Chapter I: Opening the House

To the reviewers of Open House the major fault with the poems lies in their overreliance upon others, their evasion of the self. Stephen Baldanza's contemporary review is particularly acute in its observations upon Roethke's limitations:

> Mr. Roethke sidetracks any self-revealing which might prove too hazardous for the intellect, too indecorous for the eye...despite the promise of his introductory poem, his revelation is not complete; it embodies a caution which is at the core of his poetic impulse...Once he shows more willingness to expose his true self more courageously in form and content he will attain a great stature.[1]

This indeed is the major flaw in the book. But it is also a part of the purpose. From an analysis of the organization of Open House it becomes clear that Roethke was also very much aware of his limitations, and indeed endeavored to work through them, to explore his own inability to allow his "true self" to be explored and exposed. The organization is directed to the question, what are the true elements of closedness, which prevent not only the poet from tapping and communicating his true self, but all of society as well from finding true relationships? The question is probed systematically, forming a pattern which is repeated continuously in Roethke's sequences.

The sequence in Open House is not initially apparent because it is grounded in the assumption that is to become

Roethke's distinct characteristic, the belief that the poetic quest is equivalent to the psychoanalytic, the political, the sociological. A biographical poem may follow a political one or an "imitation" of another poet, and be part of the same sequence because the subject is neither biography nor politics, but the quest for an abiding relationship between man his human and natural environment, including his unconscious. The sequential organization, then, is more important than the poems themselves, some particularly inferior poems having been included because they balance others, or illustrate a point through their very inferiority. An interpretation of the poems, then, may be at times subservient to an analysis of the poems-in-context.

Attempts to perceive an over-all organization in _Open House_ have been limited to the formulation of John Holmes and the extension of this initial formulation by Karl Malkoff. Although neither is entirely successful both organize the poems in topical sections. Holmes perceives five topics:

> The wholeness of _Open House_ demands comment. Mr. Roethke has built it with infinite patience in five sections. The first is the personal pronoun; the second the out-of-doors; the third is premonition of darker things - death among them; the fourth is the purest of metaphysical wit, something very rare in our time; and the fifth contains still another side of the poet's nature, the human awareness of which he has become capable in his recent development.[2]

Malkoff sees connections between these sections, and delineates the subjects as follows:

> I From analytic probing to vision as a means of knowing the self.
> II The self seen in terms of the correspondence between inner and outer reality.
> III The self defined by non-being, by negation.
> IV The self from the distance of comic perspective.
> V The self in its social context.[3]

The two important insights here are the assumption that the self is the concern of all of Open House, and the dynamic view of the first section. But Malkoff does not go far enough. Each section may be viewed as part of the dynamics of a mental process, the coming to terms of the self with the external universe. Although the poems were not written in this order, they have been selected and arranged to illustrate a definite pattern, and it is this pattern which shall be studied in the following discussion.

Open House explores modes of finding the self in poetry. Its highly determined structure moves through logical steps to discover the self and orient it in the world. Part I attempts to discover the self through introspection and fails. Part II attempts to orient the self in nature and fails. Part III finds the first two failures beneficial as they help to define the self through what it is not. Yet the definition by negation cuts away so much of which is purely social or purely natural and animalistic, the poet is left with no point of relationship to anything else. Part IV returns to society and views the

self from an objective stance, attempting to reorient the individual to society, and Part V attempts to place the individual in a national and social context. The movement, then, is into the self and outward. This, of course, is the direction of the later, more successful sequences. But _Open House_, through this very direction, helps to define its own limitations. It fails to find the self, fails to make a meaningful association with the universe, and fails to relate to the social environment in more than a superficial manner, until, perhaps, the final poems. And these very failures serve later as preparation for the successes of _The Lost Son_.

A close reading of the poems of _Open House_, Part I, reveals the highly structured movement of a quest which fails. Each poem presents a further step in a logical analysis: the first five poems attempt to unveil the poet, the last five acknowledge failure to arrive at an insufficiently comprehended core. The structurally central poem, "The Premonition", suggests a partial, momentary vision, to which the first poems have led, and is followed by the anticlimactic "Interlude", and the final poems which reject the possibility of internal archeology.

The antithesis upon which D.H. Lawrence found classical American literature to be based proves an apt introduction to the first poem, "Open House". Two antithetical purposes, a superficial, socially oriented goal, and the

uncontrolled, unacknowledged art-speech of the unconscious, pull the work apart. He remarks of Hawthorne, "And you can please yourself, when you read The Scarlet Letter, whether you accept what that sugary, blue-eyed little darling of a Hawthorne has to say for himself, false as all darlings are, or whether you read the impeccable truth of his art-speech."[4] The author believes he transmits one message, but the content belies his alleged purpose. "Open House" seems to reveal similar antitheses. Unlike those of Hawthorne, however, these are not unconscious. Roethke was apparently aware of what he wanted from his poems and what he failed to achieve. There are profound aspirations in the opening lines, aspirations which are admittedly unfulfilled, at least here.

> My secrets cry aloud,
> I have no need for tongue.
> (3)

The optimistic and romantic beginning assumes that neither poetic technique nor deep psychological insight is necessary for the emergence and communication of the self. Although the poem which follows fails to reveal the depths of the secrets, this failure is nevertheless an important step, for it unites the "tongue", the need for a means of communication, with the secrets themselves. By discovering that secrets do not cry aloud in the poems of Part I, that they are indeed inextricably linked to the need for "tongue", Roethke takes upon himself the search for the self in poet-

ry. His later poems find the secrets as they find the tongue.

"Open House" is characterized by an inability to unify the self and its goals, an insufficiency which promotes oxymoronic images: "I'm naked to the bone,/ With nakedness my shield." (3) The image of the poet both revealed and concealed by his nakedness is remarkable: though he turns himself inside out, he remains protected. "Myself is what I wear" (3), then, is not a line which reveals the openness of the poet, but one which proclaims it, simultaneously revealing that the self remains intact and inviolate through the use of the clothing image. It is this paradox in "Open House" which points the direction for the poems of Part I, poems which ultimately cannot go beyond psychological defenses to find the secrets of the "Open House".

The final verse of "Open House", consequently, is a jumble. It begins with a reiteration of the promises of the first two lines, but ends with a psychological truth and a poetical impossibility: "Rage warps my clearest cry/ To witless agony" (3). Were it possible to write poetry that emerges directly from the depths of the unconscious, it would be illiterate, in effect, "witless". For, although there may be a logic of the unconscious, a logic of the self, it is not immediately a poetically communicable logic. To speak in "language strict and pure", the poet

must mold these truths into art. This problem, of drawing uncommunicable material from the self and communicating it as art to others, is one which Roethke ultimately solves, not by slackening his "strict and pure" demands from language, but by altering his concept of it. In Open House the discrepancy between thought and language seems to exist as a problem, and results in imperfect poetry.

"Feud", which follows "Open House", acknowledges a lack of control. Essential to the freudian theory upon which the poem is based is the concept of blamelessness. Since all actions are predetermined by parental influence in infancy, there can be no progress in the poem. "Feud" merely enumerates the hereditary and environmental limitations upon the freedom of man, with only a dark hint of escape in the last line.

The upshot of the theory of inculpability and helplessness of man is the state of vulnerability. Not in control, man may become controlled by others - from the most remote and external beings, the "ancestral eyes" of the first verse, to the most immediate, internalized unconscious of the self. The fourth verse betrays the logical paranoic conclusion of the state of helplessness.

> ...dark forms
> Have scaled your walls, and spies betray
> Old secrets to amorphous swarms.
> (4)

These lines describing post-freudian man are particularly applicable to the problem confronting Roethke as he endeavors to expose these areas of vulnerability. Of one denies the poet control over his material, particularly when his material is his own psyche, the result must be poetry which reveals something other than it intends.

The spy in the above lines is also the critic, ferreting out the "true" meaning of which the poet was unaware and may even have sought to conceal from his own psyche. This logical paranoia, then, is the inverted fear of the self and the unconscious controls which it has upon the conscious being, and continues the direction of the poem inward, reflecting the fear of the control of the unconscious.

Given these fears and these assumptions there can be no value in writing poetry, except as it may be a harmless sublimation, and there can be a great danger - a conquering of the self by many powers. The direction of "Feud" is, for poetry, a dead end. The final lines acknowledge this terrifying limitation and tentatively point to a vague and hypothetical solution. "...The spirit starves/ Until the dead have been subdued." (4) Commenting on this poem, Roethke remarks:

> I remember the late John Peale Bishop, that fine neglected poet, reading this and saying. "You're impassioned, but wrong. The dead can help us." And he was right; but it took me some years to learn that.[5]

The Lost Son and Praise to the End! are concerned with

precisely this learning process - the growth of the ability to be nurtured rather than starved by the dead. From "The Flight" in "The Lost Son" sequence which begins, "At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry./ I was lulled by the slamming of iron" (53) to "Unfold! Unfold" which concludes, "In their harsh thickets/ The dead thrash./ They help." (91), there is a clear pattern in which the dead lose their stranglehold on the individual, are subdued, and then enabled to help. In <u>Open House</u>, the attempt is made to show this process in three poems. The difference in length is symptomatic of the difference in depth. "Feud", "Death Piece", and "Prognosis", while they reveal the characteristic roethkean movement, are too pat, labelling stages with cliches rather than dealing with the uniqueness of the question.

The sequence, nevertheless, is noteworthy in its foreshadowing of Roethke's later directions. "Death Piece" is a description of a regression to a pre-freudian state. The zen answer to the freudian trap such as the one presented in "Feud" is the question for meditation, "Before your father met your mother what did your true face look like?" Roethke's answer seems similar, a sleeplike suspension of identity which is impervious to external influences. Roethke explains the general state thus:

> The moment before Nothingness, before near an-

> nihilation, the moment of supreme disgust is the worst: when change comes it is either a total loss of consciousness - symbolic or literal death - or a quiet break into another state, not necessarily serene, but frequently a bright blaze of consciousness that translates itself into action.[6]

Clearly "Death Piece" is the "symbolic or literal death". The similarity of this poem with Leonie Adams' "Night Piece", Elinor Wylie's "Now That Your Eyes Are Shut", and Stanley Kunitz' "Night Piece", has been noted by Malkoff.[7] But this poem is an instance in which the similarities cloud the basic difference. Death is here a healing vacation from life, not an end to it.

If "Death Piece" does not carry its intended weight, if it does not give the impression of an earthshaking silence, it is nevertheless certain that in its position the poem is meant to carry a profound burden. For "Prognosis" moves out from the mire of "Feud". Freudian assumptions remain, but are accompanied by an anger, an unwillingness to accept these limitations. It may be impossible to ignore or intellectualize away the oedipal conflict, but to submit to it is to escape from more profound problems. D.H. Lawrence notes:

> While the Freudian theory of the unconscious and of the incest motive is valuable as a <u>description</u> of our psychological condition, the minute you begin to <u>apply</u> it, and make it master of the living situation, you have begun to substitute one mechanistic or unconscious illusion for another.[8]

Since Roethke studied Lawrence in depth for his Master's degree[9] it is safe to assume that he was aware of this

approach. The freudian explanation is a "misstep" which leads one away from the "quick".

The final verse is the most confusing.

> Though the devouring mother cry, "'Escape me?
>   Never -'"
> And the honeymoon be spoiled by a father's ghost,
> Chill depths of the spirit are flushed to a fever,
> The nightmare silence is broken. We are not lost.
> (5)

The verse begins with the rage promised in "Open House", and ends with passion and hope. But the process is uncertain, and can only be explained if "Chill depths of the spirit" is analogous to the state of "Death Piece". The last verse of "Prognosis", then, recapitulates the movement of the three poems, from freudian resignation, to a state beyond neurosis, to a hopeful anger and defiance. There is an identity beyond that formed by family heredity and environment.

"To My Sister" picks up on the open and closed motif of the volume title and deals with a withdrawn, escapist personality whose neuroses protect her from the danger of pain. If "All is not lost" is the message of "Prognosis", then "To My Sister" is an example of the alternative. All is lost for the sister who will "Remain secure from pain" (5) because her heart has become hate, excluding all of the present world in its concentration upon the past. This poem, characteristic of <u>Open House</u>, reveals that there is more than hate, but is unable to probe beneath the origins

of this limitation.

"The Premonition" is the central poem in Part I. The father is seen, for the first time, not as part of the child, a being who has hitherto been imitated automatically, but an image, as something apart from him that can be and is lost. The boy, in memory, keeps "close to the heels of my father" (6), until the father dips his hand in the water. "He dipped his hand in the shallow:" (6) is the central line, the seventh of the thirteen lines, and here is the turning point in the poem, for it is at this point that the father is perceived as mortal. "Water ran over and under/ Hair on a narrow wrist bone:" (6) The line, reminiscent of Donne's "a bracelet of bright hair about the bone", is a conscious imitation, an attempt to recall the image of mortality. But Donne's image also has another significance here: the "otherness" of the father, the separateness of his hand from the child is equally important. This is one of many instances of Roethke's particular style of "plagarism" which he explains in his essay, "How to Write Like Somebody Else": "...take what you will with authority and see that you give it another, or even better life, in the new context."[10]

The awareness of the father's distinct being grows in the poem until it becomes possible for the premonition to occur. "...when he stood up, that face/ Was lost in a maze of water." (6) The image is one of eventual separation from

the father, and the separation from the father is crucial to the search for the self. "It is paradoxical," writes Roethke, "that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being - and in some instance, even an inanimate thing - brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self."[11] To some extent this "heightening and awareness" will occur in Part III of Open House but does not take place here. The father has not really been reached, has not really been separated from, and the feeling of identity must remain a premonition. The dead have not been subdued.

The key to "Interlude" is the deep frustration at the storm that never comes. "The veins within our hand betrayed our fear" (6) would appropriately describe the fearful anticipation of a storm, but is strangely discordant when it describes a fear that the storm will not come. Like R.D. Laing's "schizophrenic experience", which he describes as a necessary and theraputic quest for identity, the storm is a kind of fruition which is blocked, and is reminiscent of Roethke's journal entries, "Why do I wish for an illness, something I can get my teeth into?"[12] "Interlude", with its failure to break, is the anticlimactic poem which begins a downward and outward movement in the section.

The hands whose veins betrayed the fear of the storm in "Interlude" are controlled in "Orders for the Day", and

urged to perform their duties instead, so as not to "bruise/ The spirit's tender cover." (7) "Orders for the Day" is not, however, analogous to "To My Sister". The escape into compulsiveness is not ignorant and innocent, as in "To My Sister", but consciously directed. The orders given to the parts of the body are successively outer directed as the unreached neuroses are sublimated: The compulsiveness of the first verse leads to a positive state in the second, in which feet "Cross marshland into clover;" (7) which in turn leads to an outer-directed form of sublimation in the final verse. The eyes, which throughout Open House lead outward from self concern, are told to "circumvent" the barriers of the neurotic self:

> Eyes, staring past another
> Whose bogey-haunted look
> Reveals a foolish mother,
> These barriers circumvent
> And charity discover
> Among the virulent.
> (7)

The message, try to sublimate the "poisonous" energies, rings hollow when contrasted to the analogous yet infinitely more complex message of Roethke's later works. Too much is circumvented rather than conquered.

"Prayer" extends the theme of sublimation in a lighter vein. "In truth, the Eye's the abettor of/ the holiest platonic love:/.../Take Tongue and Ear - all else I have - Let Light attend me to the grave!" (8) This poem, one of a few highly admired by Louise Bogan, is characteristic of

the feminine kind of poetry written by Roethke's favorites of the time, with just a touch of satire. Emotional about escaping emotion, its passion, like its eye, "is gentle, never more/ Violent than a metaphor." (8) The problems of the senses like the oedipal conflicts, are resolved by a conscious attempt at suppression. "Prayer", acknowledging a profound distinction between "soul" and "body", prefers the "vision" over all the other senses because it brings the poet out of the sinful self. The poem is feminine because the sentiment is.

The ultimate insufficiency of the "Prayer" is acknowledged in "Signals". The senses are felt to possess a knowledge the "eye or hand cannot possess." (8) But this knowledge of the senses is fragmented and peripheral. The entire poem, in heroic couplets, has the air of a grudging and formal compliment to powers which are better admired lightly than followed through in depth. "They flicker faster than a blue-tailed swift" (8) is a diminished image, because with its alliteration and imitative rhythm it is seen through the eye and not the blood.

"The Signals", with its removed vision, is a proper preparation for the concluding poem of the section of the self in <u>Open House</u>, for "The Adamant", the conclusion, denies the possibility of ever completely comprehending the core of "truth". Written in compressed[13], end-stopped lines, "The Adamant" has a tightly woven structure which

excludes the reader. The short, clipped phrases are themselves isolated from one another. The total effect is of stone. The possibility of reaching through this stone to the self has been negated.

The antithesis of "Death Piece", in which action is petrified from within, "The Adamant" views the petrification from without; internal senses cannot and should not be reached. And this is good. To reach, in "The Adamant", is to destroy: the tool of labor is not the probe but the sledge hammer. To be understood is to be destroyed; man without mystery is not man.

This sentiment is never negated by Roethke, merely reinterpreted. Roethke continued to admire this poem throughout his career, for as he tunnelled deeper and deeper tracing the "signals" to their sources, he found this truth continually reasserting itself. Man is not destroyed by examination, not matter how grueling. The self is inviolate, paradoxically, only when understood.

In context, however, "The Adamant" is a negation, one which comes to be dangerous in Part III, for in attempting to move out of the self, without the knowledge of its consistency, the entire concept of self becomes endangered. "Against Disaster", the sixth poem of a series of ten in Part III, brings to a conclusion the logical direction of an outward journey from an imperfectly defined self.

Now I am out of element
And far from anything my own,
My sources drained of all content,
The pieces of my spirit strewn.
(19)

Part II of Open House, however, proceeds on the assumption that interior exploration is unnecessary and undignified, and turns to the natural environment to find the "core" of identity.

The images of light and vision which have dominated the final poems of Part I are picked up in the first poem of the "nature" section. There is a fresh start, an optimistic beginning in "The Light Comes Brighter", but man's identity with nature is doomed, and Part II explores this failure. Malkoff notes:

> Part II...is concerned with the landscape as an emblem of the human mind. It presupposes a correspondence between inner and outer worlds, and exploits that correspondence not only as a means of representing, but also, in a quasi mystical sense, as a means of knowing the reality within.[14]

This remark is appropriate as an initial assumption. But, as the poems proceed, a gradual separation between inner and outer occurs, until nature is seen as predatory, grotesque, and repulsive.

The first four quatrains of "The Light Comes Brighter" describe the coming of spring, of down, the breaking of the ice, the renewal of the singing of the birds. A part of this scene is the renewal of life in the mind. Unlike later descriptions of nature which have simultaneous internal validity, such as "Cuttings", the final quatrain superim-

poses an internal validity on a strictly objective description. The effect is that of a kind of pseudo-wordsworthian who seeks communion with nature by dressing up as a tree. This, in fact, may be the basis for the failures to make associations with nature in Open House; the initial relationship is superimposed.

The over-all tone, despite this awkwardness, carries all the regenerative connotations of spring and dawn. The stone which could not be cracked in "The Adamant" can be cracked in nature as the ice gradually breaks in the four quatrains and the flowing rivulets cause the roots to stir 'And young shoots spread upon our inner world." (11) Nature has a "renovating virtue" on the poet, which diminishes in "Slow Season". The seasonal shift is thematically, rather than structurally, significant, and the two poems should be contrasted. Roethke wrote of "Slow Season" as "...a sequel to 'The Light Comes Brighter'. Some cliches but I needed them for pattern."[15] The pattern is one of antithesis. The pear fruit in "The Light Comes Brighter" is a "silken pear" (12) in "Slow Season", woven by a spider "To keep inclement weather from its young." (12) The immediate contact with the source of life is gone, the pear is woven, an artful protective creation rather than a natural fruit. The "young shoots" which had spread "upon our inner world" are now so far removed from their source that they "obscure the narrow lane" (12). The seasonal

change has inevitably brought the need for protection from nature, the alienation from nature.

"Mid-Country Blow" may well be contrasted to "Interlude", for the storm which was anticipated and apparently hoped for in "Interlude" would have been beneficial. The storm of "Mid-Country Blow" does come, and alienates the "I" even further from the natural environment. Objectively, the speaker sees an altered picture, different from his previous knowledge and his perceptions of reality. "When I looked at the altered scene, my eye was undeceived,/ But my ear still kept the sound of the sea like a shell." (12) The subjective view of nature has no correspondence with the external world. The sea imagery connected with the storm - the tree as waves, the spruce as surf, etc. - is superimposed upon reality. In the face of reality a dichotomy arises between what Jung calls the function of "sensation", the objective knowledge of external data, and "thinking", the logical, personal deductions made from sensory data. It is a conflict between inner and outer reality.

The beauty of the prairie is that it diminishes the vastness and therefore the incomprehensibility of nature. Although the technique is unsuccessful in "In Praise of Prairie", it is the purpose of the heroic couplet to reduce nature to the comprehensibility of reason. "When I stood at the window, an elm bough swept to my knees;" (12) says the persona of "Mid-Country Blow", but he comes

to realize that his perceptions are subjective. In the prairie, however, this illusion is universal: "The elm tree is our highest mountain peak " (13). The prairie seems subservient to man's imagination and there can be an armistice, if not a friendship or an union.

The coming of the cold brings the awareness of the destructive element of nature. The catalogue of signs of winter in the first part begins with sweet smells and pleasant descriptions which gradually become more ugly. "The walker's foot has scarcely room/ Upon the orchard path" (14) is reminiscent of Robert Frost, particularly "After Apple Picking". But as the sentence continues, the scene becomes less idyllic and there is a hint of wanton destruction, "...for skinned/ And battered fruit has choked the grass." (14) Compare also line one to line nine:

The late peach yields a subtle musk.

The wind shakes out the scent of pear.

Finally fragrance itself is pressed "to the soil" as cold comes. The essence of the fruit, of growth, is gone, and man is left with less sensory empathy with the scene.

Where the first part describes the death of fruit, the second part deals with the death of leaves, and the third describes the death of the sources of life, the brook, the stems, the trees, until nature can provide no stimulus for man except cold. There is a simultaneous alienation

of man from the natural scene. He is at first crowded out of the path, then left with nothing to do to participate in the scene, "The last of harvesting is done." (14) In part three there is no mention of man or his place in the scene. The sensory alienation is noteworthy. From the loss of immediate sensory data, to the loss of vision, "Dense trees no longer hold the light", the poem moves to the feeling of cold. Nature penetrates man not through sunlight or musk, but reaches into his very bones with cold.

Cold, indifference, is for the heron in the following poem the source of freedom. Perfectly in control, the heron is lawless, seemingly unlimited by unfriendly nature, unlike man. "His beak is quicker than a human hand." (15) Comic, the heron is apparently unconcerned about his anonymity, his exclusion from the scene.

> The wide wings flap but once to life him up.
> A single ripple starts from where he stood.
> (15)

Nature, gently humorous in relation to the heron, is, however, frightening when its freedom and anonymity are linked with human intellect. The reader is led into this thought unaware; "The Bat", written in diminutive heroic couplets, tells of a precious animal whose "fingers make a hat about his head." (16) Gradually less winsome qualities are introduced, until the final couplet clinches the discordance between man and nature.

> For something is amiss or out of place
> When mice with wings can wear a human face.
> (16)

That man and nature are separated is a blessing, for human intellect linked with natural wantoness is vampiric.

Part III begins at this point, with the complete rejection of nature as a complement to man. To reject both the outside world, nature, as a source of identification, and the self, the inside world, is to reject everything - and in "No Bird" this rejection is represented as death. From this rejection the poems proceed to an acceptance of negation as a means of forming identity.

In dickinsonian meter, used previously in "Death Piece" to evoke a kind of tight isolation, Roethke evokes the mood of quiet after great turmoil. "Now here is peace, for one who knew/ The secret heart of sound." (17) is the perfect contrast to the muted horror of "The Bat", and implies a step below and beyond the painful effects of nature. The woman in the poem is surrounded by nature, and has experienced private depths, but is oblivious now to all. As in "Death Piece" the state of death is a transitory phase, here a kind of carlylean "center of indifference" which succeeds the rejection and precedes the "everlasting yea".

"The Unextinguished" continues this direction, as it begins in numbness and a mythic sunset, and concludes with sunrise and the rebirth of thought. The numbness is not

that of death as in "No Bird", the emphasis having shifted and having become what Malkoff calls correctly, "the periodic purging of the mind that must inevitably precede renewal."[16] What follows is an acceptance of negation in "Long Live the Weeds!": "The bitter rock, the barren soil" (18) recalls "The fields are harsh and bare, the rocks/ Gleam sharply on the narrow sight." (15) of "The Coming of the Cold" just as "All things unholy, marred by curse,/ The ugly of the universe." (18) is reminiscent of "The Bat". These symbols of exclusion in the previous poems are now seen in a positive light, for they help the individual to define himself in terms of what he is not: "These shape a creature such as I" (18). The formation of identity through negation is, of course, a basic concept in child development. Although Roethke seems to use Hopkins as his source, the acceptance of the "otherness" of the world is not, as in Hopkins, a means toward the understanding of a higher unity, but a relieved awareness of variety.

The subject of "Genesis" is the birth of an identity, founded on the acceptance of negation. "If everything is not the same, if there are no external inevitable patterns in nature to which I am bound, and there are no discoverable internal causes which shape my identity, then I am free to create my own." This is the "central grain" (18) around which new meaning grows.

The new found freedom is explored in "Epidermal Macabre"

and "Against Disaster". "Epidermal Macabre" voices the desire to be freed even more, freed from the limitations of the flesh. It is the obscenity of the blood, and the raggedness of the anatomy from which the speaker wishes to seperate himself, for these are "false accoutrements of sense" (19). The "carnal ghost" (19) would still have a body, but not a confining one. "Against Disaster" is the fulfillment of that wish. Having found the complete freedom which had been sought, the speaker is terrified at the absence of a central core. Ibsen's Peer Gynt discovers identity to be like an onion; when one peels away the layers, one is left only with discarded peels. Similarly the speaker of "Against Disaster" finds "the pieces of my spirit strewn" (19). The dream, of cutting away all that is not-me, has come true, and has proven a nightmare.

> My special heaven is reversed,
> I move beneath an evil sky.
> (19)

The reality of the danger described in this poem is explained by Roethke in a letter to George Dillon. The poem was "written in a period of terror before a breakdown."[17]

The only hope for the state of diffusion is an ordering of forces. In "Against Disaster" this is presented as a wan hope:

> The heart must rally to my wit
> And rout the specter of alarm. (19)

In "Reply to Censure" the heart and wit present a united front. The "censure" of the world is a blessing to the formation of identity. Roethke's comment on the use of the "other" to form one's own identity is once again relevant, and once again pivotal. The negation that was terrifying, is once again a blessing.

The final negation occurs in "the Auction" which pares down even further the social identity of the individual. Aspects of the personality are sold - to an unconcerned and jeering audience. Both of these factors are significant. The discarding of social identities, society-directed characteristics, leave the poet with "unencumbered will" (21), but further alienates him from an undifferentiated society.

"Silence" seems to be a poem of what has become a traditional genre to modern American poets. As pastorals were to English poets, so the solipsistic poem is to the poet of today, a transitional learning experience. Completed as an individual identity, the poet has no relationship to the world outside. There is no communication:

> There is a noise within the brow
> That pulses undiminished now
> In accents measured by the blood.
> It breaks upon my solitude -
> A hammer on the crystal walls
> Of sense at rapid intervals.
> . . . .
> What shakes my soul to disrepair
> Shall never touch another ear.
> (22)

Five years later, W.C. Williams published a similar passage:

> Thought clambers up,
> snail like, upon the wet rocks
> hidden from sun and sight -
>   hedged in by the pouring torrent -
> and has its birth and death there
> in that moist chamber, shut from
> the world - and unknown to the world
> cloaks itself in mystery -
>   (Paterson I, iii)

The similarity does not lie only in the description of the inside prison of the mind. In both works, what follow are movements outward. Williams is more succinct and perhaps more conscious: Part II of Paterson begins "Outside/ outside myself/ there is a world". But Roethke also turns outward to society in "On the Road to Woodlawn".

Death, the ultimate isolation in "No Bird", is the means for reintegration with society in "On the Road to Woodlawn". The alienated mourner whose grief "shall never touch another ear." (22) feels not only his individuality at the identity-by-negation, but his isolation, and the wave of nostalgia which covers even the formal institution of the funeral in society is the beginning of an acceptance.

The fourth part of Open House works through various perspectives on the social environment, and moves from satiric objectivity to an involvement in society, an objective "acceptance". Part IV begins with a self portrait:

> The stethoscope tells what everyone fears:
> You're likely to go on living for years,
> With a nurse-maid waddle and a shop-girl simper,
> And the style of your prose growing limper and limper.
>   (23)

The brevity of "Academic" is perhaps its most striking feature since it indicates that the self can be catagorized in a few epithets, a feminine double rhyme, and a few choice words wrapped in a pair of couplets. "Academic", with its objective view, cancels out the whole struggle of the self in one master stroke. It is impossible to take seriously the death and the nostalgia for past order when the antic heart continues to beat through time. Time, the major element excluded in the serious third part of Open House, makes all tragedies comical, and the tragic sufferer a caricature.

What "Academic" does for the image of the self, "For An Amorous Lady" does for the whole basis of man's relation to others. In reducing the "amorous lady" to a biological phenomenon, this semi-petrarchan sonnet denies the emotional validity of a search for a meaningful relationship with the external world. What makes the beloved unique is her "Soul,/ Encompassing fish, flesh, and fowl." (23) A fine petrarchan conceit - but the point is that her soul has nothing to do with it. It is her transcendence of species which counts.

> You are, in truth, one in a million,
> At once mammalian and reptilian.
> (23)

In Praise to the End!, the biological aspects of mankind are integrated into his ontological development. Here man is masterfully reduced to one element of his ontogony.

Given the assumptions of "Academic" and "For An

Amorous Lady", there can be no point to literature and the literary aesthete. "Poetaster" negates satirically the life of the alienated poet as based upon false assumptions about the self and the world outside. In the abstract there are countless possibilities, and countless degrees and variations of emotions. But this sensitive awareness immobilizes the individual, making him unable to generalize and therefore associate himself with others of his own species. The lack of "singleness of spirit" is the immobilizing force and the primary satirical target of the poem.

A new approach is begun in "Vernal Sentiment", a fresh look at the external world. Having looked at the self objectively and having rejected the "pulse-feeling" poet, the world outside can be approached and accepted. There is no attempt, as in "Slow Season" and other poems of Part II, to incorporate nature, to find the self in external reality. Through the negation of Part III and the objectivity of Part IV there has come about a transformation of relationship, from Buber's "I-it" to "I-Thou". Each particle of the world is looked at in its uniqueness, and accepted.

The next two poems represent a back slide, as well as a progression. Having recognized the "otherness" of existence, the poet endeavors to move out and become part of this in "Prayer Before Study". Unlike "Epidermal

Macabre" which divorces the spiritual self from the temporal and loathes the temporal, "Prayer Before Study" views the self as a unity and scorns the self: "A fool can play at being solemn/ Revolving on his spinal column." (24) This prayer to escape the self remains only a prayer here, for "My Dim-Wit Cousin" is centripetal. The relative becomes part of the individual, invades the privacy of the body of the speaker: "I heard your laughter rumble from my belly." (25).

Transcendence over these two motions, centripetal and centrifugal, is sought in "Verse With Allusions". Centrifugal motion is rejected in the second couplet: "Thrice happy they.../Who want no more than Fingers seize,/ And scorn the Abstract Entities." and centripetal in the next couplet: "The Higher Things in Life do not/ Invade their privacy of Thought." (25) These two directions of the self - inclusion and exclusion, openness and closedness - cannot be transcended in this poem so much as they can be ignored. "Ignorance is Bliss" is perhaps the only allusion excluded, but it remains the dominant concept. The acceptance of life, of "Human Nature's Daily Food", is the goal. The couplet again serves to diminish, as do the alluded cliches, but this diminishing is valued for its stability.

> They feed the Sense, deny the Soul
> But view things steadily and whole.

I, starveling yearner, seem to see
Much logic in their Gluttony.
(25)

The search for identity in the world has been solved - theoretically - by denying the question. The solution in "Verse With Allusions" may be contrasted to that of the Bhagavad-Gita, for it seems deliberately antithetical to this work in which the senses are transcended as "Higher Things in Life" not only invade, but become the individual. The phenomenal ego is transcended, becoming the eternal self.

The view of life in "Verse With Allusions" is, in short, a logical gluttony. It is far more reasonable to limit one's vision to oneself and one's immediate environment. It is with this desire that the fifth section of Open House is begun, the desire to objectively, narrowly evaluate the world outside.

There are two poems which determine the structure of Part V. The first and the last poems represent a similar phenomenal view, and antithetical reactions to the phenomena of the United States. Both the Clairvoyant Widow and the train rider of "Night Journey" perceive a large area of the country, but the widow sees from a higher perspective, looking at God's country from her attic window in her hilltop house. The traveller has no perspective in "Night Journey", and merely senses things as they pass. Also, the widow looks in the day, and sees clearly defined objects

which can clearly be enumerated. The traveller stares "into the night" and sees, not countable items of urbania such as "ten million windows" or "ten thousand streets" (27), but suggestions of natural phenomena - "A suddenness of trees,/ A lap of mountain mist" (34). The key distinction in the two poems is between "seeing", objective vision, and "feeling", subjective acceptance. This accounts for all the distinctions in the poems, from the strident social criticism of "Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow" and the open acceptance of "the land I love" in "Night Journey" to the awkward and rigid verse structure of "Clairvoyant Widow" and the imitative rumbling of the train in "Night Journey". The final section of Open House develops the quest for a meaningful communication with the world outside the self, and moves from the "intellectual outrage" of "Clairvoyant Widow" to the emotional acceptance of "Night Journey".

Three references are made to transportation in the "Clairvoyant Widow" poem. "The river harbour" is "alive with men and ships" and "The men on rail and roadway keep moving on and on." (28) In some ways this vision seems indeed an optimistic one. The movements, however, are without goals; activity is undirected. In later works Roethke defines this energy and its purpose, and here and in the whole of Part V it has to be "felt". In the "Clairvoyant Widow" the goal is not felt, and the final

couplets have a ring of insincerity, with figures strained for rather than found. "Grandpa's" survival is just not the epitome of civilization.

In a letter to Earl Robinson, a song arranger who wanted to put "Clairvoyant Widow" to music, Roethke took offense at Robinson's criticism of the lack of human interest in the last verse, and pointed out "grandpa", the surgeon, and the others.[18] It is nevertheless clear that in this song, there is no hope for humanity per se. ,It is a natural energy that includes but extends beyond the human race that provides the source of hope. The Widow sees, albiet remotely, the outcome of the concluding section. From disgust with society, the vision grows to include and transcend human limitations, and peace is found in an objective view of the recycling of nature.

The "knave who scampered through the needle's eye" (28) is one who succeeds in our social darwinian system. His crimes, of crushing his inferiors, of fearlessness, of insolence, are legalized in the kind of world the widow sees. He is, in fact, a high priest of progress "beyond the touch of mortal laws." "The Favorite", following Robinson's "Richard Corey" tradition, is unsatisfied, and the cause of his disquietude the very fact that he <u>is</u> "beyond the <u>touch</u> of mortal laws" (28, emphasis supplied). The "oyster world" of "The Favorite" is both the world of money and the world of isolation,

what N.O. Brown calls "shellfishness". He longs, therefore, "to <u>feel</u> the <u>impact</u> of defeat" (28, emphasis supplied).

With the knowledge of the implications of "The Favorite" the speaker in "The Reminder" reviews his parents' admirable efficiency, and noting the disorder of his present life, cherishes "one scrap of illusion", the clock, the notion that "precision" is "ultimate law" (29). This theme, to which Roethke again and again returns, is an extension of the yeatsian dilemma: To what extent must one be in conscious control, removed from the dirt of life, to create? The parental compulsiveness of "Reminder" is analogous to the free enterprise system of the first two poems, and the aesthetic removal of Yeats' saint, in one respect. They are intellectual systems which enable one to cope with reality - and are opposed to feeling, both sensory and emotional.

The personality of "The Gentle", unlike Yeats in his development, does not return to "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart", but is even farther removed from feeling. It is this "studied inane" (29) that is the cause of failure. The journey has no purpose, only a "dubious mission" which enables the hiker to complain of "exquisite pain" from a dead bunion (29) and is therefore antithetical to the concluding journey of Part V. The feeling is manufactured from within, a "delicate" artful creation, and is therefore a negation of life: "Though

home is not happy, where else can he go?". The manufactured pain can only lead to external failure, to "honorable mention" because it has no connection with the external world.

The inevitable failure of the self directed man is dealt with in "The Reckoning". It becomes impossible to control the world and the self and keep them separate. We fail ultimately because we want to remain limited, to keep from dangerous journies, and dangerous feeling, to be able to progress endlessly in ways which must deny large segments of reality. The artist in "The Gentle" fails in his art for his desire to create his own feelings to keep in control; the capitalist fails because he assumed he could continue to accumulate vast sums without concern for a higher order which places the poor above the penny. The context of "The Reckoning" is so general it is not limited to the characters of Part V of Open House. Suddenly the pronoun is "we". This whitmanian "we" includes the reader, forming an identity with the reader that was impossible in Part I when the attempt to form relationships was thwarted by the sort of distrust exhibited in "Open House" and explained in "Prognosis", or even later in "Reply to Censure". This inclusion is part of the goal of Open House and has come about through a negation of the private journey, an awareness that the very assumptions which initiated Open House lead to imperfect poetry as well as ridiculous poets.

Once again, in "The Reckoning", the journey metaphor directs us to the problem of purpose. "What we are seeking is a fare/ One way, a chance to be secure." (30) The journey, however, is down a blind alley, for "we", in our private narrow visions, do not acknowledge more basic needs. Both a societal and poetic failing, the need for security, for unity, once acknowledged, may enable basic changes to be made.

Again the central poem in the section is pivotal: "Lull" points out the goal. Often considered an imitation of Auden's "September 1, 1939", "Lull" is noteworthy for its basic differences. The underlying goal of mankind is love in "Lull", but other factors block this natural desire. "The winds of hatred blow/ Cold, cold across the flesh/ And chill the anxious heart" (31), is a concept certainly not present in Auden, for in "September 1, 1939", these feelings do not enter into the heart, but are an irritant from without:

> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth
> Obsessing our private lives.

Auden finds no conflict in these external influences, for man is at the root egotistic and isolated.

> For the error bred in the bone
> Of each woman and each man
> Craves what it cannot have
> Not universal love
> But to be loved alone.

The final lines of "Lull" are, on the contrary, a last moment acknowledgement of the real purpose which the external winds have confused: "...out of frightened eyes/ Still stares the wish to love." (31) Once this acknowledgement is made in Open House, the healing process can begin.

The major distinction between Auden's and Roethke's poems is the historical one. "Lull" was written about a time when the world was waiting for the war to break, the time called the "phoney war", and the direction of the world could have moved either towards love or hate. Two months before, in September, Hitler had just invaded Danzig and war was a certainty. The fact that Auden's apprehensions were borne out in history and Roethke's were not is unimportant in the work, for although this statement may have proved historically untrue, it is structurally crucial: As the relationship to society grows, it transcends society's actual limitations.

The "sale" in the next poem, quite logically, is of collective limitations to love - fears, "an attic of horrors, a closet of fears" ; ancestral superstitions, "grandfather's sinister hovering hand"; history, "some watery eyes in a Copley head"; dying structures, " a fume of decay that clings fast to the wood"; and, most essentially inbreeding, closedness, "And the taint in the blood that was running too thin" (32). Closedness, the major theme of Open House, is now completely rejected. And the three poems which con-

clude the book are written from an open, inclusive vision.

One driver, killed in a crash in an automobile he himself had helped to construct, is the sacrificial lamb of "Highway: Michigan" (33). He betrays the limitations of our age in which we think we are moving ahead, but it is "the lack that keeps us where we are" ("The Reckoning", 30) and it is a kind of suicide. Certainly this form of existence is a closed circle. The poet, who now joins his fellow man, is no longer involved in this race to nowhere: "We" are at the field's edge to "survey/ the progress of the jaded." (33) and watch as the drivers perform their social ritual. The alternative to the life he has chosen, suicide, is viewed from his open perspective.

"We" are beyond all the limitations of our planet as "we go to our beds at the edge of a meadow," (33) localized and limited, and yet superior in our vision, "unmindful of terror and headlines, of speeches and guns." (33) Emily Dickinson, in the same vein, wrote, "How wonderful the news is! Not Bismark, but ourselves!" and has been misinterpreted in the same way as has "Idyll". Both are visionary.

"Idyll" attempts to include and accept the whole journey of the self, and catalogues choice images from each section, accepting each stage as part, the whole of which has been encompassed in a vision of love. "The drunk man... absorbed in self talk" (33) is an image for Part I, and

succeeding images retrace the journey until "The world recedes in the black revolving shadow," (the growth of emotional perspective) and "We" conclude where we are, in a drowsy acceptance.

"Night Journey" picks up where "Idyll" leaves off, and, refusing to remain in the somnolent suburban paradise, moves out into the country to embrace it. The journey has found a direction, a purpose: the loving encounter with the world. "I stay up half the night/ To see the land I love." (34) "We" are passengers with the poet, and journey with him, but the encounter, although universal, is unique, and the speaker must shift to the first person singular to describe his physical union with the world.

The use of imitative form is another sign of the acceptance of the interrelationship of internal and external, of the self and the world. Rather than imposing a preconceived pattern upon the thoughts (as he does, for example, in "The Light Comes Brighter"), Roethke has created a rhythmic pattern that is integral to the action.

It is the darkness, however, that is the most significant factor. The affirmation of darkness as the source of vision is the major breakthrough of "Night Journey" and, quite possibly, the greatest lesson Roethke was to learn in <u>Open House</u>. There is no way to know the

self, to know nature, to know the world, except through the darkness of the senses. All of Roethke's poetry after *Open House* proceeds from this assumption.