. Particularly significant among these poems is "The Return," which presents a powerful picture of a mental breakdown.[26] In this poem Roethke deals with his mental illness as a sort of internal infection which he must observe and understand if he is going to cope with it. The desire to escape the "self-infected lair"[27] by probing the infection to its source in order to combat its recurrence evolves into one of the central motivations for Roethke's psychological journey in Praise to the End![28]

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[24]Malkoff, p. 55.

[25]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 24.

[26]Martz, p. 29.

[27]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 31.

[28]Malkoff, p. 58.

In addition to considering the benefits to be gained by a return to the source of his mental illness in "The Return," Roethke also considers the dangers and humiliations which accompany such delving into the buried regions of the mind.[29] In the poem he deals with the struggle between sanity, with its survival of the self, and insanity, with its threat of the self's destruction. The poem delineates Roethke's reactions to the violent disruption of his sanity and his process of individuation by his periods of mental illness: he observes the nature and processes of his illness, studies the transformative power of order, and uses his conclusions to control his insanity well enough to allow him to function adequately as a human being, poet, and teacher.[30]

The poems in Part III add another dimension to the theory of correspondences seen in the greenhouse poems: an object in the external world can evoke something from the internal world of the mind, as well as represent some aspect of it. The first poem in this division, "Night Crow," is especially significant; although the poem is short, it contains a number of symbols which refer to theories about the collective unconscious which are very prominent in "The Lost Son" poem sequence in Part IV of The Lost Son and in all of Praise to the End!.[31] The poem reads:

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[29]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 17.

[30]Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Power of Sympathy," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, pp. 171-172.

[31]Malkoff, p. 58.

When I saw that clumsy crow
Flap up from a wasted tree,
A shape in the mind rose up;
Over the gulfs of dream
Flew a tremendous bird
Further and further away
Into a moonless black,
Deep in the brain, far back.[32]

In Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Carl Jung makes some comments about the collective unconscious which can be aptly applied to "Night Crow." Seen from Jung's perspective, the poem can be interpreted as an effort on Roethke's part to communicate directly an experience involving his collective unconscious, which includes the racial memory that all humanity has in common. Jung states that the collective unconscious involves "dealing with a reactivated archetype, as I have already called these primordial images. These ancient images are called to life by primitive, analogical modes of thinking peculiar to dreams."[33]

A more direct relationship is apparent between "Night Crow" and other poems in Part III and the ideas expressed by Maud Bodkin. According to Stanley Kunitz, both a close friend and critic of Roethke's, the poet was familiar with her book Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, which applied Jung's ideas about the collective unconscious and archetypes to poetry.[34] In the

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[32]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 37.

[33]Carl Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology (New York, 1957), p. 147.

[34]Stanley Kunitz, "Roethke: A Poet of Transformations," New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), 25.

first paragraph of her book Mrs. Bodkin explains the use of archetypes in poetry to relate experiences from the collective unconscious:

> The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems--a significance going beyond any definite meaning conveyed--he /Jung/ attributes to the stirring in the reader's mind, within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which he terms "primordial images," or archetypes. These archetypes he describes as "psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type," experiences which have happened not to the individual but to his ancestors, and of which the results are inherited in the structure of the brain, a priori determinants of individual experience.[35]

The exploration into the nature of the collective unconscious as seen in "Night Crow" is the theory that provides the framework for the volume Praise to the End!. The remaining poems in Part III, "River Incident," "The Minimal," "The Cycle," and "The Waking," represent Roethke's further experimentation with the possibilities of his new method for directly communicating human experience through his poetry. This extended experimentation merits some consideration because much of it is incorporated into Praise to the End!.[36]

In "River Incident" the sight of a shell swirling in seawater evokes a feeling of a return to the origins of mankind from within the poem's protagonist:[37]

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[35]Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London, 1934), p. 1.

[36]Malkoff, p. 60.

[37]Ibid., pp. 60-61.

> And I knew that I had been there before,
> In that cold, granite slime,
> In the dark, in the rolling, water.[38]

Jung's theories are relevant to the meaning of this poem also:

> The contents of the collective unconscious are not only the residues of archaic, specifically human modes of functioning, but also the residue of functions from man's animal ancestry, whose duration in time was infinitely greater than the relatively brief epoch of specifically human existence.[39]

The protagonist's regression into the slime beneath the sea in "River Incident" represents a significant aspect of Roethke's subsequent long poem sequences. The regressive journey that takes a protagonist into the slime beneath the water is a prerequisite for his dealing with some current experience. The necessity of this regression becomes the justification for the regressions of protagonists in Roethke's developmental poems, a justification which reflects Jungian theory: "When a man encounters an obstacle with which he cannot cope, he regresses to childhood, or even to the time before childhood--that is, to the collective unconscious--to find a new way of dealing with his current situation." In Part III of The Lost Son Roethke's experimentation with the therapeutic function of returning to the past of childhood or the collective unconscious in order to cope with the present is the predominating method used in Praise to the End!.[40]

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[38]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 38.

[39]Jung, p. 109.

[40]Malkoff, pp. 60-61.

Maud Bodkin makes some comments on this therapeutic process that are also pertinent to Roethke's technique in The Lost Son and Praise to the End!:

> Before a "renewal of life" can come about, Jung urges, there must be an acceptance of the possibilities that lie in the unconscious contents "activated through regression . . . and disfigured by the slime of the deep."
> The principle which he thus expounds Jung recognizes as reflected in the myth of "the night journey under the sea."[41]

The next poem in Part III, "The Minimal," is significant on both its literal and symbolic levels. The poem displays Roethke's affection for the small things of the world: "little sleepers," "beetles," "newts," "stone-deaf fishes," "squirmers in bogs,"[42] and the like, exemplifying on a literal level the paradox of the inner tenderness which Roethke hides behind an external mask. However, his imagery continues to assert the existence of a correspondence between the human mind and life's small and primitive, its "minimal," forms. In this poem Roethke is specifically concerned with the curative effects which are possible through a probing of the inner depths of the self.[43] This symbolic level is exemplified in his descriptions such as the following:

> . . . bacterial creepers
> Wriggling through the wounds
> Like elvers in ponds,
> Their wan mouths kissing the
> warm sutures,
> Cleaning and caressing,
> Creeping and healing.[44]

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[41]Bodkin, p. 52.

[42]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 39.

[43]Malkoff, p. 61.

[44]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 39.

Roethke is symbolically considering the similarities between the world of tiny creatures and that of man. The correspondence is achieved in the poem by observing the minutiae of the natural world from the perspective of the collective unconscious in order to evoke a feeling of affinity in men "with the lower orders of life, parallels /they/ have banished from thought."[45]

Although when it is interpreted out of its experimental context in Part III of The Lost Son "The Cycle" seems to refer to the natural cycle in a broad sense, the poem is more specifically related to the Jungian theory of regression and progression when it is considered in terms of Roethke's practicing with methods for exploring the collective unconscious in his verse. In the poem a correspondence is evident between the cycle of the physical world, in which rain descends "Under a river's source/Under primeval stone,"[46] and that of the human world, in which the mind descends into the depths of the conscious and unconscious past. In both cases the descent is necessary for ultimate renewal: the rain must descend in order to return upward to the clouds as vapor, and the mind must probe into its depths in order to return to an adequate existence in the present.[47]

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[45]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 15.

[46]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 40.

[47]Malkoff, p. 61.

The last poem in Part III is "The Waking." It represents the culmination of Roethke's experimentation with the exploration of the collective unconscious through the mental regression and progression of his poetic protagonist. The techniques and themes combined in "The Waking" actually lay the foundation for Roethke's later implementation of this experimental method for ascending into the light of the present after diving into the darkness of the past, a technique which ultimately becomes the nucleus for Part II of Praise to the End!, and is most satisfactorily employed in terms of Roethke's spiritual journey in The Far Field. In "The Waking" the protagonist emerges out of the depths underneath the sea's slime into the summer sunlight:[48]

I came where the river
Ran over the stones:
My ears knew
An early joy.

And all the waters
Of all the streams
Sang in my veins,
That summer day.[49]

The poems of Parts I, II, and III of The Lost Son represent the initial phases of Roethke's spiritual journey in his experiments with the theory of correspondences, the theory of regression into and progression out of the collective unconscious, the memories of childhood, and monologue sequences as he prepared for the combined utilization of these elements in Part IV of The Lost Son. Although Roethke

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[48]Ibid., p. 62.

[49]Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 41.

rather fully implements these innovations in Part IV, their cumulative effect is more powerfully evident in Praise to the End!.[50] By considering the four developmental poems in Part IV of The Lost Son in their relationship to Part I of Praise to the End! and their subsequent expansion in Part II of that volume, one may better illustrate their innovative aspects. "The Lost Son" sequence is more significant when considered in the context of Roethke's spiritual journey as it takes place in Praise to the End!, rather than in its chronologically correct position in Part IV of The Lost Son.

The framework for the developmental sequences in Praise to the End! was laid in the poems of Parts I, II, and III of The Lost Son, particularly in those of Part III which dealt with the Jungian theories of regression and progression, and with the theory of the protagonist's necessary descent into the collective unconscious.[51] Roethke's own description of what he was trying to do in earlier parts of The Lost Son clarifies the existence of a conscious awareness on his part of an attempt to undertake a spiritual journey in order to discover and then satisfactorily develop his inner being:

> Each poem . . . is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more . . . .[52]

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[50]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 15. [51]Malkoff, p. 63.

[52]Roethke, "Open Letter," On the Poet and His Craft, p. 37.

The spiritual journey in Praise to the End! can be more meaningfully understood when considered in conjunction with Roethke's personal attitudes toward his own inner being, and subsequently toward that of all humankind. The poetry in the volume represents a rendition in verse of Roethke's inner contemplations about the origin and development of his psyche, or self, as it struggles to find spiritual peace in the face of the psychological hindrances of sexual guilt and periodic insanity.

To Theodore Roethke the discovery and development of his self were crucial. He summed up the importance of self for each human being as follows: "The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible."[53] However, "myself" for Roethke was not the empirical self or flesh-bound ego. Instead, self for the poet connoted the aggregate of several selves within him.[54] Thus when Roethke began trying to find his inner self, he wanted a direction of some sort from some source. He expressed his desire for direction in one way through the words of his protagonist in "The Lost Son":

> Tell me:
> Which is the way I take;
> Out of what door do I go,
> Where and to whom?[55]

One approach Roethke felt would help in establishing a personal identity was through heightening his consciousness.

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[53]Roethke, "On Identity," On the Poet and His Craft, p. 20.

[54]Ibid., p. 21.

[55]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 47.

Roethke said that man could achieve a more intense awareness of his own self through a heightened consciousness of some other being or inanimate object.[56] As his search for self progressed, the experience of a heightened consciousness revealed itself in poetry like the greenhouse poems and the "Dying Man" sequence. In these and other similar pieces, Roethke tried to heighten his consciousness by adopting the persona of plants or of his father for an identity.[57]

Theodore Roethke's poetry explicates the stages in his search for identity. His poetry as a whole, and Praise to the End! in particular, deals with his continuous process of becoming through search and transformation.[58] According to Stephen Spender, in Roethke's poems the self or the "I" and his poetry are inseparable.[59]

More specifically, the self in Roethke's poems usually appears as a particular protagonist, who is the poet's persona. Although Roethke's stated aim is the "struggle for spiritual identity," he intends for the struggles of his protagonists to symbolize the more general realm of human experience.[60]

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[56]Roethke, "On Identity," On the Poet and His Craft, p. 25.

[57]Malkoff, p. 151.

[58]Theodore Roethke, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, p. xviii.

[59]Stephen Spender, "The Objective Ego," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, p. 1.

[60]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 16.

In many of his poems the protagonist finds a significant way to experience the meaningfulness of existence, but he never finds this meaningfulness in a final way. Throughout his poetry the protagonist repeatedly confronts psychic annihilation in the form of death, meaninglessness, or condemnation.[61] Thus his protagonists are often similar to mythical heroes that Jung interpreted as representative of a quest for psychic wholeness. They often explore the regions of memory, the preconscious, and the unconscious. Roethke's solitary protagonists must confront the trials and dangers of descending into the realm of the darkness of personal history in order to experience rebirth and illumination, just as mythical heroes descended into the underworld in order to return to the living with new insights.[62]

Because Roethke saw himself as an aggregate of several selves, unification of those elements became highly important to him. Unity of being was important to Roethke because for him insanity was a part of life, part of his self. The periodic nervous breakdowns he suffered threatened the unity of self and the sense of spiritual peace that he was trying to achieve.[63] Consequently Roethke used his poetry to accommodate his madness to reality, and thus to control his insanity to some extent.[64] Roethke was familiar with

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[61]Malkoff, p. 169. [62]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 18.

[63]Malkoff, p. 7.

[64]Peter Davison, "Madness in the New Poetry," Atlantic, CCXV (January, 1965), 93.

Carl Jung's theory that the creative process could help maintain the balance of sanity, and he seemed to use the writing of poetry as therapy.[65] According to John Ciardi, "Roethke literally danced himself back from the edge of madness" by writing verse.[66] In his later years Roethke seemingly verified Ciardi's judgment when he expressed the conviction that a close, somewhat reciprocal, relationship existed between genius and insanity.[67]

Roethke's poetry reflects the man's personal exploration of self in order to establish the inner unity that he needed to face reality. When he portrays the functioning of the mind, he does so, as Malkoff observes, in terms of how "the unconscious makes itself known to the conscious."[68] To be more specific, Roethke is concerned with how the spiritual or unconscious side of man's nature transcends the physical or conscious side. In his earlier poems like "Statement" in the volume Open House, Roethke treated his insanity objectively. That poem asserts his intention to utilize his illness in order to move beyond himself in order to find a greater awareness of reality. This earlier stage of Roethke's poetical journey reveals him to be primarily interested in relating periods of insanity or unreality to normal life.[69] However,

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[65]Malkoff, p. 13.

[66]John Ciardi, "Theodore Roethke: A Passion and a Maker," Saturday Review, XLVI (August 31, 1963), 13.

[67]Malkoff, p. 8. [68]Ibid., p. 68. [69]Ibid., p. 7.

Roethke's later poems express an interest that goes beyond relating his periods of insanity to reality. Heightened awareness of self becomes the soul or human psyche to him in these poems, and it appears as a nobility which transforms meaningless or unreal events into occurrences greater than themselves. Roethke poetically explains this view as follows:

> What's madness but nobility of soul
> At odds with circumstance?[70]

Consequently much of his later poetry emphasizes his attempts through the personae of his protagonists to achieve this transcendence of the unreal by unifying body and soul, attempts which involve rebirth of self or mystical experiences.

Roethke's later poetry is frequently concerned with the theory of Freudian rebirth to imply the self's victory over the disunity of nonbeing.[71] In Praise to the End! he is specifically concerned with the attempt to unite spiritual and psychological progress;[72] in fact, the volume generally deals with the "sensuality and hysteria of self, moving in a dark, Freudian world."[73]

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[70]Theodore Roethke, The Far Field (New York, 1964), p. 79.

[71]M. L. Rosenthal, "Closing in on the Self," Nation, CLXXXVIII (March 21, 1959), 259.

[72]Malkoff, p. 67.

[73]Robert E. Spiller and Willard Thorp, eds., A Literary History of the United States (New York, 1963), p. 1430.

Jung's theory of the process of individuation emphasizes the spiritual, as well as the psychological, aspects of the human psyche. In the poems of Praise to the End! Roethke's search for his self is undertaken through the active imagination of the personae of various child-hero archetypes. He adopts these different masks throughout the volume because he sees the very existence of his inner being threatened by a "loss of soul," or spiritual identity, due to the psychological weaknesses of mental illness and sexual guilt feelings.[74]

In the poems of this volume, Roethke utilizes the stream-of-consciousness technique to depict the course of his child protagonist's journey into the prerational and unconscious realms of experience in order to unify the conflicts within his adult self. The utilization of the perspective of the child lends itself to the stream-of-consciousness technique because the narrative can be revealed through the fluid associations and spontaneous reactions of a child's mind, instead of through the direct and logical interpretations of recollected events within the mind of an adult.[75]

Carl Jung's theoretical explanation of the child's desire to defeat his fears of darkness and enjoy the peaceful security of daylight contributes a good deal to an understanding of Roethke's theoretical approach to his

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[74]Malkoff, p. 64.

[75]Mills, Theodore Roethke, pp. 15-17.

protagonists' quests for a spiritual identity and, ultimately, for an internal spiritual illumination. In Jung's words:

> 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 primitive times, for with it a world came into being whose existence no one had expected 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 the 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.[76]

The poetry of Praise to the End! reflects the importance of both the psychological and the spiritual aspects of Roethke's protagonists' quests for identity. In the poems of the volume Roethke utilizes the imagery of the movement from darkness into light to depict the progress of the process of individuation, progress which is made possible through the experience of spiritual illumination by the poetic protagonist.[77] Roethke undertakes a journey into the psychological interior of humanity, "beyond childhood, with its order (of a sort), beyond the order of the natural world, to the swirling, threatening, inchoate sources of his

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[76]Carl Jung, Psyche and Symbol (New York, 1958), pp. 130-131.

[77]Malkoff, p. 65.

very being." However, in these poems a regression into the spiritual unconscious and the psychological conscious past is necessary before any psychic progression is possible.[78] The resultant technique in the poetry is fundamentally that of an attempted synesthesia of two approaches to the problem of directly expressing reality:

> Self and soul become synonymous, as Roethke attempts to resolve the tormenting duality of the material and immaterial /physical and spiritual/ worlds. . . .[79]

The opening poem "Where Knock Is Open Wide" is important in context of Roethke's overall effort in Praise to the End! to cyclically relive significant experiences. The main themes that appear in this poem are reiterated throughout the volume. Indeed, this first poem does "open wide" the components of the poet's self which he explores in the guise of the preconscious and conscious memories of his child protagonist. "Where Knock Is Open Wide" explicitly deals with the spiritual and psychological ramifications of birth, death, sexual guilt and confusion, and separation from the earthly and heavenly fathers, a separation which involves the "lost son" motif that predominates in the poetry of Part II.[80]

Roethke's choice of Praise to the End! for the title of the volume underscores the significance of the spiritual aspects of human psychology as far as he was concerned. The

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[78]Pearce, pp. 178-179.

[79]Malkoff, p. 65.

[80]Ibid., p. 78.

title comes from a section in Book One of Wordsworth's Prelude which reads:

> Praise to the End!
> Thanks to the means which Nature deigned
> to employ,
> Whether her fearless visitings, or those
> That come with soft alarm, like hurtless
> light,
> Opening the peaceful clouds. . . .
> (I, ll. 350-354)

These lines praise the psychological processes by means of which the spirit ultimately struggles into existence. Roethke considers his childhood from this same point of view, as he explores the means of achieving spiritual peace as an adult through understanding the psychological experiences of childhood more fully.[81]

The basis of Roethke's attempt in Praise to the End! to unite psychological and spiritual progress can also be found in another Jungian theory. According to Jung, "Spirit and matter may well be forms of one and the same transcendental being." The possibility that such a unity exists is inherent in Roethke's efforts to resolve the conflict of the dual presence of the physical/psychological and spiritual qualities which compose the human psyche.[82]

The first poem in Part I is appropriately entitled "Where Knock Is Open Wide." Although Roethke's title comes from the seventy-seventh stanza of Christopher Smart's poem

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[81] Ibid., p. 66.

[82] Jung, Psyche and Symbol, p. 67.

A Song to David, Roethke's reference to floods of light connotes more than the purely spiritual awakening implied in Smart's poem.[83] The specific passage from A Song to David reads:

> . . . in the seat to faith assign'd,
> Where ask is have, where seek is find,
> Where knock is open wide.
> (LXXVII)

However, the title has a double meaning; it refers both to the literal or physical, as well as to the figurative or spiritual, birth of the child protagonist. The words used in the title imply conception and the actual sexual act itself, two aspects of birth which directly pertain to the content of the poem.[84]

The first section of this poem deals with the child's conception in a cyclic fashion. The narrative action in this section progresses from the animal imagery connoting sexual curiosity and confusion in the first two stanzas to the child's partial awareness of the act that resulted in his conception in the third stanza. The section then closes with the child's perception of the reality of his physical origin, an event which he knows definitely occurred because his present existence testifies to it, although he was not present to witness it at the time.[85] The last three lines of the first section link the physical and spiritual aspects of the protagonist's conception:

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[83]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 18.

[84]Malkoff, p. 70.

[85]Ibid., pp. 71-73.

What's the time, papa-seed?
Everything has been twice.
My father is a fish.[86]

These closing lines are espeically significant in considering the close of the first phase of the child's regressive journey, a phase which results in his physical, psychological, and spiritual conception. Such perceptive regression by the protagonist is implicit in the line "Everything has been twice." By returning to the memory in the world of the collective unconscious beyond human existence, Roethke is able to reveal more clearly the human experience before birth.[87] The final line, "My father is a fish," in combination with the line preceding it, possesses significance in terms of the child's spiritual enlightenment as well. The protagonist's regression transcends certain conscious states and allows him to envision life beyond the temporal limits of his own human existence.[88]

The second section of the poem deals with birth and death. The imagery of a cat is used to connote acts associated with sexuality and birth. Roethke then employs the imagery of an uncle who has gone away forever to foreshadow the death of the protagonist's father:

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[86]Theodore Roethke, Praise to the End! (New York, 1951), p. 15.

[87]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 19.

[88]Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, p. 202.

My uncle's gone away,
He's gone for always,
I don't care either.[89]

The uncle's death is an important aspect of this section because it prefigures the death of the child protagonist's father, an event which has a great effect on the child's psychological and spiritual future. The child's refusal to accept the finality of the uncle's death in the latter part of this section is an anticipation of his subsequent refusal to accept the reality of his father's death. Roethke uses the imagery of the lingering ghost of the father to connote the absence of a God-father figure, a void with which the child cannot satisfactorily cope either psychologically or spiritually.[90]

In the third section Roethke continues to utilize the ghost figure, but he extends his imagery to include dream or, more particularly, nightmare elements. The source of the child's terror in this section is somewhat ambiguous; at this point in the poem the fear could be caused either by the uncle's death or by the child's insecurity due to the absence of his father.[91] A clue is found in the following lines:

Who keeps me last?
Fish me out.
Please.[92]

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[89]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 12.

[90]Malkoff, p. 75. [91]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 22.

[92]Roethke, Praise to the End., p. 16.

These lines, considered in conjunction with the fishing trip in the next section, seem to indicate that the child's nightmare is the product of his insecurity after his father's death. However, the imagery of the "happy hands"[93] at the end of the section introduces a further element of ambiguity; they could be either the comforting hands of the mother awakening the child from his bad dreams, or the hands of the child himself performing a sexual act that he does not yet understand.[94]

The first five stanzas of the fourth section are especially important in understanding the origins of the child's feelings of spiritual, psychological, and physical alienation which become the predominant motivations for his more complex spiritual journey in Part II.[95] The second and fifth stanzas read:

> 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.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> That was before I fell! I fell!
> The worm has moved away.
> My tears are tired.[96]

The second stanza describes the father's God-like powers in sparing the fish, powers that the child associates with

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[93] Ibid., p. 17.

[94] Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 22.

[95] Malkoff, p. 75.

[96] Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 17.

his similar powers in the greenhouse world. In this stanza Roethke depicts the idyllic oneness of the child and his father, both spiritual and physical.

However, the climax of the poem occurs in the fifth stanza when the child says "I fell! I fell!." Just as in each of Roethke's attempts to resolve spiritual and physical conflicts, each step forward becomes one backward; the cycles in his spiritual journey are continually repeated with variations. The imagery of a fall and a worm in this stanza seem to allude to the fall of man through his commission of the original sin and to the literal physical phenomenon of birth itself. Like Adam the protagonist is deprived of his state of paradisical happiness because he has obtained knowledge of parental life-creating activities, a knowledge that has resulted in Oedipal desires for his mother, and their concomitant guilt feelings after the death of his father. Nevertheless, the fall may also allude to physical birth itself, an incarnation which, in the tradition of Donne, Vaughn, Traherne, Blake, and Wordsworth, results in the termination of man's oneness with God. Thus by the end of the fourth section of the poem, the child protagonist has been separated from his spiritual and physical progenitors, and has begun to fuse those two father figures into one.[97]

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[97]Malkoff, p. 76.

In the fifth and final section of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," the child further unites his concept of father and God when he says that God is somewhere else, although he is really referring to his earthly father. In the protagonist's words:

> God's somewhere else,
> I said to mamma.[98]

The protagonist is thus a "lost son" at the outset in the volume; the first poem has established the loss of his spiritual father through his own birth, and that of his physical father through the latter's death. The child now faces life with an awareness of the new responsibilities that accompany him in his separated state.[99] His new state of separation involves psychological and spiritual conflicts:

> I'm somebody else now.
> Don't tell my hands.
> Have I come to always? Not yet.
> One father is enough.[100]

The reference to "hands" in this section possibly clarifies that to the "happy hands" in the third. The hands seem to be used here in both a religious and a sexual context. The protagonist appears to be simultaneously asking for forgiveness from God for his act of masturbating, and from his father for his sexual fantasies about his parents' sexual relations while he masturbated.[101]

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[98]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 18.

[99]Malkoff, p. 77.

[100]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 18.

[101]Malkoff, p. 77.

"Where Knock Is Open Wide" is perhaps the most significant poem in Part I. It sets the stage for the more complex spiritual journey in Part II by introducing Roethke's major themes and by utilizing the cyclic method for reliving significant experiences from his childhood. Throughout the remaining poems in Part I, the child continues to develop after birth, progressing from the comparative innocence of infancy to the budding awareness of adolescence.

The important phases of Roethke's child protagonist's development encompass several types of experiences in the five poems that follow "Where Knock Is Open Wide." A description of the ambiguity of the process of individuation as equally threatening and comforting is provided in "I Need, I Need." The child's increasing awareness of his sexuality as an agent in isolating him from the innocence of the world of nature is related in "Bring the Day." A consideration of the child's more aggressive individuality as he begins to look forward to his future rather than backward at his past is the theme of "Give Way, Ye Gates." The two closing poems in Part I, "Sensibility! O La!" and "O Lull me, Lull Me," depict the Freudian stages of sexual development which directly precede adolescence. The former poem deals with sexual fancies of an Oedipal nature, and the latter one depicts a period of latency, using minimized sexual imagery

to relate the protagonist's limitation and control of his recently-developed urges.[102]

In general the poetry in Part I of Praise to the End! can be evaluated as psychic research for the personal discoveries to be made in Part II. The experimental poems of The Lost Son and the implementation of their themes and techniques in Part I represent a searching on the part of the poet as he tried to find a place to begin his spiritual journey, only to learn that any beginning becomes an ending which ultimately evolves into yet another beginning. The basic difference in Parts I and II is the point of view, because the protagonist's perspective in Part II makes the latter division more complex and more representative of Roethke's own spiritual journey.

Parts I and II differ in their perspectives. In Part I, the poems emphasized the psychological formation of the individual in a basic sense. Roethke approached individuation from the point of view of a child trying to understand what he was becoming. The poems in Part II are more concerned with the significance of existence, rather than with existence for its own sake. Here the individuation is considered from the viewpoint of an adult trying to comprehend what he has become.[103] The undercurrent of the whole Part II of Praise to the End! is seen specifically in "The Lost Son" poem sequence

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[102]Mills, Theodore Roethke, pp. 22-24.

[103]Malkoff, pp. 84-85.

as Roethke's protagonist takes a retrospective look at the mysteries, miseries, and joys of a distant childhood.[104]

A letter to Babette Deutsch from Roethke describes "The Lost Son" sequence as part of a spiritual progress in four stages, as the protagonist tries to be born as a unified being. Roethke's letter declares that the sequence ends the first stages with spiritual progress only partly achieved. When "The Lost Son" closes, the protagonist has only partially transcended the paradox of a physical and spiritual nature within himself.[105]

"The Lost Son" follows a narrative line which is suggested by the titles of the first four sections, and culminates with a mystical experience for the semi-adult protagonist at the end of the final, untitled section. The poems that develop the narrative line are entitled "The Flight," "The Pit," "The Gibber," and "The Return."[106] The final section has no title in Praise to the End!, but in Words for the Wind the last section has the approximation of a title. The first line of the poem is italicized and enclosed in parentheses: "(It was beginning winter.)"[107]

"The Lost Son" is part of Roethke's overall poetic effort to depict his "struggle for spiritual identity."[108] The

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[104]Thomas Cole, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Voices, No. 55 (1954), 38.

[105]Theodore Roethke, "To Babette Deutsch," Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, pp. 140-141.

[106]Ibid. [107]Malkoff, p. 89. [108]Ibid., p. 84.

sequence begins with identification by the protagonist of father and God to rationalize the duality of his nature. In the final section of the poem sequence, however, Roethke implies the separation of a spiritual theme from the limitations of a physical base.[109] The technique of adult retrospection about childhood is used in the sequence to identify the beginnings of self and to progress toward a realistic unity of self.[110] This broad poetic concept is stated in Roethke's own words as follows: "To begin from the depths and come out--that is difficult; for few know where the depths are or can recognize them; or, if they do, are afraid."[111]

The sequence is based on a quest myth, with Roethke using the persona of adult perspective to carry it out. The protagonist first goes back into the self of his childhood and confronts the physical sensuality of his nature. He then returns toward adulthood, finding reality somewhat changed as a result of his modified experience of illumination.[112] Using retrospection from the adult viewpoint, the protagonist explores the nature and origin of his self. He uses the quest to confront a spiritual crisis of his present by considering its background in his past.[113] Thus, as in many of Roethke's

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[109] Ibid., p. 89 [110] Ibid., p. 84.

[111] William J. Martz, The Achievement of Theodore Roethke, (Glenview, Illinois, 1966), p. 7.

[112] Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 16. [113] Malkoff, p. 84.

poems, his protagonist is struggling frantically to achieve a moment of calm realization in the illumination of "wholeness."[114] The protagonist consequently is fulfilling the role of both the mask of the poet and the universal type of any man.[115]

To complement his use of quest and perspective approach in the sequence, Roethke employs the intuitive, stream-of-consciousness technique to recollect his childhood. As the protagonist returns to the psychology of childhood, inanimate objects become animated; they act and speak throughout the poem.[116] In addition, his verse forms in "The Lost Son" are more sophisticated than in Part I of Praise to the End! to match the change in viewpoint from that of a child to that of an adult. Occasional exceptions are made, however, when Roethke intentionally utilizes the speech and thought of a younger child to make his experience of the past more realistic.[117]

According to Roethke, his method in "The Lost Son," as well as in other poem sequences, is the "cyclic" method of narration, which depends on Jung's theory of regression and progression. Movement is periodically regressive instead of advancing in a straight line. Roethke offers this explanation:

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[114]Rosenthal, "Closing in on the Self," p. 258.

[115]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 16.

[116]Cole, p. 38.

[117]Malkoff, p. 84.

> I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping back, then a going forward; but there is some "progress."[118]

The poem sequence begins with the protagonist's regression in the first three sections and ends with a sort of progress on his part at the end of the final two sections.

The first section, "The Flight," depicts the spiritual crisis that brought about the meditations of the protagonist.[119] The protagonist begins by regressing metamorphically to an animistic level and pleads for some clue from the sub-human to the meaning of his existence:[120]

> 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;
> 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.[121]

Roethke describes this section as "a terrified running away--with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting; . . . the protagonist . . . is hunting like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the sub-human."[122]

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[118]Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 39. [119]Malkoff, p. 85.

[120]Kunitz, p. 25. [121]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 47.

[122]Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 38.

In this first section the self which found existence in Part I of Praise to the End! is in conflict. The physical element of death injected by the reference to Woodlawn Cemetery in the poem's opening lines initiates the struggle of self as the protagonist seeks spiritual fulfillment and maturity.[123] The protagonist seems to return to childhood to find the origin of his dual physical and spiritual characteristics. Although Roethke does not give a reason for the protagonist's regressive flight, the poem itself offers a cause: the crying of the dead at Woodlawn. The ghost of his father becomes a threat to the lost son; at the end of "The Flight" a suggestion of a threat to the boy's masculinity, which becomes sexual guilt in "The Gibber," is evident.[124]

The regression of the protagonist in "The Flight" is an example of a paradoxical pattern that became noticeable in Part I of the volume. The son feels severed from his father by the guilt of his somewhat incestuous desires. The father's death intensifies this guilt. Consequently the father's ghost in this section objectifies the child's fears of his own latent sexuality as he matures. Thus to the lost son, the poem's protagonist, the physical facts of birth and sexuality have spiritually separated him from both his human and his divine father.[125]

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[123]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 24.

[124]Malkoff, p. 85. [125]Ibid.

Roethke uses his verse forms to enhance his purpose in this section. Because the protagonist is re-experiencing his childhood, Roethke includes fragments of childish rhymes and songs with other factual descriptions in an effort to balance objective and subjective reality. For example, the stanza below is childlike in its content, but it also contains symbolic meaning in terms of the protagonist's regressive questing:[126]

> 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.[127]

The lines have the rhythmic quality of a nursery rhyme or childish recitation, but they also contrast the river's steady flow, which indicates progress to the protagonist, with the protagonist's frustrated searching among the holes and slippery mud patches, an act which indicates a possible defeating regression into their slime.[128]

Although the second section of the sequence is only one stanza long, it is significant for establishing the protagonist's search for himself in the preconscious. In "The Pit" he undertakes a panic-stricken hunt for his pre-intellectual sources to establish the fact that he is really alive. To obtain this end, the lost son re-enters the paradisical womb, symbolized

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[126]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 25.

[127]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 48.

[128]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 25.

by the greenhouse. This regression to the pre-intellectual through the womb image is preliminary to the rebirth of the self for Roethke.[129]

The external setting of this section is the same as that of the greenhouse poems, especially "Root Cellar" and "Weed Puller." The lost son subjectively returns to the place of his physical or external origin, the "slime of a wet nest"[130] from which he must emerge. The actual genesis of his physical being is enacted by the mole's act of stunning the dirt into noises, Roethke's apparent symbol for the male's act of impregnating the womb with life.[131]

The descent into the earth threatens the protagonist, because it symbolizes the relinquishing of self to the mother's womb, or the dominance of the physical over the spiritual. However, in the lines "Beware Mother Mildew./Nibble again, fish nerves,"[132] he gets an inner warning of possible spiritual origin, a warning which keeps him from surrendering to a purely physical retreat from further agonies in his search for spiritual completion.[133]

The following section, "The Gibber," is the central section of the poem, and it clearly analyzes the lost son's

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[129]Rosenthal, "Closing in on the Self," p. 259.

[130]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 49. [131]Malkoff, p. 86.

[132]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 49.

[133]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 25.

anxiety. He is suffering from guilt produced by sexual urges, which have brought the physical side of his nature into conflict with his spiritual desires of being loved not only by his physical mother and father, but also by his spiritual father in heaven.[134] Roethke describes "The Gibber" as a poem which consists of "frenetic activity" followed by an "almost erotic serenity" that ends with "a rising agitation . . . rendered in terms of balked sexual experience, with an accompanying rant, . . . and a subsequent near-blackout."[135] The section builds to a climax of the protagonist's tension between himself and the environment surrounding him. Roethke uses the imagery of masturbation to depict the tensions of sexual agony and imagery from Chapter 38 of Job to depict the protagonist's spiritual alienation.[136]

The first three stanzas are of paramount importance in presenting the sexual tensions of the lost son:

> At the wood's mouth,
> By the cave's door,
> I listened to something
> I had heard before.
>
> 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.[137]

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[134]Malkoff, pp. 86-87. [135]Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 38.

[136]Malkoff, p. 87.

[137]Roethke, Praise to the End!, pp. 149-150.

The first stanza utilizes two of Roethke's favorite images, the wood's mouth and the cave's door, which recur frequently in his work. The wood's mouth is generally the setting for attacks of anxiety as it is here, while the cave's door often appears to symbolize the womb into which the protagonist regresses.[138]

In the second stanza the barking and howling of the dogs of the groin are definitely images of the sexual urges producing guilt feelings in the lost son. The sun and moon symbolize the father and mother who intensify the protagonist's guilt by respectively turning against him and rejecting his love.[139]

The third stanza represents another experience of rejection by the protagonist, this time by the natural world. The weeds, snakes, cows, and briars tell him to die, in effect voicing their condemnation of his physical urges.[140] Roethke creates tension in the atmosphere of this stanza by using lines that are terse and short.[141] The Biblical allusion here that the wages of sin, or sexual urges, is death also foreshadows the Job imagery in the following stanzas of "The Gibber."[142]

The remaining stanzas of this section derive much of their imagery from Chapter 38 of Job. At this point the protagonist's father appears in his most terrifying aspect:

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[138]Malkoff, p. 86. [139]Ibid., p. 87. [140]Ibid.

[141]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 26.

[142]Malkoff, p. 87.

> Fear was my father, Father fear.
> His look drained the stones.[143]

The symbol of Job's alienation from his heavenly father is important to the meaning of the poem because the protagonist's fear attains spiritual as well as physical or sexual significance.[144]

The word "Die" at the end of the third stanza is fully realized in the five stanzas which follow it, because the protagonist becomes aware that he has survived the worst of his trials. The following lines indicate a new awareness:

> Do the bones cast out their fire?
> Is the seed leaving the old bed?
> These buds are live as birds.[145]

This passage shows that the poet is about to enter a new spiritual phase of transformation and rebirth that may transcend his conflicts.[146]

The specific event that has produced such conflict and terror in the child is his masturbation, which the poet tries to subordinate in sterile commercial imagery:

> I have married my hands to perpetual
> agitation,
> I run, I run to the whistle of money.[147]

The sexual sin is thus associated with a materialistic view of reality, both of which are in direct conflict with the

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[143]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 50.

[144]Malkoff, p. 87.

[145]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 50.

[146]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 26.

[147]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 51.

nature of spiritual order.[148] The lines of the next two stanzas contain images of further conflicts, including some of sexual guilt, but these conflicts are represented in the gentle terms of a look at nature in grass, birds, worms, and clouds.[149]

The last stanza of "The Gibber" functions as a transition from the realm of the unconscious back to that of the conscious:

> 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.[150]

In the first line the protagonist experiences a violent internal illumination. In the three closing lines he undergoes a period of almost hallucinatory upheaval which brings him out of the horrors of his journey into himself and back to the familiar atmosphere of everyday life.[151]

"The Return," the fourth section of the poem, focuses on the frantic activities and fragmentary images that must be emphasized before the protagonist can obtain relief from his physical and spiritual tensions.[152] The significance of this section is explained by Roethke as a vision of the protagonist's physical and spiritual fathers: "/T/he papa on earth and in

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[148]Malkoff, p. 87. [149]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 26.

[150]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 51.

[151]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27. [152]Malkoff, pp. 87-88.

heaven are blended--there is a sense of motion in the greenhouse, my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth."[153]

In the first five stanzas the protagonist continues to progress from the depths of "The Pit" and the frenzied tension of much of "The Gibber," establishing a sort of order in his physical and spiritual chaos. In the first stanza he describes his journey into the darkness of the greenhouse womb in the past tense, indicating he has left it behind for the light of the present.[154] The use of the image of roses breathing in the dark in the second stanza connotes the protagonist's recognition of his conscious self that he became aware of through his journey into the darkness of self alluded to in the first stanza.[155] The coming of the heavenly father in the fifth stanza transcends the chaos and hell of the fire pit. The psychological ramifications of this transcendence are important because the fear of paternal retribution is dissipated. The protagonist's fear is no longer bound up in obscure symbols but traced to its origin and revealed to be irrational. When the father is no longer viewed through darkness but face to face, he inspires love, not fear, in the protagonist, and becomes the source of order and life instead of the fearful tester of Job.[156]

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[153]Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 39.

[154]Malkoff, p. 88.

[155]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27.

[156]Malkoff, pp. 88-89.

The final stanza of "The Return" deals with the progress of the protagonist from the exhaustion in the darkness to the renewed potency of light.[157] The fragile state of the flowers which gradually respond to the coming of daylight after night parallels the protagonist's perception of his own being as he looks at them.[158]

The fourth section as a whole deals with the lost son's return from the unreality of childhood beginnings to the partial reality of the adult. In "The Return" onanism is seen by Roethke as a kind of unreal death in itself, because it retards the process of individuation by retreating from the individual's establishment of his personality in the real world. Roethke is apparently using the cyclic imagery of masturbation and renewed physical potency to symbolize the protagonist's spiritual rebirth. In addition, the renewal of physical potency could also be intended to imply that the self which was threatened with biological extinction in the early sections of the poem may now be able to assert itself.[159]

The psychoanalytic interpretation of the physical aspects of spiritual rebirth is closely aligned to spiritual growth. The lost son's spiritual progress is made believable because "papa," the earthly father, is easily identified with God, the heavenly father. Up to this point in the sequence, however, the spiritual or religious theme has been restricted by the biological base of sexual guilt. The renewal of potency and

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[157] Ibid., p. 88. [158] Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27.

[159] Malkoff, p. 88.

the extent of the elimination of sexual guilt in "The Return" provide the transition for the spiritual emphasis in the last section. In the final section Roethke tries to detach spiritual progress from the physical aspects of the protagonist's quest and to establish an independent and meaningful existence for it.[160]

The final, untitled section of "The Lost Son" emphasizes the experience of illumination as part of the protagonist's spiritual progress. Roethke says that "the illumination, the coming of light suggested at the end of the last passage /the last stanza of "The Return"/ occurs again, this time to the nearly-grown man. But the illumination is still only partly apprehended; he is still 'waiting.'"[161]

The attitude of this last section is a meditative one. In the first three stanzas, the barren but enduring winter landscape reflects the protagonist's condition:[162]

> It was beginning winter,
> An in-between time,
> The landscape still partly brown:
> The bones of weeds kept swinging
> in the wind,
> Above the blue snow.
>
> It was beginning winter.
> The light moved slowly over the
> frozen field,
> Over the dry seed-crowns,
> The beautiful surviving bones
> Swinging in the wind.

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[160] Ibid., p. 89. [161] Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 39.

[162] Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27.

> Light traveled over the field;
> Stayed.
> The weeds stopped swinging.
> The mind moved, not alone,
> Through the clear air, in the
> silence.[163]

In these first three stanzas, the mind of the protagonist shifts from his thoughts of what has been happening and begins to move toward the mystical experience of the final two stanzas. The imagery "bones of weeds" in the first stanza, and "light" moving "slowly over the frozen field" in the second, represents the beginnings of his mental change of direction.[164] The third stanza describes the light's first movement over the field and its cessation. Then the wind stops as well, and the mind moves "/t/hrough the clear air, in silence," but "not alone."[165]

The final two stanzas of "The Lost Son" are crucial in attempting to interpret the nature of Roethke's illumination, but they provide only indications about the light's source. However, in these closing lines evidence can be found to support a mystical source for the light, as opposed to a rational understanding.[166] The spiritual questions raised by the protagonist's experiences in "The Flight," "The Pit," and "The Gibber" are described in the final stanzas; in these last lines Roethke is attempting to experience a sense of internal peace through

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[163]Roethke, Praise to the End!, pp. 52-53.

[164]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27.

[165]Malkoff, p. 89.

[166]Ibid.

unification of the physical and spiritual aspects of his inner being, rather than through acceptance of the orthodoxy of a religion.[167] His protagonist appears to be involved in something similar to an extrovertive mystical experience, one in which the individual perceives the unity of the world and himself as part of that unity:[168]

> 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.[169]

The moving of the mind "not alone" in the third stanza has already suggested a unitary consciousness. The building of rhythms to a climax and their subsequent diminishing indicate an expansion of consciousness that is part of an extrovertive mystical experience. Further support for involvement in some sort of mystical experience by the protagonist is found in the elaboration in the entire last section on the coming of light that accompanied his face-to-face sight of the father.[170] By the end of this final section, the lost son protagonist has advanced from his regression into the preconscious and unconscious state of earlier childhood to adulthood, but has

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[167]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 27. [168]Malkoff, p. 90.

[169]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 53.

[170]Malkoff, p. 90.

not found the total spiritual illumination to transcend the paradox of his dual nature and relate himself to reality as a unified being. The poem ends on a tentatively hopeful note with the admonition to the protagonist to "/b/e still" and /w/ait."[171]

"The Lost Son" progresses from absolute terror of life's demands to a calmly affirmative but incomplete resolution of reality. The sequence begins with the brutality and nature of death and the physical and psychological challenges and ramifications of adult sexuality. The protagonist does repossess himself enough to accept his father's everyday world, but this acceptance leads to only a partial resolution of his conflicts.[172] The mystical illumination achieved at the end of "The Lost Son" lacks any explicit theological structure; it is based on an individual comprehension of transcendence through personal knowledge and evidence. However, although the illumination achieved at the end of the sequence is incomplete, it serves to show the spirit's progress over the longest and most difficult phase of its evolution toward unity of being.[173]

Throughout the poem sequence, the protagonist has been trying to overcome the fears of physical annihilation in the absorption of maternal nature as well as fear of total spiritual

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[171]Kunitz, p. 27.

[172]M. L. Rosenthal, "The Couch and Poetic Insight," Reporter, XXXII (1965), 53.

[173]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 28.

isolation from a fatherly God. He approaches the solution by trying to regain the sense of union with nature that he felt as a child, while preserving the individuality of his adult identity. After looking back into certain childhood experiences, he finds a way to survive the duality of the physical and spiritual by uniting the two. The protagonist partially succeeds in achieving such unity through a vision of the simultaneous union and separation of the spiritual in the father, who brings order and distinctness to the physical confusion of the greenhouse womb.[174] However, the denouement of the poem sequence does not satisfy the original conception of unifying the psychological differentiation of the protagonist. His desired maturity and calm internal reconciliation do not occur, as the final lines indicate. The last lines of the final stanza in the sequence express the faith that internal unity will someday, not presently, be achieved by him.[175]

Further evidence that the mystic vision of physical and spiritual unity is imperfectly achieved in "The Lost Son" can be found in the remaining poem sequences in Praise to the End!. In these subsequent developmental poems, the protagonist continues to strive for a more unified concept of himself and reality, and he still regresses to his feelings of sexual guilt and spiritual alienation.[176] The protagonist is involved

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[174]Malkoff, p. 91.

[175]Rosenthal, "Closing in on the Self," p. 259.

[176]Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 29.

in a quest for his spiritual identity throughout the rest of the volume. His quest becomes a flight, because the man has become lost in physical confusions. To find himself, the protagonist continues to re-experience the stages of the self's development from birth to maturity.[177]

The first four poems of Part Two follow the same general pattern. "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," and "The Shape of Fire" all contain five sections, and the last two of those five sections represent the progress of the mind from internal chaos to internal illumination. "A Field of Light," however, has only three sections, and it is a retrospective view of the entire pattern of development in the sequence.[178] These four poem sequences, as well as "Praise to the End!," "Unfold! Unfold," and "I Cry, Love! Love!" continue to deal with physical and spiritual alienation as does "The Lost Son." However, the imagery used and the persona adopted by the poet vary from sequence to sequence.

In "The Long Alley" the protagonist has regressed from his partial state of unity in "The Lost Son," and is suffering from renewed sexual guilt and spiritual isolation. In the first of five sections, both the internal and external settings for the protagonist's conflicts are delineated. The guilt toward his father is based on the protagonist's acceptance of the desecration of nature. Roethke uses images of dead

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[177]Kunitz, p. 24.

[178]Louis L. Martz, p. 30.

fish floating "belly upward" and "sulphurous water" proceeding from "the glory of God" to depict the protagonist's defacement of natural order.[179] The factory is used in this first section to symbolize his endorsement of a materialistic attitude toward reality. In "The Long Alley" materialism thus prevents individuation as masturbation did in "The Lost Son."[180]

The second section intensifies the protagonist's feeling of separation from the natural world because of his materialistic philosophy and his masturbation as well, both of which are impeding his spiritual progress:

> The soul resides in the horse-
> barn.
> Believe me, there's no one else,
> kitten-limp sister.[181]

An allusion to a line from Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" can help clarify Roethke's meaning in these lines. The line, "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction," seems to parallel the protagonist's dilemma in the second section. In other words, his materialistic philosophy has caused him to be spiritually and physically impotent. His impotence is further considered here in the image of the feelings following masturbation: "There's no joy in soft bones."[182] The section concludes with the protagonist

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[179]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 57.

[180]Malkoff, pp. 91-92.

[181]Roethke, Praise to the End!, pp. 57-58.

[182]Ibid., p. 58.

gazing into a pond because his impotence blocks him in his search for illumination.[183]

In the third section the protagonist experiences a brief moment of self-awareness, as Roethke's persona is revealed as having been that of a cat. The nursery rhymes such as "My love's locked in/The old silo"[184] are a continuation of the imagery used to represent sexual and spiritual failure in the previous section. However, in the final stanza the protagonist realizes that his acts have been defeating his purpose. The detaching of the match head symbolizes both materialism and masturbation, neither accomplishing the protagonist's aim of making spiritual progress.[185]

In the fourth section the greenhouse imagery is associated with a vital force within human memory. The word "drowsing"[186] is especially important here because it suggests "a dream-like state of potential regeneration, where the stems of the mind renew their vitality . . . ."[187] The protagonist is excited by the illumination he finds in nature. He has become part of the natural world again, and is prepared for some sort of spiritual resolution in the final section of the sequence.[188]

In the final section the protagonist rejects society's materialism with the phrase "Nuts are money,"[189] and goes on

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[183]Malkoff, p. 92. [184]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 59.

[185]Malkoff, p. 92. [186]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 59.

[187]Louis L. Martz, p. 33. [188]Malkoff, p. 93.

[189]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 60.

to accept his sexuality without guilt, progressing to a union of his spiritual and physical characteristics. The last stanza describes his physical and spiritual union in images of lakes, fish, and fire. Mother and father, symbolized by lakes and fish, are at peace; the protagonist's final transcendence is symbolized by his taking fire in his hands, achieving the union of spiritual and physical as he faces reality in human rather than animal terms.[190]

"A Field of Light" is the next poem sequence in Part II, and it involves another regressive journey into the unconscious which leads to the protagonist's final vision of light in the field. The poem contains only three sections, the first two of which describe the protagonist's search for the source of his guilt toward God the father. He experiences a vision in the third section as a result of his search which is reminiscent of the mind moving "not alone" toward light in "The Lost Son."[191]

> 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.[192]

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[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid., pp. 93-94.

[192] Roethke, Praise to the End!, pp. 64-65.

The protagonist becomes intensely aware of an intimate relationship between himself and the natural world, although he retains his own separate identity. The sequence closes with his realization of the individuality unique to all living things. His mind thus makes some progress toward a state of renewed consciousness because it takes in more than just the world of greenhouse life.[193]

The next poem sequence, "The Shape of Fire," involves the poet in a return to the womb's darkness, as he progresses from sexuality to spiritual illumination. The third section summarizes his inner conflict as he attempts to find the understanding of his self by re-entering the beginnings of his being and then progressing outward as he "comes a dark way."[194]

In the last two sections the adult mind of the protagonist puts childhood and maturity into their proper dimensions. The simple and naive beauty of childhood is recognized as inferior to the complex and ultimate growth of adult maturity.[195] Childhood recollections are presented favorably in the fourth section in lines like the following:

> Death was not. I lived in a drowse:
> Hands and hair moved through a dream
> of wakening blossoms.[196]

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[193]Louis L. Martz, p. 33.

[194]Malkoff, p. 95.

[195]Louis L. Martz, p. 34.

[196]Roethke, Praise to the End!, pp. 71-72.

However, the images of peaceful rowing and a flower in a full vase indicate the protagonist's decision to try to attain maturity of self.[197] Thus at the end of "The Shape of Fire," Roethke finds a meaningful pause in the confusion of living, as he momentarily contemplates the condition of his life, a pause which is represented by the image of the nearly overflowing vase in the final four lines of the sequence.[198]

The four sections of the "Praise to the End!" sequence bring the pattern of regression and progression in Part II to a kind of climax, and for the first time a final section ends with a regressive, rather than a progressive, emphasis. In addition, the sequence is very similar to "The Lost Son" until the final section.[199]

The first two sections renew the theme of masturbation and its accompanying guilt, which causes the protagonist to long for the guiltless feelings of childhood.[200] The account of the erotic act is then followed by nonsense rhymes from his past.[201]

The final two sections seemingly continue to parallel the pattern of "The Lost Son." In the third section the

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[197]Louis L. Martz, pp. 34-35.

[198]Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Poetic Shape of Death," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, p. 100.

[199]Malkoff, p. 97. [200]Ibid., pp. 97-98.

[201]Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 40.

protagonist has a dream, and in this dream he asks the ghost of his father to approach him. The facing of the ghost removes his fears, and he appears prepared to assert himself physically and spiritually.[202] However, the expected illumination does not occur in the final section. The protagonist exhibits an ambivalent attitude toward himself in the fourth section:

> I've crawled from the mire, alert
> as saint or dog;
> . . . . . .
> I lost my identity to a pebble.[203]

Neither the saint nor the dog has solved the protagonist's problem of sexual guilt in human terms, because the saint suppresses sexual desires instead of coping with them, and a dog does not possess the will or self-awareness to feel guilt. Further evidence of his regression in the process of individuation is in the line "I lost my identity to a pebble." In addition to his ambivalence about illumination, he does not retain the separateness of human identity during his union with the natural world.[204]

"Praise to the End!" thus closes on a regressive note, since the protagonist gives in to the impersonality of the collective unconscious. The line "Lave me ultimate waters"[205] is in effect a death wish, and the speaker seems to reject the process of individuation in the sequence. However, the last

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[202]Malkoff, p. 98. [203]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 78.

[204]Malkoff, pp. 98-99.

[205]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 78.

line of the sequence, "The light becomes me,"[206] does suggest that his retreat from reality is only temporary.[207] Roethke explains that the protagonist finally rejects the death wish: "In terms of the whole sequence /Part II, Praise to the End!/ he survives . . . . His self-consciousness, his very will to live saves him from the annihilation of ecstasy."[208]

The regression and apparent defeat at the close of "Praise to the End!" seem to have been caused by an intensification of the protagonist's conflicts as he neared the achievement of his goal to establish his self and relate it as a unified being to reality. In addition, neither of the two remaining poems in the volume shows a definite victory on the part of the speaker.[209]

In "Unfold! Unfold!" the protagonist continues to explore the unconscious, this time struggling to progress through the final and most difficult phases toward spiritual illumination. The confining qualities of reason are symbolized by the house built for wisdom, but Roethke's protagonist finds true reality in the field where direct contact with the natural world makes mystical illumination possible.[210] The last stanza of "Unfold! Unfold!" verbalizes Roethke's theory that if reason is useless, man's primitive side still strives toward the light. A voice from within the protagonist tells him to "Go where

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[206] Ibid.

[207] Malkoff, p. 100.

[208] Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 40.

[209] Malkoff, p. 99.

[210] Ibid., p. 102.

light is,"[211] apparently urging him to possess himself through some mystical rather than rational means.[212]

"I Cry, Love! Love!" is the final poem sequence in the original edition of Praise to the End!, and in it the protagonist continues to search for a mystical illumination to help him unify his being in order to face reality. In the first stanza of the second section Roethke suggests that knowledge is accumulated by pre-human senses and that human speech is as instinctive to men as is the communication of other creatures among themselves.[213] In the third and final section, however, the protagonist becomes exhausted, and gives in to the death wish; he quits trying to achieve the separateness that individuation requires:

> We never enter
> Alone.[214]

These closing words represent both the beginning and end of a journey. However, at this point in the protagonist's attempt to unify his physical, or sexual, and his spiritual characteristics, the desire for submersion in another identity, that of the natural or physical world, has become more important to

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[211]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 83.

[212]Denis Donoghue, "Roethke's Broken Music," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, pp. 151-152.

[213]William Meredith, "A Steady Storm of Correspondences: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, p. 45.

[214]Roethke, Praise to the End!, p. 89.

the lost son than the necessity for the separateness required to establish a sufficient spiritual identity.[215]

Many critics assert that this pattern of regression and progression is archetypal of Roethke's poetry in its entirety, not just in the volume Praise to the End!. John Ciardi says that Roethke uses the personae of his protagonists to carry him from "madness (symbolized by the wet riot of vegetable roots and the grossness of the flesh) to a reflective calm (winter and distance)."[216] Stanley Kunitz basically concurs with Ciardi's interpretation of Roethke's poetry as following a pattern of self-exploration. However, he extends his focus to compare Roethke and his poetic protagonists to Proteus, who transformed himself time and time again to avoid the painful revelations of prophecy. Kunitz says that Roethke transforms himself through the personae of different poetic protagonists to evade a total look at himself until the poems of The Far Field.[217] William Meredith thinks that Roethke uses a protagonist persona to explore himself in his poetry. Meredith says that Roethke uses one specifically to express the feelings of childhood in Praise to the End!, in order to cast off the artificiality of reason in favor of the organic elements of nature. In fact, according to Meredith, the whole volume is

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[215]Malkoff, pp. 104-105.

[216]John Ciardi, "Poets of the Inner Landscape," Nation, CLXXVII (November 14, 1963), 410.

[217]Kunitz, p. 24.

"a continuous feeling out of the structure of existence in contempt, or near contempt, of reason."[218]

When considered as a whole, Part II of Praise to the End! can be described as a series of poetic variations on a central thematic pattern of regression and progression that is exemplified by "The Lost Son" poem sequence. The six poem sequences that follow it elaborate on its central conflict between man's physical and spiritual characteristics through a protagonist who is seeking some type of mystical illumination which will allow him to order the psychological and spiritual chaos within him, a chaos intensified by his periods of insanity which threaten to destroy the self he is trying to understand.

Praise to the End! is a significant milestone in Theodore Roethke's work as a whole for both autobiographical and poetic reasons. In this volume the man and poet reject artificial forms in favor of organic ones; Roethke is trying to identify his self by exploring all areas of his living experience. William Meredith pertinently expresses the literary and personal significance of Praise to the End! as follows:

> At this point in Roethke's life , . . he performed a feat as brave and as pig-headed as The Waste Land. He seems to have trusted his poetic voice to speak for itself, to have given control of the poems to his subconscious the way a ouija-board player gives his mind to the never-mind. And this seems not to have been a desperate move, the act of a man who had run dry in a certain vein, but rather the urge of an explorer who is led on by an

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[218]Meredith, p. 45.

unfolding continent, who may die landless,
like Daniel Boone, but will have seen on
the far side of the hills.[219]

In The Lost Son and Praise to the End! Roethke concludes the early stages of his spiritual journey. In most of the poetry in The Lost Son he experimented with a system of metaphors and symbols through which he could explore the depths of his being, an exploration he undertook in a Freudian and Jungian interior. In the poetry of Praise to the End! Roethke relived numerous events and memories from his childhood in an effort to attain a sense of internal peace through a spiritual illumination. In all of the poems in these two volumes, each illumination that Roethke's protagonists have experienced has been of only temporary duration because the poet himself has not yet satisfactorily resolved his psychological and spiritual conflicts. However, in the poetry of The Far Field, Roethke finally does achieve a lasting illumination of a mystical nature, which marks the end of his spiritual journey, and, ironically, of his life as well. This posthumous volume relates the internal processes which culminate in a permanently satisfying mystical illumination for Roethke in the opening and closing developmental sequences, "North American Sequence" and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical."

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[219] Ibid.

CHAPTER III

FROM SENSUALITY AND SELFLESSNESS TO SPIRITUAL UNITY: THE END OF ROETHKE'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The Far Field is Roethke's most significant volume in terms of his spiritual journey. Although the two central sections of the book are well written, "Love Poems" and "Mixed Sequence" do not merit discussion in the context of his spiritual quest; however, "North American Sequence" and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," which respectively open and close the volume, complete the spiritual journey that Roethke began in The Lost Son. "North American Sequence" approaches unity of being from the perspective of transcending sensual desires by saturating the self in them, while "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" approaches unity from that of annihilating the senses by becoming part of the absorbent Godhead. Although the perspectives of the two sequences are fundamentally in opposition to one another, in both Roethke ultimately attains the goal he has been pursuing throughout most of his poetry: "a union of these conflicting aspects of reality, of temporal and eternal, flesh and spirit, body and soul."[1]

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[1] Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York, 1966), p. 219.

As a volume, The Far Field represents Roethke's conscious effort to perfect his earlier stylistic and thematic innovations in order to reach an emphatic and satisfactory conclusion concerning the question of man's relationship to the universe after death. The poetry written during the last ten years of Roethke's life reflects his increased preoccupation with the idea of death, and the poems in The Far Field, especially those in the first and last sequences, represent the introspective conclusions the poet reached.[2] The poetry in this last volume clearly reveals Roethke's intuitive awareness that it was to be his final one. If the documentation within the poems leaves any doubt about his conscious effort to conclude the poetical journey begun years earlier, one of Roethke's comments in conversation offers further proof of such an awareness. Ralph Mills quotes Roethke as saying "a year before his death that this /The Far Field/ might be his final book."[3]

Although the volume was actually published posthumously under the supervision of Beatrice Roethke, Roethke himself had readied the poems for publication by putting them in the basic order that he preferred. Mrs. Roethke adhered to his plan of composition as closely as possible, except for making some deletions and alterations, and except for solving the

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[2]Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Poetic Shape of Death," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, edited by Arnold Stein (Seattle, 1965), p. 109.

[3]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Roethke's Last Poems," Poetry, CV (November, 1964), 124.

problems posed by a few poems which seemed to belong in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" but which were subsequently left out of it. Nevertheless, the two key sequences under consideration were edited by Theodore Roethke, and they appear intact, exactly as he arranged them before his death.[4]

In general both "North American Sequence" and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" deal with the mystical part man plays in reality as Roethke conceived it. "North American Sequence" interprets man's mystical experience as being the major source of happiness in an otherwise depressing world. In this sequence Roethke attempts to achieve this mystical sense of internal spiritual illumination by transcending the sensual through a heightened consciousness of the external world of nature.[5]

"North American Sequence" is the poem sequence with which The Far Field is begun. It is composed of six developmental poems entitled "The Longing," "Meditation at Oyster River," "Journey to the Interior," "The Long Waters," "The Far Field," and "The Rose." From "The Longing" through "The Far Field" the series considers the difficulties Roethke encounters in his attempt to overcome the sensual, while "The Rose" depicts the mystical experience which results in the success of Roethke's spiritual effort.[6]

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[4]Malkoff, p. 172.

[5]Ibid., pp. 173-174.

[6]Theodore Roethke, The Far Field (New York, 1964), p. 9.

A number of interpretations explaining Roethke's philosophical base in "North American Sequence" have been offered. According to Hugh Staples, the poems in the sequence imply that for Roethke man must find unity by rejecting the physical and natural forms of sensuality.[7] However, Louis Martz directly contradicts Staples' interpretation. Martz says that in the sequence Roethke repudiates man's withdrawal from the realm of sensual experiences. Martz then extends his interpretation to advocate the theory that for Roethke man must find mystical unity through the creative process: "For Roethke, as for Wallace Stevens, . . . the wonder of human apprehension, the wonder of creative imagination, is enough."[8] Karl Malkoff modifies such contrasting interpretations of the sequence by suggesting that both are valid only to the extent that they help explain possible meanings. In Malkoff's approach to the philosophical meaning of "North American Sequence," the rejection of the sensual and the power of creative imagination are both significant aspects of mystical union to Roethke, but neither represents the total range of the poet's philosophical beliefs.[9]

In "North American Sequence," Roethke's general poetic techniques are very similar to those in his previous verse

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[7]Hugh Staples, "Rose in the Sea-Wind: A Reading of Theodore Roethke's North American Sequence," American Literature, VI (May, 1964), 191.

[8]Louis L. Martz, "Recent Poetry: The Elegiac Mode," Yale Review, LIV (Winter, 1965), 297.

[9]Malkoff, p. 175.

sequences, with some minor variations in perspective and theme. The protagonist in this sequence is rather clearly recognizable as Roethke himself, and Roethke sends him on an archetypal journey into the self, a journey that symbolically encompasses the landscape of the North American continent. The sequence begins in medias res; Roethke's protagonist is middle-aged when it opens, and he goes back to childhood before returning to his adult state at the end of the sequence. The theory of correspondences is again significant. Roethke's journey in the guise of his persona involves a necessary descent which corresponds to an exploration into the depths of his self, with Roethke using images which correspond to the protagonist's mental state to depict the external landscape. The correspondence is especially important because in "North American Sequence" Roethke seems to adopt the persona of the continent itself, and his poetic exploration of it represents his attempt to protect his self from non-being by using the relived past to help interpret the ominous present.[10]

"The Longing," the first poem in "North American Sequence," is an important one in terms of the whole sequence because it states Roethke's main question in its first section. The opening section depicts the materialistic stagnation of life in America through images of death, rot, and pollution, an external natural stagnation which corresponds to Roethke's

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[10]Ibid., pp. 175-176.

internal spiritual condition.[11] Roethke asks the central question of the sequence in the midst of the following external setting:

> On things asleep, no balm:
> A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
> Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish,
> petroleum,
> . . . . . .
> Agony of crucifixion on barstools.
> . . . . . .
> Lust fatigues the soul.
> How to transcend this sensual emptiness?
> (Dreams drain the spirit if we dream
> too long.)
> . . . . . .
>
> And the spirit fails to move forward,
> But shrinks into half-life, less than
> itself,
> Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
> Ready for any crevice,
> An eyeless starer.[12]

In the lines quoted above the question of the sequence is revealed: Roethke, as he is personified through his protagonist, is trying to find a way to transcend his "sensual emptiness." As the sequence progresses, Roethke comes to see the answer to this question in sensual terms; he ultimately considers "the possibility of the flesh's assuming the role of the spirit."[13] In this first section American society is depicted as dying for lack of spiritual values; the stagnation of the outer self reflects the sterility of Roethke's

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[11]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "In the Way of Becoming: Theodore Roethke's Last Poems," Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, p. 120.

[12]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 13.

[13]Hoffman, p. 110.

inner self, which is trapped by the sensuality of animal impulses. The poet's spirit has become "less than itself," a wormlike creature floundering in its own sensual decay.

In the second section Roethke utilizes the imagery of a dream and a rose to consider the possibility of transcending his present sensual state. He theorizes in the following lines:

> A body with the motion of a soul.
> What dream's enough to breathe
> in? A dark dream.
> The rose exceeds us all.[14]

In these lines Roethke reveals his hope of overcoming the dark dream, the nightmare of his sensually sterile existence, by unifying the flesh and spirit in order to provide the sensuality of the body with the spirituality of the soul. As in "The Lost Son" the rose symbolizes the means of bringing the conflicting realms of the spiritual and the physical together.[15] The second section ends with Roethke's evaluation of himself as a stalk which has the potential to become more than a mere stalk:

> To this extent I'm a stalk.
> ------How free; how all alone.
> Out of these nothings
> ------All beginnings come.[16]

In the third and final section of "The Longing" Roethke uses the first person to voice his desire to find the spiritual reality behind physical existence. Lines such as

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[14]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 14.

[15]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 121.

[16]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 14.

"I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form," and "I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of the night is still wide" reveal the poet's intention of continuing his search.[17] The first six lines of this section deal with constant motions which dispel the stagnated conditions prevalent in the two preceding sections, motions in which Roethke wishes he could participate.[18] However, the allusion to Jonah's emergence from the body of the whale reveals that journey to be an unsatisfactory one because "the mouth of the night is still wide" for Roethke.[19]

The final three lines of "The Longing" reveal Roethke's knowledge that he must undertake another journey if he is to attain the unity for which he is striving. He identifies his soul, which must explore the continent in order to find its intangible destination, with that of an Indian which must search about the happy hunting grounds for its eternal home. Roethke echoes Eliot's "East Coker," but he has a more specific approach to his search than Eliot does.[20] According to Roethke,

> Old men should be explorers?
> I'll be an Indian.
> Iroquois.[21]

"The Longing" thus introduces the main themes of the sequence, and the four poems which follow it and which precede "The Rose" deal with the ramifications of the poet's sensual

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Malkoff, p. 177.

[19] Roethke, The Far Field, p. 14.

[20] Malkoff, p. 178.

[21] Roethke, The Far Field, p. 15.

existence as well as the alternatives available to him. According to Hugh Staples, Roethke alternately utilizes water and earth imagery in the four middle poems to further consider the themes of sensual stagnation, spiritual sterility, and the unification of the physical and spiritual aspects of the poet's personality.[22]

In the next poem in the sequence, "Meditation at Oyster River," Roethke utilizes water imagery to suggest the cyclic aspect of existence. Water appears in the poem in several forms which symbolize the phenomenon of permanence in apparent change. In the third section of "Meditation at Oyster River" the poet's descent into the darkness of the water paves the way for his subsequent renewal and moment of illumination at the end of the fourth section.[23] A few significant lines from the third section read as follows:

> In this hour,
> In this heaven of knowing,
> The flesh takes on the pure poise of the
> spirit,
> . . . . . .
> I shift on my rock and I think:
> Of the first trembling of a Michigan
> brook in April,
> Over a lip of stone, the tiny rivulet;
> . . . . . .
> Or the Tittebawassee, in the time between
> winter and spring,
> When the ice melts along the edge in early
> afternoon.
> . . . . . .
> And I long for the blast of dynamite.[24]

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[22]Staples, p. 193.

[23]Malkoff, pp. 178-179.

[24]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 17.

Roethke's temporary identification with the natural world through his descent into the water of the river causes him to long for an internal explosion that will lead to his own rebirth, just as the dynamite blast causes the Tittebawassee to be reborn after the freeze of winter.[25] In Frederick J. Hoffman's words, Roethke's water imagery in "Meditation at Oyster River" actually "takes on the conventional symbolic aspects of death and the soul."[26]

The fourth section deals with the rebirth of Roethke's persona. This rebirth is accomplished through a continued use of the cyclic aspect of water as follows:

> Now in this waning light,
> I rock with the motion of morning;
> I'm the cradle of all that is,
> I'm lulled into half-sleep
> By the lapping of water.
> . . . . . .
>
> In the first of the moon,
> All's a scattering,
> A shining.[27]

In the closing lines of "Meditation at Oyster River" the poet's temporary identification with the waves results in a partial sense of spiritual illumination; he experiences a sense of light restored in the form of moonlight which shines on the waves. The poem ends on a note of hope, but Roethke's hopeful sensation is short-lived.[28]

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[25]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 123.

[26]Hoffman, p. 110.

[27]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 18.

[28]Malkoff, p. 179.

The opening lines of "Journey to the Interior" confirm the transitory nature of Roethke's minimal amount of illumination in "Meditation at Oyster River." The first section begins with a description of the difficulties with which the poet must cope in order to transcend the sensual emptiness of his existence. Roethke describes these difficulties as follows:

> In the long journey out of the self,
> There are many detours, washed-out
> interrupted raw places,
> Where the shale slides dangerously
> And the back wheels hang almost over
> the edge
> At the sudden veering, the moment of
> turning.
> . . . . . .
> Or the path narrowing
> Winding upward toward the stream with its
> sharp stones,
> . . . . . .
> Through the swamp alive with quicksand.[29]

Thus the first section brings Roethke back to the beginning of another journey, one which is made dangerous by detours along a washed-out road which runs through a swamp filled with quicksand.[30]

The second section deals with one of the detours referred to in the preceding section. Roethke relives the memory of a trip down a dusty highway, a trip which corresponds to the progress of his self in the barren interior of its sensual existence. Some of the lines which follow are particularly

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[29]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 19.

[30]Malkoff, p. 180.

important in terms of the cycle of regression and progression in Roethke's poetic journey:

> I remember how it was to drive in gravel,
> . . . . . .
> Grinding up and over the narrow road,
> spitting and roaring.
> A chance? Perhaps. But the road was a
> part of me, and its ditches . . . .
> I rise and fall, and time folds
> Into a long moment;
> And I hear the lichen speak,
> And the ivy advance with its white
> lizard feet--
> On the shimmering road,
> On the dusty detour.[31]

Although the detour represents a regression because it moves away from the water of the sea, it results in an awareness on the poet's part of what eternity is. Roethke experiences a sense of the sea's eternal timelessness in the midst of the dusty landscape of the interior. Symbolically the poet has escaped the sterility of his present adult state by returning to the past in this meaningful memory from his earlier youth.[32]

In the next section Roethke returns to the present, where he is gazing at a flower growing at the edge of the river. Here Roethke considers the separate realms of the temporal and the eternal:

> I see the flower of all water, above
> and below me, the never receding,
> Moving, unmoving in a parched land,
> white in the moonlight:
> The soul at a still-stand,
> At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,
> Petals and reflections of petals mixed
> on the surface of a glassy pool,

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[31]Roethke, The Far Field, pp. 19-20.

[32]Malkoff, pp. 180-181.

> And the waves flattening out when the
> fishermen drag their nets over the stones.
> . . . . . .
> As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is
> morning,
> I know this change:
> On one side of silence there is no smile;
> But when I breathe with the birds,
> The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of
> blessing,
> And the dead begin from their dark to sing in
> my sleep.[33]

Here Roethke begins by contemplating the destruction of the self as the soul standing still and moving neither forward nor backward. As the section progresses, he suddenly becomes aware that he is in danger of losing his self to death; nevertheless, the closing lines reveal his faith in the possibility of transcending the eternal annihilation of the self in death as he hears the dead singing to him in his sleep. The journey into the interior has consequently been helpful to the poet because he is now aware of death as a beneficial, not just a detrimental, aspect of his spiritual development. Those who have already died become guides for Roethke; they speak to him from their darkness, aiding him in his search for light.[34]

Although "Journey to the Interior" ends on a regressive note, it does not close on a note of total despair. Roethke depicts himself as a blind man, but even the blind man knows that the light of morning is there, whether or not he can apprehend it through his physical senses. The conclusion of the poem implies that physical weakness does not presuppose

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[33]Roethke, The Far Field, pp. 20-21.

[34]Malkoff, p. 181.

spiritual darkness, and so the regression has been somewhat helpful in Roethke's forward movement toward his goal.

The following poem, "The Long Waters," begins with the rejection of the death wish by the poet's self. In this poem Roethke returns to the sea from the implied conclusions reached in the dusty interior, and he immediately states his resolve to withstand the temptation to annihilate his inner consciousness. In lines near the beginning of the first section of the poem, Roethke says:

> Therefore I reject the world of the dog
> Though he hear a note higher than C
> And the thrush stopped in the middle of
> his song.
>
> And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,
> My desire for the peaks, the black ravines,
> the rolling mists
> Changing with every twist of wind.
> The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,
> Where light is stone.
> I return where fire has been,
> . . . . . .
> Where the fresh and salt waters meet,
> And the sea winds move through the pine
> trees,
> A country of bays and inlets, and small
> streams flowing seaward.[35]

In these lines Roethke commits himself to search for a solution that will allow him to get outside of the sensual subjectivity of his self without isolating it from the physical realities of which it is an integral part. Consequently the poet now finds himself no longer in the barrenness of the interior, but at the point where the temporal of flowing streams and the eternal of the sea, into which they flow, intersect.

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[35]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 22.

Roethke must now cope with another difficulty: he has rejected the death wish, the wish for annihilation of the self, but his rejection forces him to face the idea of death itself and to deal with it accordingly.[36]

At the beginning of the second section Roethke invokes Mnetha to protect him from the fluidity of the temporal and the eternal, from the threat of non-being posed by death. Mnetha appears in Blake's Tiriel as Har's mother, a nurse closely connected with nature, and apparently she functions here in much the same way for Roethke.[37]

The third section of the poem relates another effort by Roethke to unite time and eternity. He continues to use the imagery of streams flowing into the sea, imagery which was established at the end of the first section:

> I have come here without courting silence,
> Blessed by the lips of a low wind,
> To a rich desolation of wind and water,
> To a landlocked bay, where the salt
> water is freshened
> By small streams running down under fallen
> fir trees.[38]

Roethke's problem at this stage in the sequence now becomes finding a way to make the temporal and the eternal intersect within him as they do at the point where fresh and salt waters are fused.[39]

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[36]Malkoff, pp. 181-182.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 23.

[39]Malkoff, p. 183.

Although it is short, the fourth section fulfills an important function in the context of the partial resolution that is to come in the fifth section. The section centers around a stone which breaks the eddying current, making the waters a "vulnerable place."[40] This interruption of the fusion of fresh and sea water seemingly symbolizes Roethke's escape from the threats of the flux of time, preparing the way for the measure of contact with eternity to be made in the fifth and final section,[41] a contact which requires "the wreckage of waters" described before it can occur.[42]

The fifth and final section of "The Long Waters" describes Roethke's tenuous contact with eternity through the partial immersion of his self in the waves where the temporal of the fresh water and the eternal of the sea intersect.[43] The last stanza sums up his experience of contact:

> I, who came back from the depths laughing
> too loudly,
> Became another thing;
> My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom
> of the waves;
> I lose and find myself in the long water;
> I am gathered together once more;
> I embrace the world.[44]

Again Roethke has made some progress in his spiritual journey through a regression into the depths of his consciousness.

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[40]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 24.

[41]Malkoff, p. 183.

[42]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 24.

[43]Malkoff, p. 183.

[44]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 24.

The immersion of his self beneath the fused waters of time and eternity has made possible the partial union with eternity; nevertheless, the union is not a mystical one because he has not really faced the loss of self through death.[45] This stanza depicts the cycle of psychic fragmentation and reunification that he experiences through his observation of it in the details of the natural world. However, the act of embracing the world mentioned in the last line does not signify an all-encompassing embrace. Roethke does not embrace the external universe to the extent that universal oneness takes precedence over his individual being.[46]

"The Long Waters" closes on a note that is progressive in that Roethke has risked the loss of his self in the flux of time and eternity. However, he has not yet confronted the ultimate absorption of his inner being into the consciousness of God after his death.

"The Far Field" is a significant poem in terms of the final resolution reached in the last poem in "North American Sequence." The field is again the place of revelation, as it was in "Unfold! Unfold!" in Praise to the End!. In "The Far Field" Roethke is able to stand outside of his self and view its relationship to time and eternity without being afraid of the possible loss of self in death.[47] In the field Roethke

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[45]Malkoff, p. 184.

[46]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Theodore Roethke," Contemporary American Poetry (New York, 1965), p. 70.

[47]Malkoff, p. 185.

states that he "learned not to fear infinity."[48] In the third section of the poem he states that he has discovered a principle of existence that is common to both the human soul and the universe:

> I have come to a still, but not a deep
> center,
> A point outside the glistening current;
> My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
> At the irregular stones, iridescent sand
> grains,
> My mind moves in more than one place,
> In a country half-land, half-water.[49]

Roethke's reference to "a still, but not a deep center" makes possible a number of valid interpretations. If the reference is considered in light of Eliot's "still point of the turning world," Roethke may be referring to the point in a mystical experience where time and eternity meet.[50] However, Louis Martz interprets Roethke's reference to a still center as Roethke's way of coping with the sensual emptiness of life. In his interpretation Martz says that "the still center lies in the sensitive, observant, imaginative mind, responding affectionately to the flow of physical life."[51] Still another interpretation is offered by Karl Malkoff, who says that "this point outside the glittering current, the flux of life, may represent the existential ec-stasis, man's standing out from his self, his full realization of his being."[52]

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[48]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 26. [49]Ibid., p. 27.

[50]Malkoff, p. 185. [51]Martz, p. 296. [52]Malkoff, p. 185.

Although no absolute interpretation of these lines can be made, the seeming ambiguity of their esthetic, existential, and religious connotations can be clarified to some extent by Roethke's own comments about contemporary poetry. According to Roethke modern poetry must deal with four main themes: the complex chaos of life, the stablishment of one's self in the midst of such chaos, the nature of creativity, and the nature of God.[53] The first theme states Roethke's fundamental evaluation of reality, and the three themes which follow the first one represent his ways of reacting to reality as he perceives it. Thus the still center in the third section represents the fusion of Roethke's shifting emphasis from the psychological to the religious approach toward the problems of existence. Consequently it is not crucial to find an absolute meaning for this section, because its very ambiguity reflects the esthetic, existential, and religious approaches that Roethke is including in his effort to cope with the complexity of modern life. For Roethke, "beauty, being and God" are vitally important considerations in all of The Far Field, as well as in the poem "The Far Field."[54]

The fifth and final section of the poem depicts the recognition by the self of its universality. Roethke consciously faces the reality of the dual existence of his self as both an individual entity within him and also as an

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[53]Theodore Roethke, "On Identity," On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1965), p. 19.

[54]Malkoff, p. 186.

archetypal part of the universal human psyche.[55] The closing stanza of "The Far Field" reveals Roethke's conception of the mystic universality of human existence:

> All finite things reveal infinitude:
> . . . . . .
> The pure serene of memory in one man,--
> A ripple widening from a single stone
> Winding around the waters of the world.[56]

This poem ends on a note of implied progression. Roethke has glimpsed eternity while he is still a part of time. At this point in the sequence Roethke senses that although his self may continue to exist after his physical death, it will not do so as a separate entity, but will instead become part of the universal human unconscious. The two closing lines of the poem compare the individual human self to a single ripple which ultimately blends into the waters of the collective unconscious of all humanity. However, this correspondence between the soul and an object in the natural world does not resolve the conflict of the temporal body and the eternal soul. In the next poem Roethke attempts to deal with the spiritual existence of his soul more directly, again utilizing the theory of correspondences.[57]

"The Rose" is the poem which concludes "North American Sequence," and in it Roethke arrives at a viable, though not an optimum, conclusion about the relationship of the self to time and eternity. He moves from an awareness of

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Roethke, The Far Field, p. 28.

[57] Malkoff, p. 187.

the creation of light by death to a union of the temporal and the eternal as symbolized by the sea-rose in the first two sections. He then pauses to praise the American continent in the third section before he experiences the sense of self-revelation through the existence of the rose in the fourth and final section.[58]

In the first section of the poem, Roethke successfully steps outside of himself and is able to comprehend the cyclic aspect of death and birth which makes possible his subsequent resolution in the second section of the conflict between time and eternity. Several lines in the last stanza of the first section indicate Roethke's process of comprehension:

> I sway outside myself
> Into the darkening currents,
> Into the small spillage of
> driftwood,
> The waters swirling past the
> tiny headlands.
> Was it here I wore a crown of
> birds for a moment,
> While on a far point of the rocks
> The light heightened,
> And below, in a mist out of
> nowhere,
> The first rain gathered?[59]

As before, Roethke's spiritual illumination is connected with the physical aspect of natural light; as the day dawns, he observes the mist rising from the sea, mist which will eventually descend to earth as rain to revitalize the rivers. From this natural process Roethke realizes that in the cycle

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[58] Ibid., pp. 187-188. [59] Roethke, The Far Field, pp. 29-30

of nature the seeming finality of death becomes the creation of life, a realization which leads to his comprehension of the eternal through the temporal in the next section of the poem.[60]

The second section contains a description of the rose, "this rose in the sea wind" which "Stays in its true place,/ Flowering out of the dark."[61] Through a heightened sense of consciousness, Roethke perceives his struggle for psychic survival in terms of that of the rose for physical survivial. By again utilizing the theory of correspondences, he compares the similar efforts of the self and the rose to transcend the difficulties of a reality in which they both exist: the self must transcend the darkness of its sensuality in order to experience the light of spirituality, and the rose must rise above the muck and mire of the darkness of time in order to bathe in the light of eternity at the edge of the sea.[62] As Roethke contemplates the rose in the wind of the sea, his thoughts drift back to the roses in the greenhouses of his childhood world:

> And I think of roses, roses,
> White and red, in the wide six-hundred-
> foot greenhouses,
> And my father standing astride the cement
> benches,
> Lifting me high over the four-foot stems,
> And how those flowerheads seemed to flow
> toward me, to beckon me, a child,
> out of myself.

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[60]Malkoff, p. 187. [61]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 30.

[62]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 125.

What need for heaven, then,
With that man and those roses?[63]

This final stanza in the second section links the roses of Roethke's childhood past to the sea rose of his adult present. Through such a relationship of the two worlds, Roethke gradually realizes that the eternal can be reached only through the temporal, just as knowledge of adult existence can be reached only by means of exploring childhood and racial memory. In the last two lines of this section Roethke concludes that the issue of afterlife is irrelevant, because eternity can be perceived while he is within time.[64]

In the fourth and final section of "The Rose" Roethke satisfactorily resolves the conflict between the temporal and the eternal as it relates to his inner being. Lines from the two closing stanzas indicate the nature of his resolution as follows:

Near this rose, in this grave of sun-
parched, wind-warped madronas,
Among the half-dead trees, I came upon
the true ease of myself,
As if another man appeared out of the
depths of my being,
And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing,
A something wholly other,
. . . . . .
And I rejoiced in being what I was.

And in this rose, this rose in the
sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of
light,

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[63]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 30. [64]Malkoff, p. 188.

Gathering to itself sound and silence--
Mine and the sea-wind's.[65]

Roethke thus becomes aware of the reality of his own existence by perceiving it in that of the rose through a consideration of their common relationship to eternity while living in time. He has achieved this sense of the eternal within the temporal by means of a heightened consciousness which allows him to perceive the correspondence between his self and the natural world as it is embodied in the rose.[66] Roethke has found the nature of his own being as it relates to the cycle of "becoming and perishing." "The Rose" ends with a description of the status of Roethke's existence in terms of that of the rose, "Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light."

By becoming aware of the nature of his self through a heightened awareness of nature in the existence of the rose, Roethke has been able to avoid the danger of non-being which was present in the initial poems of the sequence such as "Journey to the Interior" and "The Long Waters." He has been able to experience a sense of spiritual illumination while retaining the individuality of the self as it faced the possibility of becoming selfless through mystical union.[67] Even though Roethke experiences a sense of union in "North American Sequence," the union is somewhat incomplete because it has taken place through a correspondence with the natural world, rather than through a direct mystical confrontation of eternal unity.

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[65]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 32.

[66]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 126.

[67]Ibid.

However, "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" deals with the prospect of selflessness through unity in more human terms.

"Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" interprets a man's mystical experience as a terrifying prospect because mystical union connotes selflessness, or non-being, a possibility which terrifies Theodore Roethke. He finds the strength to face such a possibility in nature, a source of support which enables him to confront the implications of mystical union in the poems of the sequence,[68] but the role of nature is not as pervasive in this sequence as it was in "North American Sequence."

Roethke explains the frightening aspect of mystical union, or oneness as he often refers to it, in terms of its relationship to the process of individuation. Although Roethke indicates that he is aware of the dangers inherent in mystical union, he also acknowledges the ultimate benefit of a sense of spiritual peace and inner unity that can be obtained through such a union. The following comments about mystical union are selected from an essay which he wrote in 1963:

> It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of 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, but either can be an occasion for gratitude.

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[68]Malkoff, pp. 173-174.

> . . . the "oneness" is, of course, the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: 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 innocency.
> . . . . . .
> . . . I can't claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. No, God for me still remains someone to be duelled with: that is, perhaps my error, my sin of pride. But the oneness, yes!
> . . . . . .
> For there <u>is</u> 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 . . . in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul . . . .[69]

"Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" is the developmental poem sequence which concludes <u>The Far Field</u>. It is composed of one dozen selections. "In a Dark Time" is the key poem which opens the sequence by describing Roethke's mystical experience, and the remaining eleven poems are various commentaries on the experience which occurs in "In a Dark Time."[70]

In this sequence Roethke begins by attempting to transcend the sensual and to attain a sense of spiritual peace and illumination through a mystical union. As the sequence progresses, he experiences such a union by leaping directly into the depths of his being, and this jump into his inner self implies elements of mystical oneness which are simultaneously terrifying and comforting.[71]

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[69]Roethke, "On Identity," pp. 25-27.

[70]Malkoff, p. 206. [71]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 174.

The opening poem, "In a Dark Time," is the most important poem in the sequence because it is a direct representation of Roethke's mystical experience and is therefore most significant in a consideration of the ultimate end of his spiritual journey. Consequently this single poem reflects the total meaning of the sequence, a meaning which is basically metaphysical. Three of the poems which follow it, "Infirmity," "The Decision," and "Once More, the Round," are also relevant because they are representative of Roethke's introspective analysis of the implications of the mystical experience to which they refer. Thus the importance of "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" in terms of Roethke's spiritual journey can be based on the implicit and explicit meanings drawn from these four poems.[72]

"In a Dark Time" is composed of four lyric stanzas. The first stanza opens the poem with a description of the darkness of spiritual isolation. The words of the stanza indicate the type of conflict that Roethke must try to resolve:[73]

> 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.[74]

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[72] Ibid., p. 207.

[73] Stanley Kunitz, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, edited by Antony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), p. 42.

[74] Roethke, The Far Field, p. 79.

These lines depict Roethke's feeling of spiritual desolation through images of night in the dark woods, symbols which usually indicate a state of spiritual despair and a feeling of anxiety in his poetry.[75]

Apparently the feeling of spiritual aloneness is a typical part of mystical perception, and as such it can be discussed relevantly in both religious and philosophical terms. St. John of the Cross describes the "dark night of the soul" as a tortured feeling within a soul which thinks "that God has abandoned it . . . that He cast it away into darkness as an abominable thing." According to St. John, this sense of desolation is intensified by the overwhelming finality of being forever without God: "The shadow of death and the pains and torments of hell are most acutely felt, that is, the sense of being without God . . . . All this and even more the soul feels now, for a fearful apprehension has come upon it that thus it will be with it for ever."[76] Dr. Rollo May describes such a feeling of aloneness in terms of psychology and philosophy. May relates the mystical sense of spiritual desolation to the subjective awareness on the part of an individual when he perceives "that his existence can become destroyed, . . . that he can become nothing." For Theodore Roethke, both the religious and philosophical aspects of his anxiety are significant in conjunction with his spiritual quest because both, in May's words, confront him with "the threat of imminent non-being."[77]

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[75]Malkoff, p. 207. [76]Kunitz, p. 42. [77]Ibid.

This first stanza also reflects the Jungian cycle of regression and progression which is essential to Roethke's spiritual progress. Again he must descend into the depths of his self in order to emerge into the light of spiritual unity.[78] According to Stanley Kunitz, this stanza sets the stage for "the archetypal journey from darkness into light, from blindness into vision, from death into life."[79] The poet meets his own death as it is personified in his "shadow," and this vision of death threatens his self with the state of non-being which becomes the subject of the second stanza.[80] Roethke himself explains the significance of his vision of death in these words: "I meet my shadow, my double, my Other, usually tied to me, my reminder that I am going to die, in the 'deepening shade'--and surely 'shade' suggests Hades, if not hell."[81]

The first stanza concludes with Roethke's plea for help in transcending his human condition. Ironically depicting himself as "A lord of nature," Roethke seemingly invokes the aid of the natural world, but his cry for help from nature contains implications of assistance from the even deeper prehuman resources within the unconscious. Roethke begins his journey into self amid the benevolent imagery of the

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[78]Malkoff, p. 79.

[79]Kunitz, p. 42.

[80]Malkoff, p. 207.

[81]Theodore Roethke, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 50.

world of nature, but in the next stanza he faces the part of his self which is uniquely human and which can only be coped with in human terms.[82]

In the second stanza Roethke encounters his insanity within the depths of his self, and he realizes that he is on the verge of either complete annihilation or an intensified struggle toward inner unity.[83] He describes his experience as follows:

> 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 a winding path? The edge is what I have.[84]

Roethke's visionary self confronts the horror of his insanity, and the "place among the rocks" becomes both a negative Golgotha of suffering and also a positive indication of some destination to come, be it a "cave" or a "winding path."[85] The word "cave" connotes the physical and psychological womb, and the womb image at this point probably represents the collective unconscious from which all human consciousness springs.[86] In contrast, the "winding path" implies the continuation of his spiritual journey as his spiritual fate is unfolded step by step.[87]

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[82] Malkoff, p. 207.

[83] Kunitz, p. 43.

[84] Roethke, The Far Field, p. 79.

[85] Kunitz, p. 43.

[86] Malkoff, p. 208.

[87] Kunitz, p. 44.

The stanza concludes with the poet's answer to the question of "cave" or "winding path," and his answer is an ambiguous one at this stage in the poem. All Roethke is certain of is that he stands on the verge of making a choice between one alternative or the other. Symbolically he has placed himself on the edge of an abyss within which the self faces absorption into the undifferentiated selflessness of the universe.[88] Thus by setting up his choices in terms of the images of "cave" and "winding path," he has left himself on the symbolic edge of a cliff with only two possible alternatives. The "cave" represents the soul trapped within its sensual bonds, while the "winding path" represents the dark and arduous journey toward a spiritual life, a journey involving discipline, prayer, and revelation. Consequently at the end of this stanza, the only conceivable alternatives for Roethke are the disaster of absorption into the selflessness of universal timelessness, or the miracle of a spiritual illumination which will make his traumatic venture to the edge of the abyss of eternity worth while.[89]

The third stanza begins with a description of Roethke's mystical experience as he approaches the moment of union between the tangible and intangible worlds within him, a union which occurs at the end of the stanza.[90] His

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[88]Malkoff, p. 208.

[89]Kunitz, p. 44.

[90]Malkoff, p. 208.

experience proceeds from the innumerable correspondences in the first lines to the moment of illumination in the last lines:

> 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.[91]

The "steady storm of correspondences" between Roethke's envisioned self and the world of nature leads Roethke to the climax of the poem, to "natural shapes blazing unnatural light." The references to birds, moon, day and night, all these elements of nature, indicate a final tremendous effort by Roethke to learn the natural secrets of life in order "to find out what he is." At the climactic moment, he goes beyond time to the brink of eternity, "where there are no divisions between night and day, reason and unreason, ecstasy and despair."[92] Roethke at last transcends his sensuality and experiences spiritual illumination as he sees the shapes of the natural world blazing in the light which is supernatural. In this manner he goes beyond the self and is able to perceive the unity inherent in universal existence. In Roethke's own words: "The time sense is lost; the natural self dies in the blaze of the super-natural."[93]

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[91]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 79. [92]Kunitz, pp. 45-46.

[93]Roethke, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" p. 52.

The third stanza ends on an ambiguous note. Roethke has transcended his sensuality only to face the terrifying prospect of non-being which is possible through complete union with the timeless universal whole.[94] Nevertheless, hope for the self is still present in his discovery of what he really is, a discovery that must be preceded by the "Death of the self" as it passes through the dark night of the soul.[95]

The fourth and final stanza of "In a Dark Time" depicts the ultimate resolution of the conflict between Roethke's desire for spiritual illumination to unify his being and his fear of non-being through absorption into the overwhelming oneness of the universe. The fourth stanza begins with a continued consideration of the light referred to in the third, and ends with Roethke's ultimate mystical unification:

> 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.[96]

As the darkness of Roethke's conflict thickens, he asks in near panic "Which I is I?." He is frightened by the thought of having no identity once he is united with the eternal, and now his fear of non-being after this union, not his sensuality, prevents a complete and meaningful union from occurring.[97]

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[94]Malkoff, p. 208.

[95]Babette Deutsch, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 39.

[96]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 79.

[97]Kunitz, p. 47.

The last three lines are crucially significant in terms of Roethke's ultimate spiritual resolution at the end of the poem. The reference to the "fallen man" has more than one possible meaning. The phrase does not mean that he has capitulated to the psychic death wish and retreated into the cave of sensuality; instead, the phrase seems to indicate his positive recognition of the fear which is preventing meaningful union from occurring.[98] Consequently he is able to overcome the fear of non-being, and this conscious victory over a strong part of his self in effect redeems him so that the union implied in the next two lines can take place.[99] Of course, the phrase "a fallen man" could be a reference to the lost son motif of earlier poems, implying either the spiritual prodigal or the physical son of the dead Otto Roethke. Whichever son is intended by Roethke in this phrase, the conclusion he reaches applies equally to either progeny: his self must rise above its deprived state and establish a meaningful existence in spite of the absence of its spiritual and physical fathers.[100]

The final couplet of "In a Dark Time" describes the process of Roethke's mystical union as the human mind and God become a part of one another yet remain essentially separate. The last line of the poem not only describes his mystical union with God, but also underscores his struggle to retain his

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[98]Malkoff, p. 208.

[99]Kunitz, p. 47.

[100]Hoffman, p. 113.

individuality in the face of the awesome oneness of God. The poem closes on a note of unity but not of absorption. Roethke's self is one with God, yet not completely absorbed into the selflessness of Him. In other words, Roethke seems to have found spiritual illumination through mystical union without losing his psychic individuality.[101] In Kunitz' words, Roethke's mystical experience leaves him as a man who has "found divinity in himself," and is free to take his chances in time and eternity.[102] Roethke himself is even more specific in his comments on the meanings within the last line of the poem. This is his interpretation of these words:

> . . . the one not merely makes his peace with God . . . he transcends God; he becomes the Godhead itself, not only the veritable creator of the universe but the creator of the revealed God. This is no jump for the timid, no flick from the occult, no moment in the rose garden. Instead it is a cry from the mire, and may be the devil's own.
>
> But we are not done with the line. The protagonist <u>one</u> and/or the Godhead are "free" in the "tearing wind"--free to be buffeted by their own creation. God himself, in his most supreme manifestation, risks being maimed, if not destroyed.[103]

Although the last stanza of "In a Dark Time" implies that a satisfactory illumination of a spiritual nature has taken place, the preceding stanzas have intimated that mystical union is a formidable experience which can result in the loss of psychic individuality within the collective oneness of the eternal God. Consequently the remaining eleven poems deal

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[101]Malkoff, pp. 209-210. [102]Kunitz, p. 47.

[103]Roethke, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" p. 53.

with his examination of the implications and ramifications of his experience in retrospect, an examination which ultimately arrives at the conclusion implied in the poem's closing couplet: through mystical union Roethke can transcend the sensual and unite himself with the eternal without sacrificing his spiritual identity to the universality of divine unity.[104] According to John Crowe Ransom, the final phrase, "free in the tearing wind," is the key to interpreting the poem as the culmination of Roethke's spiritual quest. In Ransom's words, "It is as if the suffering hero had been set free, and a storm from heaven had come to signalize the happy event, with a tearing but cleansing wind to sweep all the foolishness of the mind away."[105] Another comment on the implied spiritual victory won by Roethke in "In a Dark Time" comes from Babette Deutsch, who says that the "poem is the story of a purgation. One of its virtues is that it purges the reader, alike by what it says and what it intimates."[106]

One of the most significant poems following "In a Dark Time" is entitled "Infirmity." This poem is important because of its thematic centrality in the progress of the sequence. Thematically "Infirmity" functions in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" as did "The Lost Son" in Part II of Praise to the End! by summarizing the various themes considered

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[104]Malkoff, p. 211.

[105]John Crowe Ransom, "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, p. 35.

[106]Deutsch, p. 40.

throughout the metaphysical sequence. The poem deals with Roethke's desire to be both himself and more than himself, with the intensified spirituality that physical death makes possible, with the subsequent death and rebirth of self that such a spiritual transformation necessitates, and finally with Roethke's realization that the soul's eternal life is made possible by the body's temporal death.[107]

"The Decision," another important poem in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," immediately follows "Infirmity," and as the poem in the exact center of the sequence it summarizes the ideas of the sequence in general and those of "Infirmity" in particular. The second and final stanza is especially significant because it is concerned with the threatened loss of self waiting in eternity.[108] The stanza reads as follows:

> Rising or falling's all one discipline!
> The line on my horizon's growing thin!
> Which is the way? I cry to the dread
> black,
> The shifting shade, the cinders at my
> back.
> Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go,
> As a man turns to face on-coming snow.[109]

The central idea in this stanza is Roethke's vacillation between continuing his spiritual journey, even though he faces the threat of ultimate non-being, and retreating into the superficial reality of a strictly sensual existence. The stanza progresses from Roethke's fear of the "dread black" of

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[107]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," pp. 131-133.

[108]Malkoff, p. 215. [109]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 88.

spiritual nothingness to his decision in favor of moving toward union. "The Decision" is the turning point in the sequence because in this poem Roethke commits himself to a confrontation between the individuality of his self and the selflessness of the universal whole. The poem ends with Roethke's expression of his determination to risk the absorption of his being in the non-being of eternal oneness by means of a metaphor in which a man blindly trudges forward in the blowing snow.[110]

The final poem in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" is entitled "Once More, the Round." This piece concludes the sequence with Roethke's participation in a cosmic dance that is celebrating his sense of spiritual awakening implied in the last stanza of "In a Dark Time." In "Once More, the Round" Roethke more concretely affirms the intimated conclusions in the opening poem of the sequence. This last poem again asks and answers the metaphorical question of cave versus winding path, this time using the imagery of pebble versus pond.[111] In the first stanza Roethke poses the query as follows:

> What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
> What can be known? The Unknown.
> My true self runs toward a Hill
> More! O More! visible.[112]

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[110]Malkoff, pp. 215-216.

[111]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," pp. 131-134.

[112]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 95.

In the above lines he has discovered his "true self," the real "I" whose existence was confusing to him in "In a Dark Time," and this new self is ready to encounter the spirituality of eternity while existing in the sensuality of time. Since unity of being has been achieved symbolically in terms of the hill which is becoming more and more visible to him, Roethke is able to rejoice in a mystical union which has not deprived him of his spiritual identity.[113]

In the two closing stanzas of "Once More, the Round," Roethke celebrates his spiritual existence in terms of a mystical dance in which elements of both the natural and supernatural worlds take part:

> 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.[114]

In these final stanzas, Roethke expresses his apprehension of God in terms of both time and eternity: the spiritual lives in the physical, and the physical lives in the spiritual. Roethke's mystical union with God in which "everything comes to one" does not separate his physical nature from his spiritual one. Instead, his experience unites the dual physical and spiritual aspects of his being so that his spirit

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[113]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 135.

[114]Roethke, The Far Field, p. 95.

is able to transcend its sensual environment.[115] Thus for Theodore Roethke in this culminating phase of his journey out of the self, God is evident in both spiritual and physical manifestations. Roethke voices his belief that God exists in the "lowest forms of life" such as snails and worms, as well as in the more elevated realms of religion or philosophy.[116] Ralph Mills says that Roethke's spiritual journey "ends poetically in that inclusive and joyous representation of Divine unity."[117] The word "inclusive" in Mills's summation of "Once More, the Round" is also the key aspect of Roethke's mystical union. Roethke's resolution is inclusive, not exclusive; he includes the oneness of God without excluding the oneness of self, thereby preserving the spiritual identity that he has been fighting so desperately to establish in the face of the ultimate non-being of insanity or the eternal wholeness of the Godhead. Consequently Roethke is able to cope satisfactorily with the realities of time as well as to encounter confidently the possibilities of eternity: he is able to "dance on," "free in the tearing wind."

"Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" is successful in terms of Roethke's ultimate resolution of the conflict within him between the physical and the spiritual as they relate to

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[115]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 135.

[116]Roethke, "On Identity," p. 27.

[117]Mills, "In the Way of Becoming," p. 135.

time and eternity. In this sequence Roethke has reached the end of his spiritual travels, and has found the peaceful unification of self for which he has been searching since the poems in The Lost Son. The success of "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" can be evaluated in terms of the conclusions intimated in its opening poem, "In a Dark Time," and that implied success becomes more concretely apparent in the poems which follow the initial poem, especially in "Infirmity," "The Decision," and "Once More, the Round." Frederick J. Hoffman aptly sums up the importance of the sequence in light of Roethke's spritual journey as follows:

> "In a Dark Time" stands as a genuine resolution of the mazes caused by life and the problems created by the expectation of death. Roethke's death, seen in light of this mort accomplie, most properly sets the seal to his life, in terms of imaginative brilliance and moral courage which dominate and direct his poetry.[118]

"Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" thus explicates the culminating stage in the lengthy metamorphosis of self that Roethke has been undergoing continually in his poetry. His spiritual journey is ended at last with the mystical uniting of his human self and the Divine self. Roethke's self is not transformed into a selfless part of the eternal whole, however; it retains its identity while mingling in the unity of God's oneness.[119]

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[118]Hoffman, p. 119.

[119]Mills, "Theodore Roethke," p. 70.

When considered in its totality, The Far Field summarizes the various aspects of Roethke's spiritual quest and reveals the ultimate outcome of that quest, particularly in the opening and closing sequences, "North American Sequence" and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical." In "North American Sequence" Roethke succeeds in overcoming the limitations of sensuality by using it to attain a sense of eternity while still existing in time. His spiritual journey in "North American Sequence" occurs in terms of physical places and experiences, and his internal mystical illumination is achieved at the end of the sequence through a heightened consciousness of the sensual aspects of the external world as they are embodied in the rose growing at the point where the sea and fresh waters meet. In this sequence Roethke thus achieves a successful union of flesh and spirit by utilizing the reality of spiritual existence, while avoiding the threatened loss of individuality which a complete mystical union implies. Although a sense of union is experienced by Roethke in "North American Sequence," it is incomplete because the exploration of his inner self occurs in terms of an awareness that is too dependent on the external world of physical nature. However, mystical union is ultimately achieved in a complete sense in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" because in that sequence Roethke searches for union from within the innermost depths of his being. In "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" Roethke's predominating

concern is the preservation of his psychic individuality. "In a Dark Time" most directly expresses his recognition of that concern as paramount in experiencing meaningful mystical union with God in the eternal universe, and the poems which follow it relate his subsequent evaluation of such a union. Roethke's experience at the conclusion of the poem "In a Dark Time" and at the end of the sequence as a whole is a satisfying one to him because mystical union resolves the conflict between the physical and spiritual aspects of his nature. Through mystical union he is able to transcend the sensuality that has threatened his inner being, and yet this same union does not deprive him of the spiritual identity for which he has been striving throughout his spiritual journey. Ironically, Theodore Roethke found that unity of being in a far field that turned out to be his farthest field. Mystically it might be said that when the lost son found the way back to his fathers through the maze of his self, he followed it and joined them at last.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Theodore Roethke's poetry must be interpreted in light of his life if any interpretation is to be meaningful. The sense of psychological guilt and spiritual alienation that began in childhood after his father's death was intensified in early adulthood by his struggles with periodic insanity. Consequently, by the time he reached middle age, Theodore Roethke was embroiled in an internal conflict that had been developing over a number of years, and the ordering of this inner chaos became the primary goal in his life, a goal which he sought through the introspection within his poetry.

The greenhouse world in which Roethke spent many of his childhood hours with his father became one of the central aspects of his poetry. This environment serves as a source of symbolism and concrete detail. Throughout most of the poems in The Lost Son and Praise to the End!, the greenhouse is used to symbolize the womb, and this womb image comes to represent both security and danger to the poet's self. In addition to its symbolic function, the greenhouse provides him with the descriptive details and images which he utilizes in expressing the theory of correspondences.

After the rather intellectual verses of Open House, Roethke's poems become increasingly subjective and autobiographical in nature. Between the developmental sequences in The Lost Son and those in The Far Field, Roethke's poetry reveals his various attempts to unify the fragmentation of his personality that was caused by the combined effects of his psychological guilt, spiritual apprehension, and periodic spells of mental illness. Even though many of the introspective analyses in his poems take place in the guise of a persona, his poetry as a whole can be validly considered in terms of the phases of the spiritual journey which he undertook in order to find himself, to find the real Theodore Roethke whose being was scattered by traumatic events in his childhood and early adulthood.

The poetry in The Lost Son is significant in the progress of his spiritual journey. The poems in Parts I, II, and III of this volume represent his experimentation with the theory of correspondences, the theory of regression into and progression out of the collective unconscious, the memories of childhood, the greenhouse imagery, and developmental sequences. The cumulative implementation of these innovations is evident in "The Lost Son" sequence, which is more relevant when considered in connection with Part II of Praise to the End! instead of with Part IV of The Lost Son.

In Praise to the End! Roethke further implements the themes and techniques with which he experimented in The Lost

Son. The basic difference in the two divisions of this volume is the point of view utilized. In Part I he emphasizes the basic psychological formation of the individual from the child's point of view; in Part II he is concerned with the ramifications of the psychological and, ultimately, spiritual development of the individual from the adult's perspective. "The Lost Son" sequence in Part II is particularly significant because it clarifies the basis for Roethke's feeling of spiritual desolation. As a child he confused the identity of his earthly father with that of God, and when Otto Roethke "deserted" him, God did as well. Praise to the End! is thus important for both autobiographical and poetic reasons, because in this volume he begins trying to identify the self by exploring all areas of his living experience.

The spiritual journey in Roethke's poem sequences usually adheres to a typical pattern. He begins by regressing into the darkness of the preconscious, where he re-experiences the period of the self's first existence. He then progresses to the memories of his childhood. Through these memories he again experiences the pangs of sexual guilt and the feeling of spiritual loneliness, mental reactions which were apparently caused by his father's death. At this point Roethke often confronts his insanity, and the dangers threatening his self become more and more intense. The sequences generally end with a sensation of spiritual illumination that occurs in a natural setting in which Roethke experiences a feeling of

peaceful inner unity through a reconciliation or identification with some element in the world of nature; however, such feelings of unity are transitory, and Roethke soon regresses again into his prenatal unconscious, from which he must once more try to emerge into the light of spiritual illumination.

The Lost Son and Praise to the End! represent the conclusion of the initial phases of Theodore Roethke's spiritual journey. In most of the poetry in the former volume, he experiments with a system of imagery and symbols to be used in the Freudian and Jungian exploration of his inner being. In the latter volume he combines previous techniques and themes in an effort to attain a sense of internal peace, a peace attained by experiencing a spiritual illumination through the reliving of childhood memories. However, any illumination that Roethke experiences in the guise of his poetic protagonists is only temporary, because he has not yet found a way to resolve his psychological and spiritual conflicts. A satisfactory resolution of his inner confusion is finally found in his last volume, The Far Field.

The Far Field is Roethke's most significant volume in terms of his spiritual journey. The book represents his conscious effort to perfect style and theme in order to reach a satisfactory answer to his questions about the self's relationship to the universal whole after death. The key sequences in this book are "North American Sequence" and "Sequence,

Sometimes Metaphysical," in which Roethke deals with the threat of selflessness and the loss of spiritual identity that seem to be concomitant with the spiritual peace attained through mystical union. The sense of union he experiences in "North American Sequence" is somewhat incomplete because the exploration of his inner self occurs in terms of an awareness that is too dependent on the external world of physical nature. However, in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical" he experiences mystical union in a complete sense because his search for union takes place in human terms within the innermost depths of his being. Through this complete mystical experience, Roethke is able at last to transcend the sensuality that has been threatening his inner being, yet at the same time he is able to retain the spiritual identity that he has been trying so desperately to establish throughout his spiritual journey.

Although other poems by Roethke deal with the journey theme, The Lost Son, Praise to the End!, and The Far Field respectively seem to provide the most meaningful explication of the progressive phases of his spiritual journey. The conclusions that Roethke reaches in his poetry before The Far Field reveal his dissatisfaction with the answers found in those poems. However, in the poem sequences of this final volume, particularly in "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," Roethke at last appears to have discovered in mystical union the means by which he could unify the conflicting aspects of his inner being in order to cope with the problems of reality as well as the possibilities of eternity.

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