

Theodore Roethke's *Praise to the End!* Poems

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I'll take as my starting point an entry Roethke made in his notebook at the time he was writing the *Praise to the End!* poems: "To go back is to go forward."¹ In these poems, regression is also progression; time loops back to gather itself as it goes forward to meet itself. The "itself" that time loops back and gathers lies in the pre-history of the world as well as in Roethke's childhood. The landscape of the poems is both the greenhouse operated by Roethke's father in Saginaw, Michigan, and the primordial wilderness previous to the rise of civilizations; and the in-scape of the poems is both the emotional state of Roethke as an adult and the childhood experience of life as an undifferentiated whole previous to the emergence of adult consciousness. Children lose this undifferentiated whole as they grow into adulthood. One must go back and recover it in order to become a full man. "To go back is to go forward."

The *Praise to the End!* poems are a developmental sequence of fifteen long, experimental poems about childhood and the growth out of childhood into adolescence, first published completely in *The Waking: Poems 1933-1953* (1953). Four of the poems were initially published in *The Lost Son* (1948), and the whole sequence except for the last poem, "O, Thou Opening, O," was published in *Praise to the End!* (1951). In Roethke's arrangement (which was not followed in the posthumous *Collected Poems*), the sequence is divided into two major sections, the first consisting of "Where Knock is Open Wide," "I Need, I Need," "Bring the Day!" "Give Way, Ye Gates," "Sensibility! O Lal!" and "O Lull Me, Lull Me," and the second consisting of "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," "The Shape of the Fire," "Praise to the End!" "Unfold! Unfold!" "I Cry, Love! Love!" and "O, Thou Opening, O." Taken as a whole, the sequence represents one long poem, each part of which (that is, each poem) contains and reaffirms that whole. The movement of progression and regression, of going forward and going back, occurs rhythmically in each poem and in the overall sequence in such a way that the sequence sways as a tree does, with a unified gradation of movements and counter-movements, from the small and quick to the large and ponderous.

What gives this sequence its vitality is that its regressions carry the poet and the reader—and the language of the poems as well—back into that timeless childhood experience of life as an undifferentiated whole, as a radical means of recovering that experience for everyday life. "Whole" is an abstract word; as an experience,

¹ Quoted in Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York, 1968), p. 196.

however, it is very real and tangible, and not always pleasant, as Roethke shows. In Roethke's sequence, the human body often regresses back to its polymorphous wholeness, its being as a blob, back, in other words, to the womb, just as the world often regresses back into a confusion of all its objects together, into slime, and just as language often regresses back into nonsense and playing with sounds. These three regressions, in fact, are inseparable; they are one in structure and feeling in portions of the sequence. Roethke's most explicit description of them occurs in "The Shape of the Fire":

Who, careless, slips
In coiling ooze
Is trapped to the lips,
Leaves more than shoes;

Must pull off clothes
To jerk like a frog
On belly and nose
From the sucking bog.

My meat eats me. Who waits at the gate?
Mother of quartz, your words writhe into my ear.
Renew the light, lewd whisper.

In this passage, the mergence of the world—mud—threatens to swallow and merge with the body, and both of these images of mergence are followed by a regression of language into non-meaning.

But Roethke emerges from this primordial confusion and liquid mergence of all things; not by flying toward the opposite polarity, toward atomistic separateness, but by channeling into the world, into separateness, and carrying the wholeness from which that separateness is descended into every manifestation of it. In terms of time, this means that the sequence is about the evolution out of timelessness into that world which unites timelessness and time, that is, which unites the continual absence and presence of time, the slipping away and accumulation which *is* time. More specifically, the sequence is about the child's growth in time, and about how growth is that act which is always leaving and simultaneously falling back into itself. The best image of this is the child's literal growth into his limbs, his hands, feet, eyes, mouth, penis; as the child grows he always both retains himself and moves out of himself, and hence always unites his separate limbs and organs with his original and continual wholeness, his body. This unity is impossible to imagine visually. In visual space, the whole is always separated from its parts, or at most is the sum of them. But in Roethke, the whole—whether it be language, world, body, or time—overflows into each of its parts, into the variety of its forms, into each small thing, in the becoming act of growth. This is why Roethke's world is in fact a world of small things—pebbles, petals, slugs, leaves, cinders, seeds, tongues, fingers—but it is also why that world is a whole world.

Since each poem reflects the whole in Roethke's sequence, I will examine the

first poem in detail and then move more quickly through the succeeding ones; the first poem says all that needs to be said—but only because the rest follow.

Here is the first section of the first poem, “Where Knock is Open Wide”:

A kitten can
Bite with his feet;
Papa and Mamma
Have more teeth.

Sit and play
Under the rocker
Until the cows
All have puppies.

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

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

There was a mooly man
Who had a rubber hat
And funnier than that,—
He kept it in a can.

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

The first thing to be noted about these lines is the quality of nonsense and play that they have. Roethke has begun his sequence as close to the condition of primordial mergence as possible, and the casting around of the language, the ranging of it in play, as well as its decided lack of “meaning” in the usual sense, are expressions of this mergence. This is language at its most silent because it is language with little reference outside of itself. It is language as almost pure gesture, as a mouth, where the condition of all the body is that of a mouth. Thus, the oral images in the first four lines are especially appropriate; the child is truly at an oral stage of development, where everything, including language, partakes of that total narcissistic union for which a baby at his mother's breast is the most apt image. This is why, spatially, most of the images in these lines have to do with being enclosed, and with the feeling of softness: play *under* the rocker, a hat *in* a can, “A real hurt is soft.”

But the language in this section, for all of its narcissistic play and its self-en-

closedness, is not totally without a referential function. Indeed, part of the point of the lines is that the hard edge of "reality" is beginning to impinge upon the soft primordial wholeness of the child's world. Thus, the mention of teeth, or of a hurt, or a can, and thus also the matter-of-fact, almost abstract statements such as "Everything has been twice." This is also the feeling of the section's rhythm and movement: the casting around, the play and the flow of language is twice brought to an abrupt halt by some rather prosaic, flat lines. The language play and non-sense verse occurs in four-line units, each line of which has two or three stresses and is not end-stopped; these flow smoothly until they are halted by three-line units with three or four stresses in each line, all of which are end-stopped. This is the beginning of the strophe-antistrophe movement, the sway and counter-sway, that is evident throughout the whole sequence. Out of narcissistic play, Roethke pulls up short at the plain fact of the world: "His ears haven't time," for example.

The awakening sense of time is perhaps the most important thing to note about this opening section. The word "time" is used three times, the point being that out of a timeless condition of play and self-enclosedness, the child is losing himself into time, he is beginning to feel a past grow behind him and a future come toward him. Thus, it is significant that one of the mentions of "time" is born out of that very playfulness, out of the child's casting around with words: "Once upon a tree/I came across a time." These lines should "normally" read, of course, "Once upon a time/I came across a tree." Roethke's shifting of the normal syntax of words, something that occurs throughout the sequence, is indicative of the unsettled state of the child's consciousness; a tree is just as new and unfamiliar to him as a "time," and both are part of the new world he is inadvertently creating by tossing his words around. Of course, it is only natural that the child should come across a "time" while playing with his words, since that play is simply the birth of the poem itself, and since the poem thus born can only exist in the falling away of its words, in time.

The closing three lines of this section accumulate most of the above themes and discoveries, and introduce some new considerations that are to be extremely important in the sequence. The narrator asks, "What's the time, papa-seed?", a question that is to be taken literally: what *is* time? The appropriateness of asking "papa" this question is given in the fact that the very awareness of the father *as* father constitutes a time-consciousness, an historical consciousness. And the latter is made explicit by the ensuing two lines: "Everything has been twice./My father is a fish." These lines open up the particular nature of that time consciousness, and its differences from the primordial mergence that the child is leaving behind. Everything has been *twice*, there is a dual mode to the world-in-time, as opposed to the self-enclosed nature of play and timeless mergence. Most of the rest of the sequence, as we shall see, will be an attempt to unite that dual mode with the previous wholeness of the child, a unity pre-figured by the father's being and not-being of himself as a fish.

The image of the fish brings up another important consideration. Throughout the sequence, the father is identified with the male generative principle, that which penetrates the amorphous wholeness of pre-existence and infuses it with

form, that is, gives it parts, limbs, separations. This is why papa is “papa-seed,” and why he is also a fish. The fish image in Roethke represents the only formed thing in the undifferentiated mass, the “body without skin,” which is water: it is the root of that body, which means it is also the father of that body. The further identification of the fish with the penis, and thus of the father with the penis, is a natural one. As we shall see, images of the penis—the fish, the rat, the foot, the worm—are a central focus of much of the conflicts and resolutions in the sequence, and can be arranged opposite images of the vagina—holes, nests, gates, caves, or water. The unity of male and female becomes, then, the perfect image of the unity of separation and wholeness, of discreteness and mergence, which is the final condition of Roethke’s world. This unity is equally a unity of father and mother, and a unity, that is, an integration, of the self. This is why a common image of the unity of male and female, the act of fishing, is expressed in one of the last poems of the sequence as a self-directed act of integration: “Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears.”

Section two of the poem continues much of the playing with words that constitutes section one, but also introduces several new considerations:

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

I know who’s got him,
They’ll jump on his belly,
He won’t be an angel,
I don’t care either.

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

Winkie will yellow I sang.
Her eyes went kissing away.
It was and it wasn’t her there
I sang I sang all day.

One important feature of the sensual richness of the child’s language play is that it reveals a world that is itself sensually rich, a world that plays with and tosses around each of the various senses that open upon it. In other words, the world of the child is a synaesthetic one, and all of his various sense perceptions are present in each separate one, just as the whole of the body is present in each of its parts. Thus, “I know her noise./Her neck has kittens,” and also, “Her eyes went kissing away.”

These lines also contain the first ambiguous references to “her” in the poem.

"Her" is of course in a certain sense the child's mother, the living representation of his primordial wholeness, and the ultimate object of his regressions. But as the sequence proceeds, "her" obviously comes to indicate also another woman, one who becomes the focus of all the vaginal images in the poems, and who thus represents a separate being whom the child, growing out of childhood, must unite with.

Two more points about this section: first, death is experienced for the first time by the child, and handily disposed of in play—something that will become increasingly difficult to do as the sequence proceeds. Second, the phrase "I know" is repeated twice, an indication of the child's rapid growth in time. "I know" constitutes in both cases a kind of recognition, and recognition implies that the child possesses a past which is not simply a primordial mergence, but is a history, an accumulation of experiences.

This phrase, "I know," triggers the next section, which in feeling, rhythm and theme is substantially different from the first two:

I know it's an owl. He's making it darker.
Eat where you're at. I'm not a mouse.
Some stones are still warm.
I like soft paws.
Maybe I'm lost,
Or asleep.

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

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

If the sequence is structured on a kind of progression-regression rhythm, or to put it differently, an expansion-deflation rhythm, the meaning of "deflation" is made clear in the first two stanzas of this section. In the first section the expansive play of the child stopped at the hard edge of the "real" world; here, that stoppage is given the explicit emotional character of fear, and the temporal and spatial character of being lost. It is rhythmically expressed by the fact that all the lines are end-stopped, and some even have full stops in the middle. Thus, the lines have a kind of atomistic quality, a feeling of things broken apart and lying beside each other. In terms of time, this is to say that the growing time-awareness of the child has suddenly hit a nerve in consciousness which reveals that time is slipping away as well as going forward. Thus, a kind of fear is produced in the child, a fear that makes him clutch at whatever is at hand in order to stop the passage of time. This is "being lost"; not the loss of orientation that can occur in a map

space, but the loss of self in time that necessarily occurs in growing up. Of course, the loss of self in time is always accompanied by a coming toward one's self—but either may be experienced more intensely than the other, and in this case the former is. This is why the child grabs at things: in order not to slip away into the past. But the irony is that whatever he reaches for slips away itself—as if he were being blown backwards, and reached out of desperation for doorknobs and handles that loosened and came off in his hand. Heidegger's description of fear is apt here: "When concern is afraid, it leaps from next to next, because it forgets itself and therefore does not *take hold* of any definite possibility."² Thus, the lines:

Eat where you're at. I'm not a mouse.
Some stones are still warm.
I like soft paws.

This feeling of jumping from one thing to the next is echoed throughout the sequence. In "The Lost Son," for example:

What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water.
Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.

Or, in "Give Way, Ye Gates":

Touch and arouse. Suck and sob. Curse and mourn.
It's a cold scrape in a low place.
The dead crow dries on a pole.

The further irony is that this jumping from thing to thing in order to stop time leads finally to regression. The child clutches at everything around him as time slips away, but nothing works, nothing is rooted, until he finally clutches at himself and his world once again becomes self-enclosed. Since the feeling of time slipping away is also a feeling of losing oneself, the solution is to embrace oneself, to root oneself *in* oneself. This is the "near" that the child asks God for. His world is not near because he is being blown back away from it, and all of its handles come loose. But his hands are near, those very limbs that he uses to clutch at the world: "I know! I know! / Hello happy hands." The hint of masturbation is unmistakable here, especially given the accompanying references to "fish" and "worm." All that is necessary is for the child to direct the use of his hands toward himself, and hence allow himself to be blown totally back through time, to regress.

Masturbation is an ambiguous act throughout the sequence. On the one hand, it is a dead end, a desperate attempt to stave off being lost. The penis itself is a perfect image of the separateness into which the primordial wholeness of the child's world has been channelling; to fasten upon it is to acknowledge that fragmentation of the world which being lost results in. It is to relinquish the world as such, to let it pass by, and enclose oneself like a snake swallowing its tail. But on the other hand, the act of enclosing oneself leads back to that pool of narcissistic and maternal wholeness out of which the child has been thrust, and therefore

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 392.

leads back to the original mergence with the world. The paradox is, then, that the very image of separation and isolation, the penis, leads to wholeness, and hence thrusts the child back into the world he has just relinquished. Masturbation becomes the act by which the child can connect with the erotic nature of his environment, that is, with the life of nature itself. Thus, the child says "I hear flowers" when masturbation is hinted at. This kind of fundamental erotic connection between the child and his world is made more explicit in passages where that masturbation is made more explicit, in "Praise to the End!" for example:

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.

It's a great day for the mice.
Prickle-me, tickle-me, close stems.
Bumpkin, he can dance alone.
Ooh, ooh, I'm a duke of eels.

Arch my back, pretty-bones, I'm dead at both ends.
Softly, softly, you'll wake the clams.
I'll feed the ghost alone.
Father, forgive my hands.

The rings have gone from the pond.
The river's alone with its water.
All risings
Fall.

The "near" the child asks for becomes the natural things of the world, as well as his own skin: "It's a great day for the mice./Prickle-me, tickle-me, close stems." And so that being lost which had forced the child back on himself has become its own opposite, a being found. The deflation which is being lost has become, of its own movement, an inflation, both literally and figuratively, a mutual embrace of the child and his world.

But, of course, as the final lines of the above passage and the following section of "Where Knock Is Open Wide" both make clear, that very inflation of the child's world, which is centered in the penis, becomes in turn of its own movement a deflation. Thus, "All risings/Fall." And thus, the emphasis at the end of that passage upon being alone: "I'll feed the ghost alone," and "The river's alone with its water." Similarly, in section four of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," the narrator says:

That was before. I fell! I fell!
The worm **has moved** away.
My tears are tired.

The sway and counter-sway of time in the sequence, and the sense in which those two movements are born out of each other, is primarily felt in this recurring rhythm of being lost, regressing, and then out of that very regression, expanding

and embracing the world erotically, and in turn out of that very expansion finding oneself lost again. The emphasis at the beginning of the sequence is upon being lost, and at the end upon embracing the world and being found, but the point is that each is also present in the other.

The rest of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," re-emphasizes, after the brief counter-movement of embracing the world, the being lost and being alone of the child's fall into time. Here is section four:

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

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
Papa threw him back.

Bullheads have whiskers.
And they bite.

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

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

Nowhere is out. I saw the cold.
Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die.
How high is have?
I'll be a bite. You be a wink.
Sing the snake to sleep.

The bulk of the section is given as a kind of reverie, a memory, perhaps the only one that the child could fasten upon to prevent the recurrence of being lost. The feeling of the passage is that of a kind of uneasy stasis: there is no intensely felt fear and no radical regression, but neither is there any embracing of the world and progression.

And yet, this section does contain the climax of this first poem of the sequence: "That was before. I fell! I fell!" Out of the realization that the reverie *is* a reverie issues a temporal self-consciousness, a kind of being inside and outside of oneself, a falling through oneself that is the core of time, since time, in a sense, is a falling. "I fell!" also refers, of course, to the child's sexual sin, and it refers as well to the correlation between the child's sin and that of the race, by calling to mind the Fall of Adam. Thus, the traditional equation between the penis and the snake in

the garden is made in the next line: "The worm has moved away." The image of the penis also appears several stanzas earlier, and significantly, as in the first section of the poem, it appears in terms of a close connection between father and fish:

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
Papa threw him back.

Not only is this passage another instance of the fact of death; it is also an allegory which in general displays the authority over life that the father possesses, and in particular displays his displeasure with the son's attempt to express his sexuality, to "talk" with his penis. As in Eden the child's sin, then, is a sin of disobedience of the father; "Father forgive my hands," he says in "Praise to the End!" And therefore his salvation, as the rest of the sequence shows, will be an attempt to reconcile himself with the father.

The end of the poem, section five, shows the final break with the father that is necessary before reconciliation can be possible:

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

God's somewhere else,
I said to Mamma.
The evening came
A long long time.

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

Maybe God has a house.
But not here.

The father's death dramatically heightens the son's sense of separation from himself, that is, from his original mergence with the world. Time is now "a long long time" since it has fallen out of itself, and the son is "somebody else" since he has done the same. Nothing is in fact present, nothing is here. "Kisses come back," the son says; God is "somewhere else," and even God's house, the world itself, is "not here." What the fathers' death shows, then, is that the narrator's reconciliation with the father will be in an important sense a reconciliation with everything, with God, with the world. Thus, the line "One father is enough" will find an answer in the very last poem of the sequence: "A son has many fathers."

The dominant theme of "Where Knock Is Open Wide," then, is that of being lost. There is a momentary interlude, an awakening and being found in section

three—"I know! I know!"—but this quickly recedes, and the poem ends finally on a note of absence.

Being lost, as we have seen, is the intense experience of time slipping away. There is an experience related to being lost that equally concentrates on only one aspect of time, and which therefore produces a similar sense of incompleteness, and that is desire. If being lost is the realization of time slipping away, desire is the realization of time slipping ahead, of time always eluding our grasp. The dominant theme of the next poem in the sequence, "I Need, I Need," is this experience of desire, as its title makes clear. Grammatically, most of the poem is concerned not with what has happened, but with what may happen, or should happen. Thus, many of the sentence forms are commands or wishes. In section one, for example:

Whisper me over,
Why don't you, begonia,
There's no alas
Where I live.

There's no alas because in this new orientation in time to the future there's no pausing to reconsider or catch one's breath. There is a kind of restlessness in this section, not exactly a searching, but a quizzical wandering:

Went down cellar,
Talked to a faucet;
The drippy water
Had nothing to say.

And this wandering breaks out into pure playful wish in the next section, followed in turn by a conscious realization that the leaping ahead of time means the world is always essentially incomplete:

I wish I was a pifflebob
I wish I was a funny
I wish I had ten thousand hats,
And made a lot of money.

Open a hole and see the sky:
A duck knows something
You and I don't.
Tomorrow is Friday.

The image of the hole, and the realization that time is slipping ahead, combine in the poem to form the essential structure of desire. Desire is a hole that is always being filled, but never retains anything; hence, it is a constant and pure progression, a continual outstripping of itself. It is pure mouth, which is why the predominant imagery of the poem is oral imagery ("Sit in my mouth" at the beginning of the poem, and "My hoe eats like a goat" at the end). Desire is above all eating, and it is that particular eating, like fire, whose sustenance passes through it instead of being retained.

The images of eating—and of fire—congregate at the end of the poem, and become explicitly sexual. At the poem's beginning, oral images appear in terms of the mother, but at the end they are presented in terms of the "her" introduced in "Where Knock Is Open Wide." It is almost as if, in order to stop the ceaseless passing through and slipping ahead that constitute desire, the narrator had to invent an object of desire. This is, of course, the structure of all sexual awakenings: they are not precipitated by a "her," but rather the desire which already exists casts around until it finds a "her" it can anchor in:

Who's ready for pink and frisk?
My hoe eats like a goat.

Her feet said yes.
It was all hay.
I said to the gate,
Who else knows
What water does?
Dew ate the fire.

I know another fire.
Has roots.

In this case, the anchoring of desire succeeds to such an extent that the final image of eating is of desire itself being eaten: "Dew ate the fire." The recurring use throughout the sequence of water and fire to represent the female and male principles indicates that this devouring of desire is simply the inevitable result of sexual fulfillment. It is thus anything but permanent; "another fire" already exists, its roots are already down, and it will inevitably burst forth to start the cycle over again.

But the last two lines—"I know another fire./Has roots."—have a further possible meaning, a meaning more indicative of the direction the rest of the sequence will take. If fire, as an image of desire, represents a kind of pure becoming and pure progression, a temporality that always leaps ahead of itself, then a fire with roots represents, paradoxically, a becoming that has a permanence at its heart, a progression that retains itself. It represents, in other words, the full structure of temporality, the structure for which being lost on the one hand and desire on the other are only partial manifestations. As we shall see, the fire with roots is the very act of growth which is temporality in its most complete sense.

The next poem, "Bring the Day!" is the shortest of the sequence, and represents a kind of peaceful interlude before the emphasis in the sequence shifts to growth and embracing the world. The dominant image of this poem is the kiss, again an oral action, but that particular oral action which is neither a devouring nor a being devoured, but is rather a kind of floating on the surface of both. The kiss is the image of gentle and mutual appropriation, of the cooperative alliance of things. Thus, the poem opens with the lines:

Bees and lilies there were,
Bees and lilies there were,

Either to other,—
Which would you rather?
Bees and lilies were there.

The feeling in the poem is one of compatibility. Except for a brief brush with being lost, there is no sense of incompleteness in this poem. Rather, the images are of things which suit and complete each other:

Leaves, do you like me any?
A swan needs a pond.
The worm and the rose
Both love
Rain.

The space of both being lost and desiring was a kind of atomistic space, a space broken up into the separate objects that the narrator clutched at to steady and fix himself. Here, the space is one that funnels through things and enables them to gently manifest themselves, to introduce themselves:

The herrings are awake.
What's all the singing between?—
Is it with whispers and kissing?—
I've listened into the least waves.

Things hold themselves out in this poem, as we hold objects out on our hands. Their space is a buoyant one that allows them to float before us, to stretch and feel themselves awakening:

O small bird awakening,
Light as a hand among blossoms,
Hardly any old angels are around any more.
The air's quiet under the small leaves.
The dust, the long dust, stays.
The spiders sail into summer.
It's time to begin!
To begin!

The peace of the poem, then, is that quiet that exists before a storm, that stasis out of which beginnings proceed, and in fact, which even the most violent kind of becoming and progression has to continually carry with it and have at its heart if it isn't to outstrip itself and swallow itself as pure desire.

This becoming with a stasis at its heart is the dominant theme of the next poem, and the continual resolution of the rest of the sequence. The title, "Give Way, Ye Gates," refers to flood gates, but also has obvious sexual overtones. Throughout the sequence the gate is an image of the vagina, as in the line, "My gates are all caves," in "The Long Alley." And particularly, the gate is a symbol of the forbidden nature of sexual union, since its function is to block entrance. But in this poem, the gates literally give way, and the result is a re-awakening and a rebirth of the narrator into the world, both sexually and existentially. Birth is

thus an important theme in the poem, of equal importance to the theme of sexual union. The two themes, in fact, are collapsed in the line which describes the actual giving way of the gates: "Tufty, the water's loose." A tuft is a clump of hair, and hence "Tufty" probably refers to the female sexual organ; "the water's loose" calls to mind a release of stored up sexual energy on the one hand, and a pregnant woman's breaking water on the other. Together, these two meanings indicate the sense in which the giving way of the gates is a surge of energy; it is the surge that carries the child out of the womb into sexual union with another; the surge, in other words, which is the child's act of growth.

Throughout the sequence, the two kinds of images which best reveal the structure of this act of growth are those of openings—gates, holes, mouths, caves—and those of water—streams, ponds, lakes, the amniotic fluid. I'll talk about the images of water first. A flood is the most explicit image of growth, for it is that forward movement which always accumulates itself; and this is precisely what growth is, the movement forward in time which accumulates, the falling which is also a rising. Growth is that activity which never leaves itself behind, and yet always goes forward; in this sense, not only a flood, but any movement of water embodies the structure of growth, since water always carries its source—water—with it when it moves. The movement of water, precisely like growth, is that flow out of itself which retains itself. This is the point of the closing lines of "Give Way, Ye Gates":

The deep stream remembers:
Once I was a pond.
What slides away
Provides.

Just as water partitions itself out of an original wholeness into more and more refined parts—rivers and streams—and yet retains that original wholeness, carrying it into each of those parts, so growth is the activity of partitioning one's body into its parts, while always retaining that original mergence, that original wholeness, that "pool" out of which it came.

The imagery of holes reveals a similar structure for the act of growth. In the sequence, the concept of "hole" is used in two senses: as an enclosure, a pit, for example, and as an opening out of an enclosure. The imagery of enclosures is that imagery which we have already seen indicates regression and a return to the original condition of mergence. "Who stands in a hole/Never spills," says the narrator in "Give Way, Ye Gates," a sentiment echoed throughout the sequence in all the images of mergence and sinking, of pouring into one's self and filling one's self, that result in a kind of blob existence. Thus, in lines already quoted:

Who, careless, slips
In coiling ooze
Is trapped to the lips
Leaves more than shoes.

The "coiling ooze" is one's own body as well as the amorphous body of the earth, and thus it is one's body as a hole or pit in which one is trapped. Similarly, the

line "Everything's closer. Is this a cage?" in "Bring the Day!" or the phrase "I'm lost in what I have" in "O, Thou Opening, O" refers to the body as it funnels back into itself and fills the hole of itself, to a kind of regressive growth that never leaves itself. But opposed to these images in the sequence are all those of emerging from a hole, of flowing out of one's self. "I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog," the narrator says in "Praise to the End!", a line echoed in "O, Thou Opening, O": "I've crept from a cry." This imagery of emergence is of course related to the experience of desire, of always leaping out of and ahead of one's self, that we have already seen. And both are expressions of the becoming aspect of growth, of the structure of human existence as a continual progression; we are always "Looking toward what we are," as Roethke says in "Give Way, Ye Gates."

But the point is that the concept of growth embraces both of these aspects of the imagery of holes. Growth is that activity in which we are always being filled and yet always emerging from ourselves, it is the grave and the nest united. Growth is time as falling, and particularly, in terms of the body, time as a falling into and a simultaneous rising out of ourselves. This is growth: we lose and gather ourselves, we slip by ourselves in the very act of falling into ourselves, we always overflow ourselves without spilling. Roethke's most stunning image of a kind of overflowing which doesn't spill occurs at the end of "The Shape of the Fire":

To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.

This is precisely the condition of the body in growth, a fact made clear by Roethke's description, several lines before this passage, of a rose "Rising slowly out of its bed,/Still as a child in its first loneliness." Growth is a perfect unity of stasis and silence with continual becoming, and hence it is a sustained fullness which trembles at its own brim, and which simultaneously leaves itself in order to feed itself. It is that unity of the timelessness of the child's world with the successiveness of adulthood which enables time to embrace both presence and absence, both passing and becoming. This is why Roethke's narcissism, evident throughout the sequence, is not idle self-indulgence, but that perfect excess of being which is also perfectly trim, that complete absorption in one's self which is also completely impersonal. "Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears," he says in "Unfold! Unfold!", indicating that the reach into one's self, into the narcissistic pool, is also an emergence out of one's self. To submerge is to emerge in Roethke's poems; or, as Roethke puts it, to go back is to go forward. Growth is that very activity in which one always falls back into the hole of the self, fills that hole, and is consequently impelled forward—all in one motion.

Growth is thus the activity which organizes all of the counter movements of the poem, the sway and counter sway of its rhythm, the progression-regression, expansion-deflation movement of the child's wanderings in the world. Growth unites,

in fact, being lost and desiring or needing—it is that fire with roots by which we are what we become, and it thus unites being lost and being found. The emphasis upon being found in the rest of the sequence, then, is equally an emphasis upon coming toward oneself in the world.

The emphasis is also upon uniting with the world, upon filling the world as one fills one's self, while always not-being the world as well, while always flowing out of it. The ambiguity of masturbation in the sequence reflects this being and not-being of the self and the world, and indicates its connection with the concept of growth. Masturbation is a kind of ecstatic self-enclosedness, a being-filled which is also outside of itself, and specifically is outside of itself by being in the world, by erotically uniting with nature. Growth is thus that very excess of being which overflows into the world, into the objects of the world, and enables the body both to define itself on the "ground" of the world and to unite with the world. This is why, in "O Lull me, Lull me," images of the connection between inside and outside, and between body and world, become prominent for the first time in the sequence:

I see my heart in the seed;
I breathe into a dream,
And the ground cries.
I'm crazed and graceless,
A winter-leaping frog.

This is the kind of resolution that will occur at peak moments in the second half of the sequence. Roethke's vision is of that gap in Being, that Non-being which passes through and fills Being out, and requires that the body and the world always mutually embrace and penetrate each other so that both can truly grow. The peak moments of the rest of the sequence are when the narrator and the world slip into each other's skin through the common hole they share, the hole in time which is growth. I will conclude by examining some of these peak moments.

The first occurs in "The Lost Son," and significantly, climaxes with a dizzy plunge into the hole of the world, into that pure Non-being at the heart of everything:

These sweeps of light undo me.
Look, look, the ditch is running white!
I've more veins than a tree!
Kiss me, ashes, I'm falling through a dark swirl.

This passage occurs several stanzas after a description of being lost in which the narrator says, "My veins are running nowhere." By contrast, the "running" of his veins in this passage, the new infusion of life, is the very opposite of being lost, it is an intimate connection with the things of the world: "I've more veins than a tree." The same dizziness that is found in the extreme state of being lost is there, but it moves in exactly the opposite direction, it moves toward the world, it penetrates the world: "I'm falling through a dark swirl." The next poem, "The Long

Alley," contains lines which express a similar kind of dizzy union, except that in this case the world penetrates the protagonist. Here is the entire passage, perhaps the most beautiful one in the sequence, or for that matter, in all of Roethke's poetry:

Shall I call the flowers?

Come littlest, come tenderest,
Come whispering over the small waters,
Reach me rose, sweet one, still moist in the loam,
Come, come out of the shade, the cool ways,
The long alleys of string and stem;
Bend down, small breathers, creepers and winders;
Lean from the tiers and benches,
Cyclamen dripping and lilies.
What fish-ways you have, littlest flowers,
Swaying over the walks, in the watery air,
Drowsing in soft light, petals pulsing.

Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!
The leaves, the leaves become me!
The tendrils have me!

As in "The Lost Son," this incident occurs after a period of being lost and regressing. Here, the things of the world, their vegetal, sexual aspect, literally plunge through the body of the poet, and the result is a totally ecstatic experience of being-in-the-world: "The leaves, the leaves become me!" It is this kind of ideal metamorphic moment for which the whole sequence exists. One more example should suffice, from "Praise to the End!":

Arch of the air, my heart's original knock,
I'm awake all over:
I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog;
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.

This is that complete openness which is also completely filled, it is that total self-effacement in the presence of the world which is equally a complete self-fulfillment, a complete realization of the self. Roethke disperses himself, loses himself into even the most inanimate objects, stones and pebbles, and by that very dispersal finds himself fully and collects himself. And this losing and finding oneself

in intimate union with the world is the “bower of change” that the poet basks in, it is growth itself.

The space of this union with the world is a perfect unity of space and time. Each thing presents itself as autonomous and independent, as something with its own space, and yet all things participate in each other, all things are drawn into a common space; and they are drawn together by that particular hole in Being which is the body’s link with the world, by that mutual temporality of body and world by which they fall into and out of each other, by growth. The space of Roethke’s world, then, unites fullness and emptiness, plenitude and nothingness, as growth itself does. All of this can be seen in a passage in “A Field of Light”:

I touched the ground, the ground warmed by 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 nesting birds.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of cedars,
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

The “separateness of all things” is preserved in Roethke’s world, and so the space of that world is not one absolute objective block; but neither is it an atomistic space, in which each thing is confined totally to itself. Rather, it is a space which gathers up objects in all their separateness, as a wave gathers up stones, and integrates them by virtue of that separateness—a space in which, in other words, objects are always falling into place, a space which simultaneously contracts and expands, a becoming, temporal space. This space both anchors things and releases them for the grasp of the body, and it thus perfectly unites here and there, the subjective point of view and the absolute, objective world, fantasy and reality. It is a space which flows out of itself, as the body leaves itself in growth, and which simultaneously fills and impregnates itself. The image of things leaving themselves, as we have seen, is common in Roethke, and the most general example of it, one which reveals it as a basic structural principle of his world, occurs in “The Lost Son”:

From the mouths of jugs
Perched on many shelves,
I saw substance flowing
That cold morning.

The space of all of Roethke's poetry is a metamorphic space, dynamized by time, a space which leaves itself and becomes, changes, as the clouds in the previously quoted passage make "a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of cedars." Most of us live in a world in which holes open up, holes such as absolute space or absolute consciousness, both of which are hermetically sealed and are of a different order of being from that which they exclude. The space of Roethke's world also contains holes, but they are holes which are both continually being sealed and continually opening. It is space as a collection of mouths, not atoms. As he puts it in "Unfold! Unfold!":

Easy the life of the mouth. What a lust for ripeness!
All openings praise us, even oily holes.
The bulb unravels. Who's floating? Not me.
The eye perishes in the small vision.

Oral images, as we saw, opened the sequence, and expressed the primordial wholeness of the child's world. Here they express that wholeness as it is carried into the growing world of everyday experience and united with each separate entity in that world. "The eye perishes in the small vision" because it is drawn into the bottomless hole of each separate thing, and thus is drawn into the world itself. And this is possible only because the space of Roethke's world is one in which all things open upon each other and upon the body, in which subject and object, fantasy and reality, are perfectly united. Space is a hole and things are holes in Roethke's world, but space is also a medium and things are also things, and the pure potentiality of both is also pure actuality.

This metamorphic space, this space of mouths, is the reason that Roethke's world, as in Baudelaire's sonnet, is a world of correspondences—correspondences between things and between the body and things. And it is also the reason that the objects of that world often speak and sing, not only to the protagonist, but to each other. As Kenneth Burke has pointed out, Roethke prefers verbs of communication to any others in describing the things of the world.³ Thus, weeds whine, a cracked pod calls, "Even thread has a speech." The world of Roethke's poetry is one engaged in a constant energetic exchange with itself and with the body, it is the symbolic world in the fullest sense:

Sing, sing, you symbols! All simple creatures,
All small shapes, willow-shy,
In the obscure haze, sing!

A light song comes from the leaves.
A slow sigh says yes. And the light sighs.

Each thing in Roethke's world manifests itself in every other thing, and even—especially—all opposites exist in and of each other. As Roethke says in "Unfold! Unfold!", "Speak to the stones, and the stars answer"—or as he puts it more gen-

³ "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," *Sewanee Review*, LVIII (Winter, 1950), p. 97.

erally in "O, Thou Opening, O," "The Depth calls to the Height."

This unity of opposites indicates the way in which Roethke's world is a total alternative to the dualistic structures of classical Western thought, an alternative which is manifest in our most primary, everyday experience. Body and world, subject and object, time and space, fantasy and reality, child and man, etc., all exist in a perfect unity, a unity given previous to any reflection, and a unity which couldn't conceivably be otherwise. But each also exists as perfectly autonomous, each is bounded and liberated by itself, each is a hole, a mouth. In fact, Roethke's entire world is open ended, is a mouth, since it leaves itself and fills itself in the becoming motion which is growth. The "other condition" that Roethke claims in the last poem of the sequence to be king of is this condition of the natural and symbolic world, which embraces and unites multiplicity and unity, life and death, fantasy and reality, while falling and rising in the single flow of growth:

I sing the green, and things to come,
I'm king of another condition,
So alive I could die!