

Chapter V: The Final Secret

Both inner and outer reality the same: the final secret.¹

More criticism of Roethke has been written on The Far Field than on any of his other works. These articles alternately charge Roethke with tiresome repetition and praise his last volume as validly fulfilling his poetic potential. The former criticism, made by such distinguished men as W.D. Snodgrass, Stephen Spender, and Karl Malkoff, is the most dangerous to a clear reading of this work. For although the two middle sequences are problematical, Mrs. Roethke having removed some of the poems and added others, it is most significant to the volume that it moves from rejection of this world, to a unity with it. Beginning with a wish to escape, the protagonist moves to a desire for yeatsian "objectivity", and a genuine I-Thou relationship in love permitted by the movement towards objectivity. Then, confronted with natural reality - including God and death, he comes to embrace the limitations of human existence, and by embracing, transcends; a familiar direction, but a different level. For in this last work, the true spirality of Roethke's journey becomes clear: poetry actually spirals itself out of existence, developing to a point beyond language.

"To write poetry: you have to be prepared to die"², Roethke writes in his last years; indicating, not that suicide is the fate of those who dig too deeply into the self (As A. Alvarez suggests in his studies of Sylvia Plath³) but that the ultimate direction of poetry is a transcendence to a state beyond words.

Roethke's late notebook entries reveal a greater awareness of this purpose. "The idea of poetry itself is a vast metaphor."⁴ As poetry comes to be conceived as a metaphor for cosmic unity, the poet himself becomes a kind of prophet perceiving in the encompassable poem the unencompassable universe.

The technical equivalent for this conception is the oxymoron, which Kenneth Burke explains, expresses the mythic image of platonic transcendence, "combining contradictory elements in a single expression"⁵. Like the metaphysical conceit, the oxymoron expresses the unity of the universe and is therefore religious. Although Roethke's use of oxymoron does increase in The Far Field, more important is the concept of poetry as oxymoron, as a religious creation. "You must believe: a poem is a holy thing - a good poem, that is."⁶ It is only of this last work that this is true.

Although the oxymoron characterized Roethke's first collected poem, "Open House", the distinction between the two unities is one of consciousness. Thus, when Roethke's

protagonist first complained, "I'm naked to the bone,/
With nakedness my shield" (3) the unity implied confusion,
rather than fusion. This consciousness is of course what
differentiates the level of Roethke's first book from his
last. The objectivity of the protagonist is the crucial
distinction.

"Perhaps the poet's path is closer to the mystic than
we think: his thought becomes more imageless"⁷. This
statement, possibly a reference to Underhill's "The im-
mediate vision of the naked Godhead is without doubt the
pure truth: a vision is to be esteemed the more noble the
more intellectual it is, the more it is stripped of all
image and approaches the state of pure contemplation"⁸,
links poetic image with mystical vision.

If the direction of poetry is toward imageless
thought, then poetry eventually self destructs. As more
elements become absorbed into the realm of pure contem-
plation, poetry and vision together becomes one vast oxy-
moron. Images gradually disappear as everything becomes
equated. Words do not mean one thing but all things - each
word becomes the logos. And poetry, the ladder to transcen-
dent reality, is no longer needed. For a dedicated poet of
fifty five years to say, as Roethke did, that The Far Field
was his final work⁹, indicates, I believe, that Roethke had
gone as far as possible, that the word itself had been
outleaped. Yeats says of Phase One, complete objectivity,

"The images of the mind are no longer irrelevant even, for there is no longer anything to which they can be relevant."¹⁰ Certainly this is the final stage of Roethke's journey, and his direction throughout his works. In "Meditation at Oyster River", Roethke propo-
hesies:

In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,
A shining.

(192)

referring to Yeats, and foreseeing his own poetic trans-
cendence.

As a model for the growth of a poet's mind and the development of poetry, mysticism which elevates poetry out of existence is logical and even inevitable, like the progress of the prophet Elijah who became so holy that his death was a transitional elevation: he was carried up in a fiery chariot "by a whirlwind into heaven" (II Kings, 2:11). Roethke's final collected poem is between these two stages of existence - existence in the world on a refined, "holy", passive, all-encompassing manner, and a purely spiritual existence, beyond both the cycle of existence and the cycle of poetry.

The beginning is, as it is always, in the dreck, the cloacum upon which the church will be built. But quite obviously the "kingdom of stinks and sighs" which opens the North American Sequence is not on the same level of

expression as the "congress of stinks" in "Root Cellar". For although the stinks are the same, and creativity will be engendered through the very filth, the dimensions are different. The single most important factor in this poem is that it concerns America, an external reality far more extensive than the greenhouse, the "my lost world". Concomitant with the dimensions is the consciousness: plants may grow without knowing they grow; a country, and an attitude toward a country, must be willed. The protagonist appears here, consequently, as a guide, like the old fishing guide¹¹ of which Roethke writes in his journals, seasoned in the wilderness, a kind and gentle teacher as well as an enthusiastic participant. He is no longer a boy growing up, helpless before the conditions which form his character.

The kingdom to be transcended is one of unconscious emptiness, a parody of serious confrontation: crucifixion takes place on barstools, as surfeit substitutes for depth. Existence is fragmented: synecdoche both reveals the action and its fragmentation and purposelessness. "Hands active, eyes cherished" (187). The lust which "fatigues the soul" is a purposeless desire, fragmented and multidirectional and therefore tiring. Hands are therefore defined as active, but "active" is an adjective, not a verb, since there is no will in activity. The predicateless sentence,

Less and less the illuminated lips,
 Hands active, eyes cherished;
 Happiness left to dogs and children -
 (Matters only a saint mentions!)
 (187)

serves a similar function, so that we are not told what becomes "less and less", since nothing "becomes" but just is.

In short the "kingdom of stinks and sighs" has no productive regenerative value; unlike the odiferous castoreum which is used in medicine as well as perfume, the petroleum, dead fish, and cockroaches, end products of society, dirt and pollution, prevent new growth. The "sensual emptiness" to be transcended then is not the emptiness of sensuality (as in "The Sensualists") but the lack of sensual fulfillment. The "dreams", of progress, of national fulfillment, have wiped out potential for both spiritual and sensual growth, having lost contact with human reality.

The dominant image of The Great Gatsby, the eye-glasses of Dr. Eckleberg staring out unseeing at the vast human wasteland, is similar to the image of the spirit here, "An eyeless starrer" (187). In the comparison of the spirit with the slug and the worm there is incipient resurrection, however. The spirit is forced to retreat, to hibernate, but does not die, and it is indeed with this symbol of incipient rebirth that the protagonist wishes to identify, "naked as a worm" (188). To be as

vulnerable and as low as a slug or a worm is to be open for transformation.

Humility coupled with pride is characteristic of this phase, and the protagonist is quite aware of this danger. In Phase Twenty Four, "there is great humility ...and pride as great, pride in the code's acceptance, an impersonal pride, as though one were to sign "servant of servants"¹². Roethke writes:

A wretch needs his wretchedness. Yes
O Pride, thou art a plume upon whose head?
(188)

The protagonist of "The Longing" is far more conscious of the phase and its pitfalls. And here it becomes obvious that the moon cycle is on the point of being outgrown by the protagonist:

Who'd think the moon could pare itself so thin?
A great flame rises from the sunless sea;
The light cries out, and I am there to hear -
I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon,
(188)

One may find, in Roethke's journals, a similar desire to transcend these human limitations of Yeats. Yeats writes of Phase Twenty Four:

That which characterises all phases of the last quarter, with an increasing intensity, begins now to be plain: persecution of instinct - race is transformed into a moral conception...¹³

And sometime between 1954-8 Roethke writes:

Nietzsche and Whitman my fathers: and yet I cannot worship power. I hate power: I reject it.¹⁴

Interestingly enough, it is, apparently, Yeats himself

who balances the thrust toward autocracy in this last phase. Roethke writes:

I have two fathers in eternity:
And each called out of stone the living tree:
The one, a thin-lipped Hun,
And that Irishman
Who taught me how to wear a ragged sleeve...¹⁵

Roethke does indeed succeed in going "beyond the moon" in these last poems, but through the phases themselves; and although he thinks himself "free", "all alone", and therefore able to create a new self, a new direction, in "Meditation at Oyster River" he chooses to seek the "first of the moon", despite the danger.

Going "beyond the moon", it should be noted, is itself a part of Yeats' pattern, and the desire of the protagonist for spiritual comprehension, for objectivity, is the dominating force in the second and third sections. The numerous wishes may be summarized as a general desire to escape all limitations of self, and/or to achieve what Yeats calls "the supreme dream of the alchemist, the transmutation of the weary heart into a weariless spirit."¹⁶ For although the protagonist has "left the mouth of the whale," he can see the world only with self-distorted eyes. This prophetic limitation is parallel to the story of Jonah, the strange prophet who fled God fearing that if he preached to Nineveh, the people would repent and be spared.¹⁷ The amazing egotism of Jonah, who presumes from his limited perspective to direct the

divinity, is often overlooked, and yet Jonah remains unrepentant and uncomprehending to the end. Roethke's protagonist passes through Jonah's limitation.

Even as the speaker expresses the pure desire to unite with nature, to be a part of the divine universe, the out-of-phase Jonah within holds back.¹⁸ This schizophrenia must be surmounted.

I would with the fish....

....
The children dancing, the flowers widening.
Who sighs from far away?

I would unlearn the lingo of exasperation, all the
distortions of malice and hatred;
(188)

To go beyond this out-of-phase schizophrenia, the "distortions of malice and hatred", typical to Phase Twenty Four, is to begin a long arduous journey. But if, as Eliot says in "East Coker", all men should be explorers, for Roethke the khaki-clad, safari-bound intellectual is not the answer. Instead he chooses to be a native, an Indian exploring his own land; and an Iroquois, of the rejuvenative lakes rather than the rotting plains.

From this beginning with foreknowledge of the end, the poems proceed in an orderly, predictable, purposeful pattern. If "The Longing" is a shaping of vague emotions from disgust to desire, "Meditation at Oyster River" is a regathering of forces, a search for the means to achieve that desire. "Journey to the Interior", the detour, brings the only surprise to this sequence, the

sudden recognition that the journey out and the journey in are the same. And the final three poems follow from this hericlitean recognition, to a greater comprehension and acceptance of this amazing truth.

Water imagery dominating the sequence affords the simplest access to the movement of the poems. Fresh water in these poems is usually equated with the self and salt water with cosmic unity, and it is the trip through these waters to the point where "sea and fresh water meet," (202) which is explored by the Iroquois navigator.

In the poem, "Meditation at Oyster River", one additional factor must be considered, the geography. Geography is primary because external geography and the internal state of identity are identical. And Oyster River is a peculiar place, if not geographically, then symbolically. Both fresh and salt water are here, but are separated from each other by a barrier of small stones. There is interchange - shellfish can be found in fresh water - and this interchange intensifies the symbolism. For the speaker is an oyster in the waters of self, afraid to become a part of the sea.

As the tide begins to move over the stones, the speaker, identified with fresh water, approaches the sea, then withdraws.

At last one long undulant ripple,
 Blue-black from where I am sitting,
 Makes almost a wave over the barrier of small stones,
 Slapping lightly against a sunken log.
 I dabble my toes in the brackish foam sliding
 forward,
 Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliff-side.
 (190)

The wind, also equated with a universal spirit, "slackens" as the waves roll back, individuality triumphs and the dying self falsely revives. The log, symbol of the self from Love Poems in Words for the Wind, resists the inevitable destruction, and the fish raven (another apt image for the "fishing" explorer, who has been alternately in the later works a fisher of various sorts, as in "cat after vasty fishes" in "Give Way, Ye Gates", 79) preens on its dead perch in the rivermouth, like the self which "persists like a dying star,/ In sleep, afraid" (190).

Despite the desire to unite fresh with salt water, then, the barrier of stones, of self, remains, and needs a veritable dynamite blast to break the dam. The meditative stance of the old woman, so crucial to that point in the development of objectification, has a limited function here: the passivity here is more of a meditative treading water than an actual journey.

In contemplating natural existence, the speaker at first links his self persistence to the life instincts of the animals, but suddenly shifts his perspective to the

contemplation of the nonindividuality of the animal, to the generic role which individual animals continually fulfill. The syntax here is the key:

Death's face rises afresh,
 Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt lick,
 The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across
 the highway,
 The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting
 for its fly,
 The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to
 morning-glory, -
 With these I would be.

(190)

The subject shifts from examples of "shy beasts", self preserving creatures, to the "young snake", who is pictured as indistinguishable from its surroundings, and the hummingbird whose self-preservation is simultaneously procreative: its individual task fulfills other forms of life. And the tone shifts here, from the fear of "Death's face", to a desire to unite with all those creatures who play their timeless roles unconscious of their individual temporality.

The shifts, then, in the next sentence, to water, coordinates the symbols - cosmic identity of the sea is related to the supra-temporality of animal existence.

And with water: the waves coming forward, without
 cessation,
 The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp,
 miscellaneous driftwood,
 Topped by cross-wind, tugged at by sinuous
 undercurrents
 The tide rustling un, sliding between the ridges
 of stone,
 The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.

(191)

The catalogue of nature has of course an inward relevance; registering the desire for passivity and non-entity, purposelessness, the superiority to time and space.

Awareness of this ultimate desire of self for self-transcendence, "this first heaven of knowing" (191), is itself a partial break in the log jam. The physical placement of the individual in the "symbol" brings a physical and intellectual knowing. And the mental process, consciously and incompletely, breaks the division:

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;
 And that wrist thick cascade tumbling from a cleft
 rock,
 Its spray holding a double rain-bow in early
 morning,
 Small enough to be taken in, embraced, by two arms,-
 Or the Tittewawasee, in the time between winter and
 spring,
 When the ice melts along the edges in early after-
 noon.
 And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving from
 the pressure beneath,
 The ice piling high against the iron-bound spiles,
 Gleaming, freezing hard again, creaking at midnight-
 And I long for the blast of dynamite,
 The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its
 debris of branches and sticks,
 Welter of tin cans, pails, old birds nests, a
 child's shoe riding a log,
 As the piled ice breaks away from the battered
 spiles,
 And the whole river begins to move forward, its
 bridges shaking.

(191)

The catalogue here, with its long whitmanesque lines, functions as an incantation, pushing - with its series of accented syllables followed by series of unaccented

syllables - against the "debris of branches and sticks", the remnants of personal memories and recognizable symbols, the rigidity - learned and seasonal, until the ice breaks. Unlike the knowledge typical to Roethke, which comes when passively awaited, this breakthrough is forced, and is therefore only valid upon the level which it is manipulated, the conscious and the intellectual.

The "blast of dynamite" does not really happen, but is still longed for. Like the "wish for an illness, something I can get my teeth into" of "The Lost Son" era, the blast is conceived as a major change in the concept of self. Whereas the "illness" was something to bring the poet closer to his identity, the longed for dynamite blast is an annihilation of identity, an explosion of the ice-dam of self. The attempt to lose the self is also the attempt to break the individualization of symbols. Two major symbols of earlier poetry, the child and the log, primary symbols for the individualization process and the state of identity, are also part of the log jam, and to break this jam would be to rid the self of self and image as well.

Shifting to shorter lines of pulsing anapests, Section 4 becomes a part of the rolling water, as the speaker forces himself to identify with the cosmic order, aware of the brilliance of unity, but fearful of the danger of loss of self. The loss of all boundaries is an

attractive intellectual concept and the protagonist thinks he is willing to risk it.

And the spirit runs, intermittently,
 In and out of the small waves,
 Runs with the intrepid shorebirds -
 How graceful the small before danger!
 (192)

The tentative coyness of this passage, oxymoronic in its union of fear and desire, reveals how far the protagonist has to go. Loss of self is still danger, and the speaker is still at the stage where he can only flirt with the idea of union with the universe.

The title of the next poem, in this context, is not as confusing as critics have made it. The "Journey to the Interior" follows through with this paradoxical attitude to its logical conclusion.

The dangers of the journey are many; one may be diminished into non-entity altogether like the "Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain" (193), or lose oneself in one's own enthusiasm, rushing too quickly into death, like the "creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood roaring into the narrow valley" (193). These two possibilities have been pointed out by the old lady in her meditations. But there is also a new danger: one may take a wrong path, seeming to come to the source of self and existence in general, only to become lost:

Or the path narrowing,
 Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp
 stones,

the upland of alder and birchtrees,
 Through the swamp alive with quicksand,
 The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree,
 The thickets darkening,
 The ravines ugly.

(193)

This indeed is the greatest danger, that the path which seems to take one out to universal comprehension leads only to solipsistic schizophrenia.

Despite this danger, the protagonist takes his chances, coming as close to things as possible, driving himself through life, from childhood to the cemetery; and finds suddenly, that he is beyond the river of time/self, that he has driven off the road of life, the detour, and has joined with "the slow sea of a grassy plain" (194). Again Roethke uses the catalogue, again for a different purpose. The flora and fauna exist, and can be enumerated in their various stages of life: these contrast to the singularity of the speaker's state of being beyond time (for which shorter, more heavily accented lines are used) until the unity with the sea.

And all flows past -
 The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle
 of the prairie,
 The dead snakes and muscrats, the turtle gasping
 in the rubble,
 The spikey purple bushes in the winding dry creek
 bed -
 The floating hawks, the jackrabbits, the grazing
 cattle -
 I am not moving but they are.

.....
 I rise and fall, and time folds
 Into a long moment;

(194)

The single most important fact concerning this state of being is that by going into the interior of the self, he has gone beyond to the interior of reality. Of the plain he has made the sea, and sea it is. If the field is life, then the far field is eternity, eternal life. And this far field is within and without, like the sea which as early as "River Incident" (49) is discovered to be in the veins of the speaker. To transform this far field into the sea, as the speaker does in this section, is to make eternity, non-entity, fertile, creative, and passive. In the fields of life there is frantic movement, but the speaker remains motionless: he is beyond the individual movement and is controlled by the rise and fall of the sea.

I see the flower of all water, above and below
 me, the never receding,
 Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the
 moonlight:

(194)

The major indiosyncratic symbols of Roethke begin to melt together as vision becomes imageless. Thus the plain, the field, which as early as "In Praise of Prairie" (OH, 13) is given its symbolic value, blends with the flower - characteristic of The Lost Son period - and the sea. The unity of symbols under the white moon, presumably the moon at its full, is a moment of perfection, but yet not relevant to the "parched land", the wasteland which began the North American Sequence.

In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but
 does not fall,
 I have known the heart of the sun,
 (194)

Beyond existence, he is therefore isolated and locked into a kind of Bell Jar (similar to that of Sylvia Plath), suddenly suspended from time and the unity with other creatures. But one may be beyond time and not be trapped in a bell jar, and it is this recognition which reverses the direction of the "Journey to the Interior", the awareness that all may be eternal, that time may not be progressional and he "in a place leading nowhere (195). All life may be united in transcendent cooperation. Solipsism is cosmic.

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.
 (195)

No longer an eyeless starrer, he is a blind seer.

To "reject the world of the dog/ Though he hear a note higher than C" (196) is to reject the "detour" of "Journey to the Interior", solipsistic transcendence. Both the temporal and the eternal must be brought together, as well as both interior and exterior existence. "The Long Waters" attempts this union by arriving at a physical symbol for the metaphysical union, "...the

charred edge of the sea/...Where the fresh and salt waters meet/.../ A country of bays and inlets and small streams flowing seaward" (196), "...a landlocked bay, where salt water is freshened/ By small streams running down under fallen fir trees" (197).

This place brings the protagonist to his culminating vision, the archetype of the child.

I see in the advancing and retreating waters
The shape that came from my sleep, weeping:
The eternal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,
The numinous ring around the opening flower,
The friend that runs before me on the windy head-
lands,
Neither voice nor vision.
(198)

To the archetype of the child (sometimes appearing "in the cup of a flower...or as the center of a mandala"¹⁹) Jung assigns a number of meanings, summed up in his article, "The Child as Beginning and End".

Psychologically speaking...the "child" symbolizes the pre-conscious and the post-conscious nature of man. His pre-conscious is the unconscious state of earliest childhood; his post conscious nature is an anticipation by analogy of life after death. In this idea the all-embracing nature of psychic wholeness is expressed....The "eternal child" in man is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a disadvantage, and a divine prerogative; an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality.²⁰

Since the phrase, "the eternal one, the child" may very well come directly from Jung, and in general the verse seems tailor made to Jung's specifications, a further comparison may be necessary. The "advancing and retreat-

ing waters", the sea waters which now alternately mix with the fresh waters and retreat, bring back to the speaker the state which begins Praise to the End! - pre-consciousness - and now signals a return to this unity of consciousness in which Jung calls post-consciousness. Archetypes of unity include the ring of light and the flower, but Roethke is not listing archetypes: he is joining them together, all symbols of unity becoming something that is beyond symbol, more than a sum of its parts, "Neither voice nor vision".

But this overwhelming image is only glimpsed here, it is "the friend that runs before me on the windy headlands", and seems to have another quality of which Jung writes, the prefiguration of death and/or the prefiguration of a major change in the individual. Jung writes:

The child paves the way for a future change of personality. In the individuation process, it anticipates the figure that comes from the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. It is therefore a unifying symbol which unites the opposites; a mediator, bringer of healing, that it, one who makes whole.²¹

And only in the future poems will the speaker be made whole.

Further, Jung claims that the vision of a child is, "as we know, conditional to a dissociation having previously taken place between past and present."²² And in the last lines of "The Long Waters", all these significances are united, as past and future are gathered

together in a vast embrace.

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.

(198)

His union with the sea will not be in the form of the
 "slow sinking of the island peninsula" (196), but will
 be like "long waters", freshening the salt waters.

The embracing of the world, possibly another detour
 or dead end, begins with an embracing of the past and the
 minimal, the small as it had been defined in previous
 works. The fear of loss of self, learned at "the field's
 end" (199), the end of life, can now be faced:

I learned not to fear infinity,
 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
 The wheel turning away from itself,
 The sprawl of the wave,
 The oncoming water.

(200)

The immediate result of the acceptance of death, of the
 progress of time, is not a loss, but an enlargement of
 self. The acceptance of the concept of mortality, the
 renunciation of escape, enlarges the individual as it
 enlarges his consciousness. Roethke's "I am renewed by
 death, thought of my death" (201), is closely akin to
 Tillich's "The self affirmation of a being is the stronger
 the more nonbeing it can take into itself."²³

And this is in itself a transcendence, " a point outside the glittering current" (207), because it combines both the eternal and the infinite in the individual and the temporal into one existence. Death transcends life. "Life is renewed by death because it is again and again set free from what would otherwise become an insufferable burden of memory and monotony."²⁴

The lost self changes,
 Turning toward the sea,
 A sea-shape turning around, -
 An old man with his feet before the fire,
 In robes of green, in garments of adieu.
 (201)

The resemblances to Proteus in the above lines have been well documented by Stanley Kunitz, but the extent to which Prospero is evoked is also worthy of note. Prospero's greatest achievement is his magical conquering of both the spirit (Ariel) and the flesh (Caliban) for a creative purpose (marriage, restoration of kingdom, and justice) and his renunciation of these magical powers, his return to mortality, to humanity.

I hate power: I reject it.²⁵

Thus does Prospero agree in lines which are echoed throughout the North American Sequence and which therefore must be reproduced here despite their familiarity.

I have bedimmed
 The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
 And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
 Set roaring war. To the dread rattling thunder
 Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
 With his own bolt. The strong-based promontory

Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
 The pine and cedar. Graves at my command
 Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
 By my so potent art. But this rough magic
 I here abjure, and when I have required
 Some heavenly music - which even now I do -
 To work my end upon their senses, that
 This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
 Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound
 I'll drown my book.

(The Tempest, V,i,41-57)

The man who has conquered life and death, the sea and the heavens, the four elements, all in fact that the speaker of the first half of North American Sequence would conquer, rejects all to become a man, "the final man" (201). With full consciousness, full power is rejected to become a completed human being. It is this factor which provides the connection between the first two verses of Section 4. "In robes of green, in garments of adieu" (201) he turns from transcendence, to participation in the world (thus the green robes) and faces the human situation, "his own immensity" (201), thus moving towards God (a Dieu).

He has not rejected the eternal and the infinite, but has found that "final secret", that inner and outer reality are identical. "All finite things reveal infinitude" (201). And in this knowledge he has both lost the self and found it. He has regressed to "a single stone", but

A ripple widening from a single stone
 Winding around the waters of the world.
 (201)

Ludwig Binnswanger, founder of the school of Existential Psychoanalysis, sees this concept as central to modern existential thought.

Only...through the concept of being-in-the-world as transcendence has the fatal defect of all psychology been overcome and the road cleared for anthropology [the study of man], the fatal defect being the theory of a dichotomy of world into subject and object. On the basis of that theory, human existence has been reduced to a mere subject, to a worldless rump subject in which all sorts of happenings, events, functions occur, which has all sorts of traits and performs all sorts of acts, without anybody, however, being able to say (notwithstanding theoretical constructs) how the subject can ever meet an "object" and can communicate and arrive at an understanding with other subjects. In contrast, being-in-the-world implies always being in the world with beings such as I, with coexistents.²⁶

With this discovery in North American Sequence the road is cleared for a new beginning.

The loss of transcendent vision which begins "The Rose" has been accepted in earlier poems, and the tone of "The Rose" is comparable to that of "A Light Breather".

The spirit moves,
 Yet stays:
 Stirs as a blossom stirs,

 Unafraid of what it is,
 A music in a hood,
 A small thing,
 Singing.
 (101)

The poems which follow "A Light Breather", however, deny this kind of vision which ignores reality. Death, decay and isolation were not the foundations of "The Dream". The affirmation of "The Rose", then, is doubly difficult

and doubly secure, precisely because it is rooted in reality, in "being-in-the-world". Though in "the seawind", the rose is "Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light" (205).

The rose, furthermore, is not an evanescent vision. As "the traveller" (No longer of necessity an explorer and/or Indian) rolls with the rocking boat, his "motion" continuing, the rose too "stays" yet moves "with the waves" (203). And yet it is comparable to the roses of the lost greenhouse heaven, the unity of vision of childhood, in which the father, as God, raised the child above himself to attain a complete picture of the vast field of flowers. The return to the rose, to silence, to unity, makes Macbeth's description a suitable picture of individual existence:

It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V,v,26-8)

One need only reverse the underlying attitude to find the roethkean parallel. For Roethke has battled with Macbeth's position. Life begins and ends in silence, interrupted by "sound and fury", but its significance is different because the definition of "idiot" is different. The "idiot" is the unspoiled, the unlearned, and his tale of nothingness is a tale of freedom. The poet, Theseus explains, gives to "nothing/ A local habitation and a

name" (A Midsummer Night's Dream, V,i,16-7). It is the silence which is fraught with creation, nothing which signifies everything.

Section 3 of "The Rose" returns to silence after a review of sound - sound which alienates; "the killdeer whistling away from me", which makes false associations, which imitates; "the mimetic chortling of the catbird", which communicates "the thin whine of telephone wires in the wind of a Michigan winter", sounds which signal destruction and hint of creation:

The shriek of nails as old shingles are ripped from
the top of a roof,
The bulldozer backing away, the hiss of the sand-
blaster,

(204)

Sound involves all that is involved in life, silence all that is beyond life, "the rock singing, and light making its own silence" (204). And just as the above description is of sounds which precede silence, the full state of the moon and its oncoming objectivity is anticipated: "I think of.../ The moon lolling in the close elm, a shimmer of silver..." suspended in time and space as "a drop of rain water hangs at the tip of a leaf" (204).

With silence is the light of vision and the stillness which transcends movement, with sound is darkness and movement and the two are joined in the final section. All is united in the rose - even inner and outer reality, the symbol and the thing.

And this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
 Gathering to itself sound and silence -
 Mine and the sea-wind's.

(205)

What comes together in "The Rose", then, is day and night, dry land and water, fresh and salt water, sound and silence, and the individual and universal spirit - all in a beautiful second where creation is decreed.

Although the "Love Poems" are obviously incomplete insofar as they are neither arranged in a traditional roethkean pattern nor are they balanced as other sequences are balanced, it is possible to perceive within the context of The Far Field a projected pattern for these poems. Malkoff points out that there are two groups of love poems, those of the young girl and those of the old man - two groups of poems which are united only in love.²⁷ For the poems of the young woman are earth-bound, individualistic, passionate, reflective, in short, of the whole process of individuation which is reflected in the poems of Words for the Wind. And the old man is above these concerns, far beyond the fear of loss of self in love since his concern is with death and the identity which transcends it.

There are, however, parallel poems which reveal the similarity of the two antithetical states. "Her Reticence", for example, may be compared with "The Shy Man", the former displaying the beautiful fear of being overwhelmed

by love, and the latter the desire for the ecstasy of becoming overwhelmed by love - prevented only by the last remnants of separation between individuals, shyness.

The poems of the young girl progress linearly through "The Young Girl", "Her Words", "Her Reticence", "Her Longing", and "Her Time", as she tries to accept love and mortality, culminating in "Song".

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

Through love the questions of eternity may be answered. The tone of this poem, however sophisticated the concept of self relativity, is impatient, youthful, demanding, conquering, tragic. The tone of the less organized and less completed poems of the old man is mellow, accepting, comic. Rage for the young girl is a question of power. Who or what will be victorious in battle? "Will the heart eat the heart?" (211). For the old man, rage vanishes when a goose pecks his toe, returning him to a comic perspective of existence.

But when she pecked my toe,
 My banked up vertigo
 Vanished like April snow;
 All rage was gone.
 ("The Happy Three", 213)

Thus though love remains a battle for power, the perspective of age makes of the battle a joy. And a poem such as "Her Wrath" treats the subject with a kind of

glee.

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

Love, in this incompleated poem (Line 2 is missing), is the purgatory which enables one to reach heaven.

Love, in this section, fulfills two functions. It reveals the actual disunity of existence (as opposed to the unified vision of "The Rose") and it affords the means by which one may taste unity. Perhaps the most symbolic lines of the group are in the sentimental final verse of "The Shy Man"; a kind of post metaphysical version of "Dover Beach".

The full moon has fallen, the night wind is down
 And I lie here thinking in bleak Bofin town
 I lie here thinking, 'I am not alone'.
 For here close beside me is O'Connell's
 laughter,
 And my lips they, my lips they,
 Say many a word,
 As we embrace by the high sea-wall.
 O! my lips they, my lips they,
 Say many a word,
 As we kiss by the high sea-wall.
 (216)

In Words for the Wind, love was given a function - socialization and/or transcendence. For the young girl, these functions remain, and her impatient questioning is caused by her expectations for fulfillment. Love is functionless for the old man, and therefore pure: with no expectations and needs, there can be none of the sharp

disappointment which characterizes the later love poems in Words for the Wind. Furthermore, there can be no problem of communication in his love, since there is complete communication between the two. Secrets need not be cried aloud when they are communicated through silent lips.

The love in "The Shy Man", however, is not the end of the quest. Although well disguised as sentimental apparatus, two of Roethke's major symbols, the sea and the moon, dominate the atmosphere, and their meaning is clear. The falling of the full moon indicates that although the time is almost right, the speaker is not. The kiss is a sea wall, keeping out the rest of the world by selectively uniting with one person. Although complete objectivity is imminent, it is avoided, or retarded, through love.

Not unsurprisingly, then, the next sequence, Mixed Sequence, begins with "The Abyss", a study in purgatory. It is perhaps an oversimplification to note that Mixed Sequence begins in "The Abyss" and ends with "The Moment", in "joy" (237), particularly since Mixed Sequence is apparently unfinished and is not untouched by hands other than those of the author, and yet in these sixteen poems there is a definite unity. Each poem appears to be a study, a step further out of purgatory and into a heaven. And the purgatory has been defined in "Love Poems" to be that which is treated humorously in "Heard In A Violent

Ward": the state in which the heights of vision are in direct opposition to external reality. External reality, in fact, threatens the reality of the vision. One thus may have love, may have an earthly union, but the kiss may take place only by the wall which keeps out the sea.

This dichotomy is the immediate cause of "The Abyss", existence denies meaning. The dramatic technique of beginning in medias res has a basis more in Kafka than in Underhill's mystic way, as Heyen suggests.²⁸ The speaker has been climbing stair after stair, only to be told that the next stair goes nowhere, that he can go no higher and take his world and himself with him. Only in Roethke's final collected poem is this fully accepted. One constantly sees in his poems the desire to progress, the push toward linear fulfillment - and the inevitable disappointment. Under this belief not to rise is to plummet. Not to advance means there is nowhere to advance, and to find oneself in a chaotic universe.

And the abyss? The abyss?
 'The abyss you can't miss:
 It's right where you are -
 A step down the stair.'
 (219)

The internal rhyme, the simple meter, gradually increase in stress until the last two lines which are almost entirely stressed, and childishly demonic; the answer to the speaker's question is given by a simply informative voice, another kafkaesque element. You are going no-

where, there is no possibility for order nor for redemption, the voice says, as unconcerned as if it were only giving nonsense directions to an infant.

The acme, high noon, has been reached, and it is a failure. Since he is one step below the stair that goes nowhere, he is in the abyss. Time and space thus become disoriented, as is logical when the goals of time and space are eliminated. The choppy two stress lines, stopping their thought at the end of the line even though the thought has not been logically completed, imitates the goalessness, the purposeless movement of the actual metaphysical state.

Each time ever
There always is
Noon of failure,
Part of a house.

In the middle of,
Around a cloud,
On top a thistle
The wind's slowing.
(219)

The house is denotative of a state of being, and here even in the depths of despair and disorientation the super-perspective of the speaker is obvious. He is aware of the continual circularity of existence, of the return and the escape from the abyss. And this circular voyage is necessary since in the cycle the peak does not provide a means of escape as, for example, the cycle of reincarnation can be interrupted, can be escaped through

the peak of nirvana. The second verse quoted above explains the closedness of the cycle and the consequent inertia of the spirit.

If "on top" is "a thistle", there is nothing to be gained by movement, by quest. And, characteristically, this negativity linked to passivity is the only key to escape. "Being, not doing, is my first joy" (222) claims the speaker at the conclusion of the poem. Passivity as an exit from the abyss has been seen many times before. But the steps are different in "The Abyss", being, as Heyen has pointed out, much closer to Underhill's mystic way than anything Roethke has before written.

A confession begins Section 2, a confession which reorients the ego to the self, a common enough theme for Roethke. But the reorientation is now turned to higher ends. By integrating himself he may become capable of comprehending or creating God.

To be worthy, he must be genuine, separate from the external world. The speaker invokes Whitman - as a cataloguer - a lister of external objects; the catalogue functioning as a distancing device, distancing objects with which one wishes to come into relation. The world invades the self and must be separated, otherwise how is one to know what is self, what is world, and what is God? The self, a far more spiritual being here than the self of earlier works, would fly purely but is weighted down

by "the terrible hunger for objects", the fear of letting go. The furred caterpillar crawling "down a string" is "My symbol" because it too cannot let go of the string, and both must crawl downward rather than fly upward, although the metamorphosis will come soon.

Death is personified as a "sly, surly attendant" (220), a madhouse keeper stationed by the speaker's bedside to prevent his suicide, because the concept of death as presented, particularly in "The Far Field", prevented the "terrible hunger for objects": the death of ego enabled the self to live. If God is erased from the formula, however, and a thistle replaced, spiritual life is diminished to the simple inability to stop one's heart from beating, and God, the giver of cosmic spiritual life, is reduced to the preventer of physical death. And the hunt for meaning must begin afresh.

The third section of the five in "The Abyss" clearly reversed the direction of the poem and faces the protagonist forward again. The section, however, is entirely ambiguous, replete with oxymorons which reveal an experience too complete to be segmented into language. This experience is the reason for "The Abyss" and the fact that there can be an explanation, that enough perspective has been gained to enable the speaker to understand why he is where he is, is ultimately the most significant indication that the "night-fishing otter" (220) has

found its quarry.

He had been unready, insufficiently prepared for the immensity of the discovery, the "terrible violence of creation", which now, reviewed in silence, is meaningful and acceptable. The abyss, the vacuum, is an emptiness that is filled instantly when the realization comes that "Nothing has any meaning" only depends upon a change of emphasis for apocalyptic significance; "Nothing has any meaning". Freedom of creation is boundless. And identity is all the greater the more meaninglessness it can incorporate.

The attempt to "outleap the sea", then, has been a detour, not because it attempts to comprehend all of life, but because it attempts to answer all questions. And the awareness now comes that, as Alan Watts states, "while there may be logical problems there are no natural physical problems. Nature or Tao is not pursuing any purpose and therefore is not meeting any difficulties."²⁹

In this, my half-rest,
Knowing slows for a moment.
And not-knowing enters, silent.
Bearing being itself,
And the fire dances
To the stream's
Flowing.

(221)

"The way of liberation is 'the way down and out': it is taking, like water, the course of least resistance; it is by following the natural bent of one's own feelings; it

is by becoming stupid and rejecting the refinements of learning..."³⁰

'Adore and draw near.
who knows this -
Knows all.'

(222)

The same voice which spoke of nothingness in the first lines now speaks of "all", a simple change in emphasis brought through passivity. All is known, and action is both impossible and unnecessary. There being no distinction between subject and object, there is no point in purposive "doing", in seeking, in acting..

While the line, "Being, not doing, is my first joy." (222) would seem to be the final level of transcendence, I would like to suggest that it begins a schizophrenic detour which complicates matters in Mixed Sequence and endangers all of the progress. In "The Waking", it will be recalled, a great deal of emphasis was placed upon "going", upon "doing", and it does not seem appropriate to negate this elemental aspect of self at this point. In a section of The Gutenberg Galaxy entitled "Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy," McLuhan suggests that the written word, splitting apart thought and action as it does, has a similar effect upon the psyche.³¹ To be able to distinguish being from doing is similarly schizophrenic, and splits thought and action, identity and manifestation of identity.

"Being, not doing, is my first joy." The final joy, however, is a unity of both. The final poem in the sequence, "The Moment", seems close to this goal:

Sound, silence, sang as one.

.....
 What else to say?
 We end in joy.

(238)

The poems which follow "The Abyss", then, explore the detour, the distinctions between being and doing, subject and object, sound and silence. There are essentially two groups - poems which deal with the distinction between past and present, self and other, and those which look at nature, first as an other, then as part of the self. The tone is light since the first joy has been discovered.

The three poems which deal with the past, "Elegy", "Otto", and "The Chums", are all characterized by an attempt to approach the relationship of man to the universe and the present to the past. There is a strange resemblance, furthermore, in the subjects of these poems, to Yeats' descriptions of the characters of the last phases of the moon. How deep these resemblances go, however, is questionable. Aunt Tilly, for example, is close to Yeats' phases of pure objectivity:

His joy is to be nothing, to do nothing, to think nothing; but to permit the total life, expressed in its humanity, to flow in upon him and to express itself through his acts and thoughts.³²

This is also close to the Buddhist concept of the