

THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION IN THEODORE
ROETHKE'S "THE LOST SON," "MEDITATIONS
OF AN OLD WOMAN," AND "NORTH
AMERICAN SEQUENCE"

THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

The beautiful Saginaw Valley, his father's fantastic greenhouse, a devotion to the teaching profession, and a profound respect for poetry fashioned the identity that was Theodore Roethke. Theodore Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan in 1908. His father operated a greenhouse which was later to be the source of many images and recurrent motifs in Roethke's poetry. After receiving an M.A. from Michigan State University, Roethke accepted a teaching position at Lafayette College where he also coached tennis. After teaching there four years, he returned to Michigan State to teach. He had published several poems, but his reputation as a teacher was greater than his reputation as a poet. It was at Michigan State that he experienced his first mental problem which resulted in a stay at Mercywood Sanitarium. His contract was terminated, and his next teaching position was at Penn State. After the publication Open House, his first book, Roethke went to Bennington College to teach. By this time, he was renown not only for his fine teaching ability, but he was also receiving considerable recognition for his poetic endeavors. Shortly after finishing The Lost Son, Roethke suffered a mental setback again, and this time he was given shock treatments. The

next teaching position which Roethke accepted was at Washington State where he worked on Praise to the End! and I am! Says the Lamb. In 1949 Roethke suffered another breakdown and was put in Pinel Sanitarium. In 1953 Roethke married Beatrice O'Connell, a former student. His next two books were The Waking, which received the Pulitzer Price for Poetry, and Words for the Wind, which was a collection of poems he had already published. In 1957 Roethke had another mental attack but was able to return to teaching in 1958. Roethke gave more and more poetry readings, and he became known as an outstanding performer as well as an excellent teacher and great poet. He died of a heart attack on August 1, 1963, and The Far Field, his last book, was published posthumously.

Because a chronological account of Theodore Roethke's life, or anyone's life, is obviously lacking in some respects, I have selected three excerpts which are representative evaluations of Roethke, teacher-performer-poet, and provide insight into Theodore Roethke, the person. There are numerous anecdotes which reveal Roethke, the teacher; however, Lewis Jones's letter is typical of the appraisal which Roethke received:

I can say without any hesitation that Professor Roethke was one of the best teachers we ever had at Bennington. . . . Roethke did a marvelous job of breaking through the inhibitions of his students and we had a great burst of creative writing activity under his influence . . . Roethke would spend an endless amount of time helping individual students with their writing problems and was very good at teaching just plain

English composition. You are, no doubt, familiar with Roethke's writings. He is extremely complex, temperamental, and a somewhat eccentric person . . . If the University of Washington can take his somewhat eccentric personality, it will acquire one of the best teachers I have ever seen in operation.¹

After an extensive description of Roethke's characteristic clownish antics during a poetry reading, a discerning reviewer distinguishes the performer from the poet:

The trouble is, this is only part of the story. For about ten minutes last Sunday, something else happened. The mask of the Showman-Clown-Politician dropped and we saw the suffering face of the Poet. Then the great lines would ring out from "The Adamant," "The Bat," "Elegy for Jane," "My Papa's Waltz," "Once More the Round."

The voice would grow quiet, controlled, reverent, and poetry would happen. "I knew a woman lovely in her bones . . ." "I swear she cast a shadow white as stone . . ." "I measure time by how a body sways . . ." "Madness is nobility at odds with circumstances . . ." "The right thing happens to the happy man . . ." And suddenly one knew why Roethke was up there and what it had cost.

For ten minutes the audience became the poet. To use one of his own phrases, these poems are "in the language," singing out as clearly, painfully, inevitably as an infant's first cry.

Then one knew that those ten minutes alone were worth the price of admission. That's what it was all about.²

Zulfikar Ghose recorded his impression of Theodore Roethke in an interview:

Roethke is a large man with an attractive head, round cheeked, and thinned graying hair. He has a deep sonorous voice with an incantatory ring about it. He clarifies each point he makes in his talk, leaving

¹Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), p. 170. (Hereafter referred to as Glass House.)

²Ibid., p. 281.

no doubt about his meaning: his readiness to explain any point at length is probably due to his work as a professor.

He is conscious that his stature as a poet might give the impression in his speech that he is being condescending, and with striking humility turns round in mid-speech and says, "I hope I'm not pontificating." He has a tremendous sense of humor which is so infectious that, meeting him for the first time, you think you've been his friend all his life.

.
It is not with every poet that one's enjoyment of his poems increases after meeting him; it is with Roethke. The poems, one feels, are a part of him, they are the soul of the man as he has projected it into the language. For I came away with the feeling that I had met someone I had known for a long time previously, ever since first reading a poem of his; which is a tribute to his poetry as much as to him.³

Zulfikar Ghose is correct in his observation about the similarity between Theodore Roethke and his poems. Theodore Roethke's subjectivity has received much critical attention. All in all, Theodore Roethke's critical reception was favorable. Although a critic may point out a facet of Roethke's work which he feels is unfavorable, he will also recognize Roethke as a poet of considerable talent. Although there have not been many critical assessments of his work as a whole, many critics who have examined his work addressed themselves to Roethke's subjectivity. Roethke is subjective in two ways: first, he is subjective in the sense that much of his poetry is autobiographical; second, he is subjective in the sense that the viewpoint of his personae is primarily subjective.

³ Ibid., pp. 268-270.

M. L. Rosenthal evaluates the subjective aspect of Roethke's work in The Modern Poets. He observes the totally subjective viewpoint which dominates Roethke's work⁴ and notes: "His projection without comment of a series of differing psychological states is characteristic of Roethke's most interesting work."⁵ Rosenthal considers Roethke's imagistic technique "brilliantly successful."⁶ Although he believes that Roethke masterfully projects the agonized self,⁷ Rosenthal's major criticism of Roethke is that his conclusions are "too pat and wishful,"⁸ and he states: "As in most of Roethke's longer works, the denouement does not live up to the poem's initial demands."⁹ In agreement with Rosenthal is Hayden Carruth who feels that the poems in The Far Field "do not do what Roethke wistfully hopes they do,"¹⁰ for he says that some of the lines are "statements only"¹¹ rather than poetic realities.

⁴ Macha Louis Rosenthal, The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 242.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 244.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hayden Carruth, "Requiem for God's Gardener," Nation, CIC, September, 1964, p. 169.

¹¹ Ibid.

M. L. Rosenthal's evaluation of Roethke's work in The New Poets is not much different from his earlier assessment in The Modern Poets. He observes that Roethke's regard for nature has changed in The Far Field and there is "something like joyous acceptance of things as they are. . . ." ¹² Again he praises Roethke's ability to depict the self "longing for great change;" ¹³ however, he criticizes the longing which is "unaccounted for." ¹⁴ Rosenthal attributes what he considers to be Roethke's shortcomings to "the greater ambitiousness of the later work" ¹⁵ and mostly to Roethke's subjectivity which limited the subject range of his poetry. ¹⁶

Louis L. Martz does not consider Roethke's subjectivity detrimental. His analysis of "North American Sequence" reveals that Roethke's exploration of the self, or subjectivity, shows much about the power within the self. ¹⁷ Martz illustrates that memory is the power which enables the spirit to

¹² Macha Louis Rosenthal, "Other Confessional Poets: Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Saxton," in The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 113.

¹³ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 14-18.

be released from self.¹⁸ He continues to explain that the persona escapes subjectivity, or the confines of the self, by remembering a time in which he was an integral part of nature.¹⁹ Martz discusses the metaphysical style of Open House, Roethke's first book, and he suggests that "The Premonition" is the only poem in which Roethke employs memory, which was to be the source of his poetic identity.²⁰ Martz notes the continuous changes in Roethke's style: the Yeatsian poems in The Waking, the experimental poems in Praise to the End!, and the free style of The Lost Son.²¹ Martz believes that The Lost Son, the book in which Roethke capitalizes on his childhood memories about his father's greenhouse, is the book that reveals the unique Roethkean voice that is heard in his subsequent works.²² Unlike Rosenthal who believes that the self never truly transcends self and that Roethke's subjectivity is limiting, Louis L. Martz asserts that memory is the power which enables the self to transcend itself in "North American Sequence," and Roethke's memory of his childhood is the source of his unique poetic voice.²³

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 15-18.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 15-17.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 18-21.

²¹Ibid., pp. 18-28.

²²Ibid., p. 35.

²³Ibid., pp. 14-35.

Unlike M. L. Rosenthal who praises Roethke's ability to depict the self in all its misery, Wm. Meredith emphasizes Roethke's ability to affirm order in existence. Meredith suggests that Roethke established a second self through his work.²⁴ He observes the formal and metaphysical nature of Open House and theorizes that Roethke tried to order experience in his first book.²⁵ However, in The Lost Son, his second book, Roethke assumed that order existed, and he did not have to create it; therefore, the style of The Lost Son is much freer.²⁶ He believes that Praise to the End! is "least successful,"²⁷ but he does say that Roethke's subjectivity, "the self being the intermediary of all experience,"²⁸ is not self-centered, and Roethke discovered a lasting "poetic myth."²⁹ Meredith acknowledges the negative and positive influence of Yeats in Roethke's work,³⁰ and

²⁴William Meredith, "A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 36.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 37-38.

²⁶Ibid., p. 41.

²⁷Ibid., p. 44.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 51-52.

he believes that Roethke's greatness is his ability to affirm the existence of order. It seems that his concluding statement, "And in the end it is because we see the man clearly that we are able to see with his eyes,"³¹ interpreted in view of the entire article, implies that Roethke's intense subjectivity, his vivid depiction of self, makes him and his poetry credible and real.

James Dickey also believes that Roethke's subjectivity is an asset, for he regards Theodore Roethke as "the finest poet now writing in English"³² "because of the way he sees and feels the aspects of life which are compelling to him."³³ He believes that Roethke's technique of "showing"³⁴ as opposed to "telling"³⁵ experience enables one to perceive the world as he does.³⁶ Dickey recognizes the danger of yielding to solutions which are too easy, but he perceives genuine joy and affirmation in Roethke's work.³⁷ Unlike M. L. Rosenthal who feels that Roethke's solutions are not always

³¹Ibid., p. 53.

³²James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1968), p. 147.

³³Ibid., pp. 147-148.

³⁴Ibid., p. 149.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 149-150.

viable and Hayden Carruth who feels that Roethke's statements are ineffectual, James Dickey believes:

Roethke is one of the few great poets (and I am prepared to retract no adjective in sight) who have been able to make effective statements: ones you believe, and believe in, at first sight, like a look into the one right pair of eyes in the world.³⁸

John Wain analyzes the negative and positive aspects of Roethke's subjectivity. He believes that Theodore Roethke is one of the few writers who successfully maintains an entirely subjective viewpoint.³⁹ He says that Roethke's concern is escaping the human condition⁴⁰ and implies that Roethke's quest is not futile for he does succeed in finding joy within his inner sanctum.⁴¹ He maintains that Roethke's stylistic development is continuous⁴² and that The Far Field, his last work, is a continuation of the spiritual journey motif.⁴³ His major adverse criticism of Roethke's poetry is that "it is too narrow in scope, too repetitious."⁴⁴ So

³⁸Ibid., p. 151.

³⁹ John Wain, "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 55-57.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 57.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 58-67.

⁴²Ibid., p. 69.

⁴³Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 74.

his evaluation of Roethke's work is that while he is very successful in depicting his subjectivity, that same subjectivity makes his work one-dimensional.

One could hardly concede that Theodore Roethke's work is limited after reading Ralph J. Mills' "Theodore Roethke: The Lyric of the Self." Ralph J. Mills considers Roethke a stylistic and thematic pioneer whose work is thematically progressive.⁴⁵ He observes the archetypal nature of the persona in Roethke's work.⁴⁶ Because Roethke does not perceive in a conventional, traditional manner, "We are forced to look at things differently or reject the poetry altogether."⁴⁷ He shows how Roethke's discoveries in The Lost Son served as foundation for the works that followed.⁴⁸ In The Waking Roethke explores the relationships between body, spirit, and world.⁴⁹ Roethke continues to use the spirit as subject matter "but in general the themes of childhood are replaced by mature considerations of love, death, and the larger means of human existence in the world."⁵⁰ Whereas

⁴⁵Ralph J. Mills, Jr. "Theodore Roethke: The Lyric of the Self," in Poets in Progress, ed. Edward B. Hungerford (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1962), p. 4.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 16.

the spiritual journey in "The Lost Son" was an inner quest, the self goes beyond itself to unite with another in "Four for Sir John Davies."⁵¹ The lovers are physically united, but the real world is excluded from the world of the lovers.⁵² Mills also addresses himself to the accusation of some critics who think Roethke is too imitative of Yeats and Eliot by convincingly revealing the "poet's aims"⁵³ and showing that such criticism is unfounded. Mills concludes that Roethke did attempt "to enlarge the range of his work, as well as to consolidate his gains in theme and style."⁵⁴ Mills continues his theory in "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems." Again he points out the spiritual progression motif throughout Roethke's work⁵⁵ and claims that the mysticism in The Far Field has been foreshadowed in Roethke's earlier works.⁵⁶ Mills notes the self's ambivalent attitude toward transcendence which the persona achieves through memory.⁵⁷ He believes the climatic section

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵² Ibid., p. 18.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁵ Ralph J. Mills, Jr. "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 115.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 118-123.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

of "North American Sequence" is "The Rose" in which the rose is a symbol of two realms⁵⁸ and the rose reoccurs as a promise "that will bring about the birth of a new self from the old in the poet: Roethke introduces bird and flower images to suggest the freedom and transcendence of this change, which may permit him to taste eternity and yet not leave the world as we commonly know it."⁵⁹ Mills continues to discuss the symbolism of the rose: "Roethke nears the 'Unitive Life,' to borrow from Evelyn Underhill another time, a life symbolically represented by the unchanging rose, whose shape and petals might also remind us in a more Jungian fashion of individuation and self-fulfillment in the mandala figure."⁶⁰ In his analysis of "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," Mills notes Roethke's growing concerns with God⁶¹ with whom he is finally unified.⁶²

Frederick J. Hoffman also illustrates the thematic variety in Roethke's work. He shows that Roethke's subjectivity, or concern with self, appears throughout his work in four stages which "relate to a prenatal condition, to childhood, to the move toward maturity, and to the contemplation

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 125.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 125-126.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 126.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 130.

⁶²Ibid., p. 135.

of the conditions and implications of death."⁶³ He discusses The Lost Son and Praise to the End! which primarily exemplify the prenatal and childhood stages in which Roethke struggles to assert his identity.⁶⁴ In "Four for Sir John Davies," The Waking, and Words for the Wind, which represent the maturing stage, the self finds physical love an unsuccessful means of attaining identity and is confronted with the nature of death and God⁶⁵ which leads to the final stage where the self comes to terms with death and God in "The Dying Man," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and The Far Field⁶⁶ through wilful transcendence of death.⁶⁷ Hoffman suggests that Roethke does cope with life and death and find identity in "In a Dark Time," for he states: "Roethke has come the long way, to climb out of both his fear of chaos and his trust in easy and comfortable confidences and to stand in place of 'papa,' ministering not so much to the many as to the One he has himself created."⁶⁸

⁶³ Frederick J. Hoffman, "Theodore Roethke: The Poetic Shape of Death," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 98-103.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 103-107.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

Stephen Spender believes that Roethke achieves objectivity through subjectivity. He draws attention to the difference between Wordsworth's poetry, which enables us to "know how it feels to be one with nature,"⁶⁹ and Roethke's poetry, in which "he seems as poet, actually to become it (nature)."⁷⁰ He shows the similarity between Roethke's world of lowly animal lives and transformations with the Nibelungian world of dwarves and transformations which Wagner depicted musically.⁷¹ Spender believes that in Roethke's greenhouse poems Roethke's subjectivity enables us to perceive objectivity, for we see objects as he does.⁷² He expounds this theory further in "The Objective Ego":

The paradox of such "objective" poetry is that while concentrated in the "I" it is not egotistic. The "I" becomes the medium, the conveyor of the material of the not-I. Sometimes chameleon-like it assumes into its own being the colors of the objects upon which it is laid. In Roethke the not-I--the things outside him--seem to become him, or he to become them; yet, although outside, they come into being through the processes of his profound subjectivity.⁷³

Spender divides Roethke's work into three parts, "the poetry of isolation; the poetry of bridging the gulf of self and

⁶⁹ Stephen Spender, "Roethke: 'The Lost Son'" New Republic, CLV, August 37, 1966, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Stephen Spender, "The Objective Ego," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 9.

not self; and, thirdly, the poetry of more generally shared experience."⁷⁴ He claims that "Roethke never really does escape from his isolation. His poetry celebrates the will to do so, the impulse, the attempt, rather than the achievement."⁷⁵ Spender believes that the impact of The Far Field is lessened by the confessional poetry with metaphysical solutions which Spender thinks may be Roethke's response to the critics claim that his work was "immature."⁷⁶ Spender's total assessment of Roethke's work is:

But I think Roethke's best poetry came out either of his early self identification with an almost sub-human world, or his later inability to relate inner and outer worlds satisfactorily through exuberant moments of love-making. When he approaches the "mature" solution which we find in Eliot or Auden, he appears a lesser poet in their intellectual vein, because his genius lay in losing his way and being able incomparably to express the sense of loss, rather than in finding it along the lines of his great contemporaries.⁷⁷

While some critics emphasize Roethke's ability to depict the agonized self, others praise his ability to depict the joyous, affirmative self. The "influence" of Yeats and Eliot is considered by some to be a deficit; however, when one realizes the "poet's aims," "influence" becomes an ingenuous artistic ploy. Some critics suggest that Roethke's subjectivity limited the scope of his poetry, but

⁷⁴Spender, "Roethke: 'The Lost Son,'" p. 24.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 25.

⁷⁷Ibid.

other critics assert that Roethke's subjectivity enabled him to discover his unique, poetic voice, explore the self, and achieve objectivity through subjectivity. Although I agree that Roethke stays within the subjective realm, I do not consider Roethke's subjectivity limiting, because Roethke explores many aspects of the self, the self is not static but progressive, and the self is not that of one particular individual but a representative self whose discoveries and experiences are universal. Stanley Kunitz, who discusses "the metamorphic principal,"⁷⁸ the greenhouse-womb symbolism, and the rebirth motif in The Lost Son, points out the archetypal characteristics of the Roethkean protagonist and his journey.⁷⁹ Roethke, like Dr. Jung and Maud Bodkin, believed in the progression-regression principle, and the Roethkean protagonist exemplifies the rebirth archetype.⁸⁰ Whether or not Roethke consciously incorporated Dr. Jung's discoveries into his work is debatable. In his discussion of Praise to the End!, Roy Harvey Pearce says, "I must state flatly that the poems are supersaturated with language out of Freud and Jung, or their myriad exegetes."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Stanley Kunitz, "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), p. 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁸¹ Roy Harvey Pearce, "Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 179.

Kunitz is aware, however, of Carolyn Kizer's statement:

Like Joyce, he can use the primitive vocabulary of the unconscious, the verbal tricks of the dream, and the wild, revealing associative processes of early childhood. (I should probably say here that Roethke has not read Joyce or Jung; and, that, in 1952, after all his long poems exploring a child's history of consciousness had appeared, he was discovered in a Morris chair by a friend, with a copy of Freud's Basic Writing on one arm, his book Praise to the End! on the other, and his notebook on his lap, checking references, and chortling to himself, "I was right! I was right!"⁸²

In From Puritans to Present, which acknowledges Roethke's place in and contributions to the transcendental and mystical traditions, the value of a psychological interpretation of Roethke's work is stated and the Roethkean concept of regression-progression, an idea which Roethke shared with Whitman, is recognized:

Roethke's work, especially if approached developmentally, could be studied very rewardingly in Buberian terms of the search for reality and relationships. Roethke's preoccupation with the self is more like Whitman's than Emerson's or Thoreau's in two respects: The self takes itself as representative, and the self finds itself, discovers its deeper identity, in love, which requires a full acceptance of the reality of other selves, and not just human ones. The necessity of "dying to the self" continually, if psychic, moral, and spiritual growth is to go on, was "discovered" by both Whitman and Roethke, though more consciously, with the benefit of modern psychiatry, by Roethke, to be sure. The point is that either a Buberian or a more orthodox psychological approach to Roethke's career would uncover an element largely absent in Emerson.⁸³

⁸² Carolyn Kizer, "Poetry of the Fifties in America," in International Literary Annual, ed. John Wain (London: John Calder, 1958), p. 84.

⁸³ Hyatt H. Waggoner, "Centering In" in American Poets: From Puritans to Present (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968), pp. 575-576.

While there is critical disagreement about whether Roethke is echoing Freud and his colleagues or unconsciously affirming their discoveries, the similarity between Roethke's work and psychological discoveries suggests the truly representative nature of Roethke's protagonist, who is not one man but Everyman. Roethke has commented on the representative nature of his persona, for on several occasions Roethke expressed verbatim the goal of his latter poems: "to trace the spiritual history of all haunted and harried men."⁸⁴ Roethke believed that a man's spirit was able to grow. First and foremost in Roethke's concept of spirit (an idea which he variously expressed in lectures and poetry), is that spiritual growth occurs after a regression: "I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back."⁸⁵ Paradoxically, it is out of the mire that the spirit is sculptured: "the mire, the Void, is always there, immediate and terrifying. It is a splendid place for schooling the spirit."⁸⁶ Roethke's thesis that the spirit is capable of growth through regression raises the question which is to be the focus of this thesis: "What

⁸⁴ Stanley Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors (New York: H. Wilson Co., 1955), p. 837.

⁸⁵ Theodore 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.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

are the causes that catalyze spiritual growth?" As I stated earlier, Ralph J. Mills and Lewis L. Martz emphasize memory as a means of transcendence; however, I feel that several factors interact to generate spiritual progression.

• The causes which repeatedly promote spiritual progression in "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence" are basically the same. And, after reading Allan Seager's The Glass House, the biography of Theodore Roethke from which I obtained most of the biographical information, I recognize many similarities between the life of Theodore Roethke and the "life" of Roethke's personae in "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence." For instance, Theodore Roethke was tormented by manic spiritual states, he sought peace, he was supersensitive to natural surroundings, there is some evidence that he practiced focused meditation, he recognized the significance of his past, and he had several mystical experiences. Similarly, the speakers in "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence" experience spiritual chaos, desire peace, perceive nature, return to the past, experience mystical illumination, and practice focused meditation. In the poems these interacting elements cause spiritual progression, and these same elements, forces which were also present in Theodore Roethke's life, influenced the thematic and stylistic

development of Roethke's spiritual histories. So, while it is questionable to what extent these elements enabled Roethke to cope with his mental disturbances (in The Glass House Seager discerns that Roethke was "calmer" in later years⁸⁷), the influence of these elements considerably enriched and expanded Roethke's poetry.

In the beginning of "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence" and speakers are tormented by manic spiritual states. And, in all three poems there are an intense desire and active searching for peace and comfort. Theodore Roethke, whom psychiatrists diagnosed as manic-depressive, was no stranger to spiritual hysteria. At first he believed the mental breakdowns were self-induced and good for his creative powers:

After he had married he told his wife that this first episode had been self-induced "to reach a new level of reality." Both Peter De Vries and John Clark, as they looked back on it, felt the same thing.⁸⁸

Early in the fall of 1945, there is a curious entry in his notebooks: "Why do I wish for an illness, something I can get my teeth into?"⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Seager, Glass House, p. 279.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

Notebook, January, 1945

For some reason this illness seems to have shaken loose powers: I am alive with ideas, some bad, no doubt, but there is more vehemence, more energy, more contempt, more love.⁹⁰

In The Glass House Allan Seager suggests that much of Roethke's anguish stems from feelings of guilt and the death of his father. Theodore Roethke's colleagues, friends and wife observed that he was a man who suffered from intense feelings of guilt and fear. The cause of guilt and fear is questionable; however, that guilt and fear are elemental forces in both his work and life is unquestionable according to Allan Seager in The Glass House:

(Rolfe) Humphries, however, penetrated the mask. "There was a lot of self-hatred in Ted, you know," he said. Everyone who knew Ted well recognized this eventually, that he was host to a mass of free-floating guilt that made him loathe himself.⁹¹

She (Kitty Stokes, a girl friend) sensed the mass of fear and guilt that burdened him and his constant, gnawing, child-like need for praise, approval, and the knowledge that he was loved and she supplied them.⁹²

The past also plays an important role in his life and poems. For it was by sounding his past that he hit upon his individual poetic identity, or as Kenneth Burke called it, "the greenhouse line."⁹³ And as Seager points out, Roethke

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 165.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁹² Ibid., p. 118.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 144.

selectively employed the portion of the past that had to do with the formative years he spent near the greenhouse that his father and uncle owned and operated in Saginaw, Michigan:

In the BBC Broadcast on The Third Programme in July, 1953, Ted said of the greenhouse and the land he had to play on, "It was a wonderful place for a child to grow up in and around." It is perhaps significant that he mentions the place but not the child who is doing the growing. We get that child in the notebook entries when he said he had lived "a hideous life." Perhaps both statements are true, the calm judgment made at forty-five and the emotionally inflated one made at twenty-two. Then we have the unhappy child at play in "wonderful" surroundings. Certainly it seems that Ted very early acquired the burden of fears that haunted him the rest of his life, but equally certainly the flowers, both wild and cultivated, and the cultivation itself, the trees and shrubs and weeds, the marvellously changing light (no one has ever made anything of the light in Michigan--it deserves as much attention as the sun in Andalusia). All the birds and the little animals in the grass formed him, and, willy-nilly, became a part of him. To be exact, we must say he "remembered" them when he came to write his poetry but they do not seem to be drawn from any past. It is more as if they were all there, complete and shining, like his head and hands.⁹⁴

By the end of 1934, he had published twenty-three poems. If he were not as accomplished as he wished to be, at least his school pieces were over and he was constantly assessing what he had to write from. This demanded a persistent attention to his own past. Idiosyncratically he was its central figure and he did not think he had lived an easy life. His history, as he saw it, was one of losses, betrayals, shame, many fears, and guilt. To immerse himself in these, to force them into images or to contemplate them until they became images that he, hence others, could accept, and to find a suitable diction for them was not only taxing but may have been dangerous.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

When Theodore was 13, his father died, an event that certainly exerted a strong impact on Theodore Roethke's life and career:

Once the numbness of shock had worn away, it must have seemed to Ted that the stays and props of his whole life were broken. In the space of three months, the greenhouse was gone, his uncle was gone, his father was gone. The stage where he had played out his childhood was no longer his. The object of his hatred was removed and nothing is so foolish as to hate the dead, and what he lost when the dirt fell in his father's grave was going to take him the rest of his life to learn.⁹⁷

Kunitz saw almost immediately how important Otto Roethke's death was to Ted, what a gap it had made in his life, and without any cynicism, its possibilities as a source of poetry.⁹⁸

It ("Silence," a poem in Open House) rises probably from the desolation he felt at the loss of his father, which was to endure until his own death.⁹⁹

Seager believes that "Ted's own father was never dead to him emotionally. . . ." ¹⁰⁰

In addition to experiencing spiritual chaos and being influenced by the past, Theodore Roethke was supersensitive to natural surroundings. During his childhood, he lived, worked, and played around his father's greenhouse where he could observe natural growth. His father took him on fishing

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

and hunting trips which provided another exposure to nature. All the places in which Roethke lived and taught were located in beautiful, natural settings. Seager observes that Roethke's description of the Washington campus focuses on natural setting:

It might be remarked in passing that Ted barely notices the University buildings in his description but he lists spontaneously the flowers, trees, and shrubbery. For him, natural growths, each species, had characters as sharp as people.¹⁰¹

In college Roethke clearly revealed his attitude toward nature:

In a paper written for a Rhetoric class about this time (college), he says, "I have a genuine love of nature. It is not the least bit affected but an integral and powerful part of my life. I know that Cooper is a fraud--that he doesn't give a true sense of the sublimity of American scenery. I know that Muir and Thoreau and Burroughs speak the truth.

"I can sense the moods of nature almost instinctively. Ever since I could walk, I have spent as much time as I could in the open. 'A perception of nature--no matter how delicate, how subtle, how evanescent--remains with me forever.

"I am influenced too much, perhaps, by natural objects. I seem bound by the very room I'm in. I've associated so long with prosaic people that I've dwarfed myself spiritually. When I get alone under an open sky where man isn't too evident--then I'm tremendously exalted and a thousand vivid ideas and sweet visions flood my consciousness."¹⁰²

Just as the speakers in "Meditations of an Old Woman" and "North American Sequence" practice focused meditation, the act of concentrating solely on one object for a prolonged period of time, there is one instance which suggests

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 55.

that Roethke consciously practiced this type of meditation:

The summer of 1949 he spent in Saginaw with his mother and sister. It was hot in the Saginaw Valley, then, hot and damp, and Ted seems to have worked much at night; not that it is much cooler then but it seems so with the sun off the rooftops. Something of his manner of working after the breakthrough of The Lost Son comes from Judith Bailey. She says she believes that Ted actually abused his mind by concentrating on single objects for so long at a time, and she says he would also take deliberate flights of free association--she saw him stand and stare at a refrigerator handle one night and begin, "Refrigerator handle--Frigidaire--air-hose--snake. . . ." It went on for half an hour with incredible quickness. Any object, a refrigerator, a tree, a house, seemed to be to him not only itself but the sum of the associations he could wreath around it, a microcosm, in fact, and out of these exercises came his symbols and many new word combinations.¹⁰³

In addition to practicing focused meditation, Roethke believed that he had at least two mystical experiences:

Some time during the night on November 11, 1935, Ted left his room at the Campus Hotel and walked out to a stretch of woods on Hagedorn Road, then owned by the College. While he was in these woods, as he told Peter Dr Vries later, he had a mystical experience with a tree and he learned there the "secret of Nijinsky."¹⁰⁴

In the other mystical experience he felt the presence of Yeats:

I was in that particular hell of the poet: a longish dry period. It was 1952, I was 44, and I thought I was done. I was living alone in a biggish house in Edmonds, Washington. I had been reading--and re-reading--not Yeats, but Raleigh and Sir John Davies.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

I had been teaching the five-beat line for weeks--I knew quite a bit about it, but write it myself?--no: so I felt myself a fraud.

Suddenly, in the early evening, the poem "The Dance" started, and finished itself in a very short time--say thirty minutes, maybe in the greater part of an hour, it was all done. I felt, I knew, I had hit it. I walked around, and I wept; and I knelt down--I always do after I've written what I know is a good piece. But at the same time I had, as God is my witness, the actual sense of a Presence--as if Yeats himself were in that room. The experience was in a way terrifying, for it lasted at least half an hour. That house, I repeat, was charged with a psychic presence: the very walls seemed to shimmer. I wept for joy. At last I was somebody again. He, they--the poets dead--were with me.¹⁰⁵

In the poems "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence" the desire and active search for spiritual peace, the speaker's supersensitive perception of nature, a return to the past, and in "Meditations of an Old Woman" and "North American Sequence" focused meditation are the interacting forces which induce spiritual progression.

The same forces that induce spiritual progression in the poems influenced Roethke's poetic progression, for the thematic and stylistic scope of his poetry increased as a result of the selfsame forces that induce spiritual progression in his work.

¹⁰⁵Theodore 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), pp. 23-24.

These forces do not always interact in the same order to create spiritual progression in the spiritual histories. Although the personae do not consciously follow a pattern, their spiritual progression does take the form of a regressive-progressive pattern. Each speaker begins at one point on a spiritual plane, regresses to a lower level, and then he progresses to a level which is higher than the position at which he began. The Lost Son begins in a state of unrest, regresses to absurdity and then progresses to a higher spiritual state in which he realizes the capabilities of his spirit. The old woman begins at a lower spiritual level than the lost son, for she is bitterly despondent. She regresses to the past and then progresses to a higher spiritual state in which she realizes that spiritual transcendence is possible. The speaker in "North American Sequence," a representative man, begins in a higher spiritual level than the lost son and old woman, for he knows the spirit's ability to transcend the physical body, but he does not maintain a constant transcendent state. When the representative man is confined within the physical body, he is in a regressed spiritual state. When the representative man's spirit is merged with nature, he is in the most advanced spiritual state.

Whether or not the pattern of spiritual progression is a conscious artistic ploy is subject to speculation.

The spiritual progression pattern is present in the three poems; however, from Allan Seager's description of Roethke's manner of writing poems, it would not appear that he consciously applied the pattern. Roethke kept many notebooks where he would among other things write lines of poetry. He would enter a line and a few pages later add to that line, then gradually pages later, and sometimes years later, a poem would emerge. Roethke's notebooks suggest that he started with a line and sometimes a general idea of what the poem would encompass.¹⁰⁶ So, after reading Seager's description of Roethke's writing methods, I am inclined to believe that most of his poems grow from a line of carefully selected words which he sows painstakingly on the page.

¹⁰⁶Seager, Glass House, pp. 160-169.

CHAPTER I

THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION IN "THE LOST SON"

"The Lost Son" begins in the presence of death--the cries of dead in the graveyard--and ends in the presence of death--the "beautiful surviving bones" of flowers. Whereas in the beginning of "The Lost Son," death triggered a fear that resulted in the boy's frantic flight, at the close of "The Lost Son" the boy can refer to dead stalks of flowers as beautiful bones in the midst of deathly winter. Now instead of fleeing, the boy can "Be still./Wait." How did the spirit move from a state of chaos to peace? The four interacting forces which catalyze spiritual growth in "The Lost Son" are:

1. desiring to achieve peace
2. searching for repose and comfort
3. learning to see in such a way that promotes understanding
4. returning to a primordial state

The speaker in "The Lost Son," a young boy, acutely realizes his state of spiritual chaos and desires to attain spiritual harmony. The reason for the speaker's spiritual state is never explained, but is hinted at by the fear aroused by the graveyard in which he hears the dead cry:

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron.¹

William Meredith observes the unexplained causes and suggests:

The causes seem to be the death of parents, the speaker's recognition of his aloneness, sealed off in his link of the chain of human life, and the loss of childhood and its illusion of order.²

The speaker's spiritual chaos is increased by nature which appears inimical to the terrified boy:

All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
I shook the softening chalk of my bones.³

The boy appeals to nature in his distraught spiritual chaos:

Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worm be with me,
This is my hard time.⁴

He seeks peace in a pond of repose but his efforts are futile:

Fished in an old wound.
The soft pond of repose,
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even minnows came.⁵

¹Theodore Roethke, "The Lost Son," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Doubleday Co., Inc., 1966), p. 53.

²William Meredith, "A Steady Storm of Correspondences," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 42.

³Roethke, "The Lost Son," p. 53.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

The agent is physically alone, except for a fly, when he attempts once more to invoke something to come to his assistance and deliver him from his confused state and give him direction:

Sat in an empty house
 Watching shadows crawl
 Scratching.
 There was one fly.

Voice, come out of the silence.
 Say something.
 Appear in the form of a spider
 Or moth beating the curtain

Tell me:
 Which is the way I take;
 Out of what door do I go,
 Where and to whom?⁶

Nature gives no answer; she only directs him to the wind, the eel, and the sea in oracular, cryptic phrases that imply he must leave the "kingdom of bang and blab" in order to find comfort:

Dark hollows said, lee to the wind,
 The moon said, back of an eel,
 The salt said, look by the sea,
 Your tears are not enough praise,
 You will find no comfort here,
 In the kingdom of bang and blab.⁷

So, having learned that neither tears nor passive crying is sufficient, the speaker begins his quest for spiritual peace.

⁶Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁷Ibid., p. 54.

Thus, in order to achieve spiritual peace, the agent begins his journey that will be a learning experience. His journey takes him through a dangerous landscape of spongy ground, strewn sheep, a rickety bridge, and quick water. His search is complete, for he does not fail to look among rubbish, bug-riddled foliage, the muddy pond edge, and bog holes during his frantic hunt:

Running lightly over spongy ground,
 Past the pasture of flat stones,
 The three elms,
 The sheep strewn on a field,
 Over a rickety bridge
 Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.

Hunting along the river,
 Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
 By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
 By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.⁸

During his quest for spiritual peace, the speaker achieves his goal in two ways: first, by returning to a primordial state, and second, by learning to see in such a way that promotes understanding. Instead of getting out of the kingdom of "bang and blab," at first he seems to sink further into absurdity, for he starts to ask child-like questions in verse reminiscent of the rhymes which children learn:

The shape of a rat?
 It's bigger than that.
 It's less than a leg
 And more than a nose,
 Just under the water
 It usually goes.

⁸Ibid.

Is it soft like a mouse?
 Can it wrinkle its nose?
 Could it come in the house
 On the tips of its toes?

Take the skin of a cat
 And the back of an eel,
 Then roll them in grease,--
 That's the way it would feel.

It's sleek as an otter
 With wide webby toes
 Just under the water
 It usually goes.⁹

Although the speaker is young, the caliber of his questioning up to this point reveals that he is not at the nursery rhyme age. In "Open Letter" Theodore Roethke states that the "ancestors" of the "Lost Son" sequence are "German and English folk literature. Particularly Mother Goose; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially the songs and rants; the Bible; Blake and Traherne; Durer. "Rhythmically, it's the spring and rush of the child I'm after--and Gammer Gurton's concision: mütterkin's wisdom."¹⁰

After "The Flight" in which the speaker frantically journeys through the kingdom of bang and blab where he finally regresses to a child-like state, the speaker seems to approach the allusive peace he is seeking in "The Pit." For

⁹Ibid., pp. 54-55.

¹⁰Theodore 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. 41.

it is in the pit that he learns the art of seeing microscopically, and by looking closely, he seems to approach that which he is seeking. He learns to look beyond the object and focus not only on one object but the entire spectrum. He learns that in order to discover where roots go, he must look under the leaves. He learns to see the relationship between moss and stone, mole and motion of dirt, slime and mildew. He has learned that in order to know, he must not look at an object solely, but he must see beyond. And, in a sense, in order to know spiritual peace, he must look beyond himself. The line, "Nibble again, fish nerves" suggests that the speaker is finally arriving:

The Pit

Where do the roots go?
 Look down under the leaves.
 Who put the moss there?
 These stones have been here too long.
 Who stunned the dirt into noise?
 Ask the mole, he knows.
 I feel the slime of a wet nest.
 Beware Mother Mildew.¹¹
 Nibble again, fish nerves.

At the beginning of "The Lost Son," the speaker fished to no avail: "The soft pond of repose;/ Nothing nibbled my line,/ Not even minnows came."¹² Louis L. Martz suggests the rudimentary beginnings to which the speaker returns:

¹¹Roethke, "The Lost Son," p. 55.

¹²Ibid., p. 53.

Thus in the final sequence of "The Lost Son," each poem 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: "I feel the slime of a wet nest." These primitive images are given in a mode of flickering, sometimes ranting, incoherence, simulating the breakup of established modes of consciousness.¹³

So, after having regressed to the childlike nursery rhyme stage, (even to the womb according to Martz) and having learned to truly see, the speaker approaches peace because he feels "the nibble" in the pond of repose.

The speaker's approach to semi-peace is brief, for in "The Gibber," the next section, the speaker relapses into his chaotic state, and nature seems to be against him:

At the wood's mouth,
By the cave's door,
I listened to something
I had heard before.

Dogs of the groin
Barked and howled,
The sun was against me,
The moon would not have me.

The weeds whined,
The snakes cried,
The cows and briars
Said to me: Die.¹⁴

Finding no solace in nature, he yearns for the source of his existence, the mother and father with whom he associates fear:

¹³Louis L. Martz, "A Greenhouse Eden," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 31-32.

¹⁴Roethke, The Lost Son, p. 56.

Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice.
 Only the snow's here.
 I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and
 mother.
 Fear was my father. Father Fear.
 His look drained the stones.¹⁵

The agent seems to face disintegration of self, and for a moment, he seems to feel that his life, or doom, has been fatalistically decided, and he can do nothing about it:

Is this the storm's heart? The ground is unstilling itself.
 My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out
 their fire?
 Is the seed leaving the old bed? These buds are live as
 birds.
 Where, where are the tears of the world?
 Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher's palm;
 Let the gestures freeze; out doom is already decided.
 All the windows are burning! What's left of my life?
 I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!¹⁶

Hoping to find answers in his beginning, again he yearns to return to his initial state. Once more his questions are answered by truly seeing nature. He looks to the swaying stalk to discover if the bird is still there; he looks to the clouds to discern whether the worm has a shadow:

How cool the grass is.
 Has the bird left?
 The stalk still sways.
 Has the worm a shadow?
 What do the clouds say?¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Whereas before he seemed to fear death, now disintegration is exciting:

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.¹⁸

After being "undone" the speaker awakens in a greenhouse, Roethke's symbol for the womb:

Section IV is a return, a return to a memory of childhood that comes back almost as in a dream, after the agitation and exhaustion of the earlier actions. The experience, again, is at once literal and symbolical. The "roses" are still breathing in the dark; and the fireman can pull them out, even from the fire. After the dark night, the morning brings with it the suggestion of renewing light: a coming of "Papa." Buried in the text are many little ambiguities, not all of which are absolutely essential to the central meaning of the poem. For instance, the "pipe-knock." With the coming of steam, the pipes begin knocking violently, in a greenhouse. But "Papa," or the florist, as he approached, often would knock the pipe he was smoking on the sides of the benches, or on the pipes. Then, with the coming of steam and "papa"---the papa on earth and heaven are blended---here is the sense of motion in the greenhouse, my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth.¹⁹

In the greenhouse he is in a state of supersensitivity, for he can hear the roses breathe, and he is aware of the wind made by his knees:

The Return

The way to the boiler was dark,
 Dark all the way,
 Over slippery cinders
 Through the long greenhouse.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁹Roethke, "Open Letter," pp. 38-39.

The roses kept breathing in the dark.
 They had many mouths to breathe with.
 My knees made little winds underneath
 Where the weeds slept.

There was always a single light
 Swinging by the fire-pit,
 Where the fireman pulled out roses,
 The big roses, the big bloody clinkers.

Once I stayed all night.
 The light in the morning came slowly over the white
 Snow.
 There were many kinds of cool air.
 Then came steam.

Pipe-knock.

Scurry of warm over small plants.
 Ordnung! ordnung!
 Papa is coming!

A fine haze moved off the leaves;
 Frost melted on far panes;
 The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.
 Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds
 Moved in a slow up-sway.²⁰

In the greenhouse there are light, roses, and Papa, or the symbols decoded: womb, knowledge, soul, and God. Roethke also states in "Open Letter" that "symbols will mean what they usually mean--and sometimes something more."²¹

Therefore, light, which has been employed as a conventional symbol for knowledge, could represent knowledge in "The Lost Son." Also, Roethke states in an explication of "Light Breather" that he has often attempted to depict the soul metaphorically as a flower:

²⁰Roethke, "The Lost Son," p. 57.

²¹Roethke, "Open Letter," p. 42.

But the spirit need not be spare:
 it can grow gracefully and beautifully
 Like a tendril, like a flower. I did not know
 this at the time. This sense I tried later
 to describe, metaphorically, many times.²²

And, the symbols, greenhouse/womb, Papa/God, light/knowledge, rose/spirit, work as an integral whole: the rose needs light and "Papa" in order to grow to its fullest, just as the spirit needs knowledge and God in order to grow to its fullest. The light/knowledge symbol remains throughout Roethke's spiritual histories. Knowledge to Roethke is not acquired by programing scientific data, but it is derived through a supersensitivity to the world; it is knowledge, or understanding, acquired by seeing closely. It seems that by magnifying the small microcosmic world, he learns macrocosmic truths. So, in "The Return" the speaker returns to the womb, his primordial state, which is symbolized by the greenhouse.

After having desired peace, searched for repose, learned to truly see, and returned to his primordial state, the speaker acquires a peaceful spirit. As the title of section 5 suggests, "It was beginning winter," the setting is the interlude between summer and winter. The landscape is only partially brown; however, the death of summer is prevalent. The flowers are now dry-seed crowns; weeds and

²²Theodore 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. 21.

stalks are "surviving bones." Whereas before in the midst of death the speaker expresses fear, now in the midst of the death of winter, the speaker perceives beauty for he regards the stalks of flowers as "beautiful surviving bones":

5. "It was beginning winter"

It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.

It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.²³

With the arrival of light, or knowledge, the mind begins to move. The speaker perceives spirit and seems to find comfort in its nature which is "lively" and "understandable":

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.²⁴

²³Roethke, "The Lost Son," p. 58.

²⁴Ibid.

Spiritual growth in the "Lost Son" takes place when the speaker moves from a state of spiritual chaos to a state of spiritual peace. When the poem begins, the personae, a young boy in a graveyard, is in a position of spiritual unrest. The disturbed personae regresses to absurdity, then progresses to spiritual peace derived mainly by knowledge of the possibility of spiritual growth. Motivated by an avid desire to achieve peace, the speaker begins a journey during which he learns to truly see and understand. The speaker must actively seek and find answers, for nature does not furnish pat answers; however, it does offer a starting place. During his journey, the speaker accomplishes his feat in two ways: he learns to see truly and he returns to his primordial state. After having returned to the womb, symbolized by the greenhouse, the speaker can face the thought of death, for although things die, always the light-knowledge symbol is present. And, just as light promotes organic growth, knowledge promotes spiritual growth. The speaker does not merely look at dead stalks and perceive death, but he sees both dead stalks and the ever present light that offers the promise of eternal spiritual growth--an understanding which gives him peace.

CHAPTER II

THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION IN "MEDITATIONS OF AN OLD WOMAN"

The causes and conditions which generate spiritual peace in "Meditations of an Old Woman" are similar to those in "The Lost Son." Both speakers assume a similar mental attitude and approach to their condition, both speakers experience a journey which is a learning experience, both speakers regress backward in time, and both see the world similarly. Although causes of spiritual growth are similar, the basic differences between the personae are sex, age, and spiritual position at which each speaker begins. The personae in "The Lost Son" is a young boy who is in a state of spiritual unrest; whereas, the speaker in "Meditations of an Old Woman" is an old woman who is in a state of spiritual despondency, a less advanced spiritual state than the unrest of the lost son.

Like the speaker in "The Lost Son," the old woman desires spiritual peace and is willing to actively seek it. The agent in "Meditations of an Old Woman" is an old woman who is experiencing spiritual disintegration and inner turmoil, for she says "the spirit moves but not always upward," and "the rind often hates the life within." The inimical setting reinforces the old woman's racked spiritual condition:

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.

The spirit moves, but not always upward,
 While animals eat to the north,
 And the shale slides an inch in the talus,
 The bleak wind eats at the weak plateau,
 And the sun brings joy to some.
 But the rind, often, hates the life within.¹

After revealing her spiritual condition, the agent reveals her attitude toward her state. The agent, who desires peace in her emotionally wrought condition, is willing to actively seek peace: "How can I rest in the days of my slowness?" The agent's attitude toward herself is realistic, for she realizes her declining of old age and desires to come to terms with her life:

How can I rest in the days of my slowness?
 I've become a strange piece of flesh,
 Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
 With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.
 What's left is light as a seed;
 I need an old crone's knowing.²

Also like the speaker in "The Lost Son," the speaker in "Meditations of an Old Woman" experiences a journey that is a learning experience, and during the journey, the

¹Theodore Roethke, "Meditations of an Old Woman," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Doubleday Co., Inc., 1966), p. 157.

²Ibid.

speaker goes back in time just as the speaker in "The Lost Son" returned to the past. The old woman's journey is a twofold journey within a journey for it is a journey through imagination, and a journey to the past. Many passengers make the difficult journey and each person travels alone, going forward after a "few wavers" and then going back:

Often I think of myself as riding--
 Alone, on a bus through western country.
 I sit above the back wheels, where the jolts are hardest,
 And we bounce and sway along toward the midnight,
 The lights tilting up, skyward, as we come over a
 little rise,
 Then down, as we roll like a boat from a wave-crest.

All journeys, I think, are the same:
 The movement is forward, after a few wavers,
 And for a while we are all alone,
 Busy, obvious with ourselves,
 The drunken soldier, the old lady with her peppermints;
 And we ride, we ride, taking the curves
 Somewhat closer, the trucks coming
 Down from behind the last ranges,
 Their black shapes breaking past;
 And the air claps between us,
 Blasting the frosted windows,
 And I seem to go backward.
 Backward in time:³

The old woman's imaginative journey metamorphosizes into a journey "backward in time." And the old woman just like the young boy in "The Lost Son," travels through the past to a magnificent greenhouse that is the center of life and activity, for the birds are singing, "the trees are all in motion," and men are busily working:

³Ibid., p. 158.

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.
 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.⁴

After the old woman's journey into the past, she returns to her imaginative journey which consists of two images juxtaposed to depict the universal aspect of all journeys: the speaker tries to progress but is held back by losing a ticket, or missing the boat, and finally the journey progresses, dangerously "plunging," "careening," "swerving," "shuddering," "lunging":

Journey within a journey:
 The ticket mislaid or lost, the gate
 Inaccessible, the boat always pulling out
 From the rickety wooden dock,
 The children waving;
 Or two horses plunging in snow, their lines tangled,
 A great wooden sleigh careening behind them,
 Swerving up a steep embankment.
 For a moment they stand above me,
 Their black skins shuddering:
 Then they lurch forward,
 Lunging down a hillside.⁵

After the journey the old woman begins to meditate on the nature of the spirit, and just as the young boy in "The Lost Son" found macrocosmic truths reflected by the microcosm,

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., pp. 158-159.

so the old woman realizes that the spiritual journey, like the crab's, the salmon's, and her imaginative journey, is a continual regressing in order to progress:

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.⁶

The old woman then applies what she has realized through her journey and meditation to her own past experience. Returning to her past experiences, the old woman's spiritual journey has been one of regression and progression, for she has experienced both spiritual stasis and spiritual transcendence. She has traveled in regions beyond visual perception, in regions where lint, dust and inactivity reign, and in the realm of the "waste and lonely places." Yet, in addition to these waste lonely places, "there are

⁶Ibid., p. 159.

still times" when she hears the birds sing and the cold wind comes over stones. And because she is still awake to sound, sight, touch, perception, she is able to state that she is happy in such times, content with sheer sensuous apperception:

I have gone into the waste lonely places
 Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky
 cities.
 What's beyond never crumbles like an embankment,
 Explodes like a rose, or thrusts wings over the
 Caribbean.
 There are no pursuing forms, faces on walls:
 Only the motes of dust in the immaculate hallways,
 The darkness of falling hair, the warnings from
 lint and spiders,
 The vines graying to a fine powder.
 There is no riven tree, or lamb dropped by an eagle.

There are still times, morning and evening:
 The cerulean, high in the elm,
 Thin and insistent as a cicada,
 And the far phoebe, singing,
 The long plaintive notes floating down,
 Drifting through leaves, oak and maple,
 Or the whippoorwill, along the smoky ridges,
 A single bird calling and calling;
 A fume reminds me, drifting across wet gravel;
 A cold wind comes over stones;
 A flame, intense, visible,
 Plays over the dry pods,
 Runs fitfully along the stubble,
 Moves over the field,
 Without burning,
 In such times, lacking a god,
 I am still happy.⁷

So, instead of crying, "How can I rest in the days of my slowness?/ I've become a strange piece of flesh,/ . . . I

⁷Ibid., pp. 159-160.

need an old crone's knowing," after having desired and actively sought peace, journeyed to the past, seen truly, and maintained a supersensitivity toward nature, the old woman reaches spiritual peace, for she quietly asserts, "In such times, lacking a god,/ I am still happy."

In "I'm Here," the next poem in the "Meditations of an Old Woman" sequence, the old woman again finds herself in a tired spiritual state, and fearing that she may become "A witch who sleeps with her horse," she questions the adequacy of sheer sensual enjoyment:

Is it enough?--
 The sun loosening the frost on December windows,
 The glitter of wet in the first of morning?
 The sound of voices, young voices, mixed with sleighbells,
 Coming across snow in early evening?

Outside, the same sparrows bicker in the eaves.
 I'm tired of tiny noises:
 The April cheeping, the vireo's insistence,
 The prattle of the young no longer pleases.
 Behind the child's archness
 Lurks the bad animal.

--How needles and corners perplex me!
 Dare I shrink to a hag,
 The worst surprise a corner could have,
 A witch who sleeps with her horse?
 Some fates are worse.⁸

Just as she returned to the past in "First Meditation," so does she return to the past in "I'm Here" during an extensive memory montage of sensory images depicting her youth:

⁸Ibid., p. 161.

a time in which sensuous enjoyment of nature generated happiness through her being:

I was queen of the vale--
 For a short while,
 Living all my heart's summer alone,
 Ward of my spirit,
 Running through high grasses,
 My thighs brushing against flower-crowns;
 Leaning, out of all breath,
 Bracing my back against a sapling,
 Making it quiver with my body;
 At the stream's edge, trailing a vague figure;
 Flesh-awkward, half-alive,
 Fearful of high places, in love with horses;
 In love with stuffs, silks,
 Rubbing my nose in the wool of blankets;
 Bemused; pleased to be;
 Mindful of cries,
 The meaningful whisper,
 The wren, the catbird.

So much of adolescence is an ill-defined dying,
 An intolerable waiting,
 A longing for another place and time,
 Another condition.

I stayed: a willow to the wind.
 The bats twittered at noon.
 The swallows flew in and out of the smokeless chimneys.
 I sang to the edges of flame,
 My skin whiter in the soft weather,
 My voice softer.⁹

Having remembered her youth, the old woman returns to the present and is reminded that she can do nothing about the death of her geranium, or her own death, and she finds that her sense perceptions are still intact. It seems that her spirit has been replenished after her journey to sensuous youth, for unlike the old woman who was "tired of tiny

⁹ Ibid., pp. 161-162.

noises:/ The April cheeping, the vireo's insistence,/ The prattle of the young no longer pleases," the old woman in the final lines of "I'm Here" is able to delight in small pleasures and to fearlessly face death:

My geranium is dying, for all I can do.
 Still leaning toward the last place the sun was.
 I've tried I don't know how many times to replant it.
 But these roses: I can wear them by looking away.
 The eyes rejoice in the act of seeing and the fresh
 after-image;
 Without staring like a lout, or a moping adolescent;
 Without commotion.
 Look at the far trees at the end of the garden.
 The flat branch of that hemlock holds the last of the
 sun,
 Rocking it, like a sun-struck pond,
 In a light wind.

I prefer the still joy:
 The wasp drinking at the edge of my cup;
 A snake lifting its head;
 A snail's music.

5
 What's weather to me? Even carp die in this river.
 I need a pond with small eels. And a windy orchard.
 I'm no midge of that and this. The dirt glitters
 like salt.
 Birds are around. I've all the singing I would.
 I'm not far from a stream.
 It's not my first dying.
 I can hold this valley,
 Loose in my lap,
 In my arms.

If the wind means me,
 I'm here!
 Here.¹⁰

So, again after a return to the past, the old woman develops from a tired spiritual state to an assertive, joyous spiritual state.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 163-164.

After having experienced alternating states of spiritual unrest and spiritual peace in "First Meditation" and "I'm Here," the old woman in "Her Becoming" maintains a sustained state of spiritual peace, finding delight in nakedness, the sun, the rain, herself:

I have learned to sit quietly,
 Watching the wind riffle the backs of small birds,
 Chirping, with fleas in the sand,
 My shape a levity--Yes!--
 A mad hen in a far corner of the dark,
 Still taking delight in nakedness,
 In the sun, busy at a young body,
 In the rain, slackening on a summer field;
 In the back of my mind, running with the rolling water,
 My breast wild as the waves.

I see a shape, lighted with love,
 Light as a petal falling upon stone.
 From the folds of my skin, I sing,
 The air still, the ground alive,
 The earth itself a tune.

How sweetly I abide. Am I a bird?
 Soft, soft, the snow's not falling. What's a seed?
 A face floats in the ferns. Do maimed gods walk?
 A voice keeps rising in my early sleep,
 A muffled voice, a low sweet watery noise.
 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.

A ghost from the soul's house?
 I'm where I always was.
 The lily broods. Who knows
 The way out of a rose?¹¹

Whereas in "First Meditation" and "I'm Here" spiritual growth occurs when the speaker achieves peace after experiencing spiritual chaos, in the following three sections,

¹¹Ibid., pp. 165-166.

"Her Becoming," "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones?," spiritual growth occurs when the speaker achieves a oneness with nature, or her spirit is merged with the spirit of nature. The speakers in "The Lost Son," "First Meditation" and "I'm Here" deliver themselves from spiritual chaos by undergoing a journey, and returning to the past, and being supersensitive to nature. The speakers in "Her Becoming," "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones?" experience spiritual growth when their spirits merge with nature, thus creating a feeling of oneness, peace, harmony. Concentrated meditation is the cause which induces this state of oneness. In "Her Becoming," spiritual peace, supersensitivity to nature precede mystic illumination and oneness with nature. In "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones?," transcendence, or a sense of oneness with nature occurs after intense meditation on spiritual needs and the body-spirit relationship. In "Her Becoming" transcendence occurs after the old woman has achieved inner peace and becomes supersensitive to nature:

I have learned to sit quietly,
 Watching the wind riffle the backs of small birds,
 Chirping with fleas in the sand,
 My shape a levity--Yes!--
 A mad hen in a far corner of the dark,
 Still taking delight in nakedness,
 In the sun, busy at a young body,
 In the rain, slackening on a summer field;
 In the back of my mind, running with the rolling water,
 My breast wild as the waves.

I see a shape, lighted with love,
 Light as a petal falling upon stone.
 From the folds of my skin, I sing,
 The air still, the ground alive,
 The earth itself a tune.

How sweetly I abide. Am I a bird?
 Soft, soft, the snow's not falling. What's a seed?
 A face floats in the ferns. Do maimed gods walk?
 A voice keeps rising in my early sleep,
 A muffled voice, a low sweet watery noise.
 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.

A ghost from the soul's house?
 I'm where I always was.
 The lily broods. Who knows
 The way out of a rose?¹²

In a state of supersensitivity toward nature, she is aware of "The air still, the ground alive,/ The earth itself a tune," she approaches mystical illumination, for she says, "I see a shape, lighted with live," and perceives a playful spirit. Her meditative questioning in Part 2 reveals that in addition to having experienced great delight, she is aware of the ever present "bleak sheds of our desolation, machines, loveless, temporal," and "mutilated souls in cold morgues of obligation":

Is it the sea we wish? The sleep of the changeless?
 In my left ear I hear the loud sound of a minor collapse.
 Last night I dreamt of a jauntier principle of order;
 Today I eat my usual diet of shadows.
 Dare I speak, once more, in the monotony of great praise,
 In the wild disordered language of the natural heart?
 What else can I steal from sleep?

¹²Ibid., p. 165.

We start from the dark. Pain teaches us little.
 I can't laugh from a crater of burning pitch,
 Or live the dangerous life of an insect.
 Is there a wisdom in objects? Few objects praise
 the Lord.
 The bulks cannot hide us, or the bleak sheds of our
 desolation,
 I know the cold fleshless kiss of contraries,
 The nerveless constriction of surfaces--
 Machines, machines, loveless, temporal;
 Mutilated souls in cold morgues of obligation.¹³

Although she is aware of the mechanical world, true reality is found in the natural world where ecstatic joy in nature and self offers a transporting experience. "In a field" she seems to run out of self and again approaches mystical illumination when "all natural shapes became symbolical"; she communicates with animals and she sees "The line, The holy line!"

There are times when reality comes closer:
 In a field, in the actual air,
 I stepped carefully, like a new-shod horse,
 A raw tumultuous girl
 Making my way over wet stones.
 And then I ran--
 Ran ahead of myself,
 Across a field, into a little wood.

And there I stayed until the day burned down.

My breath grew less. I listened like a beast.
 Was it the stones I heard? I stared at the fixed stars.

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.

¹³Ibid., p. 166.

Where was I going? Where?
 What was I running from?
 To these I cried my life--
 The loved fox, and the wren.

Speech passed between small birds;
 Silence became a thing;
 Echo itself consumed;
 The scene shrank to a pin.

Did my will die? Did I?
 I said farewell to sighs,
 Once to the toad,
 Once to the frog,
 And once to my flowing thighs.

Who can believe the moon?
 I have seen! I have seen!--
 The line! The holy line!
 A small place all in flame.

Out, out, you secret beasts,
 You birds, you western birds.
 One follows fire. One does.
 My breath is more than yours.

What lover keeps his song?
 I sigh before I sing.
 I love because I am
 A rapt thing with a name.¹⁴

After a sustained state of supersensitivity to nature which results in mystic perception in Part 3, the old woman becomes almost pure spirit, for she is "a shape without a shade," and transcending self, she becomes the wind:

4
 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!--

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 166-167.

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.¹⁵

In "Fourth Meditation," the old woman no longer finds the delight, or "pure moment," in sensuous perception of nature, for "a time comes when the vague life of the mouth no longer suffices," and although nature is present, "there is no song":

1
 I was always one for being alone,
 Seeking in my own way, eternal purpose;
 At the edge of the field waiting for the pure moment;
 Standing, silent, on sandy beaches or walking along
 green embankments;
 Knowing the sinuousness of small waters:
 As a chip or shell, floating lazily with a slow current,
 A drop of the night rain still in me,
 A bit of water caught in a wrinkled crevice,
 A pool riding and shining with the river,
 Dipping up and down in the ripples,
 Tilting back in the sunlight.

Was it yesterday I stretched out the thin bones of
 my innocence?
 O the songs we hide, singing only to ourselves!
 Once I could touch my shadow, and be happy;
 In the white kingdoms, I was light as a seed,
 Drifting with the blossoms,
 A pensive petal.

But a time comes when the vague life of the mouth no
 longer suffices;
 The dead makes more impossible demands from their
 silence;
 The soul stands, lonely in its choice,
 Waiting, itself a slow thing,
 In the changing body.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

The river moves, wrinkled by midges,
 A light wind stirs in the pine needles.
 The shape of a lark rises from a stone.
 But there is no song.¹⁶

The old woman perceives the chasm between the lonely soul and the inadequate body and (in Part 2) meditates about the physical and spiritual needs of her own life, and the lives of others. She meditates about the inadequacy of an entirely physical love:

What is it to be a woman?
 To be contained, to be a vessel?
 To prefer a window to a door?
 A pool to a river?
 To become lost in a love,
 Yet remain only half aware of the intransient glory?
 To be a mouth, a meal of meat?
 To gaze at a face with the fixed eyes of a spaniel?¹⁷

She meditates about the spiritual emptiness of some lives. She wonders whether those seeking escape in drugs, women becoming what they own, and children feeling the repercussions of unattentive parents ever feel "the soul's authentic hunger," or are their needs sheerly physical:

I think of the self-involved:
 The ritualists of the mirror, the lonely drinkers,
 The minions of benzedrine and paraldehyde,
 And those who submerge themselves deliberately in
 trivia,
 Women who become their possessions,
 Shapes stiffening into metal,
 Matchmakers, arrangers of picnics--
 What do their lives mean,
 And the lives of their children?--

¹⁶Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 169.

The young, brow-beaten early into a baleful silence,
 Frozen by a father's lip, a mother's failure to
 answer.

Have they seen, ever the soul's authentic hunger,
 Those cat-like immaculate creatures
 For whom the world works?¹⁸

She prays that all men be awake, and she envisioned
 a procession of humanity. She prays that people will awake
 to the wonder that while they are creatures with bodies,
 they are also creatures with souls:

What do they need?
 O more than a roaring boy,
 For the sleek captains of intuition cannot reach them;
 They feel neither the tearing iron
 Nor the sound of another footstep--
 How I wish them awake!
 May the high flower of the hay climb into their hearts;
 May they lean into light and live;
 May they sleep in robes of green, among the ancient
 ferns;
 May their eyes gleam with the first dawn;
 May the sun gild them a worm;
 May they be taken by the true burning;
 May they flame into being!--
 I see them as figures walking in a greeny garden,
 Their gait formal and elaborate, their hair a glory,
 The gentle and beautiful still-to-be born;
 The descendants of the playful tree-shrew that sur-
 vived the archaic killers,
 The fang and the claw, the club and the knout, the
 irrational edict,
 The fury of the hate-driven zealot, the meanness of
 the human weasel;
 Who turned a corner in time, when at last he grew a
 thumb.
 A prince of small beginnings, enduring the slow
 stretches of change,
 Who spoke first in the coarse short-hand of the
 subliminal depths,
 Made from his terror and dismay a grave philosophical
 language;

¹⁸Ibid.

A lion of flame, pressed to the point of love,
Yet moves gently among the birds.¹⁹

After the intensive meditation which becomes a prayer and closes in a vision of man since the beginning of time, the old woman transcends self, becoming the "first and last of all things":

Younglings, the small fish keep heading into the
current.
What's become of care? This lake breathes like a
rose.
Beguile me, change. What have I fallen from?
I drink my tears in a place where all light comes.
I'm in love with the dead! My whole forehead's
a noise!
On a dark day I walk straight toward the rain.
Who else sweats light from a stone?
By singing we defend;
The husk lives on, ardent as a seed;
My back creaks with the dawn.

Is my body speaking? I breathe what I am:
The first and last of all things.
Near the graves of the great dead,
Even the stones speak.²⁰

The old woman in "What Can I Tell my Bones" is aware that she cannot maintain the spiritual transcendence and harmony she achieved in "Fourth Meditation," for she is a "perpetual beginner" fearful of shapes:

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.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 169-170.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 170.

Before the moon draws back,
Dare I blaze like a tree?

In a world always late afternoon,
In the circular smells of a slow wind,
I listen to the weeds' vesperal whine,
Longing for absolutes that never come.
And shapes make me afraid:
The dance of natural objects in the mind,
The immediate sheen, the reality of straw,
The shadows crawling down a sunny wall.

A bird sings out in solitariness
A thin harsh song. The day dies in a child.
How close we are to the sad animals!
I need a pool; I need a puddle's calm.

O my bones,
Beward those perpetual beginnings,
Thinning the soul's substance;
The swan's dread of the darkening shore,
Or these insects pulsing near my skin,
The songs from a spiral tree.

Fury of wind, and no apparent wind,
A gust blowing the leaves suddenly upward,
A vine lashing in dry fury,
A man chasing a cat,
With a broken umbrella,
Crying softly.²¹

In her meditations she seems to be questioning the relationship of body to spirit:

It is difficult to say all things are well,
When the worst is about to arrive;
It is fatal to woo yourself,
However graceful the posture.

Loved heart, what can I say?
When I was a lark, I sang;
When I was a worm, I devoured.

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing.

²¹Ibid., p. 171.

Mist alters the rocks. What can I tell by bones?
 The desire's a wind trapped in a cave.
 The spirit declares itself to these rocks.
 I'm a small stone, loose in the shale.
 Love is my wound.

The wide streams go their way,
 The pond lapses back into a glassy silence.
 The cause of God in me--has it gone?
 Do these bones live? Can I live with these bones?
 Mother, mother of us all, tell me where I am!
 O to be delivered from the rational into the realm
 of pure song,
 My face on fire, close to the points of a star,
 A learned nimble girl,
 Not drearily bewitched,
 But sweetly daft.

To try to become like God
 Is far from becoming God.
 O, but I seek and care!

I rock in my own dark,
 Thinking, God has need of me.
 The dead love the unborn.²²

On one hand, she realizes her physical nature, "What can I tell my bones . . . Do these bones live?/ Can I live with these bones?" On the other hand, she realizes her spiritual nature:

The spirit declares itself to these rocks

O to be delivered from the rational into the
 realm of pure song

To try to become like God
 Is far from becoming God.
 O, but I seek and care!²³

²²Ibid., p. 172.

²³Ibid.

After sustained meditation in which she questions the relationship between body and spirit, in Part 3 she resolves her question of the body/spirit conflict by accepting her physical nature, for she no longer makes unrealistic demands "for green in the midst of cinders":

To what more vast permission have I come?
 When I walk past a vat, water joggles,
 I no longer cry for green in the midst of cinders,
 Or dream of the dead, and their holes.
 Mercy has many arms.²⁴

Having accepted her physical nature after a sustained meditation, she is "released from the dreary dance of opposites":

Instead of a devil with horns, I prefer a serpent
 with scales;
 In temptation, I rarely seek counsel;
 A prisoner of smells, I would rather eat than pray.
 I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites.
 The wind rocks with my wish; the rain shields me;
 I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;
 Sometimes I think I'm several.

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.

²⁴ibid., p. 173.

What came to me vaguely is now clear,
 As if released by a spirit,
 Or agency outside me.
 Unprayed-for,
 And final.²⁵

As long as there is spiritual unrest, transcendent oneness with nature cannot occur. When she resolves the questions which create spiritual unrest through intense meditation, the old woman experiences transcendent oneness, the fullest form of spiritual growth.

So, in "First Meditation" and "I'm Here" the old woman progresses from a state of spiritual chaos to spiritual peace. In both poems spiritual peace is achieved after a journey to the past and after supersensitive perception of nature. The pattern of regression--progression, regression-progression within the sequence is in accord with Roethke's statement:

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going forward; but there is some "progress."²⁶

After having experienced spiritual regression and spiritual progression in "First Meditation" and "I'm Here," the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Theodore 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.

old woman achieves a sustained spiritual high in "Her Becoming." In "Her Becoming" the woman experiences spiritual growth in the sense that her spirit moves from a state of peace to transcendence when she experiences oneness. In "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones" the same pattern of regression, progression is present. However, in these two poems regression is not as far as in the first two poems of the sequence. Instead of being in a state of spiritual chaos, the old woman finds herself in a state of spiritual unrest caused by the physical-spiritual conflict. So, in the Roethkean pattern, the spirit constantly strives to move forward and constantly experiences regressions. However, gradually the regressions decrease, for instead of being knocked back to complete chaos, the spirit is pushed back to unrest. In "Fourth Meditation" and "What Can I Tell My Bones," once spiritual unrest is resolved through intense meditation and the spirit is at peace, the spirit is free to become one with all. Spiritual peace is a prerequisite for the spiritual high of becoming one with all, the fullest form of spiritual growth.

CHAPTER III

THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION IN "NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE"

The speaker in "North American Sequence" experiences constant spiritual regression and spiritual progression as do the speakers in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman." The spiritual progression in "North American Sequence" occurs in much the same manner as it does in "The Lost Son" and "North American Sequence," for the speaker desires peace and actively seeks peace through being super-sensitive to nature, seeing microscopically to learn cosmic truths, and returning to the past. The persona in "North American Sequence" is not as clearly defined as the young boy in "Lost Son" and the old woman in "Meditations of an Old Woman," for neither the age nor the sex of the persona is explicitly stated. Since very few details which establish the exact identity of the persona are supplied, the persona in "North American Sequence" seems to be representative of all men who experience spiritual chaos and desire spiritual transcendence. The spiritual position of the representative man is advanced in comparison with the old woman's or the young boy's. Unlike the youth and the woman,

the persona in "North American Sequence" is aware of his ability to transcend self and receive knowledge. The young boy does not know whom to question or what to ask; the old woman questions herself but is not sure of the answer; the representative man reflectively questions himself, but he already knows the answer. Thus, he seems to be in a more advanced spiritual position, for unlike the old woman and the young boy he knows he can transcend spiritual chaos. He begins where the other personae end, for he starts with the knowledge that the old woman and the young boy must learn.

The speaker in "The Longing," the first poem in "North American Sequence," progresses from a state of spiritual emptiness in which "the spirit fails to move forward"¹ to a peaceful state in which he decides that he will become an "explorer." His decision to move forward is a result of desire, supersensitivity to nature, meditation in which he truly sees, and a return to the past. Just as in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman,"

¹Theodore Roethke, "North American Sequence," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York: Doubleday Co., Inc., 1966), p. 187.

the speaker in "North American Sequence" expresses an intense desire to transcend spiritual and sensual emptiness in "The Longing." Images of death, decay and waste depict the speaker's unhappy spiritual state in which the spirit, like the slug, regresses "into a half-life":

1

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?
 (Dreams drain the spirit if we dream too long.)
 In a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year,
 The slag-heaps fume at the edge of the raw cities:
 The gulls wheel over their singular garbage;
 The great trees no longer shimmer;
 Not even the soot dances.

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.²

The speaker in North American Sequence knows what the speaker in "The Lost Son" learned: one does have a soul, and he perceives the significance of the rose and light. He is supersensitive for he is "there to hear" the light and he humbly compares himself to the bud and the worm. Another implication that "North American Sequence" takes up where

² Ibid.

"The Lost Son" left off is revealed by the speakers' view of death. The speaker in "The Lost Son" viewed the dead stalks of flowers as "beautiful surviving bones," and the speaker in "North American Sequence" compares himself to a stalk and reveals that he does not consider himself doomed, for he says "Out of these nothings/ --All beginnings come":

2

A wretch needs his wretchedness. Yes.
O pride, thou art a plume upon whose head?

How comprehensive that felicity! . . .
A body with the motion of a soul.
What dream's enough to breathe in? A dark dream.
The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all.
Who'd think the moon could pare itself so thin?
A great flame rises from the sunless sea;
The light cries out, and I am there to hear--
I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon,
Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm.

To this extent I'm a stalk.
--How free; how all alone.
Out of these nothings
--All beginnings come.³

Having expressed his empty spiritual state and his desire for and faith in spiritual growth, in a long prayer-like meditation, he expresses his desire to become the fish, the stream, the leaf. His desire to transform into another being is not an attempt to escape from himself, for he accepts the reality of "pain" and combats pain by keeping "the eye quiet on the growing rose." The image

³Ibid., p. 188.

of growth quiets the eye for it offers a peaceful prospect of growth. It is not escape from self he desires, but peace or the "imperishable quiet" which is the essence of all things: "I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form." He attempts to know this quiet by becoming other forms such as leaf and stream. For in order to become a stream or leaf, he must become the essence which is that object; he must become the "imperishable quiet at the heart of form." He does not foolishly wish spiritual disorder away, but only desires to keep the "imperishable quiet" in the midst of impending chaos suggested by "great striated rocks" and "redolent disorder":

3

I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the
 mad lemmings,
 The children dancing, the flowers widening.
 Who sighs from far away?
 I would unlearn the lingo of exasperation, all the
 distortions of malice and hatred;
 I would believe my pain: and the eye quiet on the
 growing rose;
 I would delight in my hands, the branch singing,
 altering the excessive bird;
 I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of
 form;
 I would be a stream, winding between great striated
 rocks in late summer;
 A leaf, I would love the leaves, delighting in the
 redolent disorder of this mortal life.⁴

So, just as the speakers in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" learn macrocosmic truths by seeing everything in the entire spectrum, so does the speaker

⁴Ibid.

in "The Longing" attempt to learn the "imperishable quiet at the heart of all form" by becoming several forms or everything in the entire spectrum. Like the speaker in "The Lost Son," the speaker in "North American Sequence" desires light. The imagery suggests that he is progressing from the dark, and a dangerous dark mouth is always present ready to swallow him:

This ambush, this silence,
Where shadow can change into flame,
And the dark be forgotten.
I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth
of the night is still wide;⁵

Just as the speakers in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" journey to the past, the speaker in "The Longing" journeys back in time to the era of the buffalo. And, in this era of the buffalo, he definitively states that he will be an Iroquois:

This ambush, this silence,
Where shadow can change into flame,
And the dark be forgotten.
I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of
the night is still wide;
On the Bullhead, in the Dakotas, where the eagles
eat well,
In the country of few lakes, in the tall buffalo
grass at the base of the clay buttes,
In the summer heat, I can smell the dead buffalo,
The stench of their damp fur drying in the sun,
The buffalo chips drying.

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Ogalala?
Iroquois.⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 188-189.

So, by intensely desiring peace, through supersensitivity to nature, and through prayer-like meditation in which he wishes to become other forms, he returns to the past to find an identity. The identity, an Indian explorer, suggests a spiritual progression; whereas before he was bothered by the kingdom of stinks, now the stink of buffalo hides does not bother him because it has become a part of his way of life and his identity:

In the next poem in the sequence, "Meditation at Oyster River," the speaker is standing in water where a stream meets the tide of a river. The speaker, in a state of supersensitivity, observes the natural setting, and he observes particularly in minute detail the water depicted by images of "elephant colored rocks," "rows of dead clam shells," "tiny stripped fish," "small stones," and "sunken log." In addition to being visually aware, the speaker is aurally aware, for he is aware of the pervading silence because the tide ripples are "moving, almost without sound," there is "no sound from the bay," and the gulls are quiet. Having closely observed the water, he "retires to a rock higher up on the cliff-side":

1

Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,
Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without
sound, toward me,

Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows
of dead clam shells;
Then a runnel behind me, creeping closer,
Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climbing
in and out of the water.

No sound from the bay. No violence.
Even the gulls quiet on the far rocks,
Silent, in the deepening light,
Their cat-mewing over,
Their child-whimpering.
At last one long undulant ripple,
Blue-black from where I am sitting,
Makes almost a wave over a barrier of small stones,
Slapping lightly against a sunken log.
I dabble my toes in the brackish foam sliding forward,
Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliff-side.
The wind slackens, light as a moth fanning a stone:
A twilight wind, light as a child's breath
Turning not a leaf, not a ripple.
The dew revives on the beach-grass;
The salt-soaked wood of a fire crackles;
A fish raven turns on its perch (a dead tree in
the rivermouth),
Its wings catching a last glint of the reflected
sunlight.⁷

The close supersensitive observance of nature is a preparation for transcending self. After the lengthy, sustained observation of the water, the speaker begins to meditate about death. And, by meditating about death, the physical self momentarily dies while the spirit progresses out of self. He realizes that his self is constantly dying. He thinks about the shy beasts facing death and wishes he were one of them. He also would be "with water" constantly moving forward, meeting obstacles such as "sand-bars," "beds of kelp," "miscellaneous driftwood," and the "tug of the

⁷Ibid., p. 190.

tide." This image of water moving forward and being pulled back by the undercurrent suggests the regressive-progressive motion of the spirit:

2

The self persists like a dying star,
 In sleep, afraid. Death's face rises afresh,
 Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
 The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across
 the highway,
 The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting
 for its fly,
 The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to
 morning-glory--
 With these I would be.
 And with water: the waves coming forward, without
 cessation,
 The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp,
 miscellaneous driftwood,
 Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous
 undercurrents
 The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges
 of stone,
 The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.⁸

After supersensitive perception of nature in Part 1 that prepared him for meditation about the death of self and becoming water in Part 2, in Part 3, the flesh in a sense does die, for it "takes on the pure poise of the spirit." So, he seems to achieve a state of pure spirit by sensuous perception of water. He begins concentrated, focused meditation on the breaking away movement of water: the brook breaking over stone, a "cascade tumbling from a cleft rock," ice "cracking and heaving," the embankment

⁸Ibid., pp. 190-191.

falling "as the piled ice breaks away," and "the whole river begins to move forward":

3

In this hour,
 In this first heaven of knowing,
 The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit,
 Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance,
 The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning--
 I shift on my rock, and I think:
 Of the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April,
 Over a lip of stone, the tiny rivulet;
 And that wrist-thick cascade tumbling from a cleft
 rock,
 Its spray holding a double rain-bow in early morning,
 Small enough to be taken in, embraced, by two arms,--
 Or the Tittewawasee, in the time between winter and
 spring,
 When the ice melts along the edges in early afternoon.
 And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving from
 the pressure beneath,
 The ice piling high against the iron-bound spiles,
 Gleaming, freezing hard again, creaking at midnight--
 And I long for the blast of dynamite,
 The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its
 debris of branches and sticks,
 Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's
 shoe riding a log,
 As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles,
 And the whole river begins to move forward, its
 bridges shaking.⁹

After having meditated on water and its breaking away motion, the speaker "breaks" away from autonomous self experience to experience a oneness "In the cradle of all that is," and his spirit, having broken free, "runs, intermittently,/ In and out of the small waves,/ Runs with the intrepid shorebirds":

⁹Ibid., p. 191.

4

Now, in this waning of light,
 I rock with the motion of morning;
 In the cradle of all that is,
 I'm lulled into half-sleep
 By the lapping of water,
 Cries of the sandpiper.
 Water's my will, and my way,
 And the spirit runs, intermittently,
 In and out of the small waves,
 Runs with the intrepid shorebirds--
 How graceful the small before danger!

In the first of the moon,
 All's a scattering,
 A shining.¹⁰

Just as the speaker in "Meditations of an Old Woman" is able to transcend self after having achieved spiritual peace, so does the speaker in "Meditation at Oyster River," who is in a peaceful state, transcend self. Transcendence is a result of supersensitive perception of nature and focused meditation. Just as the speaker in "The Longing" became another identity by meditating about becoming other forms, so does the speaker in "Meditation at Oyster River" become water by meditating about water. He thinks about moving water and his "flesh takes on the pure poise of spirit." He then meditates on water breaking away and his spirit breaks away from self and becomes one with nature.

Just as the speakers in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" experience journeys through

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 191-192.

rugged terrain that represent spiritual progression and the ordeals which the spirit must undergo to achieve growth, so does the speaker in "Journey to the Interior," the third poem in "North American Sequence," experience a metaphorical journey. The journey's Roethkean pattern of regression-progression is revealed by the juxtaposition of the title with the first line. Part 1 is a statement that the journey out of self is difficult for there are many obstacles to overcome:

"Journey to the Interior"

1

In the long journey out of the self,
 There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw
 places
 Where the shale slides dangerously
 And the back wheels hang almost over the edge
 At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.
 Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling
 stones.
 The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes,
 the canyons,
 Creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood
 roaring into the narrow valley.
 Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain,
 Grey from the long winter, burnt at the base in late
 summer.
 --Or the path narrowing,
 Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp
 stones,
 The upland of alder and birchtrees,
 Through the swamp alive with quicksand,
 The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree,
 The thickets darkening,
 The ravines ugly.¹¹

¹¹Ibid., p. 193.

The speaker begins to remember a previous journey out of self in exact, minute detail. The journey forward was continually hampered by "dangerous down-hill places" and skidding in loose gravel. Images of rising and falling suggest the progressive-regressive pattern of the spirit:

I remember how it was to drive in gravel,
 Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the
 wheels whined beyond eighty--
 When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale,
 The trick was to throw the car sideways and charge
 over the hill, full of the throttle.
 Grinding up and over the narrow road, spitting and
 roaring.
 A chance? Perhaps. But the road was part of me,
 and its ditches,
 And the dust lay thick on my eyelids,--Who ever
 wore goggles?--
 Always a sharp turn to the left past a barn close
 to the roadside,
 To a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children,
 The highway ribboning out in a straight thrust to
 the North,
 To the sand dunes and fish flies, hanging, thicker
 than moths,
 Dying brightly under the street lights sunk in coarse
 concrete,
 The towns with their high pitted road-crowns and
 deep gutters,
 Their wooden stores of silvery pine and weather-beaten
 red courthouses,
 An old bridge below with a buckled iron railing,
 broken by some idiot plunger;
 Underneath, the sluggish water running between weeds,
 broken wheels, tires, stones.
 And all flows past--
 The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle
 of the prairie,
 The dead snakes and muskrats, the turtles gasping
 in the rubble,
 The spikey purple bushes in the winding dry creek bed--
 The floating hawks, the jackrabbits, the grazing
 cattle--¹²

¹²Ibid., pp. 193-194.

Up to this point the speaker has spoken of the journey as a past experience; however, he has so truly re-experienced the past journey that it becomes a present experience. That he begins to experience the past as if it were present is indicated by his use of the present tense, "I am not moving . . . I rise and fall . . . I rise and fall, and time folds/ Into a long moment/ And I hear":

I am not moving but they are,
 And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the
 Tetons,
 While, farther away, the heat-lightning flashes.
 I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,
 The wind veering the car slightly to the right,
 Whipping the line of white laundry, bending the
 cottonwoods apart,
 The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house.
 I rise and fall, and time folds
 Into a long moment;
 And I hear the lichen speak,
 And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet--
 On the shimmering road,
 On the dusty detour.¹³

Not only does he transcend time, but he transcends the realm of the physical for he is submerged in still water and at the same time experiences the "moving, unmoving in a parched land." Like the speakers' journey in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman," the journey is a learning experience, for the speaker in "Journey to the Interior" has learned to know "the heart of the sun" in both light and dark places, and in "the flicker of fire." He has also heard the song of dripping leaves, and

¹³Ibid., p. 194.

he learns to face death with his senses awake:

I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the
 never receding,
 Moving unmoving in a parched land, white in the
 moonlight:
 The soul at a still-stand,
 At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,
 Petals and reflections of petals mixed on the surface
 of a glassy pool,
 And the waves flattening out when the fishermen
 drag their nets over the stones.

In the moment of time when the small drop forms,
 but does not fall,
 I have known the heart of the sun,--
 In the dark and light of a dry place,
 In a flicker of fire brisked by a dusty wind.
 I have heard, in a drip of leaves,
 A slight song,
 After the midnight cries.
 I rehearse myself for this:
 The stand at the stretch in the face of death,

Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light
 on waves,
 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.

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is
 morning,
 I know this change:
 On one side of silence there is no smile;
 But when I breathe with the birds,
 The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
 And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my
 sleep.¹⁴

As a result of the spiritual journey out of self, the
 speaker has learned to face death. As long as one stays

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 194-195.

confined within the self, one only perceives that "On one side of silence there is no smile." However, once self has been left, the senses have been used to further spiritual growth, and the transcending spirit "breathes with the birds," then one knows the "spirit of blessing" and no longer need fear death. For as the image of the dead in the last line suggests, the dead are alive because they are singing: "And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep." So, by remembering a past journey so vividly and accurately through supersensitivity to nature and focused meditation, the journey becomes a present experience for the speaker and "the spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing." By transcending self, the speaker in "The Lost Son" becomes aware of the spirit's potentiality and capability for growth. In "Meditations of an Old Woman," the speaker continually strives for spiritual peace, and once spiritual peace is attained, she can transcend self and merge with another being or object. In "Journey to the Interior," the speaker transcends self and learns from the transcendent experience. He learns not to fear physical death.

The speaker in "The Long Waters" also experiences spiritual progression and spiritual regression. Like the other speakers, his spiritual progression is a result of sensitivity to nature (perceiving whether nature is friendly

or unfriendly, seeing the entire landscape) and focused meditation. He employs focused meditation similarly in "Meditation at Oyster River," and "Journey to the Interior" when he visualizes breaking water and the past so vividly that his spirit became fluid so that spirit breaks out of self, and he actively experiences the past as a present experience. The speaker in "The Long Waters" stands at the point where the river empties into the sea which could be construed symbolically to represent life flowing into eternity. The speaker has lapsed into absurd logic:

1

Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,
 But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,
 Minnows can hear, and butterflies, yellow and blue,
 Rejoice in the language of smells and dancing.
 Therefore I reject the world of the dog
 Though he hear a note higher than C
 And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song.¹⁵

He goes back or returns to the "charred edge of the sea"
 and the point where the river empties into the sea:

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.
 I return where fire has been,
 To the charred edge of the sea
 Where the yellowish prongs of grass poke through
 the blackened ash,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 196.

And the bunched logs peel in the afternoon sunlight,
 Where the fresh and salt waters meet,
 And the sea-winds move through the pine trees,
 A country of bays and inlets, and small streams
 flowing seaward.¹⁶

In "The Long Waters," just like in "The Lost Son" and
 "Meditations of an Old Woman," nature seems unfriendly
 when the speaker is in a state of spiritual chaos. The
 speaker is again in a state of spiritual fear because he
 prays to Mnetha and asks for protection from the sea, or
 symbolically, protection from death. He seems to be
 aware of the fall that followed his past progression for
 he says, "Feeling, I still delight in my last fall":

2

Mnetha, Mother of Har, protect me
 From the worm's advance and retreat, from the butter-
 fly's havoc,
 From the slow sinking of the island peninsula, the
 coral efflorescence,
 The dubious sea-change, the heaving sands, and my
 tentacled sea-cousins.

But what of her?--
 Who magnifies the morning with her eyes,
 That star winking beyond itself,
 The cricket-voice deep in the midnight field,
 The blue jay rasping from the stunted pine.

How slowly pleasure dies!--
 The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,
 The first snow of the year in the dark fir,
 Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

In Part 3 he begins to perceive nature as do the lost son and the old woman, for he perceives the entire landscape: the trout, the ivy-branch, the pine, fisherman, the waves that "remind me of flowers":

3

In time when the trout and young salmon leap for the
 low-flying insects,
 And the ivy-branch, cast to the ground, puts down
 roots into the sawdust,
 And the pine, whole with its roots, sinks into the
 estuary,
 Where it leans, tilted east, a perch for the
 osprey,
 And a fisherman dawdles over a wooden bridge,
 These waves, in the sun, remind me of flowers:
 The lily's piercing white,
 The mottled tiger, best in the corner of a damp
 place,
 The heliotrope, veined like a fish, the persistent
 morning-glory,
 And the bronze of a dead burdock at the edge of a
 prairie lake,
 Down by the muck shrinking to the alkaline center.

I have come here without courting silence,
 Blessed by the lips of a low wind,
 To a rich desolation of wind and water,
 To a landlocked bay, where the salt water is freshened
 By small streams running down under fallen fir trees.¹⁸

The speaker in "The Long Waters" employs focused meditation like the speakers in "Meditation at Oyster River" and "Journey to the Interior." In Part 4 his meditation on a natural setting focuses on the sea, the movement of the "ripples, a wave, the current, the wreckage of water":

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

4

In the vaporous grey of early morning,
 Over the thin, feathery ripples breaking lightly
 against the irregular shoreline--
 Feathers of the long swell, burnished, almost oily--
 A single wave comes in like the neck of a great swan
 Swimming slowly, its back ruffled by the light
 cross-winds,
 To a tree lying flat, its crown half broken.

I remember a stone breaking the eddying current,
 Neither white nor red, in the dead middle way,
 Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening
 shadow,
 A vulnerable place,
 Surrounded by sand, broken shells, the wreckage
 of water.¹⁹

Continuing his meditation on the sea in Part 5, "the sea wind wakes desire" in him, and not only does he transcend self ("I . . . Become another thing"), but he also has a mystical religious experience which is suggested by "the shape," "The eternal one," and "the numinous ring around the opening flower" that come forth from the "advancing and retreating waters. (The image suggests the Roethkean regression-progression spiritual pattern.) It seems that the regression-progression generates peace, for it is after the speaker goes out and then into self that he proclaims, "I embrace the world":

5

As light reflects from a lake, in late evening,
 When bats fly, close to slightly tilting brownish
 water,

¹⁹ Ibid.

And the low ripples run over a pebbly shoreline,
 As a fire, seemingly long dead, flares up from a
 downdraft of air in a chimney,
 Or a breeze moves over the knees from a low hill,
 So the sea wind wakes desire.
 My body shimmers with a light flame.

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

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.²⁰

So, the speaker's spiritual progression is a result of supersensitivity to nature and focused meditation. This time, he not only transcends self but experiences mystical, religious illumination.

In "The Far Field," the next poem in "North American Sequence," the speaker dreams of a journey that is always the same. The journey is difficult for there is snow on the windshield and the road, the side mirror is blurred, and the road itself becomes a "rubble of stone." The isolated journey ends "in a hopeless sand-rut" and the car dies:

²⁰Ibid., p. 198.

1

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
 Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
 Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long
 peninsula,
 The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
 A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
 Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
 And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,
 The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble
 of stone,
 Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,
 Where the car stalls,
 Churning in a snowdrift
 Until the headlights darken.²¹

The first two stanzas in Part 2 are filled with images of death, the end, decay: "flower dump," "rusted pipes," "broken machinery," "dead rat," dead "tom-cat," birds and rabbits caught in the mower, the dead tree, and the field's end. He regrets the death of birds for their song could make him forget his own death:

2

At the field's end, in the corner missed by the
 mower,
 Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden
 culvert,
 Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the
 field-mouse,
 Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
 Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken
 machinery,--
 One learned of the eternal;
 And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain
 and ground-beetles
 (I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)

²¹Ibid., p. 199.

And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,
 Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,
 Blasted to death by the night watchman.

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in
 the mower,
 My grief was not excessive.
 For to come upon warblers in early May
 Was to forget time and death:
 How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering
 restless cloud, all one morning,
 And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from
 the bird shapes,--
 Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,--
 Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,
 Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the
 end branches,

Still for a moment,
 Then pitching away in half-flight,
 Lighter than finches,
 While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-
 green hedgerows,
 And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the
 chicken-yard.²²

Continuing his focused meditation, he remembers thinking
 about his death and rebirth, and learning not to fear
 death:

--Or to lie naked in sand,
 In the silted shallows of a slow river,
 Fingering a shell,
 Thinking:
 Once I was something like this, mindless,
 Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;
 Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;
 Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,
 Believing:
 I'll return again,
 As a snake or a raucous bird,
 Or, with luck, as a lion.

²²Ibid., pp. 199-200.

I learned not to fear infinity,
 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
 The wheel turning away from itself,
 The sprawl of the wave,
 The on-coming water.²³

Just like the old woman in "Meditations of an Old Woman," the speaker in "The Far Field" is able to transcend self when his spirit is at peace. After focused meditation about death in which he remembers not to fear infinity, the speaker feels as if he is water, moving forward, merging with other water until he becomes still. Having achieved peace, he transcends the physical realm, for he says, "My mind moves in more than one place,/ In a country half-land, half water." His transcendent experience results in an ironic renewal by death. It seems that having transcended self, he realizes that what he loves is eternal:

3

The river turns on itself,
 The tree retreats into its own shadow.
 I feel a weightless change, a moving forward
 As of water quickening before a narrowing channel
 When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;
 Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent
 And the yellowish-green from the mountainy upland,--
 At first a swift rippling between rocks,
 Then a long running over flat stones
 Before descending to the alluvial plain,
 To the clay banks, and the wild grapes hanging from
 the elmtrees.

²³Ibid., p. 200.

The slightly trembling water
 Dropping a fine yellow silt where the sun stays;
 And the crabs bask near the edge,
 The weedy edge, alive with small snakes and
 bloodsuckers,--

I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
 A point outside the glittering current;
 My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
 At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,
 My mind moves in more than one place,
 In a country half-land, half-water.

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
 The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
 The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
 What I love is near at hand,
 Always, in earth and air.²⁴

In Part 4, he continues to envision a man who is representative of all men as they approach death. He no longer hears the question, "Why was I born?" Now his spirit is peaceful, and "He is the end of all things, the final man." Although finite things end, there is something eternal which exists after the thing for he says, "All finite things reveal the infinite." He follows the statement with a catalogue of finite objects that reveal the finite: mountain, light, odor, the silence of water--all of which he equates syntactically with "The pure serene of memory in one man,--which like the ripple, is felt throughout the world:

²⁴Ibid., pp. 200-201.

4

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

A man faced with his own immensity
 Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
 The murmur of the absolute, the why
 Of being born fails on his naked ears.
 His spirit moves like monumental wind
 That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
 He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:
 The mountain with its singular bright shade
 Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
 The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
 Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
 A scent beloved of bees;
 Silence of water above a sunken tree:
 The pure serene of memory in one man,--
 A ripple widening from a single stone
 Winding around the waters of the world.²⁵

So, it is the "pure serene of memory" for which the speaker in "North American Sequence" as well as the speakers in "The Lost Son" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" strive. And, often the speakers experience peace, the "pure serene" peace generated by memory, after a reliance on memory of nature and the past.

It seems that the more the spirit regresses, the shorter the regressions seem to be, for less and less is the speaker in a spiritual chaotic state. He does continue to progress, for he moves from medium to high.

²⁵Ibid., p. 201.

In "The Rose," the last poem in "North American Sequence," the speaker experiences full illumination. He places importance on place and time. Once again, as a precedent to all transcendent mystical progressions, the speaker is supersensitively observing nature. The image of the hawks suggests serene gliding peace, the gulls and crows suggest struggle, and the tide suggests progression. He observes the entire landscape--the birds, the sun, the tide, the moon, and the ebbing waves. Just as in "The Long Water," the speaker transcends self through focused meditation. Having watched the tide move in and out, he moves out of self into nature:

1

There are those to whom place is unimportant,
 But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
 Is important--
 Where the hawks sway out into the wind,
 Without a single wingbeat,
 And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,
 And the gulls cry against the crows
 In the curved harbors,
 And the tide rises up against the grass
 Nibbled by sheep and rabbits.

A time for watching the tide,
 For the heron's hieratic fishing,
 For the sleepy cries of the towhee,
 The morning birds gone, the twittering finches,
 But still the flash of the kingfisher, the wing-
 beat of the scoter,
 The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water,
 The last geese crossing against the reflected after-
 light,
 The moon retreating into a vague cloud-shape
 To the cries of the owl, the eerie whooper.
 The old log subsides with the lessening waves,
 And there is silence.

I sway outside myself
 Into the darkening currents,
 Into the small spillage of driftwood,
 The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.
 Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment
 While on a far point of the rocks
 The light heightened,
 And below, in a mist out of nowhere,
 The first rain gathered?²⁶

Now the experience of merging with another not only produces peace, but is accompanied by understanding. In Part 2 he imagistically represents the slow, rocking, up and down, progressive motion of the self:

2

As when a ship sails with a light wind--
 The waves less than the ripples made by rising fish,
 The lacelike wrinkles of the wake widening,
 thinning out,
 Sliding away from the traveler's eye,
 The prow pitching easily up and down,
 The whole ship rolling slightly sideways,
 The stern high, dipping like a child's boat in a
 pond--
 Our motion continues.²⁷

He also envisions the constant rose that sways in the sea wind. The rose, like the spirit, grows out of the dark, and achieves full bloom when the sun is highest, just as the spirit achieves "full bloom" when it is enlightened with understanding. The wild rose struggles free from the other flowers and is carried down the "slow creek" to the sea where "crabs are scuttling back into their glistening crater":

²⁶ Ibid., p. 202.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 203.

But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Stays,
 Stays in its true place,
 Flowering out of the dark,
 Widening at high noon, face upward,
 A single wild rose, struggling out of the white
 embrace of the morning-glory,
 Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted
 underbrush,
 Beyond the clover, the ragged hay,
 Beyond the sea pine, the oak, the wind-tipped
 madrona,
 Moving with the waves, the undulating driftwood,
 Where the slow creek winds down to the black sand
 of the shore
 With its thick grassy scum and crabs scuttling
 back into their glistening craters.²⁸

The vision of the wild rose in the sea wind reminds him
 of the flowers in his father's greenhouse and even then
 they seemed to call him out of self:

And I think of roses, roses,
 White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot green-
 houses,
 And my father standing astride the cement benches,
 Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs.
 Russells, and his own elaborate hybrids,
 And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me,
 to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.

What need for heaven, then
 With that man, and those roses?²⁹

Possibly, this memory could be a momentary return to the
 womb, since the greenhouse is Roethke's symbol for the
 womb.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

²⁹ Ibid.

In Part 3 he questions the message or infinitude of sound. Just as death images follow meditation about death, so when meditating about sound does he catalogue images of sound. It seems that by knowing or thinking about all sounds, he can learn to know the essence of sound, "that sound, that single sound,/ When the mind remembers all":

3

What do they tell us, sound and silence?
 I think of American sounds in this silence:
 On the banks of the Tombstone, the wind-harps having
 their say,
 The thrush singing alone, that easy bird,
 The killdeer whistling away from me,
 The mimetic chortling of the catbird
 Down in the corner of the garden, among the
 raggedy lilacs,
 The bobolink skirring from a broken fencepost,
 The bluebird, lover of holes in old wood, liltling
 its light song,
 And that thin cry, like a needle piercing the ear,
 the insistent cicada,
 And the ticking of snow around oil drums in the
 Dakotas,
 The thin whine of telephone wires in the wind of a
 Michigan winter,
 The shriek of nails as old shingles are ripped from
 the top of a roof,
 The bulldozer backing away, the hiss of the sandblaster,
 And the deep chorus of horns coming up from the
 streets in early morning.
 I return to the twittering of swallows above water,
 And that sound, that single sound,
 When the mind remembers all,
 And gently the light enters the sleeping soul,
 A sound so thin it could not woo a bird,

 Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

The exalted speaker then becomes thoroughly in tune with nature because he perceives "the rock singing, and light making its own silence":

I think of the rock singing, and light making its own
silence,
At the edge of a ripening meadow, in early summer,
The moon lolling in the close elm, a shimmer of
silver,
Or that lonely time before the breaking of morning
When the slow freight winds along the edge of the
ravaged hillside,
And the wind tries the shape of a tree,
While the moon lingers,
And a drop of rain water hangs at the tip of a leaf
Shifting in the wakening sunlight
Like the eye of a new-caught fish.³¹

In Part 4 he states his closeness to all nature: the rocks, the weeds, the green harsh edges, sea-slime:

4

I live with the rocks, their weeds,
Their filmy fringes of green, their harsh
Edges, their holes
Cut by the sea-slime, far from the crash
Of the long swell,
The oily, tar-laden walls
Of the toppling waves,
Where the salmon ease their way into the kelp beds,
And the sea rearranges itself among the small
islands.³²

His thoughts return to the rose in the midst of a dying landscape where he first found peace, or he found "true ease of myself" by moving in and out of self beyond death and by moving yet remaining still. He accepts his total

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 205.

nature (physical and spiritual), the moving in and out of self, for he says, "And I rejoiced in being what I was" and he also rejoices in nature: the lilac change, the calm, the bird, the dolphin, and the rose which is constant, "rooted in stone," which keeps "the whole light" and dissolves barriers of opposites, "gathering to itself sound and silence":

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 out of the depths of my being,
 And I stood outside myself,
 Beyond becoming and perishing,
 A something wholly other,
 As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
 And yet was still.
 And I rejoiced in being what I was:
 In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,
 In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
 With all the air to greet him as he flies,
 The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;

 And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
 Gathering to itself sound and silence--
 Mine and the sea-wind's.³³

The conclusions at which the old woman in "Meditations of an Old Woman" and the speaker in "North American Sequence" arrive are very similar. They both triumphantly affirm the joy of life in which physical perception is a gateway to spiritual progression. Their transcendent experiences

³³ Ibid.

result from a supersensitive perception of nature and focused meditation. The transcendent experience results in an understanding which removes the fear of death. Perhaps the knowledge that the spirit is fluid and can move in and out of body is a negation of death because it is in the rocking regressing -progressing motion in and out of self that the speaker experiences ultimate delight.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In his work Roethke explores and develops the motifs of past, nature, transcendence, and spiritual peace within the spiritual progression motif. The speakers in "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence" experience spiritual chaos and desire peace, perceive nature with sensitivity, return to the past, experience mystical illumination, and practice focused meditation. It is the interaction which fosters spiritual progression. Although the causes of spiritual progression in the spiritual histories are similar, the personae are not the same in each poem, and they do not begin in the same spiritual position in the beginning of each spiritual history. The lost son is in a disturbed spiritual state and regresses to absurdity. The old woman is in a state of spiritual despondency and regresses to the past and greater despondency. The old woman's despondency is suggested by the prolonged description of her spiritual level. Also, the young boy innocently questions nature; whereas the old woman's questioning is bitter. Unlike the young boy, she knows how much she has lost, for only the painful memories of sensuous perception replace the ability to perceive. The representative man in "North American Sequence" is in

a state of spiritual turmoil, but because he knows he can transcend spiritual chaos, the knowledge which the other speakers lack, he seems more at peace with himself. Thus, he begins at a more advanced spiritual position than the old woman or the young boy. Therefore, Roethke's theory that spiritual regression precedes spiritual progression is suggested by the spiritual histories as a complete entity, for the pattern within the spiritual histories is one of regression and progression. As I have illustrated in the introduction, the past, nature, transcendence, and spiritual peace were dominant factors in Theodore Roethke's life as well as in the thematic development of his poems. The exploration of these themes certainly expands the range of his poetry. So, maybe the interaction of these forces did not necessarily engender spiritual progression in his life, but the exploration of these themes generated thematic development in his poetry.

One leitmotif that Theodore Roethke explores is the theme of nature and its relation to spiritual progression, the major motif in the spiritual histories. Each speaker achieves spiritual progression partly through

perception of nature. In "The Lost Son" the young boy asks nature to direct him. During his journey through a natural terrain, he is aware of both the beautiful and the ugly aspects of nature. He attempts to understand nature, for he questions, "Where do the roots go?" "Who put the moss there?" "Who stunned the dirt into noise?" At times, he feels that nature is unfriendly toward him. The entire setting of the poem is natural: the land, the greenhouses, rose and light symbols. The old woman in "Meditations of an Old Woman" is also supersensitive to nature for she too perceives whether nature is friendly or unfriendly. Much of her delight stems from sheer sensuous perception of nature, and when she thinks she will no longer be able to sensuously and sensually delight, she becomes bitterly despondent. Also, the old woman perceives reality the clearest when she is in a natural setting such as a field. She perceives nature so truly that she actually can become the sun, the air, the light, the wind. The speaker in "North American Sequence" is also supersensitive to nature, and he, too, perceives the times when nature is friendly or unfriendly. The setting of "North American Sequence" is entirely natural: the plains of the Dakotas, by a stream, river, or sea, a dangerous landscape, a field. Also, the innumerable natural images indicate the three speakers' heightened perception of nature. Whereas the lost son perceives relationships

between nature such as the relationship between moss and stones, the old woman and the speaker in "North American Sequence" perceive the relationship between nature and spirit. The old woman sees a similarity between the backward-forward movement of crabs and salmon and the regressive-progressive movement of the spirit. The speaker in "North American Sequence" also is aware of the relationship between the natural world and unseen world for he says, "All finite things reveal infinitude," and he longs for the "pure serene and the heart of all form." He also perceives the similarity between the movement of the spirit and the movement of tide water. Thus, all speakers are supersensitive to nature. The lost son perceives nature in order to gain understanding; the old woman perceives nature primarily for delight; the speaker in "North American Sequence" perceives nature in order to transcend self.

The past is another leitmotif that Roethke explores. In addition to seeking peace from spiritual chaos arising from physical or spiritual death, and being supersensitive to nature, all three speakers return to the past. The lost son strives more than the other two speakers to return to the past. The lost son attempts to find his identity by returning to his initial, primordial beginnings, and his goal is achieved when he returns to the greenhouse that represents the womb. The old woman returns to the past

past when she journeys "backward in time," to the greenhouse and also when she returns to the days of her sensuous youth. The speaker in "North American Sequence" returns to the past the fewer times. He remembers a past journey so vividly that it becomes a present experience, and he, too momentarily returns to his father's "six-hundred-foot greenhouse." So, the conscious attempt to return to the past in the poems occurs less and less, and it seems that the past becomes less important for spiritual progression.

Another theme that Roethke develops in the spiritual histories is the mystical illumination motif. Whereas a return to the past decreases as the spiritual progression motif develops throughout "The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence," the degree of mystical illumination increases. The lost son learns that the spirit is "lively" and "understandable." The old woman experiences a vague mystical illumination when she says she sees "The holy line," and "The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down./ The light air slowed: It was not night or day./ All natural shapes become symbolic." Her experience verges on mystical illumination, but she never states the symbolical meaning of the natural shapes. The knowledge that she acquires is mostly self-knowledge about the relationship between physical and spiritual

rather than mystical knowledge. On the other hand, the speaker in "North American Sequence" has a much more specific mystical vision in which he becomes another being that he recognizes as an extension of himself. And, instead of perceiving that "all natural shapes become symbolical" as the old woman does, in "North American Sequence," the speaker realizes that "All finite things reveal infinitude," and he explains through catalogue the infinite peace in nature and man, and he explains that man like the "single stone" in water creates a ripple which is felt throughout the "Waters of the world." So, the mystical experience of the speaker in "North American Sequence" is the most illuminating of the three speakers.

Focused meditation is practiced in varying degrees by all three speakers. In "The Lost Son" the young boy learns to see truly. By learning not only to look at but see beyond and perceive objects in the entire spectrum, he achieves spiritual peace after having feared death. The old woman also practices focused meditation, especially in the later part of the poem. She focuses her meditation on thoughts such as "What are the needs of the spirit?" and on "How to reconcile spiritual and physical needs." The speaker in "North American Sequence" practices focused meditation the most, and focused meditation contributes more to spiritual growth than in the other two poems in

which return to past and perception of nature are emphasized as catalysts of spiritual progression. The speaker in "North American Sequence" concentrates on an object such as water, then focuses on the breaking movement of water which causes the spirit to move and merge with water in "Meditations at Oyster River." He repeats this technique in "Journey to the Interior" in which he focuses on a past experience thereby making the past journey a present experience. In "The Long Waters" he focuses on the sea and becomes water. In "The Far Field" and "The Rose" he again becomes water through focused meditation. So, the lost son gains spiritual understanding by seeing truly; the old woman gains self-knowledge and limited mystical illumination by intense seeing (meditation); the speaker in "North American Sequence" achieves spiritual transcendence and mystical illumination through focused meditation. The lost son learns to see in the literal sense of the word; the old woman and man learn to see in the context of understanding or visionary sight.

The causes and conditions that foster spiritual progression in Theodore Roethke's spiritual histories are the same but they are emphasized to varying degrees. In "The Lost Son" there is a strong emphasis on return to

a past primordial state. In "Meditations of an Old Woman" the old woman returns to the past, but the emphasis is on supersensitive perception of nature as a means of delight and an emphasis on intense meditation as a means of acquiring understanding. In "North American Sequence" the attempt to return to the past is minimal, and the emphasis is on supersensitive perception of nature and focused meditation as a means of spiritual progression. The speaker in "North American Sequence," the last spiritual history, achieves the greatest spiritual progression. In "The Lost Son," the speaker learned that the spirit is capable of progression. In "Meditations of an Old Woman" the old woman learned to delight in herself and nature only after having learned to resolve her physical and spiritual nature. The old woman's delight in transcendence and vague mystical illumination, accompanied by knowledge of self is the highest degree of spiritual progression achieved in "Meditations of an Old Woman." In "North American Sequence" transcendence is more frequent than in any of the other poems, and transcendence is accompanied more and more by specific mystical illumination in which the speaker learns not to fear death, learns the significance of spiritual transcendence, and learns to perceive the infinite in the finite. Thus, by exploring themes of past, nature, transcendence and spiritual peace, forces that were present in the poet's personal life, Theodore Roethke widened and enriched the range of his poetry.

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