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The Birth of the Poet's Mind:
A Study of Theodore Roethke's
"Where Knock is Open Wide"

"Where Knock Is Open Wide" is the first poem of the sequence *Praise to the End!* which, as the title borrowed from Wordsworth's *Prelude* implies, traces the growth of the poet's mind. *Praise to the End!* in general, and "Where Knock Is Open Wide" in particular, have posed problems for scholars of Roethke in that this sequence is, in parts, virtually inaccessible. Although general patterns have been discerned in the poem, the justification for the gibberish is still wanting, and it is the purpose of the following analysis to determine the function of this nonsense in delineating the growth of a mind, poetic and otherwise.

Kenneth Burke's claim that in reading a poem by Theodore Roethke "you have strongly the sense of entering at one place, winding through a series of internal developments, and coming out somewhere else"¹ is perhaps more appropriate to "Where Knock Is Open Wide" than to any other poem of this length. For although the literal meaning is not immediately accessible, there is a strong sense of development in the piece, a graduation in mood that is not dependent upon plot or intellectual awareness, but on rhythms, sounds, sound patterns, repetition of key words which become symbols with almost no explanation--the sense of nonsense. And it is indeed to nonsense that we must turn in order to comprehend the significance of the poem, the logic of the movement.

Although in other works Roethke wrote nonsense verse for children,² in this stage in his professional

progression, the use of nonsense is a serious stage in the development of connection between the conscious and the unconscious, and in the creation of language from preverbal silence. In his previous sequence, *The Lost Son*, Roethke had clearly gone as far as he could with stretching the limitations of language in an attempt to describe and individual "hallucinatory" experience, and found it necessary to dig deeper into the consciousness, to arrive at a collective unconscious experience. This step could be taken only by reverting to nonsense. N.O. Brown's admonition in *Love's Body* could have provided Roethke with a prose coda for his poetic experiment:

To reconnect consciousness with the unconscious, to make consciousness symbolical, is to reconnect words with silence; to let the silence in. If consciousness is all words and no silence, the unconscious remains unconscious.

*Get the nothingness back into words. The aim is words with nothing to them; words that point beyond themselves rather than to themselves; transparencies, empty words.*³

"Where Knock Is Open Wide" could understandably be dismissed as a foolish experiment in sound or clever charlatany if this recognition of the desire to reconnect words with silence, with the unconscious, is unacknowledged. But a basic issue in poetry is implicit here and must be the basis for any consideration of the poem. At what point does the unconscious connect with the conscious; where does silence (complete immersion in the senses) become poetry (explanation, expression of sensory experience)? The question is both technical and mystical. Ultimate experience is preverbal:

For nothing spake to me but the fair Face
 of Heav'n and Earth, when yet I could not speak;
 I did my bliss, when I did Silence, break.
 (Traherne, "Dumness")⁴

This principle is echoed in literature and in critical theory. Dr. Johnson's criticism of Milton's sincerity in "Lycidas", "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief," is a variation of the same theme. In this theoretical context silence is unity, "true" feeling, complete immersion in the actual sensory or mystical experience, as well as the absence of ego-consciousness which alienates the self from the world. In breaking his silence, the poet begins to distance himself from the experience and at the same time to make communication both possible and incomplete--possible because the tools are conventional and therefore communicable, incomplete because the communication is that of an alienated individual, alienated both from his experience and from the reader. "Where Knock" begins with the gradual breaking of this silence--both infantile and mystical--and traces the development of the self which becomes alienated from experience and simultaneously bound to and alienated from the world of man.

Treated as silence becoming language, "Where Knock Is Open Wide" is far less unintelligible than it is dense, and demands and deserves extremely close reading. Even the title is packed with far more significance than its original source. "Where Knock Is Open Wide" cannot be written off as a borrowing from Smart's Song to David,⁵ although the borrowing is propitious. The free utilization of the statements of others is itself an indication of the communal nature of vision, but the change of context is an alteration of that vision. Smart's designation is one of spiritual unity:

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

Roethke's speaker, however, is more than Smart's 'Man of Prayer.' "Where Knock" retraces beginnings, not fulfillments, and all beginnings and prebeginnings are intertwined--the child's birth of perception, the adult's rebirth of vision, conception, birth, the biblical and scientific birth of the universe, and the awakening of the poet's mind. The similarity in title and theme to Dylan Thomas's "Before I Knocked," which retraces the embryonic development of Jesus, also indicates another beginning. The idea of a single myth is deemphasized in the poem, not only because as Richard Blessing has shown⁶ it is the energy and direction of the myths which concern Roethke, and not the myths themselves, but also because it is the concept of beginning, of genesis, which shall be traced here. Roethke is here concerned with the process of all creation, the moment of consciousness. Even the gnomic texture of the title is as much an attempt to cope with language as unconscious as it is imitative of the theme.

Rebirth, a new creation, has been made necessary by the limitations reached in the previous sequences. The greenhouse sequence in *The Lost Son* brings the innocent child in successive poems into a world of loss, lifelessness, dolor, and a vague memory that "there was something else I was hoping for"⁷ (47). After a plea for direction in "Last Words," and a weak prayer for the lifeless existence he encounters around him, he moves in "Night Crow" in the direction of the unconscious, "Into a moonless black, / Deep in the brain, far back." (49) The titles of the four poems which conclude the sequence indicate the spatial direction. From "River Incident" in which the knowledge of a primeval cycle of existence both within and

without the self is discovered, to "The Minimal," to "The Cycle" to "The Waking," in which he becomes a part of the source, the beginnings of existence, and "My ears knew / An early joy," a clear direction toward "Where Knock Is Open Wide" can be perceived. The innocent protagonist who grew like the shoots in the greenhouse had been destroyed by time and change in the outside world, and can find what has been lost only by a conscious return to the original situation. With this awareness, "Where Knock" begins with a kind of apology for the return.

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

*Sit and Play
Under the Rocker
Until the cows
All have puppies.*

Because a kitten (associated by alliteration throughout the poem with kisses) can cause pain only with his hidden claws, and Papa and Mama can inflict pain that is far greater (the difference in the quality of the pain is soon explained and extends throughout the poem), it is best to remain hidden with the kittens in an enclosed space, the rocking womb perhaps, until birth. The causal relationships in the grammar have to be supplied here because the state of "Where Knock" is precisely without cause and effect. Knock *is* open wide.

As Karl Malkoff has pointed out in his pioneering study of Roethke's works, the foot is a conscious phallic symbol for Roethke, and throughout the *Praise to the End!* sequence has both powerful and sinister connotations.⁸ Here the sexual potential of the

individual to bite, to cause feeling and pain--subservient to the pain-inflicting, reproductive, and orally incorporative power of the parents--is hidden like the claws of a kitten. The situation is potentially dangerous: this is an unevenly matched battle with the parents and the other hidden pain inflictors.

Since the narrator does not distinguish between self and others, but identifies with all non-aggressive, non-distincted life, all the unborn are assumed to be a part of the protagonist and are ordered to engage in hidden playful (i.e. harmless) activities, until another, more productive stage for the protagonist, the infant, and the reader is reached. Until the power of knowledge and individuality are acquired, the protagonist must remain hidden, protected.

There are three heroes in this verse who are separate and yet unite as "you": the reader, is invited to joint "me," the speaker, in an attempt to re-enter the world of "he," the infant.⁹ A comparison between the first two verses which exemplify the world of "he," the infant, and the third incantatory verse illustrates this:

*His ears haven't time
Sing me a sleep song, please.
A real hurt is soft. (71)*

The more flexible meter of this verse is related to the jump from "his" in the first line, to "me" in the second. The line expands to trimeter, a more "adult" line¹⁰ than bimeter (emphasized by the addition of "please"), and as the "he" and "me" merge in the comprehension of the third line, the line shrinks a foot again. The meaning that is transmitted is not verbal, but metrical, and is indicated by the double meaning of "feet" in the first lines of the poem--"A

kitten can/Bite with his feet." Certainly "his ears haven't time" suggests the variations of rhythm which indicate the conflict of identities in these lines. In the sleep song of the next verse, the meter is regular, as "time" is being discovered.

But there is also a significance in the verbal structure of the second verse. The statement "His ears haven't time" indicates that the ears of the infant do not comprehend the nature of time, and therefore he does not comprehend the distinction between real, chronological future, and anticipatory fantasy. Therefore "Until the cows/All have puppies" is as valid a measure of time as any other measure, and in some ways better because it is both open and fruitful, creative. As an image of birth, these lines incorporate the first animal in children's literature to be associated with maternal functions, the cow, together with one of the first animals associated as offspring, the puppy.

The child's lack of comprehension of time is related to his lack of comprehension of reality. However the term reality is misleading: for although in reality one would measure pain quantitatively (as in the first verse), "A real hurt is soft." Physical pain is hard, but psychic pain which may be greater is not measurable physically.

*His ears haven't time
Sing me a sleep-song please
A real hurt is soft.*

The three lines may now be explained as follows: If I (the speaker) go to sleep (retreat from conventional conceptions of reality into a timeless place), I will understand what real time and real feeling is. In sleep time is not linear, reality is not measurable in misleading quantitative terms. Sleep is therefore the

medium for true reality. The dream vision, a standard literary tradition from Chaucer to Roethke, almost always takes on mythic comprehensive significances; thus "he," "me," and the implied "you" are necessarily incorporated into the dream.

The next verse, "Once upon a tree,/I came across a time," is a sleep vision of pre-birth, in which space and time have been reversed: tree and time are transposed. The absolute reality of this revelation is emphasized in the next lines:

*It wasn't even as
A ghoulie in a dream.*

Not a nightmare with a "ghoulie" that could be dismissed, this vision is one of truth.

The tree in this verse may well be related to the tree alluded to by Alan Seager in his biography of the poet. Roethke describes a mystical "secret of Nijinsky," which most probably refers to the following description of Nijinsky's "awakening." Nijinsky's description can be seen as an extreme application of Wordsworth.

*I started to go down a dark road, walking
quickly, but was stopped by a tree which
saved me. I was on the edge of a precipice.
I thanked the tree. It felt me
because I caught hold of it; it received
my warmth and I received the warmth of
the tree. I do not know who most needed
the warmth.¹¹*

Not only are the interchange of forces between tree and man indicated in these four lines, but the mythic allusion to the book of Genesis is also clear. The tree in Eden taught knowledge of good and evil, that

is--knowledge of distinctions. Later in the sequence, in "I Need, I Need," the protagonist complains, "The Trouble is with No and Yes," which Malkoff and others quite correctly gloss as a philosophical introduction to disunity. Here begins the contraries without which, Blake proclaims, there is no progression.

The tree will be the introduction to the knowledge of opposites, disunity, contraries, because it is the introduction to time. "In Space things touch, in time things part," and the gradual introduction to time in "Where Knock" will simultaneously separate the infant from the mother, biblical man from Eden, primitive man from his unity with the environment, and the narrator from his identification with his subject and verse.

The verse, "Once upon a tree" is a preface to time, an introduction to the story to be told. The next verse begins with a description in which space and time are not separate dimensions:

*There was a mooly man
Who had a rubber hat
The funnier than that, -
He kept it in a can.*

The vision is perceived from a unified sensibility--man and animal are the same, and the animal is identified by the sound it makes.

The mooly man appears a simple character, but his association by assonance with the frightening "ghoulie," suggests a more complex type, a foreshadowing of the later division of papa into "kisses" (loving) and "whitey bones" (frightening). The duality of character, its division into good and evil, is perceived as single dimensioned by negating the negative half. There is no problem of good and evil if evil is denied,

but the suggestion of its existence remains here. This breakdown of unity can be more easily perceived if Roethke's verse is contrasted to its most common comparison, Joyce's introduction to the birth of his artist: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming along the road and this moocow that was coming along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo..."¹² Joyce is, as Roethke has pointed out, "something else:"¹³ and his story is an attempt by an adult to imitate the simplistic vision of the child. Roethke's is the child's vision of adulthood. In "I Need, I Need," and other poems by Roethke, the hat is associated with role-playing, "I wish I had ten thousand hats/and made a lot of money." (75) The rubber hat, then, is the ability to play roles, adapting the self to various situations. But it is accomplished through deception: the hat is preserved and hidden "in a can," and the mooly man takes on potential hypocritical dimensions.

Since "can" is the third word in the poem, indicating potential (A kitten can...),¹⁴ the implication of a man who keeps his hats in a can is one of the unfulfillment of a variegated role potential, the minimalization of individual potential. The sexual interpretations of these lines, favored by most of the critics, also can indicate unfulfilled potential.

The protagonist seems initially unaware of the implications of this verse. The outside world and its ego-ness is funny just as the whole concept of adult sexuality and the desire of two to become one, recapturing the lost unity, can only be humorous to the unified infant. All actions are humorous when removed from a chronological and therefore consequential order. For the mystic this is the ultimate vision; for the infant, however, this perspective is intrinsic in his state of wholeness.

The shift from a timeless orientation to a chronological one forces an alteration in the mode of perception of all data. Two items that happen to be found together are ordered in a sequential causal pattern, and actions seem to have results. Games, then, become serious because behavior has consequences, and because of the importance of behavior, the ego--the social identity--will become confused with the real self, the individual identity. In "Where Knock" this self is not yet confused by chronological time and social imperatives, but views the world from a unified perspective.

The state here is analogous to preconception: with fertilization, separation from the unity of life occurs and chronological time takes over. "I've boarded the train there's no getting off," says Sylvia Plath of pregnancy ("Metaphors," *The Colossus*, 39), and indeed there is a similar shocking introduction to chronological time in "Where Knock" when the protagonist, in a parody of the dutiful son of Charlie Chan movies, meets his father: "What's the time, papa-seed?" The awareness of the distinction between father and son that provokes the question in turn begins the struggle for replacement of the father. The moment of conception is the mark of the beginning of the oedipal conflict.

At least two implications are in the next line, "Everything has been twice:" that conception has not yet erased the knowledge of the cyclic nature of time, and that this birth, this vision of awakening, is analogous to the literal conception of the protagonist. Father is then literally a fish--a sperm, and Christ. The cyclicity of Christ is noted in Thomas' "Before I Knocked" and in Lawrence's "In the beginning/ Jesus was called the fish/and in the end." The cyclical nature of revelation on all levels of existence makes possible a multilayered terminology, the use of

multi-levelled symbols, and the freedom of skipping from level to level. The emphasis is on the cycle and not on the individual progression--the development of Christ, the protagonist, man, the world, and the life impulse are one.

"Everything has been twice" recalls Yeats' vision of the phases of the moon, a recollection which is repeatedly invoked in "Where Knock." Robartes describes the twelfth phase in terms similar to those the narrator uses here:

*The hero's crescent is the twelfth.
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm,
The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
In its own being, and when that war's begun
There is no muscle in the arm...*

The growth of the hero is the subject of section 2.

*I sing a small sing,
My uncle's away,
He's gone for always,
I don't care either.*

Although the identity of the child is separate from his actions here, as the subject-verb location indicates, there remains no distinction between verb and object, between action and result. There is yet no song separate from the singer, no song apart from the process of singing. But there is a distinction between the song of the self and the world outside, and this distinction between elements is prerequisite to the development of the concept of good and evil.

In the next lines good and evil come into being--the evil to be spurned and the good to be incorporated.

Roethke's uncle, who was thought to be the cause of the downfall of the father's greenhouse empire and all the financial problems of Roethke's youth, is here associated with the fallen Lucifer, expelled from heaven and thrown into a newly created hell. The extent to which the positioning of sounds affects the meaning here is noteworthy:

*They'll jump on his belly
He won't be an angel*

The antithesis and balance of sounds in "They'll jump" and "angel" and its repetition in "belly," reflect the opposition of "they" (the demons) with "angel," and the "belly" is physically, literally, and symbolically in the center. The words have meaning here precisely in the context of the sound pattern they contribute in creating.

The framing lines for the above lines, "I know who's got him" and "I don't care either," indicate two other major divisions. These lines clearly indicate a division between knowledge and feeling, the mind and the heart. They also emphasize the newly found ability to separate the needs of the protagonist from those of others who do not provide for these needs, which in turn marks the beginning of the separation of heaven and hell in the mind of the protagonist, a separation which eventually will have to be resolved and encompassed.

Those who provide for the needs of the protagonist create the heaven that follows in the next verse:

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

All that is productive and good is associated with "her;" "Her neck has kittens" describes the purring of "her" voice. It is also an image of birth, of procreativity, and because of "her" softness, warmth, and maternal association, the speaker welcomes her, makes a place for her in the seat of his passions which is yet undifferentiated and felt only as a "fire." He does not "love" her, but makes a place for her; he does not reach out, but brings her into him, in a gesture proper to the infantile incorporative stage.

From the contraries of this heaven and hell come progression. The movement in Part 2, the growth of awareness, can be traced in two elements of the poem: (1) the change from present to past tense, from undifferentiated time to specific measurements, as "I sing a small sing" becomes "I sang I sang all day," and (2) the growth of awareness of the fantastic nature of the entire scene, from the certainty of "my uncle's away" to "It was and it wasn't here there." The unity of vision diminishes, the distinctions between good and evil grow, and the awareness of time and the effects of its passage increases.

Time brings awareness of causality, a causality that may be inaccurate: two objects perceived together are related in the mind. The owl of section 3 therefore causes darkness because he appears with the night. "I know it's an owl. He's making it darker." Knock is still open wide in the mind of the protagonist, but because he is applying this knowledge of wholeness to a disunified universe, he relates data which have no logical basis for relationship. The owl which seems to bring the darkness is automatically associated with the wisdom of the search for identity, since he always asks "who." On another level then, the owl does indeed cause the darkness, since knowledge of identity is knowledge of separation, which is indeed the fall from light.

The owl, furthermore, like the darkness it brings, is considered predatory (it is incorporative, like Papa and Mamma), and he is warned to avoid the protagonist; "Eat where you're at./I'm not a mouse." Because of his very newness he should be exempt from this predatory world. Like the world at its formation, "Some stones are still warm." Although this image refers to the unformed bones of the protagonist, his bones and the stones of the earth are the same. So he, like the newly formed universe, deserves a gentle touch, the comfort of "soft paws" and not the claws of the owl or the teeth of the parents.

In his defenselessness, he is out of place in the world in which he finds himself: "Maybe I'm lost or asleep," he reasons. An error in direction or a dream are the typical alternative explanations of the Shakespearean and epic hero when caught in an illogical situation, and it is usually discovered that the hero is neither lost nor asleep, but in the midst of a situation through which his true nature will be revealed to him. Here both alternatives are true, and neither explanation solves the problem. For although in the midst of a dream vision, he is learning what it is to become lost, and will only find himself at the end of the long sequence culminating in "The Lost Son." The protagonist of "Where Knock" is made aware that he is not a part of the world, indeed that part of the world may be against him.

*A worm has a mouth.
Who keeps me last?
Fish me out.
Please.*

The prayer of section three is one of necessity, resulting from the loss in the previous verse. "I know it's an owl" is paralleled in the sound pattern of "A worm has a mouth." The authoritative tone has

become quizzical, imploring, and the protagonist who previously disdained to be considered a mouse, now asks not to be considered lower than a worm. The awareness of vulnerability has grown: if he is kept last, not permitted to develop in the world, he will be destroyed. Therefore he asks to be fished out, to be rescued from his world of helplessness.

The worm, who later becomes the snake, is also associated with Lucifer. His individuation in *Paradise Lost* is the cause of the fall, the individuation of man; and the mouth is the means for this fall--speaking and eating. The mouth, therefore, is coveted by the protagonist, for he too needs to be "fished out," to be freed from his limiting paradise. In asking "Who keeps me last?" he has expressed an awareness of his potential for self progress and individuation, as well as the antagonistic nature of the outside world. The protagonist is outside of Eden, self-conscious, and alone.

The awareness is felt in the diminishing verse which concludes with one syllable. This diminishing conclusion forces a pause before beginning the next verse: a one syllable line is only one step from silence. Here the silence has its significance in the reverse of the direction of the protagonist. His desire for separation, for freedom, has become a fear of isolation and a need for relation and closeness.

*God, give me a near. I hear flowers.
A ghost can't whistle,
I know! I know!
Hello happy hands.*

The punning call to God, "Give me a near," acknowledges the separation from God and is associated with the birth of knowledge ("I know! I know!"), the

sharpening of the senses ("I hear flowers"), and the awareness of self-distinctions ("Hello, happy hands.") Related in part to the curse of Adam--labor--hands function throughout Rothke's works a symbols of social identities. Hands operate distinct from the rest of the body as in "Orders for the Day": "Hands hard and veined all over,/Perform your duties well," (7) and "The Lost Son," "I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,/I run, I run to the whistle of money," (56) in which hands and the provision of practical necessities for the self are linked. Sources from psychoanalysts are not necessary to document the well-known stage in infant development when the hands, agents of the ego, are discovered. The hands, which enable the infant to bring to his mouth all that is lacking within him, acquire significance only when it is discovered that knock is not open wide, that there are needs which the ego must learn to provide for the self. The development from the plea to God for aid to the discovery of the powers of the ego can also be traced in the assonance of "God," "flower," "ghost," "know," and "hello" which links the words as well as the logic.

If section 3 is concerned with the fall of man and the separation of infant into id (or self) and ego, then section 4 recapitulates a lost unity and displays a growing knowledge of the implications of the fall. The narrative is one of lost unity, a fishing trip with the protagonist and his father, in which the speaker was united with his natural environment, united with the fish, and united with the father. The association of the child with the fish is also analogous to the pre-natal development of the protagonist, because the fish has desires and needs which are easily fulfilled in the environment, but is constantly in danger of more mobile, more developed creatures, such as his father.

*We went by the river.
Water birds went ching. Went ching.
Stepped in wet. Over stones.
One, his nose had a frog,
But he slipped out.*

The unification of the senses in the first verse introduces the childlike sensibility. Phrases like "Stepped in wet" rather than water which is wet, suggest here that the child does not link cause to effect, noun to verb to object, but melts verb, adjective, and object together. He is not distinct from his actions, (I-stepped), nor is the water distinct from the feeling it gives to him.

There are escalating hints of danger--the charming "ching, ching" of the water birds is the sound their beaks make when hunting for food in the water. But the danger to the frog caught in the "nose" is only seeming. Since it is only a dream world, he manages to escape. In the next verse the fish is saved only through the intervention of the speaker.

*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.*

Knowledge breeds power, and the child wins a victory over the father by protecting the fish, by asserting his human empathy. At this success, he affirms the power of the fish, and the power of the child who has, by associating with it, saved it.

*Bullheads have whiskers.
And they bite.*

If the father was a fish in section 1, the son has now

begun to replace him. Inflicting pain through incorporation will soon become a characteristic of his post-lapsarian state.

This personal memory is analogous to the biblical story, as well as another memory. The father is a fisher of souls also: he is the fish, the fisher, and the son—who is also a fish, identifying with the father. The parts of this trinity pull in different directions: identification soon becomes displacement, the equivalent of the biblical fall. Man, seeking to be like God, becomes a threat to His omnipotence.

The florist, both God and father in the Edenic greenhouse, is elegized in the fourth verse, for he has already been replaced in the present by the son.

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

The interrelationship of the creator with his creations is idyllic: the rainbow indicates promise—the covenant between father and son. But the ominousness of the last lines reveals the change. Despite the agreement between them, the father disappears, and the guilt of the son makes the same kind of associations that were made with the owl and the darkness: it is the "thank you" that makes it dark.

Because of this, the description is in the past tense: "That was before." The fall from unity, the replacement of the father which had occurred in the third section, is here acknowledged. Just as the implications of the sin of Milton's Adam and Eve are only comprehended after a review of the deed and the subsequent awareness of time, "My tears are tired" reflects the retrogressive sorrow and the further

dissociation of the protagonist.

In the biblical legend the world is tilted at the fall of man, and the seasons begin. Time begins in earnest, as a race to stay alive. Unlike the beginning of time at conception (or creation), the beginning of time here signals the start of the quarrel between man and nature. "Nowhere is out. I saw the cold." To be out of Eden, to be out of the womb, is to be nowhere, to have no orientation in the universe. Conjunctively, to be out in the universe is to be at war with the environment. The war represented here can be found in greater detail in other works by Roethke, particularly "The Coming of the Cold" in *Open House*, since this moment of revelation was one to which he continually returned in his works.

With this exclusion and division comes the desire to transcend the quarrel. The image is spatial: "Went to visit the wind./Where the birds die." The purpose of this quest is complete fulfillment. "How high is have?" expresses spatially the internal hunger that is the antithesis of the initial state of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," and in this state Blake's "Less than all can not satisfy man" is accurate. To remedy this situation the protagonist, addressing God-father, suggests becoming the emblem of incorporation and pain—the bite that has represented the parents from the beginning—while the father becomes the emblem of permissiveness and obsequiousness: "I'll be a bite. You be a wink./Sing the snake to sleep." There will be no fall from unity, no evil, no conflict, if the two reverse positions and the son incorporates the father. The oral stage, later developed in "I Need, I Need," is therefore symbolic. A child puts everything into his mouth in order to reach a recently lost entropy. Unfortunately, one cannot eat one's cake and have it too. The replacement incorporation of father results automatically in the loss of father,

and/or the loss of Edenic closeness with God. This situation leads to that of section 5, in which the prophecy of "Winkiewill Yellow," having been translated into a request--"You be a wink"--is fulfilled, and the father is gone.

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

The dead father, the alienated god, returns--but only to be felt as an absence. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the return of the ghose serves only to remind the protagonist of how much he has lost. The physical is horrifying when deserted by the spiritual, and because of this desertion time increases in duration and decreases in significance:

*The evening came
A long long time.*

Comparable in significance to O'Neill's title, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," these two lines echo the whole modern dilemma of the purpose of life and the significance of duration in a godless, fatherless, and therefore meaningless universe.

Profound though the realization may be, it cannot be acknowledged at this point if life is to continue. The social identity, the ego, cannot permit awareness of so basic a loss.

*I'm somebody else now.
Don't tell my hands.*

"I" and external, functional identity are now entirely separate, and the further development of the ego continues with this basic partial acknowledgement of the

alienation of the self. The hunger for unity continues, but it is sublimated by the ego into more practical and less fulfilling pursuits. The "fall" is complete--the protagonist finds himself on the way to eternal damnation: "Have I come to always?" echoing the "He's gone for always" of the uncle. And he has been thrust from the warm womblike space under the rocker to the open chaos of the post-Edenic universe.

*Maybe God has a house
But not here.*

The potential of a spatial enclosure for comfort, safety and unity is perceived in much of Roethke's poetry, particularly in his greenhouse poems. This comfort has been eliminated here, and the protagonist is faced with unbound desires, which lead to the title of the next poem in the sequence, "I Need, I Need." The need, the creation and development of which is traced in the poem, is the primary factor in the creation of poetry. Roethke writes in his Journal, "I am a poet: I am always hungry."¹⁵ "Where Knock Is Open Wide" has traced the evolution from blissful nonsense to ravenous sense.

Notes

- 1 "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," *Sewanee Review*, LVIII (Winter, 1950), 68.
- 2 Even Roethke's innocent nonsense verse for children are infused with the same themes and images which fill his more 'adult' attempts at nonsense. *I am! Says the Lamb* may be read much more critically than it has been read to date.
- 3 N.O. Brown, *Love's Body*, (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 245.
- 4 Roethke wrote: "My real ancestors, such as they are, are the Bible, Mother Goose, and Traherne. *Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956), p. 142. Hereafter cited as *SL*.
- 5 "The title is a line from Christopher Smart." *SL*, p. 148.
- 6 Richard Blessing, *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 86.
- 7 This and all succeeding quotations of the poems of Theodore Roethke are from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Beatrice Roethke (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1966). "Where Knock Is Open Wide" appears on pages 71-74.
- 8 Karl Malkoff, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 71.
- 9 This is an example of the way in which Roethke consciously plays roles, ritually re-enacting mythic

- situations, as Blessing has noted (86). The distinction here, of course, is that he is also playing the role of "you" and inviting you to play as well.
- 10 Roethke often mentions the use of the shorter line. In his journals he notes: "The shorter line can still serve us: it did when...we were children. *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke*, ed. David Wagoner (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1972), p. 186. Hereafter cited as *Notebooks*.
 - 11 *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 37. Alan Seager discusses Roethke's discovery of Nijinsky's "secret of a tree" in his biography, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 90.
 - 12 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1965), p. 1. It need not be emphasized that Roethke's subject here is similar to that of Joyce.
 - 13 *SL*, p. 149.
 - 14 *Notebooks*, p. 179.