

**FLIGHT TO BEING: A STUDY OF ESCAPISM
IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE**

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IN THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Larry Neal Bowers
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ABSTRACT

The theme of escapism is an integral part of Theodore Roethke's primary poetic concern, his quest for identity. In his search for a place in existence, Roethke often attempts to escape the confines of flesh, a flesh he finds distasteful. He wants to get outside himself, to assume other identities.

He soon discovers that the past affords a suitable route of escape. He travels backward in time and assumes his childhood identity. He even pushes beyond childhood, into the prenatal world.

When Roethke has exhausted the route of regression, he finds another escape--into the world around him. He identifies with a snake, a stone, a snail, the wind, and, on several occasions, he merges with the One.

In his later poetry, Roethke is surprised to learn that the flesh can be useful to the spirit. He discovers that sexual union can lead to a heightening of the spirit, and this discovery opens up another route of escape.

Finally, Roethke must come to terms with death. He tries to flee, but cannot. He is willing to accept even an inanimate existence if he can avoid dying, but all his attempts to escape are futile. He soon realizes that he must come to terms with death, and he accepts it as the final escape.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Larry Neal Bowers entitled "Flight to Being: A Study of Escapism in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Edward E. Irwin

Second Committee Member

Malcolm J. Glass

Third Committee Member

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. OPENING THE DOORS	7
III. RETURN TO THE EARLY YEARS	16
IV. ESCAPE THROUGH LOVE	34
V. APPROACHING DEATH	41
VI. CONCLUSION	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	65

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Theodore Roethke is a journal, the record of a man's attempts to discover his identity, his place in existence. As Ralph J. Mills has stated:

The primary thematic concern in Theodore Roethke's poetry is with the evolution and identity of the self, its beginnings with an individual's birth, its organic growth which resembles the growth of things in nature, and its attainment of a maturity and independence that bring it into a new, harmonious relationship with creation.¹

Mills and others have viewed Roethke's quest as a progressive, plant-like growth into harmony with creation. But they have overlooked the fact that Roethke's search does not take the form of a passive, patient evolution into a discovery of identity. His poetry more often mirrors a man's desire to escape from himself into a place in existence, and that desire to escape becomes a primary theme in his poetry.

Roethke once said, "The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible."² He might well have said, "My principal problem

¹Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on The Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 115.

²Theodore Roethke, "On 'Identity'," in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 20.

is to find out what I really am: whether I exist." This quest, which is the main concern in his poetry, does not assume the passive attitude of a flower bending toward the sunlight; it is active, vital, forceful. Roethke is not content to grow into his identity; he wants to rush about and try on many identities for size. It is not unusual to discover him wishing to be a snake, a part of the wind, the water; or to find him kissing a stone or the dirt, in an attempt to identify with them. He is continually trying to climb out of himself, trying to wish his skin away.

This paper will present and examine the theme of escapism in selected poems of Theodore Roethke. Because Roethke's desire to escape is an integral part of his "primary thematic concern," his search for identity, it merits the close study this paper proposes to give it. Selected poems will be examined in each of Roethke's six major books of poetry. The books themselves will be approached in the order of their publication, because Roethke's quest for an identity and his desire to escape follow a well defined line of development from the early poems of Open House to the final lines of The Far Field. It is that development which has dictated the design of this paper. The theme of escapism will be examined in four major sections: the preparation for escape (Chapter 2), the escape to the greenhouse and the world of the child (Chapter 3), the escape through love (Chapter 4), and the attempt to escape an approaching death (Chapter 5).

Before beginning an examination of the poetry, we should say something about the poet. In Roethke's case, especially, a knowledge of the man sheds light on his writing. We have already noted that Roethke's poetry reveals his attempt to discover his identity. As such, his poetry necessarily centers around himself. We find in his writing "a preoccupation with the poet's own self as the primary matter of artistic exploration and knowledge, an interest which endows the poems with a sense of personal urgency, even necessity."³ Because of his lack of interest in other people in his poetry (He hardly mentions anyone other than his parents and his wife.), Roethke has often been accused of being limited as a poet. But, as Allan Seager has accurately stated, "The excitement of life lay within himself, not outside, nor in anyone's past but his own. What struck him through his senses he transformed at once into signs of his own states of being, well or ill. It was himself he had to sing, not the circumambient world. He only used that."⁴ It should not be inferred that Roethke was narcissistic or that his poetry is of the confessional school. Both inferences are wrong. Though Roethke was somewhat egotistical as a man, there is nothing

³Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 8.

⁴Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), p. 123.

of the egotist in his poetry. He felt that an examination of himself was an examination of all men and that an evaluation of his own condition would yield light on the condition of others.

Roethke's view of the body and soul is of primary importance to this study. Because of statements he made in his later years and the view expressed in some of his later poems, Roethke's dualism is overlooked. It is true that he proclaimed, "Body and Soul are one!"⁵ But that is a rare line, and it occurs in an over-optimistic poem which states, "The right thing happens to the happy man" (p. 250). Such blind faith and bland passivity are atypical of Roethke. The bulk of his writing reveals a separation of body and soul. Because of his dualistic attitude, he was "willing to abuse his body to refresh his spirit."⁶ And his separation of body and soul helps to explain many of his escapist tendencies. He had to escape, "'that is, to become all soul.'"⁷ He wanted to crawl out of the prison of his flesh and merge with nature. It is, perhaps, this dualism that led Roethke to hate himself. According to Seager, "Everyone who knew Ted well recognized this eventually, that he was host to a mass of free-floating

⁵Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 250. Subsequent references to this source will be given in the text.

⁶Seager, p. 105.

⁷Ibid., p. 249.

guilt that made him loathe himself."⁸ In a letter to James Dickey, Seager says of Roethke, "I could have told you, though, that his self-destructiveness would get worse. I could have told you that awful things were going to happen to him. He was headed that way; at times he seemed eager to speed up the process."⁹ And Roethke himself was aware of his attitude. He knew what he was doing, and an entry in one of the 1955 notebooks reveals that he knew his poetry came from his suffering, from his painful attempts to transcend himself:

"I can't go flying apart just for those who want the benefit of a few verbal kicks. My God, do you know what poems like that cost? They're not written vicariously: they come out of actual suffering; real madness."

"I've got to go beyond. That's all there is to it."

"Beyond what?"

"The human, you fool. Don't you see what I've done: I've come this far and now I can't stop. It's too late, baby, it's too late."¹⁰

As Seager points out, Roethke sometimes seemed to want to speed up the process of what was apparently his dissolution. He drank a lot of alcohol as a stimulus and would sometimes spend a day "popping out of his clothes, wandering around the cottage naked for a while, then dressing slowly, four or five times a day. There are some

⁸Ibid., p. 78.

⁹James Dickey, "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic, November 1968, pp. 53-58.

¹⁰Seager, p. 224.

complex 'birthday suit' meanings here, the ritual of starting clean like a baby, casting one's skin like a snake, and then donning the skin again. It was not exhibitionism. No one saw. It was all a kind of magic."¹¹ It was all calculated to induce poetry, to create the proper atmosphere for writing, and sometimes Roethke's rituals of drinking, taking pills, and trying too hard to escape himself led to the manic-depressive states which plagued him all his adult life. But he took the risk, because even the manic states were preceded by periods of heightened activity and awareness. Roethke describes one such period: "For no reason I started to feel very good. Suddenly I knew how to enter the life of everything around me. I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, even a rabbit."¹² He could escape himself and try on many identities. That was his goal, to find out who he was, and no price was too great to pay.

¹¹Ibid., p. 144.

¹²Ibid., p. 101.

CHAPTER II

OPENING THE DOORS

In 1941, Open House was published. It established Roethke as an important minor poet, and its contents established Roethke's primary poetic concern--his quest for identity.

Because the title poem, "Open House," is a statement of Roethke's intentions, a summary of what he attempts to do as a poet, it deserves close attention:

My secrets cry aloud.
I have no need for tongue.
My heart keeps open house.
My doors are widely swung.
An epic of the eyes
My love, with no disguise.

My truths are all foreknown,
This anguish self-revealed.
I'm naked to the bone,
With nakedness my shield.
Myself is what I wear:
I keep the spirit spare.

The anger will endure,
The deed will speak the truth
In language strict and pure.
I stop the lying mouth:
Rage warps my clearest cry
To witless agony.

(p. 3)

"The art proposed in these stanzas is peculiarly autobiographical, 'naked to the bone,' and, we might say, assumes the appearance of a journal--kept with great pain--which traces the path of a sensitive mind from bondage into

the freedom of the open air."¹ More accurately, the poetry traces the spirit from the bondage of the flesh into the freedom of the open air.

The central metaphor of the poem is, of course, the equation of the speaker with a house--an open house. His "doors are widely swung," and anyone can enter. However, the doors are swung open to allow for an exit as well. The speaker is free to look out of himself, free to step outside himself if he desires.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes himself as "naked to the bone." All his flesh has been stripped away, and only the inner man, the skeleton, remains. The process is one of purification, and the idea of being nothing but bone is reminiscent of a passage in "Ash Wednesday," of the bones left by the three white leopards after they have devoured the flesh. With his spirit cleansed of the flesh, the speaker wears nothing but himself, and he keeps his "spirit spare," "spare" because it has been trapped inside his body and has not been allowed to grow. But now the spirit is free to try on whatever identities it wishes. The speaker has passed through the open doors, shed his cumbersome flesh, escaped himself.

¹Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Theodore Roethke: The Lyric of the Self," in Poets in Progress: Critical Prefaces to Ten Contemporary Americans, ed. Edward Hungerford (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1962), p. 5.

The last stanza announces that deeds will be related in "language strict and pure," and they will speak the truth for themselves. It is here that we are certain the speaker of the poem is Roethke, because the entire last stanza is a declaration of what Roethke intends to do in his poetry.

It is important to remember that the title of the first volume of poetry is Open House. The title necessarily carries the theme and implications of the poem of the same name. Apparently, Roethke wanted to present all the poems in his first volume as "naked to the bone," open, honest. And they do have the openness and honesty of a personal journal, an autobiographical account. Yet, at the same time, Roethke is allowing for the movement out of himself. We should look for the doors to be thrown wide in all of his poems, for Roethke to step outside his open house, into the world around him.

"Orders for the Day" is a directive to the hands, feet, eyes, and breath to keep the body going. In the language of the poem is reflected a distaste for the flesh. The hands, "hard and veined all over," can bruise "The spirit's tender cover" (p. 7). The feet must bear the bones past "hatred's raging river,/ The dangerous flooded plain/ Where snake and vulture hover . . ." (p. 7). The eyes must discover charity "Among the virulent," and the breath must "turn the blood over" (p. 7). The act of living appears to be a disgusting, distasteful, monotonous process.

The world is a dangerous place filled with poisonous beings, vultures, and hatred. The speaker's life has become so mundane, so filled with the stench of the world, that he must order his body to continue functioning, his breath to turn his old blood over.

"Epidermal Macabre" affords a similar, but more explicit statement about the flesh:

Indelicate is he who loathes
The aspect of his fleshy clothes,--
The flying fabric stitched on bone,
The vesture of the skeleton,
The garment neither fur nor hair,
The cloak of evil and despair,
The veil long violated by
Caresses of the hand and eye.
Yet such is my unseemliness:
I hate my epidermal dress,
The savage blood's obscenity,
The rags of my anatomy,
And willingly would I dispense
With false accouterments of sense,
To sleep immodestly, a most
Incarnadine and carnal ghost.
(p. 19)

The speaker hates his "epidermal dress," and he would willingly dispense with his flesh if it were possible for him to do so. Yet the ghost which would remain would be a fleshy one. Roethke "wishes the body away in favor of a spirit remorselessly sensual. . . ." ² It is as though he wants to experience the sensual, but not through the flesh. In opposition to Karl Malkoff's view that the poem is

² Denis Donoghue, "Roethke's Broken Music," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 138-39.

humorous or satirical,³ Roethke himself called "Epidermal Macabre" "a violent little poem" showing "an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body."⁴

"Against Disaster," the poem which immediately follows "Epidermal Macabre," is a step beyond Roethke's expression of hatred for the flesh and his wish to be rid of it:

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

(p. 19)

It is as though Roethke has succeeded in dispensing with his "false accouterments of sense." He is out of his element, and his spirit is strewn abroad. He has managed to escape his body for the first time, and what he sees frightens him. His perspectives have been reversed. His "special heaven" has become an "evil sky;" the "flat land has become a pit . . ." (p. 19). To allay his fears, Roethke calls on the heart to "rally to my wit/ And rout the specter of alarm" (p. 19). He still clings to the flesh, to the heart of his old form, and his fear of the change which has occurred drives him back to a dependence on the protective powers of the flesh.

³Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 37.

⁴Roethke, "On 'Identity'," p. 22.

"The Auction" is a clever little conceit in which the poet returns home to find his various possessions being sold. But the things which are being sold are not the ordinary fare of an auction:

One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare;
Illusion's trinkets, splendid for the young;
Some items, miscellaneous, marked 'Fear';
The chair of honor, with a missing rung.
(p. 21)

The owner makes no attempt to claim what is his, but stands still, flushed with hope as he watches each item being sold:

My spirits rose each time the hammer fell,
The heart beat faster as the fat words rolled.
I left my home with unencumbered will
And all the rubbish of confusion sold.
(p. 21)

The owner is set free. He manages to rid himself of his pride and illusions, his fear and broken honor, all the trappings of flesh. The line, "My spirits rose each time the hammer fell," is more than a description of the owner's giddiness. It becomes a literal statement of the freedom his spirit felt each time some of the "rubbish of confusion" was sold. Like a balloon, it soared higher each time one of the unnecessary bags of sand was tossed over the side.

Roethke established the metaphor of the house in his title poem, and we have seen how it functions, so it is not surprising to encounter the same metaphor here. When the owner says, "I left my home with unencumbered will," he is speaking metaphorically of leaving his body. The auction has enabled him to swing the doors wide, and he is able to

step outside himself, unencumbered by the burdens of the flesh. He is no longer frightened as he was in "Against Disaster," because he has come to view the escape as good. It sets him free to discover his identity.

In "Silence," the poet is once again pent up in his own body. The noise that hammers within his head is "The spirit crying in a cage . . ." (p. 22). Yet no one will ever hear the noise or know Roethke's grief, because he chooses to remain quiet and endure his suffering in silence. There seems to be a quiet recognition that no one could share his pain or help him alleviate it. It is his problem, one he must resolve alone.

"Prayer Before Study" is a lightly humorous treatment of Roethke's escape theme:

Constricted by my tortured thought,
I am too centred on this spot.

So caged and cadged, so close within
A coat of unessential skin,

I would put off myself and flee
My inaccessibility.

A fool can play at being solemn
Revolving on his spinal column.

Deliver me, O Lord, from all
Activity centripetal.

(p. 24)

Roethke wants to be released from the agony of thought, from all centripetal activity. He would prefer to put off his "unessential skin" and become a "carnal ghost." Though the poem is somewhat humorous, the typical complaint of the scholar or writer who must spend a large amount of time

studying, it does reflect Roethke's desire to escape himself--"I would put off myself and flee. . . ." And, in that respect, it is serious.

"Highway: Michigan" does not deal with the poet. Instead, it describes the heavy afternoon traffic on a Michigan highway and the reckless way the drivers "jockey for position" in their haste to get home (p. 33). This particular afternoon, there is a wreck:

The pavement smokes when two cars meet
And steel rips through conflicting steel.
We shiver at the siren's blast.
One driver, pinned beneath the seat,
Escapes from the machine at last.
(p. 33)

The driver who escapes is presumably dead. Death was his only way out of the machine which held him prisoner. It is interesting to speculate on the possible ambiguity of "machine." The word could refer to the driver's body, to his daily existence, as well as to his car. The workers are shown going home in their ritualistic, machine-like way, "prisoners of speed/ Who flee in what their hands have made" (p. 33). But they are prisoners of their lives as well. They spend each day on the production lines and then play with death in a frantic attempt to get home when the day is over. The only way out of their machine-existence is death.

The eight poems which have been discussed from Open House all share one thing--the theme of escapism. In the title poem, Roethke describes what he will attempt to do in

his poetry. He will fling wide the doors and make himself an open house. This action allows the reader to enter the poet, to share his privacies, but it also allows the poet to step outside himself. "Orders for the Day," "Epidermal Macabre," and "Prayer Before Study" establish Roethke's distaste for his flesh, his desire to flee from his body, and, since he has flung open all his doors, he is able to do just that. But the first excursion beyond himself in "Against Disaster" causes fear, and he soon rushes back to the security of flesh. Slowly, in "The Auction," he begins to see the desirability of separating his spirit from his body. He finds he is able to leave the trivial burdens of flesh behind. And "Highway: Michigan" is a variation on his theme of escape. It reminds us that death is one way to separate spirit and flesh.

Thus far, Roethke has merely paved the way for what is to come. He has discovered that he can step outside himself, but he has not yet tried on any of the various identities which await him. The foundation of Roethke's work is his "intensely felt impulse to merge, to identify himself, to participate in the naked processes of life itself."⁵ But he has only been preparing for that; it still lies ahead.

⁵John Wain, "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 60.

CHAPTER III

RETURN TO THE EARLY YEARS

Roethke's second book, The Lost Son and Other Poems, published in 1948, is a radical departure from Open House. The same themes are present, and the poems still have the personal flavor which characterized Roethke's first book, but the form and style are different. The shift is away from the more formal verse, into a freer, more naturally flowing form. Perhaps the biggest surprise in the second book is Roethke's choice of subjects--the plant world. It is in The Lost Son and Other Poems that Roethke introduces what have come to be known as the greenhouse poems.

As a child, Roethke was surrounded by flowers and plants of all kinds. His father operated a large greenhouse, and Roethke spent a great deal of his time playing and working among the plants. It is not surprising, then, that he turned to his memories of childhood and found the greenhouse to be a suitable and unusually rich mine for poetry.

Most striking about Roethke's treatment of the greenhouse poems is "the assumption of a correspondence between the human and vegetable worlds."¹ In his close, almost microscopic examination of the plants, Roethke

¹Malkoff, p. 48.

discovers a close relationship between vegetable and man. In "Cuttings (later)," for example, he finds that the plant's push and struggle to exist is similar to his own drive for life, and he can feel "the small waters seeping upward" through his own veins as they seep into the veins of the plant (p. 37). And it is this that "differentiates Roethke's verse from other 'flower poems'. . . his awareness of the fight to exist as an aspect of reality shared by man and plant."²

Roethke's close examination of the vegetable world soon leads him to the related world of snails, "Beetles in caves, newts, . . . Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds . . ." (p. 50). In these, too, he finds similarities, relationships to the human world, and he also finds "the difficult problems of spiritual evolution and the search for psychic identity."³ In his first book, Open House, he explores ways of separating spirit and flesh in an attempt to get outside himself. In his second book, he begins to try on various identities. Roethke describes what he attempts to do:

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances, even an inanimate thing--brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some

²Ibid., p. 52.

³Mills, Theodore Roethke, p. 12.

instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. Both feelings are not always present, I'm aware, but either can be an occasion for gratitude. And both can be induced. The first simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you. . . . If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee.⁴

This is his technique, a close observation of plant, animal, even stone, which causes him to open his doors, to escape himself, to become the thing he is observing. There is, of course, a very close parallel between this idea and Keats' theory of negative capability. But Roethke pushes the idea further than Keats does. Roethke tries on countless identities, and he sometimes becomes a part of the One. The oneness he feels is "inevitably accompanied by a loss of the 'I,' the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence."⁵

Roethke once labeled the greenhouse "my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth."⁶ And the greenhouse does indeed function as a womb. Within the glass walls, things take shape; they grow. Roethke makes extensive use of the womb symbol, often playing with phallic imagery as in "Big Wind" when the pipes force steam into

⁴Roethke, "On 'Identity'," p. 25.

⁵Ibid., p. 26.

⁶Theodore Roethke, "Open Letter," in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 39.

the greenhouse to give the plants life. With this major symbol functioning, each of the greenhouse poems becomes "a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more."⁷ Thus, Roethke's escapism takes a new turn.

"Weed Puller" is Roethke's description of what it is like to pull the "black hairy roots" from the drainholes beneath the flower benches (p. 39). To get at the "lewd monkey tails," he has to crawl along the floor on "all fours, / Alive, in a slippery grave" (p. 39). Here, of course, the "slippery grave" is a definite symbol for the womb. Roethke is in the greenhouse, in the womb, waiting to be born. It is interesting to note that he depicts himself in a fetal position--"on all fours"--and thereby enhances the womb symbol.

"Child on Top of a Greenhouse" shows Roethke out of the womb:

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried
putty,
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like
accusers,
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with
sunlight,
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!
(p. 43)

⁷Ibid., p. 37.

He has escaped his "slippery grave"; he is outside with the sunlight, the clouds, the elms, and, like them, he is above everyone, beyond the human.

Typically, Roethke finds a parallel in the plant world to the child on the greenhouse. As Malkoff points out, "Flower Dump" is a companion poem to "Child on Top of a Greenhouse."⁸ The striking thing about the flower dump Roethke describes is the tulip, the "One swaggering head/ Over the dying, the newly dead" (p. 43). The flower which sways above the heap of dead plants is an exact parallel to the child, his britches billowing, atop the greenhouse. Both the child and the flower have escaped the rubble beneath them. They have exceeded "the dying, the newly dead," and, for a short while at least, they have attained an identity, an existence which sets them apart from the rest of their world.

Roethke is able to draw parallels between the plant world and the human world in highly subtle, graceful ways. In "Transplanting," for example, he describes the young plants which have been set in pots and placed in the greenhouse to grow:

The sun warming the fine loam,
The young horns winding and unwinding,
Creaking their thin spines,
The underleaves, the smallest buds
Breaking into nakedness,
The blossoms extending
Out into the sweet air,
The whole flower extending outward,
Stretching and reaching.
(p. 42)

⁸ Malkoff, p. 55.

This passage can be seen as an expression of Roethke's own striving and pushing to extend himself. We have seen his attempts to break "into nakedness," his attempts to become something more than what he is. Like the flower, his spirit stretches and strains outward, reaching for the sunlight, for an identity to cling to.

"River Incident" is a statement about evolution:

A shell arched under my toes,
Stirred up a whirl of silt
That riffled around my knees.
Whatever I owed to time
Slowed in my human form;
Sea water stood in my veins,
The elements I kept warm
Crumbled and flowed away,
And I knew I had been there before,
In that cold, granitic slime,
In the dark, in the rolling water.
(p. 49)

Roethke senses that he was once a creature in the river, a mindless shell or perhaps a fish. For the endurance of this apparent mystical experience, Roethke feels the oneness of life. He is able to escape himself and identify with the lower forms of existence, for he feels a kinship with those forms.

"The Lost Son," the title poem of this volume, and the three poems which follow mark a definite change in Roethke's poetry. He moves into longer poems with varied line lengths, and he very often slips into the nonsense, singsong language of small children. But he does not abandon his old theme, the quest for identity. He simply alters the form of his search. Each of the last four poems "opens

with a flight from ordinary 'reality' into the irrational, the animal, the realm of the fish, the rat, the mouse, the cat, the eel, the otter, the mole; there are many implications of a return to the womb. . . ."9

"The Lost Son" is divided into five sections which Roethke has gone into some detail, in "Open Letter," to explain.¹⁰ "The flight is, of course, a running away, an attempt to escape. "The Pit" offers "the seductiveness of a descent into the earth, a relinquishing of self to the dark body of the mother. . . ."11 "The Gibber" is a return to the broken, sometimes incoherent language of childhood, and "The Return" actually takes the protagonist back to his childhood. The final section of the poem ends with the coming of light.

The lost son is apparently shattered by the death of his father. He tries to escape from the reality of his situation but finds he cannot run away. The temptation of death extended in "The Pit" section is resisted, and the son finds some consolation in memories of his father. The poem ends with the coming of light, a light similar to that associated with the coming of Papa in section four.

⁹Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 31-32.

¹⁰Roethke, "Open Letter," pp. 37-39.

¹¹Mills, Theodore Roethke, pp. 25-26.

"The Long Alley" begins with the image of a polluted river, and Roethke's contemplation causes him to "Remember an old sound./ Remember/ Water" (p. 59). The recollection of the "old sound" is similar to the recollection Roethke had in "River Incident." It seems that he is preparing himself for an escape into the identity of something else, some river animal which he may once have been. A little later, in section three, Roethke says, "This wind gives me scales" (p. 60).

There are lines in sections two and three which indicate Roethke is abjuring his flesh, and this is the signal that he is about to extend his spirit beyond himself. "The soul resides in the horse barn," "There's no joy in soft bones," and "Have mercy, gristle" all show the flesh in an unfavorable light (pp. 59-60). Immediately after the rejection of flesh, Roethke slips into the nonsense rhymes of childhood:

Gilliflower ha,
Gilliflower ho,
My love's locked in
The old silo.

She cries to the hen,
She waves to the goose,
But they don't come
To let her loose.

(p. 60)

And section four follows with a clear memory of the greenhouse world of his youth.

In two poems now, "The Lost Son" and "The Long Alley," Roethke has regressed to the nonsense language and the complacent world of the child. He explains this regression

by saying, "I believe that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward. The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned to."¹² For Roethke, the return to childhood is an escape. It is a flight from the condition in which he finds himself into the serene identity of the small boy he once was in the greenhouse world of his father.

"A Field of Light" also begins with water, but this time it is a still pond Roethke contemplates. The first section establishes a calm mood, "a watery drowse" (p. 62). And, in the second section, Roethke performs a strange ritual:

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.
(p. 62)

This primitive action is followed by an almost euphoric passage:

Listen, love,
The fat lark sang in the field;
I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the
 killdeer,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.
I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing
 a windbreak of cedars,

¹²Theodore Roethke, "An American Poet Introduces Himself," in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 12.

And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked
honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

(p. 63)

For the first time, Roethke is able to merge with the One. He sensed his relationship to the whole in "River Incident," but here he becomes an integral part of everything; he moves "with the morning." He has succeeded in escaping himself, and the mystical union he experiences is only the first of many.

According to Malkoff, "The Shape of the Fire" begins with the protagonist contained in the womb of the mother,¹³ and lines such as "Mother me out of here," and "Wake me, witch, we'll do the dance of rotten sticks" seem to indicate that the speaker is waiting to be born (p. 64). Once again, Roethke has regressed to the slime, to his origins. To leave the slime of the womb, he "Must pull off clothes/ To jerk like a frog/ On belly and nose/ From the sucking bog" (p. 65). The image is that of birth.

Section three announces that "The journey from flesh is longest," and then sections four and five follow with an attempt to go "further back/ Into that minnowy world of weeds and ditches," to a time when the world was fine and alive and "Death was not" (p. 66). Roethke wishes for the simple happiness of the herons, the crabs, the flickers, the hens, the dove, and the rose. Yet all the things he desires

¹³Malkoff, p. 95.

seem to be bound up in his childhood. What he wishes for is the identity of the child, the simple beauty and security that once were his when he moved in a world without death. The natural world and the world of the child are fused, because the child is a part of nature. Therefore, Roethke's regression to child-like language and attitudes is a part of his attempt to find his place in the natural world.

What was prepared for in Open House is realized in The Lost Son and Other Poems. The doors that were flung open provide passageways for Roethke. He moves outside himself in an attempt to identify with the plants and small animals which move around him. At times, he is successful in becoming a part of the natural world, but this fusion is never permanent. Roethke wants to slough off his skin and, along with it, all the fears and anxieties that are associated with the flesh. Roethke seems to feel that "the most exalted objects of our human desire are already possessed, in silence and grace, by the lower organisms."¹⁴ What he is after is the simplicity, the serenity of the plants and animals, even of the dirt and stone he sees around him. His "imagination is populated with shapeshifters, who turn into the protagonists of his poems. Most of these protagonists are aspects of the poet's own being, driven to know itself and yet appalled by the terrible necessity of self-knowledge; assuming every possible shape in order to find the self and to escape the finding; dreading above all

¹⁴Donoghue, p. 145.

the state of annihilation, the threat of non-being; and half-yearning at the last for the oblivion of eternity, the union of the whole spirit with the spirit of the whole universe."¹⁵

The last four poems of The Lost Son and Other Poems are all related, and the sequence is put into motion by a death. When the son hears the dead cry at Woodlawn, his flight begins. He is fleeing toward his childhood memories, toward an association with the natural world, but he is fleeing from death. What he wants "is to escape to an order; an order of which change and growth and decay are natural mutations and therefore acceptable."¹⁶ As a human, he is revolted by the flesh, and his revulsion is most often brought about by a recognition of his mutability. He longs to be able to merge with existence, to lose himself quite painlessly in the One, or to become a tree, a flower, any part of the natural world which is able to accept change and death as a matter of course.

The final sequence in The Lost Son and Other Poems prepares the way for Roethke's next book. With the introduction of the greenhouse poems and the change in form which marks the final four poems, Roethke has found his proper vein.

¹⁵Stanley Kunitz, "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," The New Republic, 23 January 1965, pp. 23-29.

¹⁶Donoghue, p. 143.

The poems of Praise to the End!, according to Malkoff, are "divided into two parts; the first one contains six poems which are, for the most part, shorter, less sophisticated, and concerned with an earlier age than the second. Risking an over-simplification, we may say that the poems of the first emphasize the struggle to be born, those of the second, the effort, perhaps even more strenuous, to become something more."¹⁷ The entire book is a continuation of the technique introduced in the final sequence of The Lost Son and Other Poems. The regression to childhood and (as in "The Shape of the Fire") beyond childhood into the prenatal world of the womb is continued in the poems of Praise to the End! with suggestive titles such as "Where Knock is Open Wide," "Bring the Day," and "Give Way, Ye Gates."

The six poems of the first section are filled to overflowing with nonsense verse, the special language of the child. Yet the nonsense passages can be made to have a certain amount of coherence, and they quite often surprise by making more sense than seems possible. For example, if we recognize that "Where Knock is Open Wide" begins with the speaker in the womb, the following passage becomes peculiarly meaningful:

Once upon a tree
I came across a time,
It wasn't even as
A ghoulie in a dream.
(p. 71)

¹⁷Malkoff, p. 69.

The idea of coming across time, intersecting with it, seems to imply conception, the very first stages of being. Most of Roethke's jingles make a strange sort of sense in the same way this passage does.

Roethke's regression to the world of the child, to the child's language and special perception, is an integral part of his search for identity. He escapes to the past in an attempt to find himself, and his search "is simultaneously a flight, for he is being pursued by the man he has become, implacable, lost, soiled, confused. In order to find himself he must lose himself by re-experiencing all the stages of his growth, by re-enacting all the transmutations of his being from seed-time to maturity."¹⁸

In "Give Way, Ye Gates," we find Roethke once again referring to his flesh as gristle--"Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree . . ." (p. 79). The flesh is rejected in favor of an identification with a tree, and, soon after, the familiar separation of flesh and spirit occurs: "Such music in a skin!/ A bird sings in the bush of your bones" (p. 79). The spirit sings in the flesh and is about to take flight, to escape the confines of the skin. The third section of the poem is a plea made to the child Roethke once was:

You child with a beast's heart,
Make me a bird or a bear!
I've played with the fishes
Among the unwrinkling ferns

In the wake of a ship of wind;
But now the instant ages,
And my thought hunts another body.
I'm sad with the little owls.
(p. 80)

Roethke seems to be tiring of the identity of the child. He wants to become something else; his thought seeks another body, and, in "Praise to the End!," he succeeds in finding another identity.

Roethke says that in the title poem, "Praise to the End!," "a particular (erotic) act occurs, then is accounted for by nonsense songs out of the past."¹⁹ The opening passage implies that the "particular (erotic) act" is masturbation:

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.
For whom have I swelled like a seed?
What a bone-ache I have.
Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last.
(p. 85)

That passage, coupled with others such as "All risings/Fall" and "An exact fall of waters has rendered me impotent" leaves little room to doubt the nature of the erotic act (pp. 85-6). When it is finished, a feeling of guilt, of defilement, takes over, and the boy feels that even "The weeds exceed me" (p. 86). He regresses into the nursery rhyme language of childhood and decides, "I've been asleep in a bower of dead skin" (p. 86). As usual, the rejection of flesh is followed by a separation of flesh and spirit and ultimately by an escape from the body. The boy dreams

¹⁹Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 40.

he is "all bones," and he can affirm, "Skin's the least of me" (p. 87). In the final section of the poem, he is successful in escaping into a harmony with creation. He is "awake all over," having "crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog . . ." (p. 88). He exclaims:

I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's
eternal pulseless longing.
Felicity I cannot hoard.
My friend, the rat in the wall, brings me the
clearest messages;
I bask in the bower of change;
The plants wave me in, and the summer apples;
My palm-sweat flashes gold;
Many astounds before, I lost my identity to a
pebble,
The minnows love me, and the humped and spitting
creatures.

(p. 88)

The union he experiences is parallel to the one in "A Field of Light." He escapes into a perfect harmony with creation and is one with the plants and animals. So complete is the union, he even loses his identity to a pebble. In the remainder of this passage, the boy remembers the old ties he has with all of life--"I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced uncles" (p. 88). And ultimately, the union is so thorough that "The light becomes me" (p. 88).

"Unfold! Unfold!" continues the union achieved in "Praise to the End!" The poem begins "By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit./ Tell me, body without skin, does a fish sweat?" (p. 89). Roethke identifies himself with snails and frogs and addresses the spirit, his own, as a "body without skin." Though he aches for another choice, "The cliffs! The cliffs! They fling me back" (p. 89).

He is made to "crawl back through those veins;" he cannot sustain the union (p. 89). After he is drawn back to his own form, he remembers:

I was far back, farther than anybody else.
On the jackpine plains I hunted the bird nobody
knows;
Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears.
(p. 89)

His escape had been so complete, he had been able to identify so thoroughly with other beings, that he caught himself, not a fish, while fishing. He was:

. . . privy to oily fungus and the algae of standing
waters;
Honored, on my return, by the ancient fellowship
of rotten stems.
I was pure as a worm on a leaf; I cherished the
mold's children.
Beetles sweetened my breath.
I slept like an insect.

(p. 89)

But the union is over. The escape, as always, is only temporary. He is forced back to himself, and whatever joy he experienced in the fusion of his identity with the rest of creation is now only a memory.

In The Lost Son and Other Poems, Roethke regressed to the greenhouse world of his childhood, but he entered only the child's world, not the child himself. In the final sequence of The Lost Son and Other Poems, Roethke enters the mind of the child. He thinks, speaks, and acts the way a child would. This is continued in the poems of Praise to the End! It is as though Roethke cannot find the appropriate identity. He is not content simply to regress to the world of the child; he must regress to the child himself. He

cannot drop himself into the greenhouse and be content; he must climb into the identity of the child he once was. And soon he even becomes dissatisfied with that and begins to identify with things external to himself and his past. He tries on the identity of an otter, a fish, a pebble. He merges with the morning, with light, and he is a part of all that exists. In his consistent drive for an identity, for an acceptable place in existence, he cannot remain still for long. He must move about, explore new possibilities. "What he is aiming at is a poetic 'history of the psyche' (his phrase) which opens with the earliest stages of life and traces the evolution of the spirit in its ordeal of inner and outer conflicts, its desire for 'unity of being,' to borrow a term from Dante by way of Yeats, that final condition of grace which is a harmony of the self with all things."²⁰ But he soon exhausts the possibilities of this approach to an identity. His escape to childhood equates with an escape to nature, because the child is in a more natural state than the adult. When he has fully explored the world of the child, both external and internal, he turns to a more direct escape--into nature itself.

²⁰Mills, Theodore Roethke, pp. 16-17.

CHAPTER IV

ESCAPE THROUGH LOVE

The Waking, published in 1953, has only a few new poems to offer. The larger portion of the book is composed of selected poems taken from Roethke's previous publications. But it does contain one poem which marks a new turn in Roethke's search for an identity, a new avenue of escape. It is in "Four for Sir John Davies" that Roethke begins to see a certain usefulness in the flesh. He finds that "The flesh can make the spirit visible . . ." (p. 106). He is beginning to alter his views concerning dualism in this, the first of his love poems.

The first section of the poem, entitled "The Dance," seems to be a statement of Roethke's attempt to transcend the flesh. He has been "dancing-mad" while "dancing all alone" in an attempt to "fling my shadow at the moon . . ." (p. 105). Alone, he has tried to escape himself but has been unsuccessful.

The title of the second section, "The Partner," reveals the change that has occurred. Roethke is no longer dancing alone; he has obtained a partner, a woman. The dance that he and his partner do is highly sensual, and Roethke makes full use of phallic imagery:

Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?

(p. 105)

The ladle rattling in the dish is a very definite symbol of the sex act. But Roethke does not stop there; he makes his meaning blatantly clear:

She kissed me close, and then did something else.
My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse.

(p. 106)

The "something else" the partner does leads Roethke to affirm, "we live beyond/ Our outer skin" (p. 106). Through the closeness of the sex act, the spirits of the participants are heightened, lifted. Recognizing this, Roethke states, "The body and soul know how to play/ In that dark world where gods have lost their way" (p. 106).

The third section, "The Wraith," continues with a very definite description of the sex act:

The spirit and the flesh cried out for more.
We two, together, on a darkening day
Took arms against our own obscurity.

Did each become the other in that play?
She laughed me out, and then she laughed me in;
In the deep middle of ourselves we lay;
When glory failed, we danced upon a pin.
The valley rocked beneath the granite hill;
Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood
still.

(p. 106)

Roethke and his partner "took arms" (obviously a pun) against obscurity, and a change of identities occurred. The sensual sets the spirit free, and, in this passage, the spirits seem to merge, or to exchange identities. Of course, being laughed out and in, and lying in the deep middle of themselves are explicit references to the sex act, but this

purely sensual activity allows the souls to combine. Roethke has found that, through sexual activity, he can escape himself; he can assume the identity of his partner; his soul can look beyond. He describes this escape of the spirit from the flesh in the following lines:

What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?--
 Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore?
 Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?
 (p. 107)

Roethke is somewhat perplexed to find that he can use the flesh to free the spirit, and his puzzlement is revealed by his questions. The shape that "leaped forward at the sensual cry" was the spirit which had been able to transcend, to escape the flesh:

Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall.
 The word outleaps the world, and light is all.
 (p. 107)

In "Four for Sir John Davies," Roethke has learned a valuable lesson, and his escapism theme has taken a new turn. For the first time, he has resolved, at least temporarily, the tension between flesh and spirit. He has also, for the first time, lost himself in the identity of another person.

Words for the Wind, subtitled The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke, appeared in 1958. It contains a broad selection of poems from earlier volumes and has a large number of new poems as well. In the volume, Roethke devotes a large amount of space to love poems in an effort to

exploit fully the possibilities of escaping into an identity through the flesh, the theme he dealt with in "Four for Sir John Davies."

"All the Earth, All the Air" reveals the effect Roethke's loved one has on him:

All innocence and wit,
She keeps my wishes warm;
When, easy as a beast,
She steps along the street,
I start to leave myself.
(p. 121)

Similar to the severance of spirit from flesh which occurred in "Four for Sir John Davies," in this poem, Roethke finds that flesh can draw out the spirit. However, there is an essential difference here. Roethke escapes himself without the aid of sexual activity. He simply looks on the woman and experiences the escape. The sensual is still involved, but Roethke has apparently moved beyond, into the realm of love which transcends the purely sensual.

In "The Sententious Man," Roethke contemplates his sensual actions in an effort to understand how they help him transcend the physical. He determines, "My indirection found direction out" (p. 131). By indulging in the flesh, Roethke found his proper direction:

We did not fly the flesh. Who does, when young?
A fire leaps on itself: I know that flame.
Some rages save us. Did I rage too long?
The spirit knows the flesh it must consume.
(p. 131)

This passage seems almost a rationalization. Roethke has always seen the flesh in an unfavorable light; when he finds

himself indulging in sensual pleasures, he feels guilty. He attributes his actions to his youth, and decides that his rage has saved him (ironically), his "indirection has found direction out." By turning to the flesh, he has found that he can transcend it, because "The spirit knows the flesh it must consume." Because of his actions, Roethke finds that "All dimensions quivered to one thing" (p. 132). He can taste his sister when he kisses his wife, and he has learned "Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone" (p. 132). What Roethke senses is the same unity we noted earlier in "A Field of Light" and "Praise to the End!" He senses a harmony among all things, and he is himself one with creation. But he has arrived at that union through the flesh, through love.

A similar union is achieved in "The Renewal":

Sudden renewal of the self--from where?
A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine;
I know I love, yet know not where I am;
I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.
Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?
I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.

Dry bones! Dry bones! I find my loving heart,
Illumination brought to such a pitch
I see the rubblestones begin to stretch
As if reality had split apart
And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
I find that love, and I am everywhere.
(p. 135)

In this poem, love helps the self to overcome what appears to be a wish for annihilation. Roethke's "flesh is breathing slower than a wall" and "Dark hangs upon the waters of the soul . . ." (p. 135). His plight is mirrored in the

line, "A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine." The self is about to be lost, but the sudden renewal which seems impossible comes about, and Roethke becomes a part of the One again. He finds his love, and he is everywhere.

The distinction between sensuality and love is important to Roethke. In "The Sententious Man," he states, "True lechers love the flesh, and that is all" (p. 131). For him, there has to be more than mere lechery. "The Sensualists" is an excellent poem to help make the distinction between the kind of love Roethke requires and a love of flesh alone:

"My shoulder's bitten from your teeth;
What's that peculiar smell?
No matter which one is beneath,
Each is an animal,"--
The ghostly figure sucked its breath,
And shuddered toward the wall;
Wrapped in the tattered robe of death,
It tiptoed down the hall.

"The bed itself begins to quake,
I hate this sensual pen;
My neck, if not my heart, will break
If we do this again,"--
Then each fell back, limp as a sack,
Into the world of men.
(p. 136)

There is no love reflected in these passages. What we see is raw sensuality. The sex act is a savage, beast-like activity, filled with rank smells and almost-broken necks. There is no lifting of spirits here as there was in "Four for Sir John Davies." Instead, a ghost, which resembles death, is set loose. The couple are not able to transcend the world of men; they lower themselves into a "sensual pen."

For Roethke, the flesh is not enough. The mere union of bodies will not achieve a heightening of the spirit. The union of flesh has to be accompanied by a union of spirits, a coupling of souls as well as of bodies, before the spirit can escape the confines of the flesh.

CHAPTER V

APPROACHING DEATH

"Plaint" is found among the love poems, but it seems to go more logically with the poems of the following section, "Voices and Creatures." Occasionally, Roethke will include a poem that reminds us of the one certain way to separate body from spirit, a way which avoids all the pain and difficulty involved in regression or in a union of souls through love. In Open House, "Highway: Michigan" reminded us of the alternative, and here "Plaint" points it out to us again. In his search for an "eternity/ Of inward blessedness," for "the knowledge that/ Could bring me to God," he realizes that there is always death (p. 139). Death is the one sure, the one permanent escape. The statement, "Death is a deeper sleep,/ And I delight in sleep," reveals a fascination for death, an attraction to it, but it is not the way Roethke chooses to escape (p. 139).

"The Exorcism" continues along the same line of thought, and Roethke imagines his own death:

The grey sheep came. I ran,
My body half in flame.
(Father of flowers, who
Dares face the thing he is?)

As if pure being woke,
The dust rose and spoke;
A shape cried from a cloud,
Cried to my flesh out loud.

(And yet I was not there,
But down long corridors,
My own, my secret lips
Babbling in urinals.)

(p. 147)

He flees, afraid to face what he is, and he cannot hear the dust or the shape in the cloud (representatives of flesh and spirit) which call to him. He is far down his own corridors, deep in himself. This is obviously a reference to his escape to the childhood world of his past. He flees, unwilling to face the thing he is, not wanting to accept the identity he has.

In part two of the poem, Roethke sees his "several selves/ Come running from the leaves,/ Lewd, tiny, careless lives . . ." (p. 147). He turns and turns, "Writhing until the last/ Forms of his secret life/ Lay with the dross of death" (p. 147). The poem ends:

I was myself, alone.

I broke from that low place
Breathing a slower breath,
Cold, in my own dead salt.
(p. 147)

The final lines are a definite image of death, but it is a symbolic death, not a real one. On many occasions now, we have seen Roethke identify with all of creation. We have observed him becoming one with even the tiny creatures that scurry under stones. In this poem, his killing of those "careless lives" is a symbolic suicide. Since he identifies with all of creation, the death of any part of it is his death as well. That is as close as Roethke can come to

death. He is fascinated by it, at times attracted to it, but he always refuses it. By killing the tiny lives which he recognizes as a part of him, Roethke purges himself of the death-wish. He exorcizes himself. His is a vicarious participation in the dying of the tiny creatures, an escape through the death of something other than himself.

"Plaint" and "The Exorcism" mark a change in Roethke's poetry. They reveal an increasing concern with death, a concern which reaches its height in the final sequence of Words for the Wind and in The Far Field.

The final section of Words for the Wind consists of a sequence of five poems under the general title, "Meditations of an Old Woman." In each of the poems, Roethke adopts the persona of an aging woman and presents her meditations. Yet the meditations are Roethke's too; the views expressed are his. He assumes the woman's character so he can stand at the edge of the abyss and record the feelings of someone who is near death. But the feelings are peculiarly Roethke's, and the old woman becomes simply a form he dons, a shape he uses. She has little identity of her own.

The "First Meditation" opens with a scene of dissolution, of erosion:

On love's worst ugly day,
The weeds hiss at the edge of the field,
The small winds make their chilly indictments.
Elsewhere, in houses, even pails can be sad;

While stones loosen on the obscure hillside,
And a tree tilts from its roots,
Toppling down an embankment.

(p. 157)

Malkoff states that the exterior scene echoes the interior mental condition of the old woman.¹ But it seems more accurate to say that the dissolution of her environment parallels the dissolution of her own body. The images are those of death: the old woman is dying. She has "become a strange piece of flesh,/ Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,/ With a cheek soft as a hound's ear" (p. 157).

The old woman realizes "the mind, often, hates the life within," and her statement echoes Roethke's familiar dualism (p. 157). The flesh hates the spirit; it holds it back, hinders it. But the final separation is near. The flesh is wasting away, and "What's left is light as a detached seed . . ." (p. 157). As usual, the rejection of the flesh is followed by a separation of flesh and spirit, and, in section two, the old woman escapes herself. Her escape takes the form of an actual journey, a bus trip which she imagines. But she soon moves beyond that, and her thought returns her to the past:

And I seem to go backward,
Backward in time:

Two song sparrows, one within a greenhouse,
Shuttling its throat while perched on a wind-vent,
And another, outside, in the bright day,
With a wind from the west and the trees all in
motion.

¹Malkoff, p. 160.

One sang, then the other,
The songs tumbling over and under the glass,
And the men beneath them wheeling in dirt to the
cement benches,
The laden wheelbarrows creaking and swaying,
And the up-spring of the plank when a foot left
the runway.

(p. 158)

She regresses to her childhood, to Roethke's childhood, to the greenhouse world of Roethke's past.

Section three is important to the whole sequence and to Roethke's poetry in general, because it explains the journey the spirit takes:

As when silt drifts and sifts down through muddy
pond-water,
Settling in small beads around weeds and sunken
branches,
And one crab, tentative, hunches himself before
moving along the bottom,
Grotesque, awkward, his extended eyes looking at
nothing in particular,
Only a few bubbles loosening from the ill-matched
tentacles,
The tail and smaller legs slipping and sliding
slowly backward--
So the spirit tries for another life,
Another way and place in which to continue;
Or a salmon, tired, moving up a shallow stream,
Nudges into a back-eddy, a sandy inlet,
Bumping against sticks and bottom-stones, then
swinging
Around, back into the tiny maincurrent, the rush
of brownish-white water,
Still swimming forward--
So, I suppose, the spirit journeys.

(p. 159)

The backward and forward movement of the spirit depicted in these lines is representative of Roethke's major modes of escape. In its attempt to find another life, to escape into another identity, the spirit moves both backward and forward. It regresses, crab-like, into the past or pushes

forward, like the salmon, exploring the back waters and side streams along the way. It enters the greenhouse world of childhood or pushes outside, in an attempt to assume the identity of some other being, to become a part of the One.

The fourth section continues the death imagery. It shows "the waste lonely places," "the motes of dust in immaculate hallways," "the darkness of falling hair," "The vines graying to a fine powder," and ends with an attempt at self-consolation (p. 159). The old woman tells herself she is happy with "The long plaintive notes" of the phoebe, the lonesome call of the whippoorwill (pp. 159-60). But her happiness seems forced and unreal.

"I'm Here," the second poem of the sequence, supports the idea that the woman's happiness is not genuine. The first section reveals that she finds no pleasure in the songs of birds:

Outside, the same sparrows bicker in the eaves.
I'm tired of tiny noises:
The April cheeping, the vireo's insistence. . . .
(p. 161)

She seems irritated by the activity around her, by life itself, because it serves only to remind her of her own condition.

In section two, the old woman travels, crab-like, backward. She recalls her youth, the time when she was "queen of the vale . . ." (p. 161). She was "Bemused; pleased to be;/ Mindful of cries,/ The meaningful whisper/

The wren, the catbird" (p. 162). But now, like her geranium, she is dying:

The body, delighting in thresholds,
Rocks in and out of itself.

(p. 163)

She accepts her fate, delighting in the threshold, the door which will allow her to step outside herself. She feels, "It's not my first dying" (p. 164). And she prepares herself for what is to come; she is ready:

If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here.

(p. 164)

"Her Becoming" continues the gradual dying of the woman. The opening line, "I have learned to sit quietly," implies a complacent acceptance of death (p. 165). "I'm Here" ends with the old woman's acceptance of death as she announces herself ready. "Her Becoming" shows that she is still prepared, waiting quietly.

The "First Meditation" establishes the backward and forward journeys of the spirit, and, in "I'm Here," the old woman travels backward, to her past. In "Her Becoming," she travels forward, exploring various identities. She becomes things, and her becoming is prepared for in section one when her spirit escapes her body:

Dare I embrace a ghost from my own breast?
A spirit plays before me like a child,
A child at play, a wind-excited bird.

(p. 165)

She soon recalls the time she "ran--/ Ran ahead of myself,/ Across a field, into a little wood" (p. 166). She remembers:

The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down.
The light air slowed: It was not night or day.
All natural shapes became symbolical.
The only thing alive in heaven's eye,
I shed my clothes to slow my daemon down.
And then I ran again.

(p. 166)

The running and the shedding of clothes are symbolic of an escape from the self. Indeed, she ran ahead of herself, and she became one with the "loved fox, and the wren," with the "small birds," the toad, and the frog (pp. 166-7). The poem ends with:

Ask all the mice who caper in the straw--
I am benign in my own company.
A shape without a shade, or almost none,
I hum in pure vibration, like a saw.
The grandeur of a crazy one alone!--
By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live.
My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
I live in air; the long light is my home;
I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
A light wind rises. I become the wind.

(p. 167)

Her escape results in a close identification with all of creation, a fusion with the One. The union is very similar to that described in "A Field of Light" when Roethke moves with the morning through the light air, and the ending recalls the conclusion of "Praise to the End!"--"The light becomes me" (p. 88).

The "Fourth Meditation" resumes the quiet waiting that began "Her Becoming." The woman is patient, calm, quiet, and "The soul stands, lonely in its choice,/ Waiting, itself a slow thing,/ In the changing body" (p. 168).

The second section of the poem is a digression in which the old woman thinks of other women, of "the self-involved:/ The ritualist of the mirror, the lonely drinkers . . ." (p. 169). She wishes them awake, aware, alive. It is as though her nearness to death causes her to sympathize with those around her, with those who are blind to what is to come.

The final section returns to the calm waiting. The woman is "in love with the dead;" her "whole forehead's a noise" as she waits for what must come (p. 170).

"What Can I Tell My Bones" is the conclusion of the sequence, the culmination of the waiting. Section one implies that death is close at hand:

Beginner,
Perpetual beginner,
The soul knows not what to believe,
In its small folds, stirring sluggishly,
In the least place of its life,
A pulse beyond nothingness,
A fearful ignorance.

(p. 171)

The soul slows in the body, as though it feels a kinship with the dying flesh. The old woman is afraid. She is not certain that her soul will escape the death which is about to claim her body. She longs for an escape: "Dare I blaze like a tree?" (p. 171). She wants to relieve her fear, to remove it, and she feels, "I need a pool; I need a puddle's calm" (p. 171). She longs to be a mindless puddle, anything which is insensitive to death. She has waited calmly, but now that death is at hand, she is frightened and uncertain.

She loses her calmness. Death is no longer welcome, and she becomes almost frantic:

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing.
(p. 172)

Her affirmations of existence, of identity, are futile. They dwindle away into nothingness, and she feels that the spirit is "a wind trapped in a cave," "a small stone, loose in the shale" (p. 172). Oblivion is her enemy, and she fears that the spirit trapped within her body may not escape. She tries to console herself by thinking, "God has need of me./ The dead love the unborn" (p. 172).

In the final section of the poem, the old woman no longer cries "for green in the midst of cinders . . ." (p. 173). Her despair is removed "by a spirit/ Or agency outside me./ Unprayed-for,/ And final" (p. 173). She has assurance that "Existence dares perpetuate a soul," and she is "released from the dreary dance of opposites," from the tension between flesh and spirit and her fear that the spirit might die with the flesh (p. 173). She senses the union, the fusion with the One, which we have seen again and again in Roethke's poetry:

The sun! The sun! And all we can become!
And the time ripe for running to the moon!
In the long fields, I leave my father's eye;
And shake the secrets from my deepest bones;
My spirit rises with the rising wind;
I'm thick with leaves and tender as a dove,
I take the liberties a short life permits--
I seek my own meekness;

I recover my tenderness by long looking.
By midnight I love everything alive.
Who took the darkness from the air?
I'm wet with another life.
Yea, I have gone and stayed.

(p. 173)

"Meditations of an Old Woman" prepares the way for Roethke's final book, The Far Field, published posthumously in 1964. The five poems of the Old Woman sequence deal with death, with the woman's attempts to come to terms with her own death. The majority of the poems in The Far Field deal with the same theme--Roethke's realization that death is near at hand and his attempt to come to terms with it.

"The 'North American Sequence' . . . which begins The Far Field, is a series of six poems devoted to the problems of transcending the sensual."² "The Longing" begins the sequence and establishes Roethke's desire to escape:

On things asleep, no balm:
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.

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

Lust fatigues the soul.

How to transcend this sensual emptiness?

(p. 187)

The world Roethke shows us is one filled with stinks, death, void of happiness (except for dogs and children). He longs to transcend this sickening, sensual pen where people wallow. The things he has described stifle and choke the spirit:

²Ibid., p. 174.

And the spirit fails to move forward,
But shrinks into a half-life, less than itself,
Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
Ready for any crevice,
An eyeless starrer.

(p. 187)

Trapped in an environment, in a life, which is dwarfing him spiritually, Roethke wishes to be "beyond the moon,/ Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm" (p. 188). He longs to escape the flesh and the world of the flesh. He would be a fish, a lemming, a child, a flower, a stream, a leaf, an Indian.

"Meditation at Oyster River" continues Roethke's desire to escape, but the surroundings are different. He is sitting near the water, where Oyster River empties into the ocean. The first section of the poem establishes a calm seductive quietness which causes him to lapse into deep contemplation. He longs to escape into the world of the doe, the "young snake," "The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to morning-glory--/ With these I would be" (p. 190). The water itself holds an attraction for him as it laps against the bank:

Water's my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds.
(pp. 191-2)

Roethke wants to assume another identity; he wants to escape into another form. An early poem, "River Incident," revealed Roethke's feeling of kinship with the creatures of the water, the sensation that he had been there before, in

the river. Here, he is attracted by the water and expresses a desire to return to it. Inherent in his desire is a regression which would take him far back, past anything human, into the world of slime. "A wish to discard the self, or at least to purify it to essentials, seems obvious here."³

"Journey to the Interior" begins with the "long journey out of the self," a journey which takes the form of an automobile trip, leaving behind the "towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters,/ Their wooden stores of silvery pine and weather-beaten red courthouses . . ." (p. 193). Roethke drives out of civilization, past the farm houses and ranches, onto the dusty roads. The journey is symbolic of his attempt to transcend the sensual, and, as he states in the opening line, to escape the self:

And I roam elsewhere, my body thinking,
Turning toward the other side of light,
In a tower of wind, a tree idling in air,
Beyond my own echo,
Neither forward nor backward,
Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere.
(p. 195)

The escape is different than it usually is. Roethke does not journey backward (like the crab) into his past nor does he journey forward (like the salmon), pushing into new waters, taking on new identities. He escapes into "a place leading nowhere," into a kind of oblivion, a place where he is static, and the escape begins to take on the appearance

³Mills, "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems," p. 123.

of a death-wish. "The self, afraid of death, ironically wills its death to escape fear."⁴

In "The Long Waters," the death-wish is continued. Roethke rejects "the world of the dog" and the thrush in favor of inanimate, unfeeling things (p. 196). He confesses:

And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,
My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the
 rolling mists
Changing with every twist of wind,
The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,
Where light is stone.

(p. 196)

Here too, he is wishing for oblivion. He does not want to assume the identity of a dog or a thrush, but is drawn to the peaks and ravines, to the fields where nothing breathes. As he says in another poem in The Far Field, "Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!" (p. 244). He is afraid of his own death, and he is willing to give up his life for any form of being in order to relieve himself of the fear which presses so heavily upon him.

But a change occurs near the end of "The Long Waters." Roethke is pulled from his death-wish by the sea breeze "as a fire, seemingly long dead, flares up from a downdraft of air in a chimney . . ." (p. 198). He looks into the waves and finds:

I, who came back from the depths laughing too
 loudly,
Become 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.

(p. 198)

⁴Malkoff, p. 179.

He is shaken from his wish for oblivion and turns to a fusion with the One. Rather than become a part of the "black ravines" or the jagged peaks, he becomes a part of everything, in harmony with creation. Like the change which occurred in the old woman, Roethke's change is "Unprayed-for,/ And final" (p. 173).

"The Far Field" also begins with an image of death. Roethke dreams "of journeys repeatedly: of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,/ Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula . . ." (p. 199). He finds himself alone on a road that changes from pavement to stone to sand "Where the car stalls,/ Churning in a snowdrift/ Until the headlights darken" (p. 199).

The second section of the poem reveals that Roethke "learned not to fear infinity" through his discoveries, as a child, of a dead rat or a cat shot by the night watchman (p. 200). His identification with other beings also helped him overcome his fear. He would finger a shell and think, "Once I was something like this, mindless," or he would think of his death and believe he would return "as a snake or a raucous bird,/ Or, with luck, as a lion" (p. 200). He learned to accept his death, not to fear it. It seems that Roethke is trying to relearn that old lesson, to achieve the acceptance of death which he had as a child.

Now he has "come to a still, but not a deep center . . ." (p. 201). He is an old man "in garments of adieu";

his death is nearing (p. 201). But he is unafraid. He believes "All finite things reveal infinitude," and he is content (p. 201).

"The Rose" is the sixth and final poem of the "North American Sequence." As in "Meditation at Oyster River," Roethke is at a place where fresh water empties into the sea. The location is important because of its symbolic value. The stream, like Roethke, is emptying into the larger body, the One.

Looking into the water, Roethke sways outside himself "Into the darkening currents," and he wonders, "Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment?" (p. 202). He feels his relation to everything. He is with the water, and he senses that he may once have been a bird.

In the second section, Roethke finds the rose which has struggled into existence and rooted itself firmly in a place of change. And the rose reminds him of his childhood, of the greenhouse and the flowers which seemed "to beckon me, only a child, out of myself" (p. 203). This rose affects him in a similar way:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched,
 wind-warped madronas,
 Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true
 ease of myself,
 As if another man appeared outside myself,
 Beyond becoming and perishing,
 A something wholly other,
 As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
 And yet was still.

(p. 205)

The rose has fought into existence, and it lives in its rightful place. It is itself, even in a world of change, even near these waters which symbolize the surrender of small life to the larger body. The rose simply is, and it helps Roethke to rejoice in what he is, even though he is near death.

The six poems of the "North American Sequence" deal with death. "The Longing" and "Meditation at Oyster River" reveal Roethke's desire to escape the sensual world. He wants to assume another identity or to be "beyond the moon." "Journey to the Interior" and "The Long Waters" reveal a definite wish for an inanimate existence, a kind of oblivion, but the wish is reversed near the end of "The Long Waters," and Roethke escapes into a union with the One. "The Far Field" and "The Rose" express Roethke's acceptance of death. He no longer fears it, and he does not try to escape it. He has given over his desire to be like the ravines and the peaks, insensitive to death. Like the rose, he is able to accept what he is, and he rests in the assurance that "All finite things reveal infinitude . . ." (p. 201).

The theme of death is continued in other poems of The Far Field. "The Abyss," for example, symbolizes the void, "the immense immeasurable emptiness" which Roethke associates with death (p. 156). The abyss cannot be missed; it is just "'A step down the stair'" (p. 219). Roethke feels death drawing near; he is "no longer a bird dipping

a beak into rippling water/ But a mole winding through the earth,/ A night-fishing otter" (p. 220). He is near the abyss, near the dark, devouring sea, and he wonders, "Can I outleap the sea--/ The edge of all the land, the final sea?" (p. 221). He is still afraid of death, still striving to find a way to avoid it, to escape it. But here, as in "The Rose," his fears are allayed, and he concludes, "Being, not doing, is my first joy" (p. 222). His heaviness is taken away by "The Lord God," and he is content in being (p. 222).

"In a Dark Time" contains the final escape--death. The familiar dualism is observed:

My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.
(p. 239)

The soul is trapped within the body and struggles to get out as a fly, seeing the light beyond the window, taps frantically at the pane in an attempt to escape. But this time the soul escapes from the "fallen man" (obviously a dead man) and enters the One. It is interesting to note that God has begun to appear in Roethke's last poems. The One which has been nameless in all of the earlier poems is now synonymous with God. Thus Roethke's escape results in a union with God.

"In Evening Air" reveals an even further emphasis on God's role. Roethke is held by a "dark theme," by death, and he prays, "Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing/

59

Time cannot overwhelm" (p. 240). Roethke does not try to escape. Instead, he places himself in God's hands and asks to be made into something that is beyond time and death. He no longer takes the initiative; he has become a supplicant.

"Infirmary" reveals Roethke's weakening physical condition. He is dying inward and must have cortisone injected into his shoulder and fluid drained from his knee. "Pride, fear, and self-love prevent him from abandoning himself wholly to the spirit. . . ." ⁵ He recognizes, "I love myself: that's my one constancy," and he longs "to be something else, yet still to be!" (p. 244). He still wishes to escape his coming death, to be turned into something else, but the poem ends with his observation of "How body from spirit slowly does unwind/ Until we are pure spirit at the end" (p. 244). And there is something of an acceptance, a quiet resolve, in that final remark.

"The Tree, The Bird" recalls the dualism of "A bird sings in the bush of your bones" in "Give Way, Ye Gates" (p. 79). Roethke strolls through the fields, "At ease with joy, a self-enchanted man" (p. 248). He is close to the snails and the light:

Yet when I sighed, I stood outside my life,
A leaf unaltered by the midnight scene,
Part of a tree still dark, still, deathly still,
Riding the air, a willow with its kind.
(p. 248)

⁵Mills, "In the way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems," pp. 131-32.

He becomes like the willow tree. He is in close communion with the natural objects around him, and the willow with its bird is so like himself that he becomes that thing. The bird within the willow becomes the soul within Roethke's body, and the identification is so intense it unnerves Roethke:

The willow with its bird grew loud, grew louder
still.

I could not bear its song, that altering
With every shift of air, those beating wings,
The lonely buzz behind my midnight eyes;--
How deep the mother-root of that still cry!

(p. 248)

The "lonely buzz" recalls the image of the fly tapping at the sill in "In a Dark Time." Roethke's soul is preparing to take wing when "the present falls away . . ." (p. 248).

"Once More the Round" is the final poem in The Far Field. It is an appropriate ending for that volume of poems and for this study. Roethke affirms that only the unknown can be known, so he adores his life "With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,/ With the Fish, the questing Snail . . ." (p. 251). He is a part of everything:

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.
(p. 251)

The Far Field is the culmination of Roethke's poetry not simply because it is his last volume but because the poetry itself has a certain finality about it. The entire book seems to foreshadow Roethke's death. The "North American Sequence" is an attempt to achieve a calm acceptance of death, and the other poems which have been examined here

are variations on that theme. Throughout his poetry, Roethke makes use of the escape. Here, in his final poems, he prepares for the final escape.

CONCLUSION

Although Roethke's desire to escape permeates his poetry and plays a crucial role in his quest for an identity, it has been largely overlooked by critics and scholars. This study has proposed to give the escapism theme the attention it deserves by tracing its development and its variations through selected poems of Theodore Roethke.

The title of Roethke's first book, Open House, implies what he intends to do. He plans to make of himself an open house. With the doors flung wide, the reader can enter Roethke's personal world, his thoughts. But Roethke can use the opened doors too. He can use them to escape from himself, into the world around him. It is Roethke's dualism, his separation of flesh and spirit, which first leads him to want to escape his body. However, his first few forays outside himself frighten him, and he finds he must become acclimatized to the new situation.

In the second book, The Lost Son and Other Poems, the escapism theme takes a new turn. Roethke regresses to the greenhouse world of his childhood, to the flowers and plants. He is in quest of an identity, so he escapes to the past. But, at this point, he has entered only the external world of the child he once was. In the final section of the

03

book, Roethke escapes into the child himself. He enters the internal world of the small boy of his past and assumes the thoughts and the language of his childhood. This avenue of escape is continued in the poems of Praise to the End! and is explored even more fully when Roethke regresses to the pre-natal world.

The Waking initiates another avenue of escape. In "Four for Sir John Davies," Roethke finds that he can use the sensual in order to transcend the flesh. He finds that love can enable him to escape himself. The sexual union causes the spirit to be heightened, but only if the spirits are participants in the union. The love of flesh alone is not enough. The escape through love is continued in the first parts of Words for the Wind.

The final sequence in Words for the Wind, "Meditations of an Old Woman," marks the beginning of Roethke's concern with death. His treatment of the death theme is continued in The Far Field, particularly in "North American Sequence." Death itself is the ultimate escape, but it frightens Roethke. He frantically flees it and tries to escape into numerous identities to avoid having to face it. Ultimately, he accepts what he knows must come.

Intermixed with these major movements of the escapism theme, and an integral part of them, is Roethke's continual escape into the identities of things around him. He tries on the identity of a tree, a frog, a snake, the wind, the light, a bird--the list is quite lengthy. And sometimes

his escape is accompanied by a union with the One, the whole of creation.

Roethke's poetry is indeed the journal of a man's attempt to find his place in existence, to grasp his true identity. His search most often takes the form of an escape, and it is through escaping that he moves closer to a realization of what and why he is.

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