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GINEVRA PAPARONI

Tutor: Prof.ssa PAOLA LORETO

Coordinatore del dottorato: Prof.ssa MARIA VITTORIA CALVI

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## ABSTRACT (English)

The subject of this dissertation in American Literature and the History of ideas is the influence of Protestant spirituality on Theodore Roethke's sensibility, worldview, and imagination in his early unpublished poems and his work from the thirties and the forties, collected in *Open House* (1941), *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), and *Praise to the End!* (1951). The dissertation aims to demonstrate that, in spite of the apparent breaking point between Roethke's first volume and the subsequent two, the three collections share a fundamental feature: they are rich with religious themes, motifs, and symbols and informed by philosophical notions that Roethke inherited from the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition and elaborated according to his personal sensibility and the spirit of his age. More precisely, in his early poetry Roethke recovers the original existential and psychological meaning of such pre-existing themes, motifs, and symbols but also enriches them thanks to a new awareness deriving from the discoveries of psychoanalysis and the reflections of Protestant existentialist philosophy.

The three chapters of which this dissertation is comprised bring to light the complexity of the relationship between Roethke's early poetry and the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition by focusing on its points of contact with particular branches of such tradition. Chapter one deals with Roethke's early unpublished poems and his poems from the thirties collected in *Open House* in relation to two opposite – albeit related – theological orientations: Calvinist Orthodoxy, dominated by the feeling of human fallenness and guilt, and the Protestant heresies that reclaimed the mystical aspirations at the origin of reformed spirituality, which implicitly asserted the divine nature of the human soul. Such mystical aspirations were inherited by Luther from the disciples of Meister Eckhart, whose view of the relationship between man and God was very similar to that expressed in the poetry Emily Dickinson, one of Roethke's fundamental sources of inspiration in the thirties.

The second chapter, which focuses on the Greenhouse Poems collected in the first section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, explores the poems' philosophical kinship with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Calvinist Theology of Nature, as well as their treatment of Biblical metaphors and symbols: the metaphor of God as a gardener and plants as eschatological symbols of resurrection and regeneration, previously used in seventeenth-century Protestant lyric poetry – especially that of Henry Vaughan –, William Blake's poems which draw inspiration from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem books, and Emily Dickinson's poems which are influenced by Jonathan Edwards' natural typology.

Lastly, the third chapter, which deals with the long narrative poems collected in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!*, is centered on the protagonist's spiritual struggle to overcome his estrangement from God, culminating in the paradoxical reversal from desperation to faith – or regeneration – at the core of the Protestant scheme of salvation described by Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth. This process is analyzed predominantly through the echoes of Scripture in Job, the Psalms, the Song of Songs and the Gospels, as well as the Biblical symbols of desperation and regeneration through which the psychic and spiritual states experienced by the protagonist are evoked; namely, the pit, the deep waters, the wrath of God, the Rose of Sharon, and the Baptism.

The coexistence of all these variegated beliefs and feelings in Roethke's early poetry is made possible by their common philosophical premises, widely analyzed by Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Roethke's early poetry can be more easily understood in light of the reflections of these existentialist heirs and interpreters of the Protestant tradition, who used the language of philosophy to describe the very experiences and feelings at the core of his poetry.

## ABSTRACT (Italiano)

L'oggetto di questa tesi di letteratura anglo-americana e storia delle idee è l'influsso esercitato dalla spiritualità protestante sulla sensibilità, la visione del mondo e l'immaginario di Theodore Roethke, così come si manifestano nelle sue prime poesie inedite e nella sua produzione degli anni trenta e quaranta raccolta in *Open House* (1941), *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) e *Praise to the End!* (1951). Lo scopo della tesi è dimostrare che, nonostante l'apparente discontinuità formale e contenutistica tra il primo volume di Roethke e i suoi due volumi successivi, le tre raccolte presentano un fondamentale punto di contatto: sono ricche di temi, motivi e simboli religiosi e fortemente influenzate da nozioni filosofiche che Roethke ha ereditato dalla tradizione filosofico-letteraria protestante ed elaborato in accordo alla sua sensibilità personale e allo spirito della sua epoca. Più precisamente, nella sua poesia degli anni trenta e quaranta Roethke recupera l'originario significato filosofico ed esistenziale di temi, motivi e simboli preesistenti e nel contempo li arricchisce attraverso la nuova consapevolezza derivante dalle scoperte della psicoanalisi e dalle riflessioni dell'esistenzialismo protestante.

I tre capitoli della tesi mettono in luce la complessità del rapporto tra la prima produzione di Roethke e la tradizione filosofico-letteraria protestante, soffermandosi sulle sue affinità con particolari rami di tale tradizione. Il primo capitolo prende in esame le prime poesie inedite di Roethke e le sue poesie degli anni trenta raccolte in *Open House* in relazione a due opposti, ma imparentati, orientamenti teologici: l'ortodossia calvinista, dominata dal sentimento della condizione caduta e della colpa umane, e le eresie protestanti che hanno recuperato le aspirazioni mistiche all'origine della spiritualità riformata, asserendo implicitamente la natura divina dell'anima umana. Tali aspirazioni mistiche sono state ereditate da Lutero attraverso i discepoli di Meister Eckhart, la cui visione del rapporto tra essere umano e

Dio si avvicinava molto a quella espressa dalla poesia di Emily Dickinson, una delle principali fonti di ispirazione di Roethke negli anni trenta.

Il secondo capitolo, sulle poesie della serra raccolte nella prima sezione di *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, esplora la loro affinità filosofica con la teologia calvinista della natura del diciassettesimo e del diciottesimo secolo. Si sofferma inoltre sull'uso che vi si fa di metafore e simboli di origine biblica: la metafora di Dio come giardiniere e le piante come simboli escatologici di resurrezione e rigenerazione, precedentemente impiegati nella poesia lirica protestante del diciassettesimo secolo – specialmente quella di Henry Vaughan –, nelle poesie di William Blake che traggono ispirazione dai libri di emblemi del sedicesimo e diciassettesimo secolo e nelle poesie di Emily Dickinson che risentono dell'influsso della tipologia naturale di Jonathan Edwards.

Infine il terzo capitolo, concernente i poemetti narrativi raccolti in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* e *Praise to the End!*, si concentra sulla lotta spirituale compiuta dal loro protagonista per superare la propria alienazione da Dio, lotta culminante nel paradossale rovesciamento della disperazione in fede – o rigenerazione – al cuore dello schema di salvezza descritto da Lutero, Søren Kierkegaard e Karl Barth. Tale processo è principalmente analizzato attraverso gli echi del Libro di Giobbe, dei Salmi, dei Cantici, dei Vangeli e i simboli biblici di disperazione e rigenerazione attraverso cui gli stati psichici e spirituali esperiti dal protagonista vengono evocati: la fossa, le acque profonde, l'ira di Dio, la rosa di Sharon, il battesimo.

La compresenza nella poesia di Roethke degli anni trenta e quaranta di concezioni e sentimenti così variegati è resa possibile dalle loro comuni premesse filosofiche, ampiamente analizzate da Søren Kierkegaard e Paul Tillich nel diciannovesimo e nel ventesimo secolo. La prima produzione di Roethke può essere compresa più facilmente alla luce delle riflessioni di questi eredi e interpreti esistenzialisti della tradizione protestante, che hanno trattato con il linguaggio della filosofia le stesse esperienze e gli stessi sentimenti al cuore della sua poesia.

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## **INTRODUCTION: Theodore Roethke and the Protestant Tradition**

### **Object and Aims**

On the occasion of the posthumous publication of the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” in *The Far Field*, in 1964, Roethke’s readers were faced with something very different from his well-known work from the forties. A poet who had made divine presence and activity in nature the main subject of his most popular poetry had finally produced religious meditations that – as Peter Balakian later pointed out – expressed the orthodox idea of an infinitely transcendent God and went as far as to echo Edward Taylor’s “Huswifery” (Balakian 1989: 13, 158). The work of Edward Taylor, a Puritan minister and metaphysical poet, had been discovered twenty-seven years before in the archives of Yale University by Thomas H. Johnson and had come to stand for the most representative poetic expression of early American religious culture.

In actuality, it was not the first time that Roethke’s poetry had established dialogue with the vast literary-philosophical Protestant tradition, for which Taylor was a spokesman. Several scholars have in fact highlighted the influence which other members of this tradition had on some of his previous works. Louis Martz’s and Peter Balakian’s analysis of the religious implications of Roethke’s love poems from the fifties brings to light their similarities and differences with those by John Donne. Moreover, Karl Malkoff’s influential study finds seventeenth-century English Metaphysical poetry to be one of the main sources of inspiration of Roethke’s earliest poems, mostly published in the thirties (Martz 1962: 31; Balakian 1989: 96, 101-102; Malkoff 1966: 19). Nevertheless, until now, scholars have failed to notice that, paradoxically, in Roethke’s corpus, it is his nature poetry from the forties which reveals the deepest philosophical and imaginative kinship with the English and American pre-Romantic religious tradition. This gap in the previously produced criticism about Roethke’s work do not simply make

our knowledge of its relationship with Protestantism incomplete, but also leads us to undervalue its actual extent. It is thus necessary, in order to fill that gap, to take into exam Roethke's early production, focusing on two fundamental aspects. On one hand I will show how some religious notions and images introduced by Roethke's "metaphysical" poetry of the thirties which have not yet been exhaustively analyzed are further developed by the poet in his nature poetry of the forties. On the other hand I will analyze the latter in relation to the Calvinist theology of nature and, more generally, nature poetry produced by English and American poets belonging to the Protestant tradition.

The aim of the present study in Literature and the History of ideas is thus to bring to light the influence of Protestant spirituality on Roethke's sensibility, worldview, and imagination, as they find expression in his work from the thirties and the forties, mainly collected in *Open House* (1941), *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) and *Praise to the End!* (1951). Roethke's indebtedness toward the Protestant tradition is extremely complex and articulated, as he deals with notions deriving from different "orthodox" and "heretical" orientations and, at the same time, develops them according to his twentieth-century cultural heritage and his personal temperament. Nevertheless, it is possible to find significant elements of thematic and imaginative continuity as well as a coherent evolution in his first three collections of poems. Roethke does not simply rely on fundamental philosophical concepts at the core of reformed thought; he also consciously expresses them through religious motifs and symbols of fallenness and regeneration that English and American authors of the Protestant culture inherited from the Bible and the typological tradition, and widely exploited.

As I shall demonstrate, the aforementioned concepts, motifs, and symbols reacquire their original existential and psychological meaning in Roethke's work from the thirties and forties, and are, at the same time, enriched by being considered in light of modern philosophy and psychology. This is particularly true of the "almost Calvinistic sense of guilt and sin" that – as Randall Stiffler points out in *Theodore Roethke: the Poet and his Critics* (1986) – Roethke exhibits "in some of his earliest poems" (Stiffler 1986: 2).

As a matter of fact, Roethke lived in an age when the psychological insights at the core of Protestant thought were being analyzed through the instruments of psychoanalysis, and his work reflects this new awareness. As Elisa New writes, in Lowell's poetry "believing 'art a way to get well,' is the old rock pile of Christian exercise that called neurosis sin, and cure redemption" (New 2009: 15-16). Likewise, in Roethke's work psychosis and healing respectively also represent the most extreme developments of the fallen condition and potential final salvation, while poetry becomes an instrument with which to explore and elaborate past traumas.

These aspects of Roethke's poetry are an outcome of the religious culture at the origin of American History that often similarly affected the work of American poets. They are thus better understood if inserted into a wider conceptual and historical framework. Following a path previously blazed by Yvor Winters, Elisa New scales down the prominence of Emerson's poetics in her study entitled *The Regenerate Lyric* (1993) and underscores the influence of seventeenth-century religious sensibility and thought on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American lyric poetry. Contrary to Hyatt Waggoner's and Roy Harvey Pearce's widely shared thesis that the temperament of American poetry is essentially Emersonian, and Harold Bloom's belief that Emersonianism in general is the "American religion [...] canonized as American literature," New traces back several fundamental features of American poetry to the Calvinist religious worldview that the Romantics officially rejected (Bloom 1985: 99).

According to New, "in the decades after the 'Divinity School Address' those intractable assumptions that the theologian Jonathan Edwards shared with the poet Edward Taylor pass out of the care of seminarians and into the hands of poets." Authors like Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Lowell, and Frost give voice, in their poetry, to notions and feelings of Calvinist origins that Emerson had dismissed, such as fallenness, sin, idolatry, dread, doom, atonement, purity, incarnation, God's unnameability, awe, the Fortunate Fall, and most of all, regeneracy. In other words, the years between the Civil War and World War II saw the birth and the proliferation of a poetic tradition representing "the abandonment of Emerson's poetics by the very poets he

saw as his culture's new priests." In fact, "even as these poets try out the Emersonian 'power' in the long poems we have long called major, they interrogate that power in poems we neglect." New's analysis of Whitman's "The Sleepers" – a long poem which relies heavily on notions such as Adamic shame and Christ's atonement, as well as the Pauline taxonomy of the saved and the damned – reveals the complex relationship with Emersonianism in *Leaves of Grass*. Most of all it reveals that "the liberty the speaker of 'Song of Myself' enjoys is not originary but regenerate, wrested out of Whitman's engagement with an older law. Under the auspices of that law, 'Song of Myself' can be born." More generally, "it is 'regeneracy' rather than 'originality' [...] the American poet's modus operandi and narrative mandate" (New 2009: 3, 5-7).

As influential studies (some of which by the aforementioned scholars) have shown, Theodore Roethke's poetry – or at least his poetry collected in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* – owes much to the Romantic tradition. According to Waggoner, Roethke was an heir of Emerson, "a Transcendental poet, a nature poet, and a poet of the transcendent self" (Waggoner 1984: 567). Bloom, who considers *The Lost Son and Other Poems* Roethke's most original achievement, defines Whitman and Wordsworth the "true founders of the tradition that chose Roethke, at his rare best, as its own" (Bloom 1988: 1, 5). Jay Parini – another supporter of the Emersonian vein of American literature – also considers Roethke as a Romantic poet, stressing "the American quality of his Romanticism with Emerson and Whitman as primary ancestors" (Parini 1979: 3).

Granted that Roethke was significantly indebted to the English and the American Romantics, it is interesting to notice how New's theses provide us with useful cues to grasp previously neglected or overlooked nuances of his work from the thirties and the forties. In the thirties, before writing his most popular "Romantic" works, Roethke produced (and would later produce again) much published and unpublished poetry centered on the need to overcome his melancholy and satisfy his longing for fullness through a spiritual union with a transcendent and apparently unreachable deity. In

these poems, partially collected in *Open House*, the notions of guilt, fallenness, and the desire for Grace play a crucial role. Moreover, in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* – both significantly imbued with a panentheist worldview – the poet’s problematic interaction with the divine through a fallen and often obscure nature meant as an extension of God is coeval with his interaction with an incommensurable deity extending beyond nature itself, and symbolically acquiring the features of a personal God. In Roethke’s second and third collection, the aforementioned notions at the core of the Protestant worldview re-emerge, often treated through Biblical symbols and motifs, previously employed by an array of authors of the Protestant tradition, including Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Henry Vaughan, and William Blake. Finally, the poet’s guilt, meant primarily as a feeling of inadequacy deriving from his estrangement from God – and, consequently, from His creation – is presented as something that can be healed only through regeneration, and the feeling of being the recipient of God’s love.

The point of departure of my research are the theses illustrated by three critical studies analyzing the philosophical and/or theological worldview underlying Roethke’s work in light of the reflections of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers. Nathan Scott’s *The Wild Prayer of Longing* (1971), Norman Chaney’s *Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wonder* (1981), and Lynn Ross-Bryant’s *Theodore Roethke: Poetry of the Earth, Poet of the Spirit* (1981) all interpret Roethke’s poetry through the theoretical instruments provided by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists whose mindset they consider to be akin to the poet’s, such as Søren Kierkegaard, Conrad Bonifazi, Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Paul Tillich, Sam Keen, and Carl Jung. I share with Scott, Chaney, and Ross-Bryant the fundamental assumption that in Roethke’s poetry of the forties, nature is conceived as rooted in God, or the Being, thus as a context of interaction with the divine, in a perspective that must not be misunderstood as pantheist. As Norman Chaney writes, “the religious pathos that governs Roethke’s work may be described in philosophical terms as ‘panentheism’” (Chaney 1981: 3). The term “panentheism” was coined in the eighteenth

century by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause to indicate a metaphysical view which conciliated aspects of theism and pantheism. Whereas theism considers God as completely separate from the world and pantheism identifies Him with the world itself, panentheism sees the deity as both immanent and transcendent. In other words, everything is in God and, at the same time, God transcends everything – both individual beings and the universe – infinitely.

Moreover, like Chaney, I believe that there is a deep kinship between Roethke's worldview and the philosophies of existence developed by some Christian thinkers. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that this kinship is essentially a consequence of the strong influence exerted on Roethke's sensibility by the Protestant thought that so significantly affected American culture and informed much of American literature. In fact, the main objects of interest and analysis of Christian Existentialism coincide with several fundamental preoccupations of Reformed Theology: ancestral feelings and experiences which find a narrative transposition in the myth of the Fall and a theological formulation in the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin attempts to provide an explanation of the condition of finitude, precariousness as well as spiritual incompleteness and misery lived by each human being who, in the language of Existentialism, finds himself "thrown into the world." According to the doctrine, such condition is the consequence of the loss of an original union with God that occurred in occasion of the Fall, which twentieth-century Existentialist philosophy interpret as a symbol of the entry into existence. Crucial to both Protestant and Christian-Existentialist sensibility is also the feeling of anxiety derived from the awareness of one's predicament and the incertitude that one day its most painful outcomes will be overcome by establishing a new harmonious and meaningful relationship with God, thanks to the gratuitous infusion of His love or Grace. Significantly, Luther's belief that salvation can be achieved only once one's fallenness has been thoroughly endured shaped the Protestant scheme of salvation as well as Kierkegaard's conception of conversion as an outcome of desperation and Barth's theology of crisis (Pareyson 1950: 119; Loreto 1999: 51-52).

Until now, no one has focused on the influence of a specific Judeo-Christian religion on Roethke's early poetry. While Balakian generically acknowledges "Roethke's idiosyncratic but deep commitment to a Judeo-Christian tradition," Scott explicitly stresses his "independence from any established tradition of religious belief," and Chaney writes that "he was not self-consciously a religious poet" who was "working within a given tradition" (Balakian 1989: 13; Scott 1971: 117; Chaney 1981: ix, 3). Bryant generically assimilates him to that "current running through the Judeo-Christian heritage" that "emphasizes the goodness of creation and its value in itself," also hastening to specify that "this is not to say that Roethke is part of this tradition" (Bryant 1981: 21). More simply, according to her, his understanding of the world presents significant points of contact with the thought of some religious thinkers, which can be used as an instrument to better understand his poetry. Neil Bowers – who read Roethke's work in relation to the Western mystical tradition in *Theodore Roethke: The Journey from I to Otherwise* (1982) – holds that the main difficulty faced by a critic interested in Roethke's mysticism is "dealing with the mystical elements in his poetry without bringing in all the religious elements conventionally associated to mysticism." According to him, the fact that Roethke found in the work of mystics possible explanations to psychic states that he had previously experienced does not make him "a religious man" (Bowers 1982: 13). I, however, believe that, although it was Roethke's personal experiences and readings, more so than the Lutheran-Presbyterian education that he received, which led him to develop a "Protestant sensibility," the prominence of such sensibility is undeniable and has emerged clearly in his early work.

Another element of originality in my research lies in the prominence it affords to Roethke's first collection. According to a number of scholars – especially those from whom I drew inspiration – *Open House* plays a minor role in Roethke's corpus. This opinion leads Scott and Cheney to almost entirely neglect Roethke's first volume in their studies while Ross-Bryant chooses not to deal with it at all. She justifies this choice by asserting that the poems from *Open House* are completely "overshadowed" by the subsequent two collections, with which Roethke "discovered the form and approach

through which he would write his best poetry.” Compared to them, “*Open House* seems an experiment, a tentative expression” (Ross-Bryant 1981: 5). Although many of the poems from *Open House* are, undoubtedly, theoretically and formally immature in comparison to Roethke’s later poems, reading them still offers significant advantages. The poems collected in Roethke’s first collection – as well as other early unpublished poems – for the first time present conceptions and motifs which reveal the poet’s philosophical temperament and religious sensibility. Discovering and analyzing them not only allows for the collection of useful information surrounding Roethke’s original cultural background; it provides us with premises that are extremely useful in understanding Roethke’s later work from a perspective of continuity and evolution.

### **Biographical Context**

Seeing as Roethke’s first three volumes of poems take significant inspiration from his personal experiences, it would be worth considering some basic biographical data. Theodore’s grandfather, Wilhelm Roethke – a former head forester on the estate of Prince Bismarck’s sister – moved to the United States from his native Prussia in 1872 with his wife and three sons when Theodore’s father, Otto, was still a baby. They settled in Saginaw, Michigan, where they built the largest greenhouse in the United States, composed of several glass buildings extending over one quarter of a million square feet. When Otto and his older brother Charles took over the greenhouse Charles managed the business, while Otto took care of the flowers, for which he had a real passion. Otto’s specialties included orchids and roses and, in addition to growing and selling them to customers, he would experiment with creating hybrid specimens that he kept for himself.

The Roethke family – Theodore, his parents, and his younger sister June – lived in front of the greenhouse. It was there and in the surrounding woods that Theodore spent his lonely but emotionally intense childhood, in admiration and fear of his father, a stern man who expressed his hidden



sensitivity through his work. Despite the business' success, the relationship between Otto and Charles deteriorated over time. In 1922, after becoming aware of Charles' countless acts of fraud, Otto finally resolved to sell his share of the greenhouse to him. Shortly after, the company began to fail, and in February 1923 Charles committed suicide. Three months later Otto died of cancer and Theodore's childhood world vanished once and for all. It is impossible to know whether these abrupt and painful changes provoked the manic-depressive psychosis the young poet suffered throughout his life. Still, the frequent presence of the father figure in poems concerning Roethke's spiritual malaise reveals his belief in a connection between the two.

The greenhouse, his florist father, the young poet's ambivalent relationship with him, and his father's premature death, as well as Roethke's mental illness, were destined to become the main subjects of his most popular poetry. The Greenhouse Poems and the long narrative poems collected in Roethke's second and third collections form two sequences which describe the life of the poet before and after his father's death. The Greenhouse Poems recount a number of memories from Roethke's childhood in the greenhouse, in which his father retrospectively acquires godlike, almost mythic, stature, and a symbolical value. Accordingly, the poet's complex relationship with him is charged with deep religious, philosophical, and psychological implications. The narratives, on the other hand, recount the poet's inner struggle with the crises that would afflict him periodically after his father's death. He attempted to overcome these crises through a reconciliation with the memory of his father, a feat which coincided with his personal attempt to establish a deep communion with God and his creation.

In *The American Moment* (1977), Geoffrey Thurley writes that the main weakness of Roethke's narratives lies in the fact that they cannot be understood without knowing the poet's biography. Yet, such criticism is undeserved. While inspired by his life, Roethke's poems can stand perfectly on their own. Not only do they provide the reader with the necessary information to understand them; the personal experiences they describe are also charged with symbolical and universal meanings. As Roethke wrote in

1953, the protagonist of the narratives is “not ‘I’ personally, but all haunted and harried men” (Roethke 2001: 23).

The biographical nature of Roethke’s poetry, as well as its focus on the poet’s spiritual sufferings, led Robert Phillips to liken him to other contemporary poets like Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath in *The Confessional Poets* (1973). In *Theodore Roethke’s Far Fields* (1989) Peter Balakian defines the Roethke of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* “confessionally Freudian in a manner that would become important to” the aforementioned poets, although “the psychic identity of his persona, the lost son, is based predominantly on Jungian psychology.” In fact, “unlike his modernist predecessors he did not try to transform his personal sufferings into a medium that was impersonally mythic or aesthetically self contained.” Whereas Eliot, Crane, and Stevens never reveal the origins and the private details of their sufferings, Roethke explicitly writes about particular events of his life and his personal inner torments. At the same time, like Lowell and Ginsberg, he is “concerned with the mythic shape of his family past and the archetypal and cultural significance of that past” (Balakian 1989: 3-5). Generally speaking, the biographical and the mythic/archetypal dimension perfectly coexist and harmoniously intertwine in Roethke’s work, allowing the reader to grasp its multiple levels of meaning: literal and symbolical, psychological and philosophical, personal and universal.

### **State of the Art**

In 1963, the year of Roethke’s death, Ralph J. Mills wrote that “we will be defeated in the endeavor to read his poetry honestly if we settle for a particular category in which to lodge him and so avoid further thought. Roethke needs first to be seen through his own work” (Mills 1963: 7). Although most scholars acknowledged the essentially eclectic nature of Roethke’s work, some of them focused on its points of contact with particular literary traditions and/or of philosophical trends, thus bringing to light

different and sometimes contradictory aspects which coexist within it. Some studies analyze Roethke's poetry in relation to his literary readings, while others interpret it in light of the reflections of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers he was familiar with or with whom he simply shared a similar conception of the world. In this subchapter I will provide a short excursus of both, in which I explain to what extent my theses resemble or differ from those expressed in these studies.

In his article entitled "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke" (1950), Kenneth Burke asserts that the vision of existence expressed in the *Greenhouse Poems* is akin to the one conveyed in Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences," a vision that shapes the "somewhat mystic *ars poetica* of so many contemporary poets" (Burke 1950: 83). Nonetheless, Burke writes, although the young protagonist of the *Greenhouse Poems* obscurely senses the correspondences pervading reality – especially those between the natural and human world – he is still unable to clearly grasp and express them.

In *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (1976), Jenijoy La Belle maintains that Roethke did not adhere to any particular literary tradition but often chose to creatively echo or, more rarely, quote the work of individual authors whom he admired. Nevertheless, she believes that William Wordsworth was the author with which Roethke felt the deepest kinship. Although Parini acknowledges the influence of English Romanticism on Roethke's work (especially Wordsworth's and Blake's), in his study meaningfully entitled *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (1979), he essentially presents Roethke as an heir of Emerson and Whitman.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, in the second chapter of *Theodore Roethke* (1966), Karl Malkoff stresses the influence of metaphysical and neo-metaphysical poets on Roethke's first collection, later focusing on the originality of his subsequent works. According to Malkoff, the authors who most influenced Roethke at the very beginning of his career were his contemporaries W. H. Auden, Eleanor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan (some of whom were close friends of his) as well as the metaphysical poets John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. In fact, "like Donne" Roethke was "torn between flesh and spirit; like Herbert, he was tormented

by the near impossibility of faith; like Vaughan, he sought the eternal in the temporal” (Malkoff 1966: 19). In his study, *Theodore Roethke’s Dynamic Vision* (1974), which focuses on the techniques and strategies through which Roethke represented dynamism in his poetry, Blessing highlighted the poet’s particular appreciation of Vaughan’s work and, most of all, Vaughan’s capability to convey divine activity in nature as pure motion and energy.

In the third and fourth chapters of his study, Malkoff provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of Roethke’s work from the forties. According to him, particularly in the narratives, “using a framework provided by Freud and Jung” (the theories of the latter he knew through Maud Bodkin’s *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*), the poet “presented the development of the individual not by means of rational discourse, but in terms of imagery and symbolism of the natural world, of the world of myth and legend, and the prerational consciousness from which it springs.” Malkoff specifies that “Roethke is probably not consciously following Freud’s stages of development; but his imagery, like Freud’s stages, comes from the observation of the universal aspects of existence” (Malkoff 1966: 9-10, 59, 78). While it would seem that at times Malkoff uses Roethke’s work to illustrate Freudian theories of the psychic and sexual development of children, phase by phase, rather than employing Freud in order to better understand Roethke, his study is rich with precious and useful insight.

As previously explained, Nathan Scott, Norman Chaney, Lynn Ross-Bryant, and Neil Bowers also focus on the theoretical framework underlying Roethke’s work, more so than on his literary heritage. Although neither regards Roethke as a systematic thinker, they share the opinion that much of his insight is likely to be explained through the reflections of philosophers and theologians some of whom were objects of interest for him at different points in his life.

In *The Wild Prayer of Longing*, Nathan Scott assimilates Roethke’s worldview to that of thinkers such as Conrad Bonifazi, Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Jung. According to Scott, far from being animistic or panpsychist, Roethke’s vision is essentially sacramental. When he looks at the world surrounding him he suspends what

Heidegger calls “calculative” reason, and is able to feel “simple enchantment before the irrevocability whereby the things and creatures of this world are what they are.” At the same time, he senses that everything is “an outward and visible expression of something *else*.” At the core of Roethke’s poetry lies the “lively intuition that both the human and the nonhuman modes of existence are animated and empowered by some primal reality, which may be denominated simply as Being itself” and whose “splendid fecundity and holiness” is reflected by all created things. This intuition dictates the contemplative quality of Roethke’s poetry and engenders the “humble *pietas*,” the attitude of “praise and thanksgiving” that it expresses. In fact “there is rarely to be found in the literature of our period a body of poetry so predominantly psalmic and doxological as Roethke’s” (Scott 1971: 77, 81, 85, 87).

Scott stresses the feeling of passive and naïve wonder in front of sheer reality which characterizes Roethke’s poetry, a feeling that – as Tony Tanner’s *The Reign of Wonder* (1965) teaches us – is typical of American literary sensibility. In his investigation of Roethke’s religious vision entitled *Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wonder*, Norman Chaney makes reference to Turner’s thesis as well and states that “like Emerson, Roethke was what” the American scholar “called the poet of wonder, for whom the cultivation of the innocent eye [...] is the means of regaining a childlike appreciation of ‘the miraculous as well as the gratuitousness of the world around us.’” In order to demonstrate that “Roethke’s poetry is systematically based on an attitude of wonder” Chaney reads it in light of the works of thinkers “who attempted to elaborate these attitudes into general philosophies of existence,” including Paul Tillich’s “Nature and Sacrament,” Conrad Bonifazi’s *A Theology of Things*, and Sam Keen’s *Apology for Wonder*. Like Scott, Chaney believes that Roethke’s poetry revolves around the “apprehension and celebration of the Divine Ground of all created life,” which is at the source of the “mystic kinship of man and nature” (Chaney 1981: x, 1, 3-4). Referring to John Wain’s article “Theodore Roethke” (1964) and Wain’s assertion that Roethke is an evangelical writer whose poetry revolves around the question “what shall I do to be saved?”, Chaney deals with Roethke’s apparent answer to the question.

This answer is reminiscent of the one “that might have been given by St. Francis of Assisi or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: love the earth with all your heart as the dwelling-space of God” (Wain 1964: 324; Chaney 1981: ix-x).

Lynn Ross-Bryant’s reading of Roethke’s poetry in *Theodore Roethke: Poetry of the Earth, Poet of the Spirit* rests largely on the theses expressed by Martin Buber in *I and Thou*. Ross-Bryant reveals the points of convergence between the three main phases of Roethke’s work and the three stages of Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. As he undergoes these three steps a human being gradually establishes a meaningful relation with “the eternal Thou” by learning to correctly relate to its manifestations: nature, other human beings, and spiritual beings. The experiences and spiritual states described in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* are typical of the first stage. The two collections reveal how the poet gradually connects to the primordial vitality at the root of each individual being by aligning himself to its rhythm, as he perceives it in nature. During this process he escapes the danger presented by the temptation – or “death urge” – to dissolve in such vitality and instead succeeds in interacting with it harmoniously through the definite beings it underlies, all the while preserving his own identity.

In his study on Roethke’s mysticism, Neil Bowers derives Roethke’s fundamental philosophical assumptions and spiritual aspirations from the Western mystical tradition that he studied throughout his life starting from the late thirties and which influenced his poetry from beginning to end. The book demonstrates that Roethke’s studies in mystical literature were both extensive and regular, and he was familiar with the thoughts of mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Saint Francis, Saint Theresa, Jakob Böhme, and Evelyn Underhill, but it is essentially the work of the latter which provides us with the most useful instruments to explain the mystical aspects of his poetry. According to Bowers, the five stages of “the Mystic Way” that Underhill describes in *Mysticism* give “a good idea of the general direction in which the mystic travels and should therefore be of considerable use to us as landmarks in our study of Roethke’s mystic quest” (Bowers 1982: 27-28).

In his study, Bowers dedicates much attention to the relation between Roethke’s mental illness and his mysticism. According to him, the poet

identified his manic crisis with mystical moments when he had access to a higher level of reality, which he later successfully described in his poetry. Roethke saw his manic depression as a fundamental source of poetic inspiration and, as a consequence, “he took such chances by courting his illness, virtually wishing it upon himself” (Bowers 1982: 97).

Three additional studies provided me with interesting cues about Roethke’s sensibility and imagination, despite not focusing on the relationship between his work and a particular literary or philosophical tradition. They are: L. M. Lewandowska’s “The Words of their Roaring: Roethke’s Use of the Psalms of David” (1980), George Wolff’s *Theodore Roethke* (1986), and Rosemary Sullivan’s *Theodore Roethke: the Garden Master* (1975).

Lewandowska’s article on the stylistic and imaginative influence of the Psalms of David on Roethke’s narratives served as a useful point of departure in my search for Biblical motifs and symbols in his poetry. These symbols, deriving from the Psalms, the Book of Job, the Gospels, and the Song of Songs, can be detected in each of his first three collections of poems.

George Wolff’s individuation of the “inherited curse” motif in *Open House* and his identification of this curse with the mental illness that afflicted the poet is a useful prospect that merits further exploration. The conception of illness implied by this identification does not simply constitute a valid counterpart to Bower’s interpretation of Roethke’s manic depression as a privileged access to the mystical experience. If examined in depth and taken into consideration while reading his poems, it confirms the aforementioned relation between the fallen condition and psychosis in Roethke’s work.

Like other scholars who were inspired by what Roethke himself suggested in 1950 in “Open Letter,”<sup>1</sup> Wolff stresses the symbolical nature and godlike stature of the figure of the father-gardener in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. According to Wolff, when Roethke wrote his second collection of poems, he discovered that “he could manage his emotions well enough [...] if he tempered them a bit by intellectualizing them.” He thus “gradually

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<sup>1</sup> Text originally published in *Mid-Century American Poets*, edited by John Ciardi (New York, Twayne, 1950).

transformed the loss, anger, and guilt stemming from his father's death into the kind of search for God that many stricken people undertake." What the poet suffers in the narratives is "the state of lostness, of being cut off from his father, both his earthly father" – from whom he showed to be already alienated in the *Greenhouse Poems* – "and God" (Wolff 1986: 20, 35, 47). This analysis of the superposition of the poet's relationship with his father (or his memory) and his relationship with God is undoubtedly accurate, but I believe it would be wrong to define it as an abstract "intellectualization" or a "sublimation" meant to make the issues at hand more bearable emotionally. Rather, it is the result of the poet's brave exploration and examination of his condition of radical estrangement from his father, God, and his world, and his consequent discovery that these all spring from the same source. As we will see, the investigation of the philosophical and psychological sources of these two motifs – the "inherited curse" and the superposition between the poet's father and God – will reveal that they are deeply rooted in Roethke's Protestant sensibility. Moreover, far from being contained in a single collection, they prove to be constantly recurring motifs in each of the three volumes dealt with in the present study.

Finally, Rosemary Sullivan's insistence on the most disturbing aspects of the *Greenhouse* and the inner turmoil of the young poet who inhabits it brings to light aspects that were regularly overlooked by scholars who considered Roethke's representation of childhood to be idealized. This last point is of particular importance.

Despite agreeing with Scott's basic premises, Chaney and Ross-Bryant contradict his opinion that Roethke did not "have any taste for eschatological abstractions from the world" (Scott 1971: 113). Chaney in particular highlights the "strongly eschatological cast of Roethke's work." Nevertheless, all the three hold the opinion that, in Roethke's *Greenhouse Poems* and narratives, the "salvation" of their autobiographical protagonist – whether meant as simply existential or eternal – depends on his willingness to return to his infancy in order to remember and re-experience the way he originally related to nature. According to Scott and Chaney, in his narratives the poet tries to repossess the freshness of the infantile perception described in the



Greenhouse Poems and the feeling of wonder that animated him as a child. Scott also sees the poet's quest as an attempt to recover his original ability to grasp the deep correspondences existing "between the human and the non human modes of being." Moreover, Chaney stresses the poet's need to reacquire his original view of nature as a place where, in spite of the presence of death, life finally prospers; that "sense of the miraculous way in which the world triumphs over the power of nothingness" (Scott 1971: 88-89; Chaney 1981: 29). In contrast, according to Ross-Bryant, the poet's return to his infancy is a necessary "stage [...] he must go beyond." He must "re-experience the world as a child" for two reasons: in order to enjoy his original "participation to the primeval power [...] that derives from the basic unity and indestructibility of the livingness of creation," as well as to accept those aspects of nature – notably death – that, in his infancy, he rejected, and come to terms with the conflicts of existence (Ross-Bryant 1981: 13, 25-26).

In my opinion, this last aspect – the young poet's anxiety when faced with the most troubling sides of nature – plays a fundamental role in the Greenhouse Poems. The child does not simply see nature as a place of proliferation of life. His attention is also attracted by the manifestations of evil or "privation" pervading it. But this is not the only disturbing element in his relationship with nature. Contrarily to Ross-Bryant and Chaney, I believe that, instead of participating in the primeval power of nature, the young poet is already estranged from it, and such estrangement is mirrored by the way he perceives it in the Greenhouse Poems. Most of the time – with the exception of two fleeting moments of Grace –, far from being transparent symbols, natural creatures appear as obscure and ambiguous entities to him. In fact, Roethke's personal acknowledgement – which already emerges in *Open House* – that the loss of innocence or the "personal fall" is a process starting immediately after birth goes hand in hand with the impossibility to express an Edenic conception of the relationship between children and nature. All this must be kept in mind in order to better understand the meaning of the quest undertaken by the protagonist of the narratives. What he longs for is not the recovery of his childhood condition but the

achievement of a new condition – through regeneration – in which a real, deep communion with God’s creation is experienced for the first time.

In light of the afore-highlighted features of the poems from *Open House* and the Greenhouse Poems it is possible to detect a recurring aspect in the conception of the human being’s relationship with God and His creation expressed in Roethke’s work. As we have seen, according to Balakian, what makes the meditations composing the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” Roethke’s most orthodox poems is the radical dualism they express – that sense of abyssal distance from God that makes the poet cry in “The Marrow”:

Godhead above my God, are you there still?  
To sleep is all my life. In sleep's half-death,  
My body alters, altering the soul  
That once could melt the dark with its small breath.  
Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day:  
From me to Thee’s a long and terrible way. (Roethke 1991: 238)

At the same time, the scholar insightfully acknowledges that the “sense of otherness” or “pre-Romantic sense of the separateness that exists between man and God [...]” presented in the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” is actually “evident at various points in various forms throughout Roethke’s poetry” (Balakian 1989: 13). While in the poems of *Open House*, like in the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical,” this sense emerges as a result of God’s transcendence, it persists in a different form in the nature poems of the forties, where both God and the nature He permeates are primarily perceived as alien and inscrutable. Each of these compositions revolves around the distance between the subject and God, whether He is conceived as immanent or transcendent, and the desire to overcome it.

Like many American poets, Roethke was unavoidably faced with the implications of the marked contradiction at the core of Emerson’s thought, which Elisa New explicates in *The Regenerate Lyric*. The hope that Emerson expresses in *Nature* with the question “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” reveals, through its very formulation, the

impossibility of its fulfillment. The phrase “original relation” is in itself an oxymoron inasmuch as originality precedes any kind of relation and relation implies the death of originality. “The original relation is ironically almost indistinguishable from the original sin it would annul,” since “a breach against a prior state, sin is constitutionally relational” (New 2009: 19):

Theologically speaking, relation is the condition of our dividedness from God. Temporarily speaking, relation distinguishes past from present and so gives us history, [...]. Linguistically, relation defies our capability to name. The etiology of all the three is a dividedness, a scarcity for the original, yearning for reparation. (New 2009: 19-20)

After all, the “theological fiat that made desire (a longing for union) and language (a longing for knowing) the twinned signs of our distance from what was” is the Fall, meant as a “breach from unity” and the loss of originality (New 2009: 17).

Incontestably, the problem of “original relation,” which in our time was “detheologized” by “its best interpreter,” Martin Heidegger, does not begin with Emerson. “Long the property of mystics, the problem of the ‘original relation’ finds its place in the more mystical interstices of Puritan literature, understood by no one better than Edward Taylor,” whose *Preparatory Meditations* “eschewing originality, [...] strike for the sense of renewal – a *regeneracy* – by which the lyric keeps faith with the Fall” (New 2009: 18, 20). In other words, far from erasing the tension at the core of American religious spirituality, Emerson renews it by positing the unreachable ideal of its extinguishment. ...Unreachable, if not through the renewal or regeneracy sought by Taylor.

In the fifties, Roethke once again directly and indirectly dealt with the relationship between the subject and God in his philosophic meditations on love and death collected in *The Waking* (1953) and *Words for the Wind* (1958), notably “Four for Sir John Davies,” the love poems, and the “mask monologues” entitled “The Dying Man” and “Meditations of an Old Woman.” While in the latter the poetic voice essentially identifies the divine it broods

over as a sacramental nature, the other compositions express a more intangible idea of God or “the Absolute,” like in the poems from *Open House*. These two different attitudes will emerge more distinctly in the “North American Sequence” and the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” respectively, both collected in *The Far Field*, Roethke’s most eclectic volume in terms of form and content. Interestingly, the distance between the subject and a deified nature is significantly scaled down in the “North American Sequence,” which describes – with Whitman’s long unmetered line – the poet’s growth into maturity and progressive acceptance of death through landscapes symbolizing his spiritual and mental states. According to Elisa New, “Song of Myself” is the result of its author’s previous “regeneration.” The same could be stated about the “North American Sequence.” Still, the presence of the “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” in the same volume including the “North American Sequence” testifies that the tension between the self and God, and the mystical aspiration which it engenders, are never entirely overcome in Roethke’s poetry; rather, they constitute two of its most persistent propulsive elements.

## **Work Plan**

Based on the illustrated assumptions regarding the long-standing influence of the Protestant literary-philosophical culture on Roethke’s work, the following pages will analyze in detail the points of convergence between the poet’s first three volumes and the specific ramifications of this culture.

Chapter one, which deals with Roethke’s published and unpublished poems from the thirties, will focus on three fundamental aspects. Firstly, it will investigate the influence exerted on Roethke’s early poetry by the centuries-long Protestant heretical mystical tradition through the work of its heir, Emily Dickinson. Seeing as this tradition essentially stressed the mystical aspects of Luther’s thought, inherited by the reformer from the disciples of Meister Eckhart, Roethke’s early mysticism will be analyzed through Eckhart’s main philosophical assumptions. Secondly, the chapter

will provide a detailed analysis of the meaning that the concept of guilt – stressed by Calvinist Orthodoxy, opposed by Protestant mystics and rejected by Dickinson – acquires in Roethke’s early poetry, ultimately integrating in the poet’s overall worldview. Such analysis will be supported by Kierkegaard’s and Tillich’s reflections about the notions of guilt and the fallen condition. Finally, particular attention will be dedicated to Roethke’s conception of the “personal Fall” and its psychological and philosophical implications.

Chapter two will focus on the philosophical view underlying the Greenhouse Poems collected in the first section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and its kinship with seventeenth and eighteenth-century Calvinist theology of nature. The poems will be thus read in light of the thought of John Calvin and the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards, a spokesman for Calvinist Orthodoxy and its dogmas and, at the same time, a spiritualist animated by deep mystical aspirations. A close examination will also be made of the scriptural metaphor of God as gardener, and plants as eschatological symbols of Biblical origin appearing in two of the Greenhouse Poems. Roethke’s treatment of such symbols will be examined in relation to those of seventeenth-century Protestant lyric poetry – especially Henry Vaughan’s –, William Blake’s poems which openly develop the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem tradition, Jonathan Edwards’ eighteenth-century natural typology – which finds in the book of nature, like in Scripture, “types” or symbols of “fragments” of God’s Being and design –, and Emily Dickinson’s poems which are influenced by Edwards’ natural typology.

Chapter three, which focuses on the narratives collected in the last section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!*, will deal with the spiritual swings between desperation and exaltation experienced by their protagonist during his painful struggle to overcome his radical condition of alienation and achieve profound pacification with God. This process will be analyzed in light of Paul Tillich’s reflections on the most extreme developments of the fallen condition and the Protestant scheme of salvation culminating in the death-and-rebirth process described by Luther and examined in depth by Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Finally, the

chapter will deal with the scriptural echoes from Job, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the Gospels and the Biblical symbols of fallenness and regeneration through which the poet narrates his inner journey; namely, the pit, the deep waters, the wrath of God, the Rose of Sharon, the baptism.

So as to not overlook the influence exerted on Roethke's work by the cultural climate of his age, his poetry will be read in relation to both the past Protestant literary-philosophical tradition and the reflections of existentialist heirs and interpreters of this tradition, notably Søren Kierkegaard (whose works were translated by Walter Lowrie into English at the beginning of the twentieth century) and Paul Tillich. In fact, both scholars use the language of philosophy to deal with the very experiences and feelings at the core of Roethke's poetry.

In order to support my theses about Roethke's recovery and elaboration of the Protestant literary-philosophical tradition, I will also rely on the results of my research surrounding the poet's education, readings, and personal knowledge of English and American literature, philosophy, and theology. This data has been provided by a number sources: Allan Seager's biography of Roethke, entitled *The Glass House* (1968), three microfilms housed at the University of Washington which contain a list of the books owned and underlined by Roethke and his notebooks from the thirties, a University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) general course catalogue indicating the content of a course on American colonial literature which, according to Seager, the poet attended as a student in 1930, a list of essays in mysticism that, as Bowers' research showed, Roethke read in the thirties and the forties, and Roethke's lectures and articles – collected in *On Poetry and Craft* (1965) – in which the poet indicates several of his sources of inspiration. Nevertheless, it is a close reading of Roethke's poems that will provide the main foundations for my theses.

**“Some Day I’ll step with Arrowed Grace  
into a Brighter Realm of Space”:  
God’s Distance and the Dream of the *Unio Mystica*  
in Theodore Roethke’s Poetry of the Thirties**

*Open House* is largely regarded by scholars as a variegated and uneven collection, bearing the influence of various English and American poets, written by Roethke before finding his own voice and developing a coherent worldview. As Roethke acknowledges in “How to Write like Somebody Else”<sup>2</sup>: “imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps *the* method of learning to write” (Roethke 2001: 61). *Open House* still reveals such practice and it might be defined as the result of Roethke’s early apprenticeship. Still, the stylistic versatility and permeability of Roethke’s first collection conceals certain fundamental elements of thematic and theoretical coherence in light of which it is possible to better understand his later work.

Roethke’s published and unpublished poetry from the thirties presents a deep and complex relationship with the Protestant spirituality at the origin of North-American history and culture. More precisely, it reveals an apparently paradoxical kinship with two different ramifications of the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition: orthodox Calvinism and the Protestant mystical “heresy” that historically opposed it. In the poet’s early production the belief of the Protestant heretics in the possible fusion of the human soul with the divine coexists with the feeling of the infinite human limits before God’s fullness stressed by the Calvinist sensibility, thus with the conception of the spiritual quest as a strenuous and tormenting experience. Moreover, Roethke’s poetry from the thirties sometimes conveys a Calvinist sense of “guilt” apparently at odds with the conception of the soul as made “*of the same substance as God*” implied by the belief in the possibility of the *unio*

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<sup>2</sup> Text published by the Yale Review in March 1959.

*mystica* (Parkes 1962: 125). Despite expressing such contrasting feelings and existential attitudes, in actuality, all of Roethke's early poems are built upon the same philosophical grounds as they reflect the influence of two trends in Protestant thought that, by having a common origin, also share several basic theoretical premises.

The mystical tendencies Luther acquired from followers of Meister Eckhart, like Johannes Tauler, affected Protestant thought in general and, indirectly, New England Puritanism (Parkes 1962: 125). Such tendencies were stressed by the Protestant mystics – largely regarded as heretics – whose worldview, like Eckhart's, implied two main assumptions: the idea that the distance between God and the human being is a consequence of the ontological insubstantiality of the latter in comparison to the Being of God and the belief that such distance can be overcome through a mystical union, favored by the detachment from the material world and the consequent abandonment of one's "creaturality" (Klein 1978: 172; Loreto 1999: 58-59). Still, like all the other Protestants, Protestant mystics believed that, given the weakness of human capabilities, every effort of union with God is useless without divine intervention on the soul of the individual. The darker Calvinist perspective also went as far as considering the ontological difference between God and man as the root of the "fallen condition" or "state of sin" in which every human being is born, while stressing the limiting effect of the "fallen condition" on the human faculties, meant as an obstacle to a conciliation with God through faith and love. The painful acknowledgement of these limitations is the original source of the feeling of guilt and anxiety which characterizes Calvinist sensibility.

As we will see in this chapter, the conception of the ontological nature of the distance between God and man underlies many of Roethke's early poems. Some express a deep aspiration to overcome one's incompleteness and reach a condition of fullness through a union with the Being or God, while others even avow the poet's attempts to prepare himself for this union through detachment. Still, these poems also frequently and painfully describe the feeling of experiencing one's predicament as extremely difficult, if not impossible, to transcend. Like those of Emily Dickinson, they imply a view of



the human condition in relation to God that is strongly reminiscent of Eckhart's (Loreto 1999: 58). As a comparison of several poems by the two authors will reveal, Roethke's intensive reading of Dickinson's work was crucial in leading him to embrace such a view. In other darker poems Roethke does not simply seem to identify his predicament or "fallen condition" with the limitations and constrictions of human existence, but he sees it as the result of a mysterious "curse," something strongly reminiscent of the Calvinist "guilt" – meant as a theological notion – that Dickinson rejected (Loreto 1999: 25, 58). These poems express a sense of condemnation and anxiety, while suggesting the philosophical and psychological implications of such feelings – implications that have also been taken up, from a theoretical perspective, by Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich.

The spiritual and psychic developments of the poet's inner struggle, as well as its related mood swings, are often documented in accordance to the American Protestant proclivity toward introspection and self-analysis. This aspect is particularly relevant in Roethke's earliest uncollected poems, which will constitute the starting point of our analysis.

### **1.1 – Roethke's Early Mysticism: the Legacies of Meister Eckhart and Emily Dickinson**

As previously explained, the worldview expressed by Roethke's early poetry implies a philosophical conception of the human condition that is very similar to that expressed by Meister Eckhart. According to Eckhart, the distance between God and man essentially lies in their different ontological status, in the ontological insubstantiality of the human being before the Being of God. God and Being coincide. Human beings partake in the Being of God, who continually keeps them into existence, but at the same time they do not enjoy His fullness because, unlike Him, they are finite and limited. According to this view, the Fall is actually a direct consequence of creation, which bestows on human beings – as on every single being – their definiteness and, as a consequence, their finitude and precariousness. Since human beings

partake in the Being of God only partially, they find themselves suspended between Being and nonbeing and at the same time they consciously or unconsciously feel an inner longing for a complete union with the Being in which they are rooted. They can thus try to abandon their “creaturality” and be “reabsorbed” in God’s Being through a detachment from the material world – or *Abgeschiedenheit* – and the *unio mystica* or they can indulge in it, increasing their distance from God. Roethke’s early poetry mirrors Eckhart’s view of the relationship between God and man, and explores both possibilities envisaged by the German mystic: the union accomplished through detachment and the permanence in the condition of separation implied by existence.

Roethke’s notes on Christian unitive mysticism – what he defined as the “complete fusion of the soul with the divine” (cit. in Bowers 1982: 4) – began to appear in his notebooks in 1939, revealing his increasing familiarity with the work of mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Saint Francis, Saint Theresa, Jakob Böhme, and Evelyn Underhill. It is likely that Roethke started studying Eckhart’s thought through *Love in the Western World* by Denis De Rougement in 1942 as one of his notebooks from that year contains notes about the third chapter of the book, entitled “Passion and Mysticism” (Bowers 1982: 4-5). Still, as Roethke’s poetry written before 1942 testifies, he started absorbing the worldview belonging to the tradition engendered by Eckhart earlier in his life, most likely through the work of another poet whose mindset and sensibility are akin to those of the German mystic: Emily Dickinson. Some of Dickinson’s most significant stanzas ascribe her work to the Protestant mystical tradition that historically tried to recover the original mystical aspirations of Protestant spirituality (Loreto 1999: 58). Thanks to a letter addressed to Dorothy Gordon, we know today that Roethke read Dickinson “considerably” in 1934, and a subsequent letter from 1943 to Léonie Adams proves that he knew her work well (Roethke 1968: 18, 105). Roethke’s interest in Dickinson’s work is not surprising. The two poets did not simply share a few basic philosophical preoccupations. They shared feelings and inner experiences which both of them chose to describe in their poetry. In his first collection Roethke frequently prefigures the union rather

than recalling it but, like Dickinson, he describes in detail the melancholy and the spiritual malaise deriving from separation as well as the dangers provoked by its worst effects.

Apparently, the poet's oscillation between the hope for union and the desperation in experiencing the near insuperability of the painful outcomes of separation were not simply provoked by his continual introspection; they were also related to the mental illness with which he struggled throughout his life. The effects of Roethke's illness on his life and work can be better understood in light of some biographical data. On November 12, 1935 – a few weeks before being hospitalized at the Mercywood Sanitarium in Ann Arbor – Roethke experienced the first of many breakdowns that his manic depression would cause him during his life. The previous night he had left his room at the Campus Hotel of Michigan State College where he taught and had reached a stretch of woods near the campus. As he later described to Peter De Vries, that night, in the woods, he underwent a mystical experience with a tree and learned the “secret of Nijinsky” (Seager 1968; 90).<sup>3</sup> As he explained during an interview years later, that feeling was “a sense of being again part of the whole universe” (cit in: Bowers 1982: 8).

More than once, Roethke defined his first mystical experience as self-induced. As he wrote in his notebooks:

a “descent” can be willed – or at least the will – the human will – can be a factor. [...]. My first ‘breakdown’ was in a real sense deliberate. I not only asked for, I prayed it would happen. True, I had used a though resilient athlete's body as if it were rubber: had gone without any sleep at all for months. (cit in: Bowers 1982: 12)

Roethke's statements, as well as the testimony from people who were in contact with him in the months preceding these events led Allan Seager to believe that the poet actually induced the crisis by drinking, taking drugs, and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Allan Seager, at that time Roethke might have referred to a passage from the *Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, where he describes the feeling of finding himself in “the trance of love” and writes: “I went on and came to a tree. The tree told me that one could not talk here, because human beings do not understand feelings. I went on. I was sorry to part with the tree because the tree understood me.” (cit. in: Seager 1968: 32-33).

not sleeping, even though the biographer was aware of the tendency of manic-depressive individuals to assert that they brought their attacks upon themselves (Seager 1968: 101). The hypothesis that Roethke's first mystical experience might have been favored by his personal strivings is actually supported by his interest in mysticism and the spiritual longings expressed in his early poetry.

Roethke's description of his first breakdown as a self-induced mystical experience led Neil Bowers to identify a significant relationship between his mental illness and his mystical temperament. According to studies in psychiatry, both mystics and manic-depressive psychotics share the tendency to live frequent mood swings from states of exaltation to states of depression and the "capability" of regressing to a stage where the constraints of existence are nullified. In fact, supposedly, the manic stages are moments in which the individual sometimes enjoys the mystical feeling of "oneness." According to Bowers, even though the mystical experience and the crises undergone by manic-depressive psychotics are regarded by many as two different states in spite of their similarities, Roethke did not make this distinction. He felt that what he experienced during his first breakdown was a higher level of reality and, from that moment on, he would constantly struggle to reach it again. This struggle was both documented in and realized by his poetry (Bowers 1982: 13-16, 19).

Roethke certainly considered mystical ecstasy as a form of madness and he strove for what Rimbaud defines as the *dérangement de tous les sens* (Bowers 1982: 8-9). Still, Bowers' interpretation of the role played by Roethke's mental illness in his life and work does not provide a complete account of its ambivalent implications. By focusing on the possibilities implied by the manic phases and, as a consequence, presenting the mental illness essentially as privileged access to the mystical experience, Bowers neglects to deal with the opposite negative effects produced by the illness, which are described in detail in Roethke's poetry. In fact, the depressive phases of manic depression constitute the furthest conditions from the mystical union, in which the same psychic integrity of the individual is seriously threatened.

An attentive reading of Roethke's published and unpublished poems written before 1935 would seem to suggest that in its first stages, his illness manifested itself mainly as a source of radical estrangement, spiritual prostration, and consequent longing for a state of fullness that, at that time, he knew indirectly through his readings, more so than through his personal experience. Far from being overcome through the union, the condition of separation described by Roethke in his poetry becomes so radical at times that it raises the risk of psychic disintegration and annihilation. Though it is likely that, at the time, the poet did not yet perceive his spiritual malaise as a symptom of mental illness, he considered it to be the result of a sort of "virus" that infected his blood and afflicted his spirit. In fact, he started writing about a mysterious disease years before being diagnosed with manic depression.<sup>4</sup>

The poems from *Open House* written after 1935 continue to develop the subjects from his previous poems and, at the same time, testify to the poet's attempts to prepare himself for a mystical union, through the debasement of the body and the senses, and the sacrifice of analytical thinking in favor of an intuitive kind of knowledge. The existence of a superior reality is sometimes fleetingly perceived, or even grasped in short moments of illumination, but the mystical union is always projected in the future.

When considered in light of his early work, Roethke's account of the events that took place in the woods on the night of November 12, 1935 naturally raises two questions. First, we cannot help but ask ourselves why his first collection presents no mention of such events. In fact, even though Roethke had his first mystical experience six years prior to the publication of *Open House* in 1941, the volume does not contain any poem about such an experience as he would later describe it to his friends. The book includes one of the two pieces that Roethke wrote about his life in the sanitarium, but it does not feature any poem about the events preceding his hospitalization. According to Bowers, this is due to the fact that when Roethke wrote his first

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that Roethke already struggled with manic depression before having his first mystical experience in 1935 is testified by a letter from professor Tupper (head of the English Department of the Lafayette College in Easton, where Roethke had taught from 1931 to 1935) to professor Johnston (head of the English department at Michigan State College). According to Tupper, Roethke had at least one other manic crisis when he worked at Lafayette College, albeit not as violent as the one he experienced in 1935 (Seager 1968: 97-98).

collection of poems he still needed time in order to assimilate what he had felt and, consequently, to be able to describe it (Bowers 1982: 7). Bower's explanation is plausible, but further hypotheses can be made. It is possible that, while Roethke's first mystical experience confirmed his belief in the existence of a higher reality, its fleetingness and the long spiritual prostration that followed it led him to perceive such reality as extremely difficult to achieve in a complete and definitive way. The poet's first real moment of relief from his existential predicament was followed by a new Fall into his previous melancholic condition and a long period of spiritual emptiness that, as his poetry from the forties confirms, he would later experience again. This might be the reason for which the main subject of *Open House* are profound, yet unfulfilled, spiritual aspirations.

Moreover, the reader of Roethke's description of his first mystical experience unavoidably wonders why the poems he wrote after 1935 continue to deal with a quest for a transcendent reality that does not take place through the immersion in nature but through the dismissal of the senses and a detachment from the material world. This second question is much more difficult to answer. It is impossible to know the reasons for which Roethke's study of the divine presence in nature through his senses will only begin to be documented in his second collection. Nevertheless, it is important to note that – as we will see in the next chapter – *Open House* contains poems about nature and in some of them it is possible to detect and anticipate premises of the new direction his quest and work will eventually assume.

When read together, Roethke's early introspective poems form a sort of spiritual autobiography describing universal feelings and inner states that can be analyzed through instruments provided by psychology and philosophy. As Rosemary Sullivan writes, while the poems collected in *Open House* are sometimes impersonal and conventional in the way they interpret the poet's sufferings, earlier poems – unpublished or published individually in magazines – explore and express more personally “the terrors and the frustrations of private psychic disorders” (Sullivan 1975: 4-5). It is thus worth focusing on both the collected and uncollected poems in order to have a

complete picture of the poet's inner life. "Difficult Grief" (one of the unpublished poems Roethke sent to Dorothy Gordon between 1933 and 1934) is one of the first testimonies of the spiritual distress that would periodically afflict him:

This is not surface grief, but care  
That catches me unaware  
A grief too difficult for tears  
That ravages my greenest years,  
destroying innocent peace to start  
a swell of sorrow at the heart.  
Since I am young, it does not find  
Sufficient mastery in the mind.  
Since I am careless, it may be  
As treacherous as ecstasy,  
And though it leaves, it will return  
To mock me with embittered scorn:  
a sorrow as ponderable as clay,  
Old desolation, young dismay,  
A fear too shameful to confess,  
A terrible child-loneliness. (Roethke 1968: 22-23)

Though, from a formal point of view, still immature, "Difficult Grief" presents some interesting aspects. Like other poems that will be examined in this subchapter, it reveals the proclivity of Roethke's early work to give an account of the poet's inner life by enacting the faculties and feelings that play a role in it. The state of depression that cyclically oppresses the poet, depriving him of his "innocent peace," makes his rational faculties (mind) helpless while overwhelming the emotional ones (heart). The feelings that it engenders – "sorrow", "desolation", "dismay", and "fear" – cannot simply find relief in tears because they are so deep and pervasive that they involve and paralyze his entire person. The sense of humiliation expressed by the poem, the sense of being an object of "embittered scorn," is provoked by the consequent

awareness of one's impotence. The fleeting allusion to ecstasy, which turned out to be as "treacherous" as grief, does not simply bring to light the emotional instability of the poet and his being subject to mood swings oscillating between exaltation and distress. By defining the moments of ecstasy as deceptive as those of grief, he indirectly presents them as moments when his attempts to rise above the constraints of his predicament were finally abortive. The reference to "a terrible child-loneliness" in the last line reveals that when Roethke wrote this poem he knew that the secret root of his present suffering lay in his childhood, even though he had not yet completely elaborated and given voice to such awareness, as he would in his later work.

Sometimes, moments of "distress" and "black loneliness" are preceded and presaged by states of "infertile quietude," like in "Exhortation," written in 1934. Still, such conditions are not so pervasive to completely nullify the poet's spiritual aspirations. Rather, they engender the desire of their own overcoming, which Roethke vigorously expresses:

[...]  
Thou gusty hope, release  
Me from this sudden ease,  
Route my quiescent will  
With sudden miracle! (Roethke 1968: 24)

Here Roethke exhorts the hope he still feels in the midst of his spiritual stagnation to be strong enough to awaken his weakened will and free him from his indolence. Although he seems to believe to have within himself the source of his possible "salvation," the choice of the word "miracle" implies an intervention on his inner faculties of what, in the Protestant view, is commonly called "Grace." It appears that the poet's future relief from his periods of spiritual paralysis and distress will be as unpredictable and uncontrollable as their advent, and thus cannot simply result from his personal strivings.

From time to time, Roethke's desire to transcend his predicament and his inner drive toward the Absolute engenders dreams and fantasies in which



this very drive is fulfilled. The full actualization of the “miracle” the poet hopes for is imagined to take place in poems like “More Pure than Flight” (1934):

Some day I'll step with arrowed grace  
Into a brighter realm of space:

With grave felicity of motion  
I'll tread an incidental ocean

Lightly; wander minutely where  
Confederate clouds divide the air;

Place accurate feet upon the brink  
Of nothingness: obliquely sink

In crystal wind; more pure than flight  
Of curving bird, I'll walk the night.

Death shall not drift my limbs apart  
When ancient silence storms my heart.

Before my patterned dance is done,  
I'll pace on shadows to the sun.

How delicate will motion be  
In this, my fleet identity! (Roethke 1968: 23-24)

Access to a superior reality, which the poet dreams to achieve one day, would be accompanied by an overall sense of lightness and liberation. Instead of being subjected to the limitations and the conflicts of finite existence, he would witness that harmonious coexistence of contraries that takes place in the Being: in Its “brighter realm of space” he would “walk the night” and

“pace on shadows to the sun,” and enjoying Its fullness would also mean to find himself “on the brink of nothingness.” Still, such convergence of light and darkness, fullness and emptiness, would also provoke ambivalent feelings. When, in his lifetime, the poet comes face-to-face with the “ancient silence” which precedes and follows human existence, paradoxically, the silence will “storm his heart.” In the more conventional “little religious poem” “Prepare Thyself for Change” (1933) the encounter with “His world, bright as a flame” is imagined to take place at the moment of death, when the body will dissolve, allowing the “soul, immortal, white” to “Lift[s] into light / In unbewildered flight” (Roethke 1968: 9-10). In “The Knowing Heart” (1934) the moment of death is marked by a sudden and sharp apprehension of the Absolute:

In ecstasy at being sure  
Of what Time has reserved for it,  
The flesh will burn a meaning pure  
And make its dying exquisite.

O this mortality will break  
The false dissembling brain apart –  
The uninstructed soul will quake  
In terror at the knowing heart. (Roethke 1968: 24)

Once again, the central experience in the poem is described through the definition of the roles played by the faculties involved in it – or the organs symbolizing them – and the soul: when the brain will “break apart,” the soul, unencumbered by the obstacles of reason, will finally acquire full knowledge through the intuition of the heart alone. The object of such intuition is not described or even mentioned: it is only indirectly evoked through the allusion to the awe – the mixture of “ecstasy” and “terror” – that it will provoke. God, or the Absolute, is thus connoted through His unnameability in the poem.

The frustration provoked in the poet by his unfulfilled inner aspirations is expressed by “Verse with Allusions,” in which he ironically admits his envy

to those “whose world is spanned / by the circumference of Hand” and scorn “Abstract Entities” because, while they are happy with what satisfies their everyday needs – “Human Nature’s Daily Food” –, his insatiable spiritual longings condemn him to be a “starveling yearner” (Roethke 1991: 24). By employing starvation as a metaphor for unsatisfied spiritual desire, Roethke recovers a motif previously exploited by mystics, as well as poets like Emily Dickinson and Edward Taylor in their mystical works.<sup>5</sup>

In “Against Disaster,” from *Open House*, the encounter with the Being that the poet dreams of in “More Pure than Flight” is not simply hindered. The poet’s apparently insurmountable estrangement from the Being causes the risk of annihilation. Significantly enough, Roethke wrote that “Against Disaster” (like “The Cure”) was written in “a period of terror before a ‘breakdown’” (Roethke 1968: 59):

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

All random, wasted, and dispersed,  
The particles of being lie;  
My special heaven is reversed,  
I move beneath an evil sky.

This flat land has become a pit  
Wherein I am beset by harm,  
The heart must rally to my wit  
And rout the specter of alarm. (Roethke 1991: 18)

As Tillich explains in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* – moving in the same philosophical direction indicated by Eckhart –, existing

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, “Oh Sumptuous moment” (J1125) by Dickinson and “The Reflexion” by Taylor.

means being separated, or estranged, from the Being to which we originally belong and, as a consequence, from our own being and ourselves. The most extreme effects of existential estrangement can make this basic conflict between the individual and himself so radical as to provoke in him a process of self-loss, a disintegration of the unity of the person, whose psyche falls into pieces, as observed in psychopathological disruptions (Tillich 1963: 59-62). When experienced, this process can affect the personal perception of the Being. When describing God, Luther once wrote: “as you believe him, so you have him.” According to Tillich, this means that when a human being is aware of his estrangement from God, or the Being, God is the menace of final destruction for him, while if he is reconciled to God, He is love. More precisely, in the Christian perspective God *is*, in himself, love and, since love is a cohesive force, God cannot actually be destructive. Still, when a human being finds himself in a state of radical estrangement from Him he undergoes that process of self-destruction (meant as psychic disintegration or suicide) which can be the final outcome of desperation and which, as Böhme also wrote in *The Way to Christ* in the seventeenth century, is symbolized by the wrath of God in the Bible (Tillich 1963: 77).

In “Against Disaster” Roethke describes the awful feeling of being radically estranged, “out of element / And far from anything my own,” up to the point that his “spirit” and his same “being” break into pieces and disperse. Moreover, the entity that he once wished to embrace now becomes menacing, a “reversed heaven” and an “evil sky.” The “pit” mentioned at the beginning of the last stanza – an image which the poet will employ again – is reminiscent of the pit of the Psalms: a symbol for the state of desperation in which David sinks when God abandons him and turns his wrath against him. Faced with the danger of complete annihilation, both the rational and emotional faculties (heart and wit) must “rally” in order to avoid the final “disaster.”

Well before Roethke wrote “Against Disaster,” Dickinson had dealt with the process of psychic disruption in similar terms in her poetry. In “I felt a funeral in my Brain” (J280) – a poem describing the direct experience of a death that might be interpreted as physical or psychological (Loreto 1999: 43)

– the destruction of the psychic balance is foreshadowed by the sense of having mourners “creaking across” one’s soul and becomes concrete when “a Plank in Reason” breaks. Since the beginning, the feeling that “sense” is “breaking through” is accompanied by a regular, haunting sound: “A Service, like a Drum - / Kept beating - beating - till I thought / My mind was going numb - ” (Dickinson 1960: 128-129). In “Silence” Roethke’s psychic malaise manifests itself as “a noise within the brow” whose regular rhythm – “A hammer on the crystal walls / Of sense” – sounds like the presage of a forthcoming breaking. Still, the final crisis never takes place and the poet silently withdraws into himself, resigning to the “monotony of grief”:

There is a noise within the brow  
That pulses undiminished now  
In accents measured by the blood.  
It breaks upon my solitude—  
A hammer on the crystal walls  
Of sense at rapid intervals.  
It is the unmelodic ring  
Before the breaking of a string,  
The wheels of circumstance that grind  
So terribly within the mind,  
The spirit crying in a cage  
To build a complement to rage,  
Confusion’s core set deep within  
A furious, dissembling din.

If I should ever seek relief  
From that monotony of grief,  
The tight nerves leading to the throat  
Would not release one riven note:  
What shakes my skull to disrepair  
Shall never touch another ear. (Roethke 1991: 21)

When the poet's spiritual malaise takes the form of an inner paralysis, "the fantasies of sorrow" can "breed / Acedia in the active brain" to the point that every action becomes meaningless, if not impossible to accomplish ("the hands are useless for the deed"), like in "The Cure," an unpublished poem sent by Roethke to Stanley Kunitz in 1937. In medieval theology, *Acedia* is the melancholia or depression suffered by those who spend their lives in solitary contemplation. The solution envisioned by Roethke to soothe this spiritual malaise in "The Cure" is quite extreme:

[...]

Your flesh is wasting on a frame  
Designed for swift, explicit wrath.  
Denials of the spirit tame  
The conscience into stupid faith.

So bleed yourself of love, the blood  
That melancholy feeds upon,  
And learn the marrow's fortitude,  
The hatred burning in the bone. (Roethke 1968: 54)

Love is a cohesive force that should allow an individual to experience a new union with the Being to which he originally belongs, but when union fails love only feeds melancholy. Overwhelmed by this feeling, the poet apparently resolves to disavow his faith and turn his love and frustrated desire into hate. Rather than a "cure," this act of rebellion is essentially a choice to completely abandon himself to his "illness," causing it to become "chronic" and turning his "fallen condition" into mere hell.

Perhaps it was the risk of psychic death that Roethke personally experienced and described in his poetry that led him to write about physical death, a possible consequence of the former or simply a suspension of the sufferings provoked by psychic instability. In a letter to Dorothy Gordon dated 1934, Roethke writes, "I seem to write nothing but poems about death" (Roethke 1968: 22). In poems like "Death Piece", "No Bird" (from *Open*

*House*), and the unpublished “The Tribute” (from the letter mentioned above), death is not described as the moment of apprehension of the Absolute, like in “The Knowing Heart,” but as a state of annihilation or final rest. “Death Piece,” for example, portrays a state of complete psychic inactivity:

Invention sleeps within a skull  
No longer quick with light,  
The hive that hummed in every cell  
Is now sealed honey-tight.

His thought is tied, the curving prow  
Of motion moored to rock;  
And minutes burst upon a brow  
Insentient to shock. (Roethke 1991: 4)

Unlike the “brow” in which a disturbing noise resounds in “Silence,” that which is described in “Death Piece” has finally turned “insentient,” with the complete extinguishment of “thought” and “invention.” Whereas Dickinson goes so far as to imagine her own death, Roethke always portrays death “from the outside,” from a position of safe detachment. In “Death Piece” such detachment is so complete that the poet does not express any feelings in front of the lifeless mind that he observes and describes. In spite of this significant difference, some of Dickinson’s poems about death might have been an inspiration for Roethke. Interestingly, “No Bird” is an epitaph for Dickinson and a rewriting of her poem “On this long storm the rainbow rose” (J194), and also features echoes of “Our journey had advanced” (J615), another poem about death (La Belle 1976: 13-14):

Now here is peace for one who knew  
The secret heart of sound.  
The ear so delicate and true  
Is pressed to noiseless ground.

Slow swings the breeze above her head,  
The grasses whitely stir;  
But in this forest of the dead  
No bird awakens her. (Roethke 1991: 16)

While in “On this long storm the rainbow rose” Dickinson expresses regret for the indifference of the dead in front of the sweetness of nature before imagining her awakening in paradise, “No Bird” conveys, from the start, a deep feeling of pacification. In “The Tribute,” where “the quiet wrapped about his [the dead’s] head / Bespeaks the mind’s surcease” death is more clearly perceived as a liberation (Roethke 1968: 22); it becomes the fulfillment of that longing for “rest without conflict” which, according to Freud, every individual unconsciously feels (Tillich, 1963: 75-76).

The analyzed poems reveal that Roethke believed in the possibility of a mystical fusion of the human soul with God, whose necessary philosophical condition is the idea, expressed by Eckhart and his heirs, of the participation of human beings in the Being of God in spite of their structural separation from Him, imposed on them by existence itself. Like Dickinson, Roethke deals with the dangers deriving from the radicalization of the separation from the Being or “existential estrangement,” as Tillich defines it. Yet, in his early poetry, the opposite condition – the mystical union – is never described as an object of direct experience but simply as an object of spiritual longing, whose achievement is projected in the future. As we will see in the next two subchapters, unlike what might be suggested in poems like “No Bird” and “The Tribute,” in Roethke’s early work the frequent feeling of the impending impossibility of the union does not ultimately result in an enhanced death instinct. Rather, it engenders in him the will to deeply explore the conflicts implied by the condition of separation, before trying to accomplish his mystical quest through a process of detachment from the material world.



## 1.2 – “Calvinist Guilt” and the Stages of the Personal Fall

The Fall is not simply a cosmic event coinciding with creation: it is a personal experience, as well. It “happens again” and at the same time fully actualizes itself in the early life of every individual as soon as he becomes painfully aware of its existential implications: the structural condition of finitude and precariousness as well as spiritual incompleteness to which the separation from the fullness of the Being destines humankind. An attentive reading of *Open House* reveals that Roethke conceived the personal Fall – meant as a loss of innocence – as the result of a process and tried to describe its stages, as he experienced them, in poems evoking childhood memories. Although the poet presents the stages of the personal Fall as part of the necessary development of a human being, he also demonstrates how painful and problematic they can be.

*Open House* also includes poems about the outcomes of the Fall – this time meant as both universal and personal – which Roethke symbolically identifies with the consequences of an “inherited curse,” using the motif at the core of the Biblical myth narrated in Genesis. The main subject of these poems are the radical inner conflicts developed by the poet during his personal fall, which exacerbate his existential estrangement, and still afflict him in his adulthood. These last poems convey feelings of guilt and condemnation, while, at the same time, evoking their philosophical and psychological implications.

As previously explained, Roethke’s work can be ascribed to the philosophical tradition that considered the distance between man and God to be the result of their different ontological substantialities, and not as a consequence of a presumed human guilt or “innate depravity.” In point of fact, when interpreted in philosophical terms, the second conception is not incompatible with the first. As Tillich explains in his *History of Christian Thought*, the concept of “innate depravity,” often wrongly translated into merely moralistic terms, actually means that there is no part of the human being which is not affected by existential distortion and self-contradiction. The human being desires to find a new union with the Being through the

unitive principle of love but he is also subject to the structures of separation implied by existence. As a consequence he is torn by a constant conflict between opposite drives (Tillich, 1968: 245-246). Calvinist guilt is originally born from this inner conflict and the feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness which it engenders. By expressing a feeling of condemnation in poems describing his existential estrangement Roethke brings to light the philosophical root of the “guilt” that he himself feels, without diminishing its psychological implications.

It is important to note that the estrangement Roethke writes about in the poems analyzed in this subchapter is not simply estrangement from God, as it was in previous ones; it is an estrangement from his own world, as well. From a panentheist perspective, which Roethke thoroughly embraced when writing his poetry in the forties, the latter is actually a consequence of the former. As Roethke himself explains, using the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, when commenting on the narratives in “*On Identity*,”<sup>6</sup> according to the panentheist view, “God is above all things by the excellence of his nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things” (cit. in: Roethke 2001: 40). Tillich, like Eckhart before him, also believes that the Being of God includes the universe. Still, unlike Eckhart, he focuses on the effects of the “existential estrangement” on the relationship of the individual with concrete reality and the people surrounding him. The more radical our estrangement turns, the more problematic such relationship becomes. In Roethke’s poetry this process significantly involves his relationship with the memory of his father, the most important figure of his life, and a protagonist of his later work.

Some poems from *Open House* deal with moments of childhood preceding the completion of the process through which an individual loses his innocence. Roethke does not idealize the stage of existence preceding the complete loss of innocence, but rather brings to light its complex and problematic nature. “The Premonition” and “To my Sister” take on this stage from two different perspectives, highlighting different aspects of it. In “The

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<sup>6</sup> Transcription of a statement made at a Northwestern University panel on “Identity” in February 1963.

Premonition” the poet remembers when, before losing his father, he obscurely realized that he was destined to die:

Walking this field I remember  
Days of another summer.  
Oh that was long ago! I kept  
Close to the heels of my father,  
Matching his stride with half-steps  
Until we came to a river.  
He dipped his hand in the shallow:  
Water ran over and under  
Hair on a narrow wrist bone;  
His image kept following after,—  
Flashed with the sun in the ripple,  
But when he stood up, that face  
Was lost in a maze of water. (Roethke 1991: 6)

The vague intuition of the child is provoked and at the same time visually conveyed to the reader by the dissolution of the reflection of his father in the flux of water, but the imminence of death is also suggested through the image of the “hair on a narrow wrist bone,” a clear allusion to the “bracelet of bright hair about the bone” in John Donne’s “The Relic” (La Belle 1976: 19). The acquisition of awareness of the existence of death and evil through the experience of death itself is foreshadowed by the simple event described in the poem. The feeling of anxiety clearly raised in the young poet by this situation is at odds with the serenity usually associated with the innocence of children, but it is a concrete fact of life that Kierkegaard analyzed long before modern psychology discovered the complexity of the infantile psyche.

As previously explained, from the Protestant philosophical perspective underlying Roethke’s poetry, the Fall – meant as the moment of separation of each being from the whole – coincides with creation, but it only truly reaches completion when humankind becomes aware of the negative implications of separation and feels anxiety for the first time. Such an “event” is lived by

every individual in his early life. In Genesis, the human race's acquisition of awareness and its discovery of anxiety are symbolically identified with the moment when Adam eats from the Tree of Knowledge and loses his innocence, which essentially amounts to ignorance. Still, as Kierkegaard explains in *The Concept of Anxiety*, before losing his innocence every human being feels a primitive form of anxiety, which is provoked by ignorance itself. In fact anxiety, unlike fear, does not have a defined object and in the early stages of human existence it is born from the sense of Possibility, which is by definition unknown and unpredictable (Kierkegaard 1980: 41-42). What makes the young poet restless in "The Premonition" might be the intuition of both the possibilities that are external to him – like the death of his father – and the possibilities that he might actualize himself as he acquires responsibility – the symbolic murder of his father, consisting in the acquisition of one's identity and independence. In this case they are two sides of the same coin.

In "On The Road to Woodlawn" childhood anxiety is remembered and presented in an even more primitive form:

I miss the polished brass, the powerful black horses,  
The drivers creaking the seats of the baroque hearses,  
The high-piled floral offerings with sentimental verses,  
The carriages reeking with varnish and stale perfume.

I miss the pallbearers momentarily taking their places,  
The undertaker's obsequious grimaces,  
The craned necks, the mourners' anonymous faces,  
– And the eyes, still vivid, looking up from a sunken room.  
(Roethke 1991: 21)

This poem deals with the memories of the funerals that Roethke attended in his childhood, most likely as a result of his father's business as a florist. "On The Road to Woodlawn" expresses the feeling of attraction aroused in the young poet by the theatrical character of the funeral while the last line reveals

his inner turmoil in front of the harsh reality at the core of the funeral itself. This turmoil might once again be intensified by an obscure sense of premonition. Significantly, Roethke's father himself was buried at the Woodlawn cemetery. What the poet seemingly "misses" is the time when death and the most disturbing aspects of reality would provoke in him the embryonic form of anxiety that manifests itself in children as a mixture of attraction and aversion, desire and fear to know, and – to quote Kierkegaard – "a seeking for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic" (Kierkegaard 1980: 42).

In "To My Sister" the personal Fall is presented as the result of a choice:

O my sister remember the stars the tears the trains  
The woods in spring the leaves the scented lanes  
Recall the gradual dark the snow's unmeasured fall  
The naked fields the cloud's immaculate folds  
Recount each childhood pleasure: the skies of azure  
The pageantry of wings the eye's bright treasure.

Keep faith with present joys refuse to choose  
Defer the vice of flesh the irrevocable choice  
Cherish the eyes the proud incredible poise  
Walk boldly my sister but do not deign to give  
Remain secure from pain preserve thy hate thy heart.  
(Roethke 1991: 5)

The adult poet asks his younger sister to "remain secure from pain" by preserving her innocence and the childhood world which he himself clearly regrets having lost. The choice that in his eyes risks her loss of innocence is seemingly that of acquiring sexual experience. The complexity of the moment of transition experienced by the young woman is expressed in the poem through certain ambiguities. The poet's exhortation to "*defer* the vice of flesh" attenuates the previous request to not choose at all, conveying the idea that the feared change cannot be avoided but only postponed. Moreover there

is a vague contradiction in the plea to “keep faith with the *present* joys” and at the same time “remember”, “recall” the childhood world associated with perfectly innocent happiness. In fact the young woman’s state of balance between her childhood and its being completely overcome is made temporary by the fact that she is experiencing her necessary and irreversible development as a human being. Her transition to adulthood actually began the moment she started to contemplate the possibility of acquiring experience. Kierkegaard explains this process in relation to the act of choosing in general. In Genesis, when the divine prohibition to eat from the Tree of Knowledge makes Adam aware of the possibility to choose, he feels a new form of anxiety which is “superior” to the aforementioned primitive feeling and will become even deeper after the final acquisition of awareness (Kierkegaard 1980: 44-45). In other words, when the individual finds himself in the position to choose whether or not to actualize himself through his choices, and at the same time is made anxious by the unpredictability of their consequences, the process which leads to the Fall has almost reached its unavoidable completion. As “To my Sister” shows, the particular choice to actualize oneself through the acquisition of sexual awareness entails the same implications.

Roethke deals with choice and anxiety by referring to Kierkegaard both explicitly and in ironical terms, in his undated “Duet”:

[...]

We’ll sail away from the frightful shore

Of multiple choice and Either/ or

To the land where the innocent stretch and snore

– with never a thought for Kierkegaard

[...]

Should Dame anxiety ever come near

We’ll give each other a box on the ear,

– in honor of Father Kierkegaard. (Roethke 1991: 264)

In the first version of “To my Sister,” sent to Dorothy Gordon in 1934, the list of wonders belonging to the world of innocence ends with two lines that Roethke ultimately decided to cut:

Remember too the loins from whence you sprung the limbs  
within the grave before you had his love (Roethke 1968: 11-12)

The subject of these lines is most likely the poet’s father, a fundamental part of the world that the girl should strive to preserve. Still, the recognition of the fact that their father is already gone shows once again that such a world is fading away, unavoidably and even independently from the girl’s choices. It is so fleeting that it starts to be remembered even before it is enjoyed all the way through, like the love of a father who died too soon. We might go a step further and suppose that the perfect innocent happiness that the poem evokes is not an object of concrete experience as much as a “memory” in our cerebral cortex. In the nostalgic poem entitled “The Reminder” the childhood that the poet mourns the loss of is more clearly dominated by the figure of his father, remembered as a reassuring presence and a guarantor of order and security.

I remember the crossing-tender's geranium border  
That blossomed in soot; a black cat licking its paw;  
The bronze wheat arranged in strict and formal order;  
And the precision that for you was ultimate law:

The handkerchief tucked in the left-hand pocket  
Of a man-tailored blouse; the list of shopping done;  
You wound the watch in an old-fashioned locket  
And pulled the green shade against morning sun.

Now in the misery of bed-sitting room confusion,  
With no hint of your presence in a jungle of masculine toys,  
In the dirt and disorder I cherish one scrap of illusion:

A cheap clock ticking in ghostly cicada voice. (Roethke 1991: 27)

The harsh contrast between the past and the present – between the “formal order,” the “precision,” the “ultimate law” of the former and the “dirt and disorder” of the latter – is made pathetic by the image of the adult poet surrounded by the old toys of his childhood. The ticking of the clock in the last line is itself a symbol of order, but – unlike the watch mentioned in the second stanza – it has a “ghostly” voice because it only vaguely calls to mind the atmosphere of a world which is now lost.

The poem about the consequences of the Fall where Roethke most powerfully gives voice to the sense of guilt and condemnation that afflict him is certainly “Feud”:

Corruption reaps the young; you dread  
The menace of ancestral eyes;  
Recoiling from the serpent head  
Of fate, you blubber in surprise.

Exhausted fathers thinned the blood,  
You curse the legacy of pain;  
Darling of an infected brood,  
You feel disaster climb the vein.

There’s canker at the root, your seed  
Denies the blessing of the sun,  
The light essential to your need  
Your hopes are murdered and undone.

The dead leap at the throat, destroy  
The meaning of the day; dark forms  
Have scaled your walls, and spies betray  
Old secrets to amorphous swarms.



You meditate upon the nerves,  
Inflame with hate. This ancient feud  
Is seldom won. The spirit starves  
Until the dead have been subdued. (Roethke 1991: 4)

In “Feud” Roethke defines himself as “the darling of an infected brood” who feels disaster climbing in his veins. He is the victim of a corruption that “thinned the blood” of his fathers and, as a consequence, his own. Such corruption is primarily physical, or “biological,” as long as it affects “the blood,” but it is also spiritual as it provokes in the poet a condition of despair: it makes his hopes “murdered and undone.” As George Wolff points out, the inherited disease Roethke alludes to might be his manic depression, that he presents as a sort of “inherited curse” in the poem (Wolff 1981: 26-27). Since “Feud” was written in 1935, that is, before Roethke’s first breakdown, it is not possible to ascertain whether he was already aware of his mental illness and regarded it as a “legacy” from his uncle, who committed suicide in 1923. Nevertheless, it is clear that Roethke felt he was the victim of a symbolical “curse,” a sort of physical and spiritual “illness” which deprived him and his family of the “perfection” that their stern ancestors enjoyed long ago. He will take up this subject again in “Sale” in which the heirs of a decayed family sell the last tangible tokens of its lost material and moral prosperity: “All the rings and the relics encrusted with sin / – And the taint in a blood that was running too thin” (Roethke 1991: 30).

The meaning of “Feud” is as personal as it is universal. Reference to the serpent in the third line calls to mind the Fall and the expulsion from the garden of Eden, leading the reader to regard the poet and his family as specimens of humankind. The physical and spiritual illness provoked by “serpent-headed” fate is an outcome of the condition of precariousness and consequent spiritual misery that in the Biblical myth begins afflicting all human beings after the Fall. Since the state of perfect happiness preceding the Fall cannot be remembered by the children of Adam, it is customarily situated in a near or distant – yet always mythicized – past, whose inhabitants Roethke portrays as menacing in “Feud.” The condemning and

hostile attitude of the ancestors, or “the dead,” is most likely a projection of the poet’s feeling of inadequacy and self-condemnation, deriving from the impossibility to equal the “perfection” that they symbolically represent. More precisely, it derives from the impossibility to overcome his estrangement and acquire the ideal condition of pacification with God, the world, and oneself, which theoretically preceded the Fall.

In 1963, during the lecture that was later published under the title “On *Identity*,” just before quoting the first stanza of “Feud” Roethke says:

In any quest for identity today – or any day – we run inevitably against this problem: What to do with our ancestors? I mean it as an ambiguity: both the literal or blood, and the spiritual ancestors. Both, as we know, can overwhelm us. The devouring mother, the furious papa. And, if we are trying to write, the Supreme Masters.” (Roethke 2001: 38-39)

The last sentence has led many scholars to focus on the second meaning suggested by Roethke, while neglecting the first, though the poet’s association of ancestors with a “furious” father is highly significant. Roethke’s statements from 1963, long after writing the poem and after becoming fully aware of the role that his father played in his life, retrospectively enrich the meaning of “Feud.” The poet’s predicament described in the poem also results from the lack of a harmonious relationship with the memory of his father, the most painful outcome of his existential estrangement or, more precisely, of the radicalization of such estrangement.

Roethke’s relationship with his father – “a stern, short-tempered whose love he doubted” – was always troubled. In his childhood memories recorded in high school and university essays, as well as autobiographical short stories, the poet recalls his desire as a boy to praise his father, as well as the “hate” aroused in him by his father’s harshness, a feeling which unquestionably turned into a source of guilt (Seager 1968: 23-26). Unfortunately, Roethke did not have the opportunity to unravel the tangle of such ambivalent feelings when Otto was still alive. Generally speaking, the unavoidable “rebellion” against one’s father and the “separation” from him every individual must go

through in order to form his identity is always accompanied by a feeling of guilt. The intensity and pervasiveness of this feeling in Roethke's life and work (the same feeling that led him to describe a "furious" father and "menacing" ancestors in his poem) is likely due to the circumstances in which that separation took place. As Seager writes in *The Glass House*, the moment when Roethke started to symbolically "kill" his father fatally coincided with the moment of his father's death, when he was fourteen:

His father's death was the most important thing that ever happened to him. Many youths can accept the death of fathers with some toughness and what grief they suffer does not rankle, but not Ted. The ambiguity of their relationship entangled his whole life at fourteen. [...] Ted once wrote in a letter that he had "murderous" feelings toward his father. Many boys wish their fathers dead, not necessarily because of any Oedipal involutions, merely in a resentful flare-up after they have been slapped or beaten, but few have their fathers die with what must have seemed a dreadful promptness afterward. Ted would still have been enough of a boy at 13 to fear that he had obscurely caused his death, and, even if he hadn't, the juxtaposition in his life of his wish and the dying would have been enough to make him guilty forever. (Seager 1968: 104)

The guilt that obliquely emerges in "Feud" as a feeling of personal condemnation is explicitly conveyed by some entries in Roethke's notebooks from the forties, expressions of a malaise which had more likely afflicted the poet since his adolescence, if not earlier:

I carry the guilt of many lives.

The Devil that has my heart  
Will not let me be.

The bones of my human guilt.

Anxiety – it is when we begin to hurt those that we love that the guilt with which we are born becomes intolerable... we hate ourselves then.

My private conscience is terrible. (cit. in: Parini 1979: 62-64)

The fourth entry quoted above shows that Roethke was aware of both the psychological and the philosophical roots of his guilt. As previously explained, the deep guilt one sometimes feels for no apparent reason is, in reality, innate as it is a normal outcome of the state of “separation” from that which one belongs to when one is born. More concretely, it is engendered by the estrangement from our world and the people surrounding us in which such separation often results. The human being’s contradictory condition of belonging and separation, desire for union and incapability to fulfill it, provokes everyday inner and external conflicts and ambivalent feelings accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and guilt. The most eloquent example of this mechanism is demonstrated by the painful situation of having negative feelings for someone we love. It is not possible to know whether the poet had his father in mind when he wrote this particular entry, but his ambivalent relationship with Otto Roethke, with its mixture of love and resentment, admiration and fear (as Seager and Roethke himself describe it), was likely his first and most significant experience of the guilt he wrote about.

With reference to the last lines of “Feud,” Peter Balakian writes that there is only one apparent solution to Roethke’s Hawthornian feud with the human fallen condition: “Reconciled to the impossibility of recovering a prelapsarian world, the best the poet can do is penitence to purify the self [...]: ‘The spirit starves / Until the dead have been subdued’” (Balakian 1989: 22). The last lines of the poem seem to express an attitude of rebellion rather than acceptance and penitence: since “the dead” are a part of the poet, he feels that he must kill a part of himself in order to free himself from them. Nevertheless, in 1960, when Roethke commented on the poem, he had changed his mind and acknowledged that, as John Peale Bishop had told him, “the dead can help us”: we need to be reconciled with our roots in order to be reconciled to ourselves (Roethke 2001: 39).



when read thoroughly and in light of his other works, these poems confirm my theory that Roethke did not conceive the Fall as an event but rather as a process. Such a process naturally and unavoidably takes place, in the life of every individual, through specific steps; moments when one desires, and at the same time fears, self-actualization through the separation from one's parents, the acquisition of knowledge and awareness, the acquisition of experience (both sexual and non), and so on. The death of his father brought this process to completion for Roethke. Yet, it also provoked a degeneration of the natural conflicts the poet harbored within himself and a serious radicalization of his existential estrangement. The question of whether the causes of Roethke's illness were organic or caused by psychic traumas (notably Otto's death) is left open by Seager. Nevertheless, our reading of the narratives will confirm that the personal loss suffered by Roethke on the threshold of his adolescence created a fracture in his psyche and his inner world that would later threaten his mental health. This is the reason for which one of the instruments he will later use to try to overcome his condition of radical estrangement is the exploration of his past, in an attempt to find a pacification with "the dead."

The adult poet's painful state of radical estrangement described in "Feud" and "Prognosis," with its related inner conflicts and its feelings of inadequacy and guilt, is essentially the state that – as the poems analyzed in the next subchapter will testify – he sought to escape through detachment (or *Abgeschiedenheit*) and the mystical union with a higher reality, whose existence he perceived in fleeting moments of illumination.

### **1.3 – The Mystical Quest: the *Abgeschiedenheit*... and the Return to the World**

While the manic crisis the poet experienced shortly before being hospitalized in 1935 allowed him to temporarily rise above the constraints of existence and enjoy a state of fullness, what followed was a sort of "new Fall" in the world of divisions, conflicts, and unresolved tensions. Roethke's poems about

life in the sanitarium describe the outcomes of such “relapse.” Once again, trapped in his predicament and afflicted with melancholy, the poet turns to his tormented inner struggle, as in “Lines upon leaving a Sanitarium,” or the futile and passive wait for a new “visitation,” as in “The Gentle.” In the latter work the narrow spaces of the sanitarium, filled with meaningless “prating,” become an objective correlative of the oppressive spiritual condition suffered by the poet, who is once again subject to the limitations he tries to escape:

[...]

The son of misfortune long, long has been waiting

The visit of vision, luck year overdue,

His laughter reduced the sing-song of prating,

A hutch by the EXIT his room with a view.

[...]

(Roethke 1991: 27)

In the first draft of the posthumous “Lines upon leaving a Sanitarium” the poet’s search for a source of relief within and outside himself proves to be in vain, as well. Contemplation is ineffectual while “brooding leads to blank despair” and introspection is “bound to kill / all hope, and enervate the will” (cit in: Bowers 1982: 17-18). While contemplation of the outer, natural world will become an important subject in Roethke’s later poetry, “brooding” and introspection, meant as both self-analysis and exploration of one’s past, have been fundamental aspects of his work from the very beginning. Far from relieving the poet, his inner search wears him out. As Roethke would later write in his notebooks from the forties, “many meditations destroy.” Still, introspection and “brooding” sometimes engender fleeting intuitions: “Long, fruitless introspection, characteristic of the German, relieved by occasional dim flickers of insight. Like a half blind animal that at best can see no colors but gray, he broods and broods” (Roethke 1972: 147). In this entry the insights momentarily grasped by the poet are compared to deeper and more truthful visual “perceptions” of reality than those offered by limited human sight. Attempting to capture them is like being half blind and trying to see

colors. In other words, the faculty of intuition can be metaphorically described as a sort of enhanced sight.

Mystics often described the intuitive knowledge of the divine in terms of the senses, referring to “spiritual sight and hearing” (Losskiĭ 1938: 20). In Dickinson’s “You’ll know it - as you know ’tis Noon -” (J420) such “knowledge,” due to its immediacy, is compared to sight:

[...]

By intuition, Mightiest Things

Assert themselves - and not by terms -

"I'm Midnight" - need the Midnight say -

"I'm Sunrise" - Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence - had not a Tongue -

His lisp - is Lightning - and the Sun -

His Conversation - with the Sea -

"How shall you know"?

Consult your Eye! (Dickinson 1960: 200-201)

According to “Just lost, when I was saved!” (J160), the Absolute will be similarly “perceived” at the moment of death, when it will be possible for “the things to see / By ear unheard, / Unscrutinized by eye –” (Dickinson 1960: 75-76).

In Roethke’s “The Signals” the visions that the poet’s spiritual sight unexpectedly allows him to catch a glimpse of are as fleeting and partial as the insights described in his aforementioned notebook entry:

Often I meet, on walking from a door,

A flash of objects never seen before.

As known particulars come wheeling by,

They dart across a corner of the eye.



They flicker faster than a blue-tailed swift,  
Or when dark follows dark in lightning rift.

They slip between the fingers of my sight,  
I cannot put my glance upon them tight.

Sometimes the blood is privileged to guess  
The things the eye or hand cannot possess. (Roethke 1991: 8)

The metaphorical description of insights as fleeting visual perceptions is followed by a clear distinction between them and the perceptions of “real” eyes and exterior senses in general. Insights come out of “blood,” which is the organ of intuition and has a positive meaning in “The Signals,” unlike in other previously analyzed poems.

The first stanza of “Dream,” an early unpublished poem about the limits of the human cognitive faculties, once again compares the impossibility of knowing true reality to the impossibility of seeing clearly:

A tangle of disorder vexed my sight  
That strained to follow a consistent thread,  
The strand that tied me to the tethered dead.  
Patient, I picked beneath a dimming light.  
(cit in: Bowers 1982: 52)

The obstacle in the way of the full apprehension of truth – or perception of the “light” – about which the poet writes is his instinct to approach truth as if it were “consistent,” thus understandable by reason. The intervention of the rational faculties in the attempt to grasp something which can only be known through intuition makes the endeavor impossible to accomplish. The limits of reason are more clearly stated in “The Adamant,” where truth or “true substance” is compared to a stone which cannot possibly be penetrated by human thought:

Thought does not crush to stone.  
The great sledge drops in vain.  
Truth is never undone;  
It's shafts remain.

The teeth of knitted gears  
Turn slowly through the night,  
But the true substance bears  
The hammer's weight.

Compression cannot break  
A center so congealed;  
The tool can chip no flake;  
The core lies sealed. (Roethke 1991: 9)

Nevertheless, there are rare moments of illumination when supernatural reality unexpectedly and spontaneously reveals itself to the poet. It is not “understood” but “felt” with the same clarity of visual perception. One of these moments is described in “In the Time of Change” (published by *The Atlantic* in 1937), where past and present suddenly split allowing the poet to briefly see, in between them, “the shape of an eternity”:

[...]  
But in the time of change, a rare  
illumination fills the air.  
There is a shift, a holy pause  
Between what is and what it was.  
The senses quicken with delight;  
The scene grows pure upon the sight.  
Our fixity is lost; the eyes  
Look out with passionless surprise,  
And in that instant we may see  
The shape of an eternity. (cit in: Blessing 1974: 37)

Though ambiguous, the line mentioning the senses that “quicken with delight” most likely alludes to the spiritual senses about which mystics wrote. A full and sudden intuition is also described in “Genesis,” where it is nevertheless compared to an alternative form of “understanding” rather than to a spiritual kind of sight: intuition is like an “elemental force” lying within the brain, a “pearl” or “grain” around which sometimes “new meaning grows immense” (Roethke 1991: 17).

As Malkoff, Wolff, and Bowers point out, the contrast between intuition and analytical thinking is a fundamental subject in Roethke’s early poetry, together with the contrast between body and spirit. Bowers in particular thoroughly analyzed the relationship between the analysis-intuition and body-spirit dichotomies in Roethke’s early work, also relying on the reading of his most didactic unpublished poems concerning these subjects (Bowers, 1982: 53). As Bowers’ research reveals, Roethke’s “movement from logic and flesh to intuition and spirit corresponds closely to the mystical stages of awakening and purgation” described by Underhill in *Mysticism* (Underhill 1955: 49). The moment of awakening, or intuition of the existence of a superior reality, epitomized by “The Signals” is followed by the moment of purgation when “the body is abjured in an effort to elevate the spirit. It is a cleansing process undertaken by the individual in the attempt to make himself worthy of the vision of ultimate truth.” At the origin of the process of purgation is the assumption that “the spirit is capable of apprehending true reality but is held back by the flesh” and the flesh-bound senses (Bowers 1982: 59). “Epidermal Macabre” provides a testimony of Roethke’s early tendency to demonize the body:

Indelicate is he who loathes  
The aspect of his fleshy clothes, –  
The flying fabric stitched on bone,  
The vesture of the skeleton,  
The garment neither fur nor hair,  
The cloak of evil and despair,

The veil long violated by  
Caresses of the hand and eye.  
Yet such is my unseemliness:  
I hate my epidermal dress,  
The savage blood's obscenity,  
The rags of my anatomy,  
And willingly would I dispense  
With false accouterments of sense,  
To sleep immodestly, a most  
Incarnadine and carnal ghost. (Roethke 1991: 18)

In reference to “Epidermal Macabre” in 1963, Roethke states:

[...] the young often do have an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body. Thus I remember marking this feeling in a violent little poem [...]. [It is an] Hyperbole, of course, but behind it there is still the same desire for a reality of the spirit.” (Roethke 2001: 38)

In fact, the human being sometimes feels “a real hunger for reality more than the immediate: a desire not only for a finality, for a consciousness beyond the mundane but a desire for quietude, a desire for joy.” According to Roethke, “this desire is what the drunkard, the saint, the mystic hankers for in varying ways: – a purity, a final innocence [...] Americans are very wistful about it.” (Roethke 2001: 36). In other words, in Roethke’s early poetry the demonization of the body is dictated by the desire to grasp the reality that hides beyond the one we know through the body’s “false accouterments of sense.” Roethke tends to demonize physical desires as well (that consequence of the Fall that is defined as *concupiscentia* in the Bible) because they distract human beings from the deep spiritual longing for fullness that is actually at the source of all the other desires, preventing them from fulfilling it. In 1945 he still writes in his notebooks: “I am in the pits still; in the mire, spiritually. I cannot seem to throw away the sensuality that is a part of me” (cit. in: Parini

1979: 46). As long as it keeps us anchored to our predicament, the body is thus “the cloak of evil and despair.”

The conception of the body as an obstacle to the apprehension of the Absolute is also expressed in “Prayer before Study”:

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

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

I would put off myself and flee  
My inaccessibility.

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

Deliver me, O Lord, from all  
Activity centripetal. (Roethke 1991: 23)

The title of this poem might refer to the most popular “prayer before study,” namely “Creator Ineffabilis” by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’ prayer is a plea for liberation – through direct divine intervention – from the condition of “sin and ignorance” that afflicts human beings, limiting their cognitive faculties:

[...] do Thou, who art in truth the fountain of light and wisdom, deign to shed upon the darkness of my understanding the rays of Thine infinite brightness, and remove far from me the twofold darkness in which I was born, namely, sin and ignorance. (Schmidt, Stickney 2012: 29)

What Roethke is likely preparing to undertake is not a real “study” but a spiritual quest based on intuition. Still, in order to start such a quest he must

free himself from the constrictions imposed on him by his “coat of unessential skin.” Once again, the body with its limited senses prevents the poet from knowing what hides beyond the material world, reducing his quest to a vain and meaningless “centripetal activity” and caging him in a narrow existential dimension.

In Roethke’s early work the rejection of the body goes hand in hand with the attempt to purify the spirit, making it naked or “spare.” This is the subject of “Open House,” the programmatic poem that lends its name to the collection:

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

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

The anger will endure,  
The deed will speak the truth  
In language strict and pure.  
I stop the lying mouth:  
Rage warps my clearest cry  
To witless agony. (Roethke 1991: 3)

As Roethke would explain years later, when writing “Open House” he was “going through [...] a stage that all contemplative men must go through.”

What he was trying to keep “spare” in his “desire for the essential” was not “the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego; it is a simple word: *myself*, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will. The spirit or soul – should we say the self, once perceived, *becomes* the soul?” (Roethke 2001: 37). In “The Auction” the act of making one’s self “naked” and turning it into pure soul is symbolized by the act of selling all one’s “belongings”:

Once on returning home, purse-proud and hale,  
I found my choice possessions on the lawn.  
An auctioneer was whipping up a sale.  
I did not move to claim what was my own.

“One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare;  
Illusions’ trinkets, splendid for the young;  
Some items, miscellaneous, marked ‘Fear’;  
The chair of honor, with a missing rung.”

The spiel ran on; the sale was brief and brisk;  
The bargains fell to bidders, one by one.  
Hope flushed my cheekbones with a scarlet disk.  
Old neighbors nudged each other at the fun.

My spirits rose each time the hammer fell,  
The heart beat faster as the fat words rolled.  
I left my home with unencumbered will  
And all the rubbish of confusion sold. (Roethke 1991: 20)

After getting rid of “the rubbish of confusion” – all the feelings and false conceptions through which external reality affects the flesh-bound ego (fear, pride, honor, illusions) – the poet imagines to leave behind him the flesh-bound ego itself, epitomized by the house, and start his quest as a pure soul.

As the analysis of these poems shows, Roethke’s poetry from the thirties never describes the direct experience of the mystical union that could follow

illumination (as we have seen, the union is only imagined); rather, it is a testament of the poet's attempt to prepare himself for it. Besides the rejection of analytical thought in favor of intuition, such preparation implies the mortification of the body and the senses, and the preservation of the "spare spirit." The last two endeavors imply the detachment from earthly things and oneself – efficaciously illustrated by "The Auction" – which Eckhart calls *Abgeschiedenheit*. These two acts of renunciation are in fact greatly related insofar as when the human being renounces to deal with worldly things he renounces to something that strongly contributes to making him determinate and finite (Klein 1978: 79-80).

Paradoxically, Roethke's early escape from the world – his desire to grasp the "true substance" transcending it – will result in a return to the world itself, more precisely an immersion into nature. According to Eckhart, when the mystic becomes aware of the nothingness of earthly things he also becomes aware of their divine foundation: since things have no being they must exist because God confers His Being to them. This means that every creature is full of the Being of God. All things exist in God who, at the same time, infinitely extends beyond them. When seen in light of this panentheist view, the world becomes a theophany, and a place of encounter with God (Klein 1978: 11-15). The change Roethke's poetry went through in the transition from *Open House* to *The Lost Son and other Poems* demonstrates a similar "reversal" of perspective. While Dickinson's perception of the divine presence in nature as extremely elusive led her to seek a "dialogue" with a transcendent deity, Roethke followed an opposite path in his first three collections of poems. In *The Lost Son and other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* nature becomes the context of the poet's investigation about God and his attempts to acquire a right perception and harmonious, mystical, relation with Him and his creation.

Admittedly, the change marking Roethke's work in the forties is not sudden and unpredictable. As Stiffler explains "there are two Theodore Roethkes displayed in the poetry, each of whom offers a way of overcoming alienation and a way of arriving." The different attitudes of these two figures "coexist and often collide within individual books and even within individual



poems but at different points of Roethke's career one or the other of the two takes precedence." The first Roethke is – in spite of his faith in the power of intuition – a “reflective and philosophical man” who “values spirit over flesh and reaches out of himself toward the light, leaving behind the body” while the second is more sensual, intuitive, and prone to “experiencing rather than articulating the ‘eternal things’” through contact with nature. “Of the two Roethkes, the second comes to the fore in *The Lost Son and other Poems*, but it takes some effort to detect this Roethke in the poems of *Open House*” (Stiffler, 1986: 2-3). In the next chapter we shall make this effort in order to show how Roethke's conception and representation of the relationship between man and nature evolves through time.

**“When Flowers Grew, their Bloom Extended Him”:  
God’s Immanence and Transcendence  
in the Greenhouse Poems**

When Theodore Roethke published *The Lost Son and Other Poems* in 1948 his contemporaries witnessed a significant change in his work. After demonstrating a mastery of traditional verse forms and a remarkable skill in conscious imitation of the style of other poets in *Open House*, Roethke proved capable of performing several forms of experimentation through a deeply personal voice. Roethke’s second collection is also a testament to the new turn taken by his spiritual quest: while *Open House* documents Roethke’s effort to achieve a spiritual union with a transcendent God through the detachment from the material world, in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* nature becomes grounds for the poet’s investigation about a both immanent and transcendent deity and the context of his effort to establish a deep communion with it.

These novelties led most scholars to consider the publication of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* as a complete breaking point in Roethke’s literary production and, in some cases, even to neglect and dismiss his earlier work as unrelated to his most original accomplishments. It is my opinion that another perspective should be adopted in the analysis of Roethke’s first two collections and the transition from one to another. In fact, not only does Roethke’s poetry from the forties present significant elements of continuity with his earlier work; it can be more deeply understood in light of themes, motifs, and philosophical conceptions that appear and are dealt with in *Open House*. Indeed, such themes, motifs, and conceptions re-appear, evolve and interact with each other in the second and the third collection, reaching their full philosophical development and imaginative expression. In *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* Roethke continues to deal with the state of separation from God and the progressive estrangement from Him, the existential consequences and the psychic dangers of such estrangement,

the longing for a deep communion with God, the need for Grace or Love and acceptance, the figure of his father and his death, childhood and the process of the personal fall, the loss of innocence, and the inherited curse. The retrieval of these elements within the context of a nature poetry that – as I will show – reveals a deep philosophical and imaginative kinship with the Calvinist theology of nature is a testament to the continuity of Roethke's involvement in the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition.

In order to fully appreciate the so called "Greenhouse Poems" composing the first section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, it is important to make a distinction between their literal and their philosophical meaning, as well as to understand how the two relate to each other. The Greenhouse Poems are essentially memories from the poet's childhood in the greenhouse run by his father until 1922, a few months before his death. In the poems, the child's complex relationship with his father-florist and the nature of the greenhouse itself both determine and become symbolic of his relationship with God and His creation.

Roethke's conception and representation of God thus undergoes a significant evolution in the transition from *Open House* to *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. On one hand the poet's full adoption of a panentheist worldview – whose premises were already identifiable in *Open House* – leads him to regard nature as a part of God, as something which God permeates and at the same time infinitely transcends. On the other hand, on the imaginative level, the deity acquires the features of a "personal God," symbolically identified with the father-florist, whose love becomes a necessary condition for the achievement of a harmonious relationship with Him and His creation.

In spite of God's immanence, the sense of separation and even estrangement from Him that the poet expresses in *Open House* persists and goes hand in hand with his estrangement from the nature in which He manifests Himself. Once again, separation is at the heart of the poet's sense of fallenness, physical and spiritual incompleteness, guilt, and anxiety. In fact, in accordance with Roethke's view of the personal Fall as a process that begins in the early years of life, the young protagonist of the Greenhouse

Poems has already started experiencing all these feelings, albeit in a primitive and only partially conscious manner.

The conception of nature and the human being's relationship with it conveyed in the Greenhouse Poems presents significant points of contact with the pre-Romantic Calvinist theology of nature and its particular formulation expressed by American theologian Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century, more so than with the Emersonian philosophy of nature. Like Luther, John Calvin had a panentheist view of nature but he insisted on the distance and inscrutability of God more than on His closeness to individual creatures. Calvin embraced the Judeo-Christian conception of nature as a second book of revelation, according to which, even though nature was corrupted by the Fall, it is scattered with symbols of God's Being and design. Still, in accordance to his view of the deity as a *numinous* entity, he conceives such symbols as "momentary, disappearing, and self-negating," only graspable in extremely fleeting moments of illumination (Tillich 1968: 263).

American Puritans from the seventeenth and eighteenth century like Cotton Mather adopted a view of the book of nature that was more similar to the medieval view than to Calvin's: they studied the natural world in order to discover in its order stable and univocal symbols of divine laws. In his scientific and philosophical writings, Jonathan Edwards also combines a scientific interest in natural beings and phenomena and the will to find in them images of supernatural realities. Still, unlike Cotton Mather, by beginning with the "Personal Narrative" recounting his conversion, he stresses the way the spiritual condition of the observer affects his perception of nature (Sampietro 1987: 357). According to Edwards, the Spirit of God only occasionally acts upon the natural man, and in doing so affects his perception of nature, but It endows the regenerate with a "new sense of things," allowing him to fully perceive the glory of creation and enhancing his ability to see attributes of the divine essence and hints of the providential plan mirrored in it (Lowance 1980: 279-280). In fact, in Edwards' thought, the main dogmas of Calvinist Orthodoxy coexist with a mystical conception of the apprehension, or "sensible knowledge," as he called it, of divine truths.

This conception, historically stressed by Protestant heretics, was actually conveyed by the doctrine according to which God communicates his Grace directly to the soul of the individual.

After his conversion, Edwards studied the book of nature using the instruments of Biblical typology, which searched for images, figures and events (referred to as types) in the Old Testament that prefigured and found fulfillment in images, figures and events from the New Testament, or pointed to eternal fragments of God's Being and design (both referred to as antitypes). The American theologian sought in the natural world similar types, mostly eschatological symbols, often of Biblical derivation, with which he filled his notebooks and his sermons and which, according to Perry Miller and his disciples, later evolved in Emerson's secular correspondences.

Like Dickinson, Roethke shares with Calvin and Edwards both the awareness of nature's fallenness and the sense of the divine presence in it. The two poets often express restlessness in front of the manifestation of death and decay afflicting the natural world and – although Roethke's perception of God and his manifestations is less elusive than Dickinson's – both describe moments of illumination in which the human conscience grasps and decodes one of the symbols pervading nature. The state of estrangement from nature experienced by the protagonist of the Greenhouse Poems as well as the rarity of the fleeting illuminations that he is faced with suggest that his existential condition is similar to the one experienced by Edwards' "unregenerate," who only occasionally benefits from the assistance of the Spirit of God in his investigation of the reality surrounding him.

In the two Greenhouse Poems describing the young poet's moments of insight, Roethke recovers eschatological symbols of Biblical origins reminiscent of those employed by the literary Protestant tradition. More precisely, they call to mind the vegetal symbols identifiable in seventeenth-century religious lyric poetry – especially Vaughan's –, Blake's poems about flowers which freely draw inspiration from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem books, Dickinson's poems which conventionally rely on natural typology, and, occasionally, Thoreau's prose.

## 2.1 – The Greenhouse Poems and the Calvinist Theology of Nature

The Greenhouse Poems significantly relate to the vast and complex American tradition born from the Calvinist theology of nature that – according to the historians of ideas who followed the footsteps of Perry Miller from the thirties onwards – evolved, through time, in Jonathan Edwards’ and later Emerson’s philosophies of nature.<sup>7</sup> Roethke was familiar with the different stages of this tradition and in the forties he was led by his sensibility and personal experience to adopt a view of nature that was closer to Calvin’s and Edwards’ more so than to Emerson’s.

In a letter from 1947 to Léonie Adams, Roethke claims that he studied the earlier writers with little interest when he was a student in Ann Arbor. Nevertheless, he was familiar with their work (Roethke 1968: 104-105). American academia of the thirties and the forties was characterized by the awakening of a new interest in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American literature and culture, and their elements of continuity with the national literature of the nineteenth century. One of the first proponents of a more thorough study of the history of American literary and intellectual civilization was Howard Mumford Jones, professor of English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor from 1930 to 1936. In 1944 Jones published a collection of essays written in the previous decade entitled *Ideas in America*. The book complained of the scarce attention given to American studies by English departments and periodicals and encouraged American scholars to focus their research on the “baffling process by which a transplanted European culture has been changed [...] into the unique American thing” thus developing a “comprehensive and illuminating history of ideas, of morals, and of taste in the United States” (Jones 1944: viii). According to Allan Seager, one of the courses that Roethke attended in the summer session of 1930 concerned “American Literature up to the Revolution” (Seager 1968: 65). The University of Michigan’s general course catalog which describes the degree programs in English and their course

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<sup>7</sup> See in particular Perry Miller’s portraits of Jonathan Edwards as a precursor of American Transcendentalism: “From Edwards to Emerson,” (1940) and *Jonathan Edwards* (1949).

offerings shows in that period a course, taught by Jones, called “Studies in American Literature of the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods.” The themes studied in the course included:

investigations in Colonial American writers; influence of French and English attitudes and writings upon American writers; effect of American environment upon writers emigrating from Europe to America; emergence of typical tendencies in American writers. (Bulletin of General Information, 1929-1930: 137)

The program required the reading of works by Cotton Mother, William Byrd, St. John the Crevecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Imlay, and William Bartram. It is not specified which texts were read and analyzed during the course and, specifically, which texts by Edwards were studied, though a plausible hypothesis can be made. When in 1935 Jones edited, along with Ernest E. Leisy and Richard M. Ludwig, an anthology of American literature entitled *Major American Writers* he inserted in it Edwards’ “Personal Narrative”, “The Story of the Conversion of Sarah Pierrepont,” and two short philosophical essays entitled “Of Being,” and “Concerning the Notion of Liberty and moral Agency.” The only anthology containing works by Jonathan Edwards published before 1930 was Carl Van Doren’s *Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards: Selections from their Writings* (1920), which includes, among other things, the first three texts later published by Jones in his anthology, passages from Edwards’ diary, and sections of “Things to be considered, or written fully about” like “On the Growth of Trees,” and “Continuous Creation” (Minkema 2004: 668). Roethke kept in his personal library a copy of Mark Van Doren’s *The Oxford Book of American Prose*, including the “Personal Narrative,” perhaps the most relevant and studied text by Edwards at the time.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Although Roethke spent the 1930-1931 academic year at Harvard, when Perry Miller started to teach there, it is not possible to ascertain whether he attended Miller’s first course in 1931. We only know that Millers’ name is noted in one of Roethke’s notebooks from 1939.

While *Major American Writers* allows us to presume which of Edwards' texts Jones' students had to read, his essays on the History of ideas found in *Ideas in America* suggest much about the possible theoretical orientation of his course. Of particular interest are Jones' theses about the essentially Protestant nature of American culture and his objection to Parrington's popular antithesis between an American "Classic" and a "Romantic" period, against which he posited the continuity of American spirit since the colonial era. In "The drift to Liberalism in American Eighteenth Century," after comparing passages from Cotton Mather's, Jonathan Edwards', and Emerson's works, he argues that "although some writers have spoken of Transcendentalism as a revolt against Calvinism, an intellectual revolution, or what not, others have, I think more wisely, traced its sources upward to the 17<sup>th</sup> century" (Jones 1944: 118). Thus

if we are to understand the historic function of the various American 'romanticisms,' we must turn to that epoch of American literary history, which, since the days of Moses Coit Tyler, has scarcely been explored; we really must begin by discovering what the 19<sup>th</sup> century really owes to the colonial period. (Jones 1944: 120)

It is thus probable that Jones' teaching partially focused on a confrontation between the Calvinist theology of nature, Edwards' philosophy of nature, and Emerson's thought, as well as the worldviews underlying them, from a perspective of continuity and evolution bringing to light both points of contacts and differences. When Roethke wrote the Greenhouse Poems he embraced several fundamental aspects of the pre-Romantic view of nature, and its related philosophical notions such as the panentheist conception of the natural world, the fallenness of nature, the conception of nature as the second book of revelation, continuous creation, and the existence of a divine design presiding over nature. Moreover, as we will see in the next subchapters, he chose to give religious, eschatological meaning to the rare spiritual symbols encountered by the child in the greenhouse.



According to Roethke, “a book should reveal as many sides of a writer as it is decent for him to show” and all of them should “be brought together in some kind of coherent whole that is recognizable to the careful reader. This means that some poems will support other poems either by being complements to them, or by providing contrasts” (Roethke 2001: 31). The Greenhouse Poems in particular should be read with the last sentence in mind. Each of them can be read independently from the others, but when read all together, as a sequence, they reveal an articulate world, as well as the nature of the two figures inhabiting it and their complex relationship. In fact, though most of the poems are detailed descriptions of flowers, plants and natural processes, the presence of the working florist and the observing child is always implicit.

Roethke wrote most of the Greenhouse Poems (as well as the narratives included in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*) between 1945 and 1946, shortly before and after a new bout of mania that would lead him to undergo shock therapy at Albany General Hospital and spend a few weeks in a nursing home. At that time writing the sequence allowed him to remember his childhood in close contact with nature in the greenhouse and the father-gardener who dominated it, rediscovering ancient fears and turmoil deriving from his interaction with both. In other words, it would seem Roethke used poetry as a therapeutic instrument to explore his past and find in his childhood the roots of traumas whose consequences he suffered in his present life. According to Parini, Roethke frequently returned to the painful memory of the death of his father in his poetry in the hope to achieve – through its elaboration – “that final atonement where conflicts are abolished” (Parini 1979: 8). As the Greenhouse Poems testify the poet needed to dig even deeper into his past in order to try to find peace. The practice at the core of psychoanalysis, to trace the roots of one’s present malaise back to one’s early years of life, is coherent with Roethke’s view of childhood as a moment of life when the process of the personal Fall has already begun. In the Greenhouse Poems the advancement of this process is revealed by the primitive form of anxiety felt by their young protagonist.

In the Greenhouse sequence past events are remembered as they were lived by the child, yet they are charged with the complexity of the awareness of the adult who remembers them. As a consequence, at times the boundaries between past and present merge in a single poem. Indeed, “Cuttings (*later*)” and “Carnations” describe spiritual processes and aspirations that the reader might be more prone to attribute to the inner life of an adult. This ambiguity is also suggested by the shifts in verb tense that occur in the transition from one poem to another.

Though recollecting the time when his father was alive and analyzing the nature of his relationship with him was painful for Roethke, his immersion in the memory of the greenhouse was not entirely pleasant, either. As Roethke himself acknowledges, rather than an Eden, the greenhouse where he spent his childhood was to him “both heaven and hell” (Roethke 2001: 22). It was a marvelous and extremely fascinating world, but it also presented disquieting aspects that troubled him, such as sickness and decay that affected the plants, and their most chaotic impulses of growth. Before the publication of the second collection, he wrote in one of his notebook entries: “...A cold paralyzing horror: a glimpse into the subhuman... the sickness of life beginning again: the exhausting awareness of every ache” (Roethke 1972: 154).

The abstract recognition that the gardener guarantees order in the greenhouse does not diminish decay and death in the eyes of the child. On the contrary, these elements make him and his creative activity appear just as ambiguous and mysterious. As Rosemary Sullivan writes, the greenhouse is “a universe complete, exhaustive, with its eschatology of heaven and hell, a moist artificial womb of fecund growth, and a place of death, with the father-gardener, all powerful, all ordering, at its center” (Sullivan 1975: 22). The greenhouse is a rigorously controlled, yet fallen, world, dominated by a figure whose design is perceived by the child as largely inscrutable, and often unsettling in its manifestations.

Several scholars share the opinion that the gardener represents both Roethke’s father and is a symbol of God in the Greenhouse poems. While we will eventually analyze the psychological (thus biographical) and

philosophical reasons and implications for the superposition between the two figures in the poems, it would behoove us to first make some general considerations about the gardener as a symbol of God.

As previously explained, the Greenhouse Poems are not the expression of a pantheism where nature and deity interpenetrate completely, as is often the case in the work of the English and American Romantics. Rather, they are based on the panentheist conception of God as an infinite entity encompassing the universe. This philosophic conception is strongly related to the idea of a deity that is not simply omnipresent, but that continually exerts its creative action on every part of the world in order to achieve its design. According to the notion of “continuous creation” embraced by Jonathan Edwards, God does not create the universe once and for all, but rather creates each individual being in every moment of its existence. In a school essay on Henry Vaughan, Roethke praises the English poet’s ability to express “the sense of divine activity in nature,” an activity he later tried to evoke through the image of the florist symbolizing a mighty God that constantly intervenes on natural beings (cit in: Blessing 1974: 25). The “artificiality” of the greenhouse is thus symbolic of such continuous creative action. This will find suggestive expression in the poem “Otto” (published in 1964 in *The Far Field*), when Roethke writes of his father potting plants: “What root of his ever denied its stem? / When flowers grew, their bloom extended him” (Roethke 1991: 216).

The Calvinist theology of nature stresses the idea that God’s “continuous creation” also involves the agency of evil. In fact, according to a notion that Calvin inherited from Saint Augustine, since God is the source of Being, all existing things depend on Him – even evil. Evil is one of the instruments that God employs to accomplish his inscrutable design, both in nature and in history. In the greenhouse world as well, as Wolff points out, the florist manages his realm by taking care of some plants, while neglecting and even destroying others (Wolff 1986: 34). In “Orchids” the flowers are described as gently guarded babies while in “Forcing House” they are forced to grow into maturity sooner than they would naturally grow. “Root cellar,” by contrast, presents a storage full of dormant bulbs and roots, left to chaotically grow,

while “Flower Dump” describes vegetal waste, dead and dying plants which the florist chooses to discard. More specifically, sickness and death intertwine with life in individual poems (like “Forcing House” and “Flower Dump”) as well as in the whole sequence, which was intended to be a description of the entire life of the greenhouse.

While the idea that the fallen world is part of the Being of God might sound incoherent, there is, in actuality, no contradiction between the notion of fallen nature and the panentheist worldview. In fact, “panentheism does not grant the necessity to draw a line between God and fallen world until redemption occurs.” From a panentheist perspective “there is room for a strong soteriology, but it occurs as transformation of individuals and societies, not as an ontological separation and reunion (after all, a world without God would be nothing at all)” (Clayton 2003: 215). Indeed, as Eckhart believes, if God contains everything, paradoxically, he also contains nonbeing (a necessary condition for becoming and change), and thus evil, meant as finitude and precariousness.

The deity inhabiting the greenhouse is certainly less elusive than the one “haunting” the house of nature in Dickinson’s poems. It constantly manifests its presence to the young poet through its creative action, like Vaughan’s God. Nevertheless, while Vaughan idealizes nature as a place where every creature lives in a condition of delightful communion and communication with God, Roethke, like Dickinson, is troubled by God’s apparent indifference in the face of the suffering and decay of small creatures. More generally, he shares her dismay in front of the imperturbability with which God enacts a design including privation and death within itself (Loreto 1999: 19, 49). This is evident in poems like Dickinson’s “Papa Above!”<sup>9</sup> (J61) and Roethke’s “Flower Dump.” As Jennifer Leader writes, Dickinson doubts the complete goodness and trustworthiness of God (Leader 2016: 109). Roethke, for his part, is not able to disguise the same doubts.

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<sup>9</sup> “Papa above! / Regard a Mouse / O’erpowered by the Cat!” (Dickinson 1960: 32).

Nevertheless, sickness and death are far from being the only subjects of the Greenhouse Poems. The two poems of the sequence in which the creative action of the florist is not implicit but constitutes the main subject of the composition suggest the wonder and admiration that the young poet feels before such a spectacle. After describing the life-giving activity of the florist by focusing on the movements of his working hands, “Transplanting” shows the wonderful result of such work: the stretching of the plant and its buds, lovingly embraced and nurtured by the sun:

Watching hands transplanting,  
Turning and tamping,  
Lifting the young plants with two fingers,  
Sifting in a palm-full of fresh loam, –  
One swift movement, –  
Then plumping in the bunched roots,  
A single twist of the thumbs, a tamping and turning,  
All in one,  
Quick on the wooden bench,  
A shaking down, while the stem stays straight,  
Once, twice, and a faint third thump, –  
Into the flat-box it goes,  
Ready for the long days under the sloped glass:

The sun warming the fine loam,  
The young horns winding and unwinding,  
Creaking their thin spines,  
The underleaves, the smallest buds  
Breaking into nakedness,  
The blossoms extending  
Out into the sweet air,  
The whole flower extending outward,  
Stretching and reaching. (Roethke 1991: 40)

“Old Florist” focuses once again on the marvelous creative activity of a faceless florist, but unlike the previous poem it also mentions the various attitudes he assumes toward different creatures:

That hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums  
Or pinching back asters, or planting azaleas,  
Tamping and stamping dirt into pots,  
How he could flick and pick  
Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,  
Or scoop out a weed close to flourishing roots,  
Or make the dust buzz with a light spray,  
Or drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice,  
Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat,  
Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue in rubber boots.  
(Roethke 1991: 40)

The act with which the florist scoops out weeds close to flourishing roots and kills bugs in order to preserve the life of the most beautiful flowers acquires a new meaning in light of “Weed Puller” and “Flower Dump,” in which the young poet reveals his feelings of kinship with the neglected and discarded plants of the Greenhouse. In “Weed Puller” the child, in charge of pulling out unwanted weeds and vines growing beneath the concrete benches, expresses the feeling of being cut out of the world of the most beloved flowers of the greenhouse, just like the weeds and vines his father chooses to discard:

Under the concrete benches,  
Hacking at black hairy roots, –  
Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes, –  
Digging into the soft rubble underneath,  
Webs and weeds,  
Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,  
Or yanking tough fern-shapes,  
Coiled green and thick, like dripping smilax,

Tugging all day at perverse life:  
The indignity of it! –  
With everything blooming above me,  
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,  
Whole fields lovely and inviolate, –  
Me down in that fetor of weeds,  
Crawling on all fours,  
Alive, in a slippery grave. (Roethke 1991: 37)

While in “Flower Dump” the poet’s sympathy for a dying flower, whose destiny of mortality he shares, will apparently engender resentment, “Weed Puller” only conveys a feeling of discouragement and abandonment. This poem reveals a fundamental aspect of the Greenhouse sequence, charging all the other poems with deeper meaning. The sequence does not simply revolve around the relationship between the child and the nature surrounding him. It also deals with the desire of the child to establish a harmonious relationship with the gardener, to receive from him the same love that the best flowers of the greenhouse receive, and thus be freed from his present condition of death in life (he is now “alive in a slippery grave”). His sense of affinity with the weakest creatures of the greenhouse and his feeling of abandonment engenders in the young poet a condition of spiritual misery which can be healed only through a “regeneration” operated by the love of the gardener. Clearly, “Weed Puller” presents a double level of meaning: the poet longs both for God’s love and for his father’s acceptance.

Unlike “Weed Puller”, “Big Wind” recounts a childhood memory to which Roethke attributes positive meaning. In this poem Roethke remembers a night spent helping his father protect the roses from a windstorm that had left the greenhouse without the water necessary to keep them warm and alive through steam heat. The roses were finally saved by circulating liquid fertilizer through the waterless heat pipes. In the second part of the poem – reminiscent of the episode of the deluge in Genesis – the greenhouse metaphorically becomes a sort of Noah’s Ark which rescues the cargo of roses by bringing them safely through the storm (Phillis 1973: 114):

[...]  
But she rode it out,  
That old rose-house,  
She hove into the teeth of it,  
The core and pith of that ugly storm,  
Ploughing with her stiff prow,  
Bucking into the wind-waves  
That broke over the whole of her,  
Flailing her sides with spray,  
Flinging long strings of wet across the roof-top,  
Finally veering, wearing themselves out, merely  
Whistling thinly under the wind-vents;  
She sailed until the calm morning,  
Carrying her full cargo of roses. (Roethke 1991: 39)

The condition of “achieved serenity” and “closeness to Papa” epitomized by the last lines is also the condition that the child desires to acquire in a stable way (Wolff 1986: 40).

As the aforementioned poems demonstrate, the various contradictory feelings for his father, conveyed both directly and indirectly by Roethke in previous works like “Feud”, “Prognosis,” and “The Reminder,” are even more intricately intertwined in his poetry from the forties. The poet’s relationship with God and nature was significantly affected by his ambivalent relationship with his father. His fear of not being loved by Otto and his deep desire for conciliation with him significantly shaped his feelings for God. This psychological mechanism is revealed by the words he uses in his private notebooks. In an entry dated August 1945 he writes: “Wait. Watch. Listen. Meditate. He’ll come. When? No, I know He won’t come. He doesn’t care about me anymore. No, I mean Him, that great big three-cornered Papa” (cit in: Seager 1968: 166). Far from being a simple literary device, the frequent superposition between his father and God in Roethke’s work is thus rooted in the poet’s personal experience and has deep psychological implications.



Moreover, as Allan Seager explains, since Roethke's "divinization" of the father-gardener is partially influenced by his admirable mastery over nature, Roethke's perception of the two – the father and nature – are strongly interrelated:

The love and fear that he felt for Otto Roethke were the deepest emotions he ever had and his complex feelings for nature were tied to his father, almost as if Otto working Ted in the greenhouse and taking him fishing and for long walks in the woods, had created the woods, the lakes, the carnations. (Seager 1968: 104)

The intertwining of love and fear to which Seager refers is effectively expressed in the widely anthologized "My Papa's Waltz," included in the second section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. In spite of its apparently playful character, "My Papa's Waltz" brings to light complex aspects of the father-and-son relationship. In the poem the tipsy father engages in a dizzying and awkward dance with his son, provoking much confusion:

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt. (Roethke 1991: 43)

Although, as Brendan Galvin writes, Otto Roethke is certainly “a figure of terror to his young son” in this poem, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is an ambivalent mixture of fear and desire of protection in the act with which the son holds his father’s shirt in the last stanza (Galvin 1971: 86).

Years after the publication of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* Roethke would once again offer an ambivalent portrait of his father in the previously mentioned poem “Otto.” Here the admired gardener appears as a powerful and intimidating figure, who, in the eyes of his son, derives his godlike stature from his mastery over the natural world surrounding him. Otto was deeply familiar with the woods surrounding the greenhouse. In the child’s imagination he was like a king that reigned over that land, and at the same time protected it with supreme firmness and authority from whomever tried to violate it:

His hand could fit into a woman's glove,  
And in a wood he knew whatever moved;  
Once when he saw two poachers on his land,  
He threw his rifle over with one hand;  
Dry bark flew in their faces from his shot,  
He always knew what he was aiming at.  
They stood there with their guns; he walked toward,  
Without his rifle, and slapped each one hard;  
It was no random act, for those two men  
Had slaughtered game, and cut young fir trees down.  
I was no more than seven at the time. (Roethke 1991: 216)

The rudeness displayed by the gardener, even toward the plants that he himself cultivated, hid the most powerful life-giving ability, and a deep intimacy with the objects of his creation:

He potted plants as if he hated them.  
What root of his ever denied its stem?  
When flowers grew, their bloom extended him.  
(Roethke 1991: 216)

Otto was “a Prussian who learned early to be rude” and “the youngest son of a strange brood,” a brood capable of both love and violence, which created and ran the greenhouse itself on love and violence (Roethke 1991: 216). Like his ancestors, he was “both a saint and a boor” who did his work by intermittently giving and annihilating life:

A house for flowers! House upon house they built,  
Whether for love or out of obscure guilt  
For ancestors who loved a warlike show,  
Or Frenchmen killed a hundred years ago,  
And yet still violent men, whose stacked-up guns  
Killed every cat that neared their pheasant runs;  
When Hattie Wright's angora died as well,  
My father took it to her, by the tail.  
Who loves the small can be both saint and boor,  
(And some grow out of shape, their seed impure;)  
The Indians loved him, and the Polish poor.  
(Roethke 1991: 216-217)

The words “brood”, “ancestors”, “guilt”, and “impure seed” unavoidably call to mind “Feud”, “Sale”, “Prognosis” and the poet’s feeling of being the victim of an inherited curse that has provoked the loss of an original condition of perfection in his family. This time the origin of the curse that corrupts some seeds of the brood – like the poet – is clearly attributed to an “obscure guilt”

committed in the past by its forefathers (certainly not the stern owners of the “ancestral eyes” who menace the poet in “Feud,” whose memory is lost far back in time, but their descendants mentioned in “Sale”). It would appear that, in the eyes of the child, his godlike father has not been touched by such corruption, while the poet’s “impurity,” his sense of inadequacy previously expressed in “Feud,” lies in the sense of nothingness in front of him.

The superposition between the father and God in the Greenhouse Poems is the result of an evolution of philosophical conceptions and motifs previously encountered in *Open House*. As we have seen in chapter one, according to the worldview underlying Roethke’s poetry, the “fallen condition,” intended as an existential estrangement, in the early life of every individual results concretely in his progressive estrangement from his world – epitomized by nature in Roethke’s poetry of the forties – and his parents. It is a natural and necessary process which, for contingent reasons, occasionally degenerates, menacing the psychic and spiritual well-being of the individual. In the Greenhouse Poems, in which the father and God are juxtaposed, Roethke’s estrangement from the former is not simply a consequence of his estrangement from the Being or God like in *Open House*, but the same symbol of such estrangement. By blurring the line between his longing for a harmonious relationship with the father and his desire for an equally harmonious relationship with God and his creation, Roethke emotionally charges the latter, depriving it of the impersonality of philosophical categories and conveying its intensity to the reader.

As we have seen, and will later see more in depth, Roethke does not idealize childhood as Emerson and Wordsworth do. Nevertheless, there are significant affinities between his view of childhood and the one expressed by Blake in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. As Northrop Frye explains in *A Fearful Symmetry*, real children are not symbols of perfect innocence in *Songs of Innocence*, notably because Blake knows that the ignorance at the core of innocence is not destined to last after birth. Childhood is a phase of human imagination in which the world appears entirely new and at the same time reassuring. “In the protection which the child feels from his parents and his evening prayer against darkness there is the image of a cosmos far more

intelligently controlled than ours.” Still, children grow up in a world where evil does exist and “in every attempt of an adult to console a crying child there is a reminder of the fact that as long as a single form of life remains in misery and pain the imagination finds the world not good enough.” Innocence meant as ignorance and security is in itself extremely fleeting and transient because there is no growth without experience and both are unavoidable. Since, as the poem “Infant Sorrow” suggests, every human being starts feeling pain at the very moment of birth, the progressive loss of one’s innocence is also destined to begin right away. According to Frye, Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* descend from the pastoral convention. Pastorals are congenial to satire as their aim is to highlight the artificiality and corruption of court life and city life and, by contrast, to idealize simple rural existence. Nevertheless, the world that a pastoral idealizes is as artificial as the world it satirizes, and too frail to last. Likewise, the songs of innocence satirize the songs of experience as much as the latter satirize the former. While the songs of innocence make the world of experience appear absurd, the songs of experience make the state of innocence look helpless and unavoidably transient (Frye 1947: 235-237).

In the Greenhouse Poems the child’s original condition of ignorance and security has already begun to erode due to experience. Moreover, the young poet’s progressive estrangement from his father and God has begun to manifest itself through the loss of the feeling of paternal and divine reassurance and protection which, according to Blake, plays a fundamental role, from early on, in the life of every child. Scholars who, like Bowers, present the Greenhouse Poems as a sequence portraying the state of innocence in which children supposedly live overlooked this aspect (Bowers 1982: 91). When Roethke wrote *The Lost Son and Other Poems* he did not wish to recover the relationship with his father (more precisely with his memory) and God that he had as a child. Rather, he wished to acquire a mature and continuously harmonious relationship with both of them for the first time, through the exploration, the elaboration and, hopefully, the consequent overcoming of past anxieties and traumas. This process also involves the pacification with nature and its underlying divine design, which

Roethke examined through his observation of the flowers and plants of the greenhouse.

## **2.2 – The Perception of Nature: From *Open House* to the Greenhouse Poems**

As disclosed in the previous chapter, *Open House* includes poems about nature in which Roethke deals with the American Romantic tradition to which he will later relate in more complex and personal terms, ultimately embracing a pre-Romantic conception of the natural world and the human being's relationship with it. These poems portray a harmonious interaction between the observer and the natural landscape in which deep correspondences between the two occasionally come to the surface. As George Wolff correctly points out, these poems are mostly reminiscent of Thoreau's work (Wolff 1986: 24-25). In Thoreau's view, when the human being retreats from civilization and immerses himself in nature he becomes aware of the deep kinship between his inner, spiritual and intellectual, world and the natural world, as well as the possibilities of self-discovery through the observation of nature. As Mason I. Lowance Jr. explains in *The Language of Canaan*, such realization is accompanied by an awakening of the senses that "unite[s] the individual with universal consciousness" and "enables him to experience life on two levels simultaneously, the literal and the figural": "Thoreau lived out a 'literal' existence" but "he also received through his experience communications of the spiritual world so that certain kinds of experience may in fact bring both the literal and the metaphysical together." As a writer he thus "shaped his recollected episodes to represent the two levels of experience" he had perceived (Lowance 1980: 282).

Thoreau's forays into nature correspond to spiritual journeys which follow the rhythm of the days and the seasons. The particular experiences marking these journeys naturally intertwine with corresponding inner ones, like the enjoyment of the sunrise and the awakening of "some part of us [...] which slumbers all the rest of the day" (Thoreau 2014: 58). Roethke's "The

Light Comes Brighter”, “Slow Season,” and “The Unextinguished” perfectly exemplify this “reconciliation of symbol with event, spirit with flesh, tenor with vehicle, *litera* with *figura*” (Lowance 1980: 283). In these poems, descriptions of natural environments mirror particular spiritual and mental states and processes. “The Light Comes Brighter,” for example, establishes a correspondence between the coming of Spring and the spiritual and intellectual awakening of the viewer:

[...]

And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,  
The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled,  
Will turn its private substance into green,  
And young shoots spread upon our inner world.  
(Roethke 1991: 10)

Likewise, in “Slow Season” the stillness of winter mirrors the poet’s condition of drowsiness (“clear eyes put on the look of sleep” and “the blood slows trance-like in the altered vein”) and at the same time calls to mind the moment in life when “our vernal wisdom moves through ripe to sere” (Roethke 1991: 11). In “The Unextinguished” the fading of sunlight at sunset and its reappearance at dawn correspond to the slumber of the mind at night and its awakening in the morning, when the light “comes tapping at the lid” and “thought crackles white across the brain” (Roethke 1991: 16).

In the three poems an awareness of the correspondences between one’s inner life and the life of nature seems to be dependent upon both intuition and the sense of sight. Indeed, although Roethke demonizes the physical senses in *Open House*, in “Prayer” he values sight above the others, presenting it as nobler:

If I must of my Senses lose,  
I pray Thee, Lord, that I may choose  
Which of the Five I shall retain  
Before Oblivion clouds the brain.

My Tongue is generations dead,  
My Nose defiles a comely Head;  
For hearkening to carnal evils  
My Ears have been the very devil's.  
And some have held the Eye to be  
The instrument of lechery,  
More furtive than the Hand in low  
And vicious venery – Not so!  
Its rape is gentle, never more  
Violent than a metaphor.  
In truth, the Eye's the abettor of  
The holiest platonic love:  
Lip, Breast and Thigh cannot possess  
So singular a blessedness.  
Therefore, O Lord, let me preserve  
The Sense that does so fitly serve,  
Take Tongue and Ear – all else I have  
Let Light attend me to the grave! (Roethke 1991: 8)

Sight is the sense through which we can potentially embrace objects in a “gentle, metaphorical rape,” and grasp their spiritual meaning which, according to Emerson, hides behind their material shape, enjoying a deep intimacy with them. While “The Signals” and other poems analyzed in the previous chapter compare intuition to “spiritual sight,” in “Evening Eye” – an unpublished poem whose draft Roethke sent to Dorothy Gordon as early as 1934 – physical sight becomes the instrument through which the poet strives to achieve illumination:

The (sharp) long eye pins the object fast  
In seeking out a shape of grace,  
And all within (my being's range)  
    (my narrow round) the vision's rim  
Is held transfixed in its place.



The faint stars wane above the hill,  
The moon a laggard course has run,  
And now this minion of the will  
Has bound the sky and land as one.

The leaves are lost in changes, the bough  
Moves out to meet the dying light,  
But soon, caught in a velvet maze,  
The branches vanish on the night.

As if to fathom dusk, the gaze  
Grows wider still; but lashes fall,  
Undone by subtle dark, and eyes  
Are sealed, their lids in summer's thrall. (Roethke 1968: 19-20)

After trying to grasp the object of his observation, perceiving “a shape of grace,” in the second stanza the poet expands the scope of his gaze in order to embrace the whole landscape in its unity. But then night falls and darkness conceals everything from his sight, reminding him the limitations of his visual and intuitive faculties. The object's resistance to the eye's attempt to penetrate it will emerge again in Roethke's highly visual *Greenhouse Poems*.

In the *Greenhouse Poems* the condition of harmonious interaction between the daily and seasonal unfolding of nature and the life of its creatures and the unfolding of the human spiritual world is not the condition in which the child normally lives. The greenhouse does not appear to him as a garden of transparent symbols mirroring his feelings and his spiritual development. The plants and flowers he observes are obscure and ambiguous creatures which instigate in him confused impressions. They reveal to him something about himself, but only as far as he vaguely realizes that, like them, his body is subject to inescapable biological and deterministic laws, and that it shares their mortality. While Thoreau joyously acknowledges the existence of a leaf-shaped “prototype” of creation, likening the human world

to the vegetal world in *Walden*, the protagonist of the Greenhouse Poems occasionally perceives his “material” kinship with the world of plants as a source of anxiety and even revulsion (Thoreau 2014: 198). Only in two rare and fleeting moments of Grace do vegetal elements become spiritual symbols in the eyes of the observer, provoking in him a spiritual reaction.

According to the Romantic view both the human being and nature are unfallen. The lack of a harmonious communion between the two, and the consequent incapability of human beings to perceive the deep connections between the natural and the spiritual world is the result of the corruptive effect of civilization on the “poetic” faculties they possessed in childhood. The individual can thus establish a new, deep connection with nature and a right perception of it by choosing to be immersed in it again. In the pre-Romantic Judeo-Christian culture the idea that nature is fallen coexists with the belief that it is scattered with symbols pointing to fragments of God’s design and attributes of his Being. From Jonathan Edwards’ Protestant perspective, only the intervention of divine Grace can heal the human faculties from the obfuscation afflicting them since birth. It is only after such intervention that the human being will see “shadows and images of divine things” mirrored in nature, truly perceiving nature’s glorious beauty, and trusting the final goodness of the design hiding behind it, in spite of particular manifestations of evil. According to Edwards, the Spirit can indeed operate on the mind of the natural man “as an extrinsic, occasional agent,” but it is on the mind of the regenerate that it acts as a stable principle, bestowing upon him a special perceptive power (Lowance 1980: 279-280). In other words, the right perception of nature, which, according to Emerson and Thoreau, can be spontaneously achieved by the human being through an act of will, is a rare gift in the Calvinist view embraced by Edwards.

The protagonist of the Greenhouse sequence is not the child or the poet who, in Emerson’s view, spontaneously grasps the correspondences running through the natural world, nor is he the regenerate to whom Edwards attributes the ability to read the book of nature. He is a fallen human being in a fallen world, who mostly perceives the latter as opaque and mysterious, if not in rare moments of illumination. He finds himself in a condition akin to

the one that Edwards attributes to those who have not yet experienced regeneration. This is also testified by the insistence with which particular manifestations of death and decay attract his attention and trouble him.

The American Romantics were able to put back into perspective the presence of evil in nature by presenting the latter as a harmonious whole in which particular imperfections disappear. As Emerson writes, nature must be considered as “the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects” (Emerson: 1983: 9). Whitman’s summary of nature as a continually metamorphosing organism allows him to state that death is not real, since it is part of a process that constantly engenders new life. This general belief affects the perception of the particular phenomenon: “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (Whitman 2004: 196). Thoreau writes in his Journals: “There seem to be two sides to this world, presented us at different times, as we see things in growth or dissolution... If we see Nature as pausing, immediately all mortifies and decays; but seen as progressing, she is beautiful” (Thoreau 1906: 328). Unlike Emerson’s, Thoreau’s knowledge of nature was not theoretical but extremely concrete and, as a consequence, he observed in it “impurity” and “decay.” Still, he chose to confine the turmoil and doubts deriving from such observations to his Journals and censure them in *Walden*. According to Stephen Railton the final view expressed in *Walden* (where winter becomes a prefiguration of spring and something that makes spring possible) is actually the result of the final overcoming of the doubts expressed in the Journals (Railton 1972: 212). Edwards himself believed that the aim of creation is the triumph of the Divine Glory meant as the harmonious interaction of every created thing, in spite of particular disharmonies: “God inclines to excellency, which is harmony, but yet he may incline to suffer that which is unharmonious in itself, for the promotion of universal harmony [...]” (Edwards 1994: 323). Still, in his view, the regenerate alone can sense the overall harmony of nature.

In the Greenhouse Poems, the child who looks at nature for the first time focuses on its single elements and phenomena, seeing them in their individuality and immediacy. As a consequence, while he is abstractly aware of the presence of a “divine hand” imposing an overall order upon nature,

manifestations of decay and death do not appear to him as simple links of a chain resulting in the final triumph of life. In his eyes, they constantly intertwine with life and are as concrete and surprising as it is. Only in his narratives will the subject of Roethke's poetry succeed in acquiring a wider perspective of nature.

Before analyzing in detail Roethke's treatment of the plants in each poem of the Greenhouse sequence, it would be worthwhile to briefly focus on the Biblical and literary origin of the metaphor of God as a gardener and plants as eschatological symbols. Bowers writes that the greenhouse and its plants are examples of the images of growth and transmutation that, according to Underhill, were employed by

those who are conscious [...] of the Divine as a transcendent life, immanent in the world and the self, and of a strange spiritual seed within them by whose development man, moving to higher levels of character and consciousness, attains his end, will see the mystic life as involving inward change [...]. (Underhill 1955: 119)

It is my opinion that only in the two opening poems of the sequence – “Cuttings” and “Cuttings (*later*)” – as well as the last poem – “Carnations” – do the plants and their growth become symbols of spiritual “transmutations,” while the other poems do not live up to the reader's possible expectations about the surfacing of such symbols.

The employment of plants and their lives as symbols of regeneration and resurrection is very common in the Bible and in the work of Protestant authors like George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, who draw their vegetal metaphors from the Bible itself, Biblical commentaries, treatises of Biblical typology, sacred emblem books, the works of the fathers and the mystics, and liturgical texts (Durr 1962: 15; Lewalski 1979: 351). Central to the work of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan – for whom Roethke had “a real enthusiasm” – is the Biblical metaphor of God as a gardener and the human being as a plant or a tree on which He acts (Roethke 1968: 104; Lewalski

1979: 199).<sup>10</sup> The fact that the Bible itself was a primary source of inspiration for Roethke is testified by his same statements and the verses that he recorded in his private notebooks of the forties, like Psalm 19:12: “I became to myself a barren land” (cit in: Parini 1979: 64).

In Vaughan’s view, although nature has lost its original perfection because of the Fall provoked by human beings, its creatures – especially plants – are perfect examples of innocence, showing their devotion to God by singing hymns in his praise and striving upward to him. They represent the simple obedience, the passionate and univocal aspiration to God to which Vaughan desires to be able to abandon himself completely (Humfrey 1999: 142-146). This leads him to describe regeneration in terms of the lives of plants. He often writes about a seed planted in the ground of the soul waiting for a beam of Grace to grow. Apparently, on occasion the seed symbolizes the word of Christ, like in the Parable of the Sower, while other times it represents a divine innate element in the human soul, which makes its union with God possible. In the poem “The Seed Growing Secretly,” the seed seems to acquire the latter meaning. Though it may grow under the rain and the beams of Grace, or be hit by the storms and the frosts of sin, the seed never dies. It always lies in the soul, green and alive, awaiting a shower of water or sun that will allow it to sprout (Durr 1962: 23, 29):

[...]

Dear, secret *greenness!* nurst below  
Tempests and winds and winter nights!  
Vex not, that but One sees thee grow;  
That *One* made all these lesser lights.

[...]

What needs a conscience calm and bright  
Within itself an outward test?  
Who breaks his glass, to take more light,

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<sup>10</sup> See John 15: 1-2: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”

For Roethke’s interest in Vaughan see also Bowers (1982: 34-36) and Blessing (1974: 24-26).

Makes way for storms into his rest.

Then bless thy secret growth, nor catch  
At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb;  
Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life, and watch  
Till the white-winged Reapers come! (Vaughan 1976: 277-278)

When the seed is nurtured by the beams and the rain of Grace, the soul finally flourishes like in “Unprofitableness” or “The Morning-Watch”: “O joys! infinite sweetness! with what flow’rs / And shoots of glory my soul breaks and buds!” (Vaughan 1976: 179).

The influence of Vaughan’s work on Roethke’s imagination is already apparent in “Feud” whose third stanza can be read as a reversal of “The Seed Growing Secretly”:

There’s canker at the root, your seed  
Denies the blessing of the sun,  
The light essential to your need  
Your hopes are murdered and undone. (Roethke 1991: 4)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, “Feud” describes a condition of physical and spiritual decay meant as an extreme development of the fallen condition. In this dark poem, far from keeping its greenness, the seed – and, with it, the hope of any possible spiritual renewal – is corrupted, “murdered and undone,” and inexorably deprived of the sunlight it needs in order to grow. On the other hand, Roethke compares the transmutation of the human spirit to the growth of a plant in the first lines of “A Light Brighter,”<sup>11</sup> a poem strongly reminiscent of the second stanza of “Transplanting”:

The spirit moves,  
Yet stays:

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<sup>11</sup> Most likely written in 1949 and published for the first time by *The Kenyon Review* in 1950, to be later included in *The Waking* (1953).

Stirs as a blossom stirs,  
Still wet from its bud-sheath,  
Slowly unfolding,  
Turning in the light with its tendrils;  
[...]  
(Roethke 1991: 10)

There is nevertheless a significant difference between these poems and Greenhouse Poems like “Cuttings (*later*)” and “Carnations.” While in “A Light Brighter” and “Feud” Roethke treats vegetal images as simple metaphors of spiritual conditions, in the Greenhouse Poems, far from being abstract symbols and metaphors, the plants are real. As Stiffler points out, the plants in the greenhouse have a life of their own, independently from the meaning that the human mind occasionally attributes to them. In fact, as we will see, in “Cuttings (*later*)”, “the protagonist dissociates himself from the plants in the conclusion. Their struggle is successful, over, and done by the end of the poem but his has only begun” (Stiffler 1986: 56).

In the next subchapters we will deal in detail with Roethke’s treatment of flowers and plants in the Greenhouse Poems, in order to show how and to what extent each of them mirrors the Calvinist view of nature and relates to the centuries-long, complex American tradition of seeking images of supernatural realities in the concrete world. The poems will be divided into three groups on the basis of their features but analyzed in the order in which the poet assembled them in the sequence, in an attempt to not overlook aspects that might emerge from an intertextual reading.

### **2.3 – “Cuttings”, “Cuttings (*later*)” and Jonathan Edwards’ Natural Typology**

The “diptych” comprised of the two poems “Cuttings” and “Cuttings (*later*)” describes a moment of Grace in which the sudden “perception” of a symbol of resurrection in nature leads the poet to experience a sort of temporary

transcendence of his existential predicament. The concreteness of the described phenomenon and the eschatological meaning it acquires in the eyes of the observer makes it akin to the symbols that Edwards transfers from the Scriptures to the book of nature. In other words, it is strongly reminiscent of the “natural types” or religious, eschatological symbols which – in the transition from early Puritan to Transcendentalist modes of metaphoric and symbolic expression – constituted the direct ancestors of Emerson’s correspondences and which in the nineteenth century sometimes still appear in the work of Dickinson and Thoreau, alongside secular ones (Lowance 1973: 5).

The Judeo-Christian notion that, though nature is fallen, God communicates with humankind through it was supported by passages from the Psalms, the Gospels and the Pauline epistles. In accordance with this view, the Calvinist theology of nature, with which seventeenth-century reformed ministers were deeply conversant, was based on the assumption that every physical phenomenon hides a spiritual truth corroborating God’s teleological purposes revealed in the Scriptures. American Puritan divines and pastors “were expected to be able to give a rational account for God’s systematic design of the universe in consonance with His character” (Leader 2016: 7, 24). In the eighteenth century, the belief that both the Scriptures and nature are sources of divine revelation led Jonathan Edwards to employ the instruments and methodologies of Biblical typology to read the book of nature.

Typology was born as a branch of Biblical exegesis which investigates how images, characters, and events in the Old Testament – or types – foreshadow and are fulfilled by images, characters, and events in the New Testament – or antitypes – each of them related to the coming of Christ and its outcomes. The complex and articulated typological tradition has always had two primary orientations. The conservative, orthodox method – privileged by the Reformers and the Puritans – emphasized the literal meaning of the type, its historical veracity, and the correspondence between type and antitype within the bounds of the Scriptures, while the more liberal method tended to give an allegorical meaning to the type, often reading it as a



Platonic ahistorical symbol. Edwards reconciles the two systems by reading the types both as symbols pointing to fragments of the divine design existing out of time and as symbols of particular historical manifestations of such design. Moreover, he detected such types in the natural world, always marking their eschatological significance (Lowance 1980: 251-253).

In her study on Edward's natural typology and its legacy entitled *Knowing, Seeing, Being* (2016), Jennifer Leader highlights both the elements of innovation and the elements of continuity of Edwards' thought with the pre-existing tradition. Edwards' natural typology is an expression, albeit original, of the Calvinist theology of nature and the tradition of reformed Biblical hermeneutics, as well as contemporary science and philosophy. What resulted from Edwards' synthesis and elaboration of all these elements was a poetics based on the idea of a meaningful relation between the natural and the spiritual world and a tripartite scheme of experience which Leader calls the "knowing/seeing/being-relation": the new sense of things bestowed upon the regenerate by Grace allows him or her to know divine truths through the observation of nature. Such "intimacy of sight" and the "affective" knowledge it engenders provoke a radical transformation of the self in its relation with the divine (Leader 2016: 8).

Though Edwards developed his natural typology and its related poetics throughout his life in various notebooks, treatises, exegetical works, and sermons, their fundamental premises and tracts are already recognizable in the "Personal Narrative," in which Edwards documents the different steps of the conversion he went through in his youth as well as the way it affected his perception of nature and his relationship with it. The first effect of the intervention of the Spirit on the soul is the acquisition of the aforementioned "new sense of things," allowing him to perceive divine glory in the beauty of creation:

[...] my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his

wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. [...] And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm. (Edwards 1932: 37)

Edwards inner change also allows him to see fragments of God's Being and design mirrored in His creatures. After describing his regeneration, in a passage expressing his feelings of communion with God, he writes that the soul of the saint is like:

a little white flower as we see in the spring of the years; low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory; rejoicing as it were in a calm rapture; diffusing around a sweet fragranc; standing peacefully and lovingly, in the midst of other flowers round about; all in like manner opening their bosoms, to drink in the light of the sun. (Edwards 1932: 40)

According to Leader, what this passage illustrates is not simply the relationship between what Edwards will later define as a natural type and its divine antitype. It also presents the way a third element – the subjectivity of the viewer – reacts to the contemplation of such relationship. “Edwards’ apperception of the flower opening its bosom to the sun becomes for him an effective experience (involving both the mind and the emotions) of his own soul in mutual relationship with God.” (Leader 2016: 20).

Edwards relies on this scheme of experience to emotionally involve the listeners of his sermons and provoke in them an intimate change through poetic images, many of which are featured in the notebook entitled *Images of Divine Things*. In the third entry of this notebook, for example, by evoking through plant imagery both Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, both the

human predicament suffered by the listeners and its possible future transcendence, he aims at arousing in them an empathetic participation in Christ's sufferings and allowing them to momentarily enter the future state for which they presently long (Leader 2016: 53).

Many of the types "created" by Edwards were actually inspired from those he found in the Scriptures, or were scriptural symbols which he revitalized. Images of plants and flowers in different stages of their life employed as symbols of spiritual conditions with eschatological implications are common in passages of the Old and New Testament, and Edwards often relied on these particular images.<sup>12</sup>

If, as Hyatt Waggoner points out, "the source from which Emerson felt completely estranged is Biblical," Thoreau, like Edwards, did draw inspiration from the Bible (Waggoner 1984: 651). In *Walden*, after describing the daily and seasonal mutual mirroring of nature and the human spirit, he describes the future destiny of the departed soul through a natural symbol of Biblical origins. When he compares the grass growing again in the springtime to "our human life" that "dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity," he echoes a passage of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where the physical body is compared to a seed from whose death a new spiritual body will be born (Thoreau 1995: 201):

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. [...] So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. (I Cor. 15:35-38, 42-44)

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the Parable of the Sower in the Gospels (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15), Isaiah 17:8, Psalm 1:3, or I Corinthians 15:35-44.

Dickinson also found symbols of a future resurrection in nature. Jennifer Leader widely demonstrates how the poet absorbed the main notions of the reformed typological tradition and Edwards' natural typology through her school textbooks of natural theology and mental and moral philosophy, the Bible aids and the collections of sermons in her family library, the sermons and the lectures she attended, and the people with which she exchanged ideas (Leader 2016: 61-77). In accordance to Jonathan Edwards' theory of the "sensible knowledge," Dickinson believed in the existence of instants of insight, in which the human conscience glimpses general meanings in particular phenomena (Loreto 1999: 36-37). Dickinson mostly created her own original and polysemous types, or creatively manipulated pre-existing ones, and subverted the conventions of traditional typology according to poetic strategies that are "as varied as her attitudes concerning belief and doubt" (Leader 2016: 80; Loreto 1999: 37, 113). In her corpus there are, nevertheless, poems which more conventionally rely on Biblical symbols and the natural typological tradition. Some of these poems concerning the resurrection of the dead – like "The Dandelion's pallid Tube" (J1519), "We should not mind so small a flower" (J81), and "When I count the seeds" (J40) – echo, once again, I Corinthians 15.

In "When I count the seeds" (J40), for example, the poet's perception of the intimate connection between an "earthly type" (the seeds destined to grow into flowers) and its "divine antitype" (the dead who will one day resurrect) arouses in her a temporary feeling of faith in an happy afterlife and a profound acceptance of death:

When I count the seeds  
That are sown beneath -  
To bloom so, bye and bye -  
When I con the people  
Lain so low -  
To be received as high -

When I believe the garden  
Mortal shall not see -  
Pick by faith it's blossom  
And avoid it's Bee,  
I can spare this summer - unreluctantly. (Dickinson 1960: 24)

Roethke's "Cuttings (*later*)" also recovers a Biblical image of vegetal death and rebirth bearing eschatological meaning, and presents what could be defined as "type-antitype-response structure." Still, the response of the observer is not a simple dash of faith like in "When I count the seeds" (also implicit in the passage of *Walden* quoted above). It is a momentary entry into the spiritual state symbolized by the natural phenomenon.

"Cuttings (*later*)" is preceded by its "twin" poem "Cuttings," which focuses in detail on the natural phenomenon which will later become the source of the observer's insight. The two poems should thus be read together. "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (*later*)" describe the outcomes of the practice of cutting a section of a living plant, planting it, and inducing it to struggle to grow and become a new independent life. In the poems such struggle is finally successful:

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,  
Their intricate stem-fur dries;  
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;  
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth  
Nudges a sand-crumble loose,  
Pokes through a musty sheath  
Its pale tendrillous horn.

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,  
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,  
What saint strained so much,

Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?  
I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,  
In my veins, in my bones I feel it --  
The small waters seeping upward,  
The tight grains parting at last.  
When sprouts break out,  
Slippery as fish,  
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet. (Roethke 191: 35)

After describing the almost imperceptible movements of the growth of the sticks in “Cuttings,” in the first two lines of “Cuttings (*later*)” Roethke compares this phenomenon to a “resurrection.” The word “resurrection” anticipates the content of the following two lines, which mention the spiritual experience to which, in the eyes of the observing poet, the phenomenon points. The cut plants which struggle to grow – or to be born again – evoke in his mind the vivid and violent image of saints who, after enduring painful mutilations, rise to a new life. This image is reminiscent both of the sacrifice and the resurrection of Christ, as well as of their “existential meaning”: the sufferings implied by the existential condition in which the human being lives and its possible future transcendence.

The connection between the cut plant growing again and the individual life that may possibly one day resurrect calls to mind Job 14:7-15 rather than the first letter to the Corinthians. In this passage of the Old Testament, overwhelmed by his suffering, Job wonders if he will finally find relief after his death. The Book of Job, later directly quoted in the narratives, is among the annotated books in Roethke’s personal library. It is thus possible that when he wrote “Cuttings (*later*)” he consciously chose to echo this passage:

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is

he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up:  
So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall  
not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep. O that thou wouldest hide me  
in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past,  
that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man  
die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till  
my change come. (Job, 14:7-15)

The second part of the poem, which begins with the personal pronoun “I,” describes the reaction of the viewer to the observation of the phenomenon and the insight engendered by it. The poet’s sympathy for the cuttings as well as his involvement in their “sufferings” – “the sickness of life beginning again” (Roethke 1972: 154) – and the existential predicament they epitomize lead him to experience a deep identification with the plants, which takes the form of an extremely sensual intimacy. By virtue of such identification he undergoes a “temporary spiritual rebirth” which is coeval to the rebirth of the plants.

The mystical character of this experience is evoked through sexual allusions, more precisely through the allusion to emasculation and male sexual release, and their paradoxical juxtaposition. Therefore, the poem does not simply function as a reflection of Job 14:7-15, but as a reversal of the passage. Job’s question – “if a man die, shall he live again?” – expresses Job’s hope in a future transcendence of his predicament, but the mood of the entire chapter is one of desperation. He is completely absorbed in his present suffering. Roethke enacts the spiritual release Job desires to enjoy one day, but he gives such release the form of a temporary resurrection, or a rising above the constrictions of existence, which occurs in this life. Rather than a final regeneration, the poem seems to describe an intense but temporary moment of Grace, whose fleetingness is confirmed by the reading of the following poems of the sequence.

#### **2.4 – The Falleness of Nature in “Forcing House”, “Root Cellar”, “Flower Dump” and “Orchids”**

The four poems which describe plants and flowers subsequent to “Cuttings (*later*)” are significantly different from it. In “Forcing House”, “Root Cellar”, “Flower Dump,” and “Orchids,” far from acquiring clear and univocal spiritual meaning, plants and flowers are obscure and ambiguous entities which elicit complex and variegated impressions in the young viewer and the reader. This aspect is reflected by the structure of the poems. While “Cuttings (*later*)” presents a tripartite structure where what Edwards would call “type” and “antitype” are clearly stated and followed by the reaction of the viewer to the perception of their connection, the four subsequent poems simply describe the plants and flowers in detail, sometimes suggesting the child’s reaction to their observation – as the adult poet recalls – through connotative adjectives and adverbs with different degrees of intensity. Whereas such connotative linguistic elements are completely absent in “Forcing House,” they reach their climax in “Orchids.”

Sometimes the poems evoke aspects of human life which, nevertheless, are not of spiritual or intellectual nature. The “disturbing quality” of the Greenhouse Poems highlighted by Ralph J. Mills is partially due to the child’s intuition that his body is an integral part of the fallen nature which he contemplates and, as a consequence, it is subject to decay, death, and biological and deterministic laws just like it (Mills 1963: 14). Apparently, the still semi-conscious intuition of such “kinship” with the plants does not simply provoke in the viewer a primitive form of anxiety. It sometimes results in a feeling of revulsion that constitutes a reversal of the harmonious interaction with the vegetal elements fleetingly achieved in “Cuttings (*later*).” As Kenneth Burke writes in “The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke,” the “soil” Roethke writes about is “life-laden but sickly.” In fact “Deathly connotations are implicitly there, at the very start, in the account of the cuttings, which are dying even as they strain heroically to live. And there is the refuse of ‘Flower Dump’” (Burke: 1950: 82,87). While in “Cuttings (*later*)”



such fallenness is temporary transcended, in the other poems it is simply portrayed.

In his aforementioned influential essay, Burke explains that “in describing the flowers objectively” Roethke “comes upon corresponding human situations, as it were by redundancy.” Sometimes, in the life of the flowers he vaguely recognizes “subtle human relations and odd strivings, before he could have encountered the equivalent patterns of experience in exclusively human terms” (Burke 1980: 83-34). It is my opinion that in “Forcing House”, “Root Cellar”, “Flower Dump,” and “Orchids” these relations and strivings essentially concern biological impulses directed at the conservation of species shared by all forms of life.

Finally, as Stiffler highlights, in Burke’s view, “the strength of the Greenhouse Poems lies in their suggestiveness.” It is the result of “Roethke’s unwillingness or his inability to state conclusively the significance of the correspondences one might draw between the vegetables and the human being” (Stiffler, 1986: 52). In other words, the adult poet who remembers his childhood in the greenhouse and writes about it does not choose to retrospectively assign a precise meaning to the plants, but to convey the obscure and confuse suggestions and feelings they aroused in him as a child.

The most obscure of the Greenhouse Poems is probably “Forcing House”:

Vines tougher than wrists  
And rubbery shoots,  
Scums, mildews, smuts along stems,  
Great cannas or delicate cyclamen tips, –  
All pulse with the knocking pipes  
That drip and sweat,  
Sweat and drip,  
Swelling the roots with steam and stench,  
Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones, –  
Fifty summers in motion at once,  
As the live heat billows from pipes and pots. (Roethke 1991: 36)

The plants and flowers described in this poem live in a part of the greenhouse where they are forced to grow faster than they would naturally do. Although the presence of the florist is always implicit in the Greenhouse Poems, it is stressed in “Forcing House” by the mention of the steam pipes that produce “fifty summers in motion at once,” keeping the plants warm and artificially enhancing their growth. The allusion to the ground bones feeding the plants recalls the interaction between death and life that was previously displayed, albeit in different terms, by “Cuttings” and “Cuttings (*later*).” Still, in “Forcing House” such interaction does not acquire a spiritual meaning. It is simply presented in its sheer materiality: dead organisms feed other organisms through a cyclic process. The observer (or the reader) who trusts the wisdom of the florist will take for granted that such interaction and the laws to which it responds are part of an ultimately benign design. Still, in the bare representation of the phenomenon there is a quality of mystery that is likely to engender both wonder and inner turmoil.

Unlike “Forcing House”, “Root Cellar” presents linguistic connotative elements which allow the reader to guess the child’s reaction to his observation of the plants:

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,  
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,  
Shoots dangled and drooped,  
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,  
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.  
And what a congress of stinks! –  
Roots ripe as old bait,  
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,  
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.  
Nothing would give up life:  
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath. (Roethke 1991: 36)

“Root Cellar” describes bulbs and roots which have been left to grow larger in the darkness of a dank storage before being planted. They are embryonic forms of life, still dormant and at the same time tenaciously attached to life. Like in the other poems, the vegetal elements are described from a very close perspective, with a sort of intimacy that, nevertheless, ultimately turns into a feeling of revulsion for the poet and the reader. The disturbing quality of the root cellar is not simply due to its humidity, its stink, and the slimy consistency of its contents. The disorderly proliferation of its bulbs and roots once again evokes “the sickness of life beginning again” and, at the same time, the most primitive and tenacious impulses of growth of nature, the voracity with which the youngest creatures seek nurture in manure and “hunt” for sunlight (Roethke 1972: 154).

Critics have written extensively of the sexual implications of the phallic shapes hanging in the cellar – the “shoots dangled and drooped, lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,” and the “long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.” The employment of the words “evil” and “obscenely” suggests that the young poet obscurely associates the chaotic growth of the plants with the surfacing of the sexual instincts that he is beginning to feel, both semi-consciously and anxiously, as if they responded to similar biological laws. As we have seen, the poet already deals with the achievement of sexual maturity in relation to anxiety in “To my Sister” and effectively feels that it is one of the forms of personal development which determine a progressive self-actualization and consequent detachment from the parent figures. According to Brendan Galvin, “there is the possibility that the awakening of sexuality and puberty and the subsequent death of the father were in some way coupled in the boy’s mind” (Galvin 1971: 89). It is also possible that this awakening began to provoke a feeling of guilt before the father’s death, making the poet’s relationship with him more problematic.

Generally speaking, though the author of the Greenhouse Poems clearly values the senses more than he did in the past, he has not yet completely overcome the defilement of the body he so clearly expressed in *Open House*. Such defilement now assumes the form of revulsion for some basic and apparently chaotic impulses which the plants and his body manifest, albeit in

different forms. These impulses are also epitomized by the “devouring” attitude of the “adder-mouthed” orchids, whose need for nourishment is compared by the poet to the voracity of newborn babies (Roethke 1991: 37). The allusions to infants in their cradles is likely meant to create an association between the instincts which dominate over the other undeveloped faculties and the flowers’ “blind” impulses of growth. There is something ambiguous and “deceptive” in these flowers, so “delicate” yet at the same time revealing of a malignant side of nature:

They lean over the path,  
Adder-mouthed,  
Swaying close to the face,  
Coming out, soft and deceptive,  
Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird’s tongue;  
Their fluttery fledgling lips  
Move slowly,  
Drawing in the warm air.

And at night,  
The faint moon falling through whitewashed glass,  
The heat going down  
So their musky smell comes even stronger,  
Drifting down from their mossy cradles:  
So many devouring infants!  
Soft luminescent fingers,  
Lips neither dead nor alive,  
Loose ghostly mouths  
Breathing. (Roethke 1991: 37)

The impulses at the core of “Root Cellar” and “Orchids” find their final annihilation in “Flower Dump,” a still life portraying a heap of dead and dying vegetal waste discarded by the florist:

Cannas shiny as slag,  
Slug-soft stems,  
Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile,  
Carnations, verbenas, cosmos,  
Molds, weeds, dead leaves,  
Turned-over roots  
With bleached veins  
Twined like fine hair,  
Each clump in the shape of a pot;  
Everything limp  
But one tulip on top,  
One swaggering head  
Over the dying, the newly dead. (Roethke 1991: 41)

In “Flower Dump” death is observed in all its concreteness. It does not engender new life like in “Forcing House,” nor does it become a symbol for the step preceding the resurrection, like in “Cuttings (*later*).” Although the description of the plants is objective, a connotative adjective again allows us to guess the feelings of the observer in front of the portrayed scene. The word “swaggering,” employed to describe the tulip on top of the heap of discarded plants, conveys the young poet’s sympathy for the flower and at the same time his resentment and desire for rebellion for having been subjected to its same mortality. It is not clear whether the tulip is “the newly dead” over “the dying,” or if it is over both “the dying” and the “newly dead.” If – as the “but” would seem to suggest – the second interpretation is correct and the flower is still alive, it is still destined to die, after its last “impulse of rebellion.”

As previously explained, in “Flower Dump” the young poet reveals a feeling of kinship with the discarded and neglected plants of the greenhouse, like in “Weed Puller,” but he also expresses a sense of shared destiny with them. In “Flower Dump” the state of spiritual misery in which the poet apparently finds himself does not simply result from his sense of exclusion from the love of the gardener. It also derives from the general feeling of being left at the mercy of his condition of physical fragility and mortality, a

condition whose possible transcendence he will imagine or “dream” in “Carnations.”

## **2.5 – “Carnations” and William Blake’s Elaboration of the Emblem Tradition**

Carnations, the last of the Greenhouse Poems portraying plants, strikingly distinguishes itself from previous poems due to the quality of its language and the plants it describes:

Pale blossoms, each balanced on a single jointed stem,  
And leaves curled back in elaborate Corinthian scrolls;  
And the air cool, as if drifting down from wet hemlocks,  
Or rising out of ferns not far from water,  
A crisp hyacinthine coolness,  
Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,  
The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud.  
(Roethke 1991: 41)

As Kenneth Burke points out, one of the main peculiarities of the Greenhouse Poems is the extreme concreteness of their diction and “a speech wholly devoid of abstractions.” In fact, in the sequence “you will rarely find [...] a noun ending in -ness or -ity” (Burke 1950: 69, 73). “Carnations” is the only Greenhouse Poem in which the flowers, with their “hyacinthine coolness” and their pallor, in spite of their tangibility, become sorts of “abstractions,” ineffable spiritual entities existing outside of time, “in the autumnal weather of eternity.”

The peculiar qualities of the carnations seem to suggest that they become spiritual symbols in the eyes of the observer. If this is in fact the case, the poem should be read – using Parini’s description with respect to “Cuttings” – “as a conceit with half of the metaphor missing, the tenor presented without its vehicle (as in Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’).” (Parini 1979:

72). Blake's poems about flowers like "The Sick Rose" and "The Lilly" indeed have something in common with "Carnations." *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is the result of Blake's personal elaboration of the tradition of secular and religious emblem books born in sixteenth-century Europe. Emblem books were volumes containing images, sometimes of Biblical origin, followed by a motto and an epigram explaining their meaning. In like manner, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is comprised of plates in which the text of each poem interacts with an illustration, though, failing to draw a definite meaning from the interaction, Blake broke the rules and left the meaning open-ended (Höltgen 1996: 137). Nevertheless, there have been various attempts to interpret Blake's poems through the individuation of possible Biblical and literary allusions (as Frye points out, nineteen percent of Blake's literary echoes come from Scripture) as well as intertextual readings.

Seeing that "The Lilly" is on a plate comprised of two other poems concerning flowers ("My Pretty Rose Tree" and "Ah! Sunflower") it has been occasionally interpreted in relation to them. According to Grant, for example, the three poems may symbolically allude to three kinds of love. In such case, the third – epitomized by the lily – would be the most spiritual (Grant 1969: 333, 345). This interpretation is encouraged by the connotations presented by the lily in the Song of Songs, the book of the Old Testament which metaphorically describes the love between the soul of the believer and God.

Likewise, "Carnations" can be read in light of "Flower Dump" (the poem which, significantly, precedes it in the sequence) and possible Biblical and literary echoes. The carnations may very well be symbolic images of souls which, following the death portrayed in "Flower Dump" and evoked by the word "hemlocks," have experienced a resurrection. In other words they could allude to "the spiritual body" of I Corinthians 15:35-44, vaguely echoed in "Cuttings (*later*)". "Carnations" might also have been inspired by "I Walk'd the Other Day," a poem by Vaughan echoing the same passage of the first letter to the Corinthians, where the poet imagines his late brother as an unearthly flower, which "fresh and green [...] liv'd of us unseen" (Vaughan

1976: 241). Significantly enough, in a previous version of the poem, the carnations were defined as “pale souls” (cit in: La Belle 1976: 34).

While in “Cuttings (*later*)” the perception of a symbol of resurrection leads the poet himself to experience a sort of temporary overcoming of his fallen condition, the spiritual state evoked by the carnations seems simply to engender in the observer an implicit spiritual longing for that state, or a feeling of faith like in Dickinson’s “When I count the seeds.”

Among the many critics who have written about Roethke’s work, Rosemary Sullivan brings to light the darkest side of the greenhouse. According to her, “the greenhouse is largely negative. Life beneath its plenitude is mechanical, deterministic, administrated by an implacable father inaccessible to the child. It is an image of fallen world of materiality and death” (Sullivan 1975: 24). It is my opinion that, although the protagonist of the Greenhouse Poems does feel apprehensive when faced with the fallenness of nature and reveals his desire to transcend such fallenness in “Carnations,” we would be mistaken to define his perception of the nature in the greenhouse and the father-gardener as wholly negative. Poems like “Transplanting” and “Big Wind” demonstrate that many aspects of the greenhouse and the gardener’s “creative” activity fascinated the young poet and filled him with joy. The recollection of the wonders of the greenhouse will be one of the instruments through which, following the premature death of the gardener and the radicalization of his condition of estrangement, the poet will find a final pacification with the memory of his father – once again symbolically superposed with God – and nature. Only then will he embrace nature in its wholeness, in all its aspects, even death.



**“The Redeemer Comes a Dark Way”:  
“Wrath of God” and Regeneration in the Narratives  
from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!***

The narratives collected in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and *Praise to the End!* present a strong thematic and theoretical continuity with the Greenhouse Poems and certain poems from *Open House*, though, formally, they constitute an entirely different kind of composition. They are long narrative poems composing a sequence in which Roethke traces “the spiritual history” of his literary alter ego through streams of words – mainly inner monologues taking place in different moments of his life – trying, “in the rhythm, to catch the very movement of the mind itself” (Roethke 2001: 27). Beginning with the birth of the protagonist, the narratives once again recount the story of his personal fall and go on to describe the serious radicalization of the estrangement from God and nature he suffers after the death of his father, the outcomes of such estrangement and its psychic dangers, the protagonist’s struggle to heal through the reconciliation with the memory of his father and the establishment of a deep communion with God and His creation.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, in Roethke’s narratives the desire to attain a harmonious relationship with nature, an aspiration at the core of Romantic literature, coexists with the Protestant belief that such relationship can be achieved only as a consequence of a “regeneration.” The title “Praise to the End!”, from the first book of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, alludes to the poet’s ultimate success in establishing a suitable relation with nature after many misadventures. In the narratives this positive outcome is made possible by the former realization of being a recipient of divine love, and being enveloped, through all of creation, by the unifying embrace of such love.

The protagonist’s complete abandonment to his fallenness and desperation at the end of his quest will prove to be a necessary premise for the final overcoming of his predicament. Such sudden and unpredictable change mirrors the paradoxical reversal, at the heart of the Protestant

scheme of salvation, that was introduced by Luther and expanded by Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.

The psychic and spiritual conditions lived by the protagonist of the narratives during his quest are often evoked through symbols and motifs deriving from the Bible, whose original meaning Roethke retrieves and elaborates.

### **3.1 – The Poet’s Spiritual Path: Structure and Biblical Allusiveness**

As explained in the previous chapter, in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* Roethke expresses a worldview with experiential origins as well as psychological and philosophical meaning. The poet’s identification of God with the Being leads him to see the world as a part of God himself, even though – given God’s incommensurability – the two never coincide. In this identification lies the reason behind the deep connection existing between the poet’s perception of the deity and his perception of nature. Imaginatively, Roethke expresses his panentheist view of God by symbolically identifying Him with the father-gardener, who continually exerts his “creative” activity upon the nature in the greenhouse. This symbolical superposition is due in part to the author’s awareness that his relationship with his father strongly affected his relationship with God, in whose presence he felt the same fear of not being accepted and the desire to be loved. Significantly, in the narratives, the line between the deceased father and God becomes blurred, as well as the need of pacification with the memory of the former and the desire of communion with the latter.

As previously shown, the child in the Greenhouse sequence has already begun experiencing the process of gradual estrangement from his father and his world – a process that is also dealt with in poems from *Open House*, like “The Premonition” and “To my Sister” – implied by the natural actualization of the human being. While, during this process the young poet develops an ambivalent relationship with both the florist and nature, resulting in inner conflicts, in the narratives, before such conflicts are resolved, the florist’s

death has dramatic effects on the child's spiritual and psychological development. His relationship with the world surrounding him and God becomes so troubled that a deep sense of separation, incompleteness, and inadequacy is provoked in him, destined to result in a sharp radicalization of his condition of estrangement and serious neuroses in his adulthood. The violent manifestation of the poet's illness, after an unsuccessful attempt to satisfy his desire for fullness through contact with nature, will lead him to explore and elaborate the deep source of his alienation in an attempt to eradicate the very root of his malaise. Only after reconciling with his father's "ghost" and with God through this process will he establish a harmonious relationship with God's creation. It is nevertheless important to note that, in spite of the poet's personal strivings, this final pacification will take the form of a sudden and unexpected "gift."

In the narratives the evolution of the poet's troubled relationship with God and nature after the death of his father is marked by psychic and spiritual experiences that he already described in his poetry from the thirties. Nevertheless, in the new collections these experiences are perceived and portrayed differently by the author, in accordance with his panentheist view of the world. The sense of abandonment that has periodically afflicted the poet since his early childhood – both implicitly and explicitly expressed in "Flower Dump" and "Weed Puller" – now intensifies and intertwines with the sense of condemnation about which Roethke wrote in his poetry from the thirties. The poet's perception of his alienation as "guilt," and his external projection of such guilt, which takes the form of an accusation, like in "Feud," involve both God and nature, making them appear distant and hostile. The danger of psychic disruption deriving from the radicalization of the poet's estrangement from the Being, previously described in "Against Disaster," manifests itself again as the result of a radical estrangement from God and is symbolically portrayed as the feeling of being the object of His "aggressiveness." Sill, according to poetic modes that are typical of Romantic literature, and psychological mechanisms that – as we will see – have been previously described by Melville, this danger also manifests itself as nature's "aggressiveness." Although, as an analysis of the first two narratives will

reveal, the poet begins to perceive God and nature's "hostility" during his childhood, especially after the death of his father, it is in his adulthood that such "hostility" manifests itself so violently as to threaten his psychic balance.

In this critical phase of his life, the poet experiences occasional moments of Grace in which a sudden feeling of reconciliation with the recollected deified florist or the Divine Father, an unexpected visitation from a "lively understandable spirit," or the sense of being touched by a "redeemer" is accompanied by a mystical feeling of deep communion with nature. These moments are normally followed by new periods of prostration, dominated by the sense of emptiness or "dark night of the soul" that according to Evelyn Underhill often follows illumination.

The death of his father marks a further change in the poet's perception of the world surrounding him. The manifestations of evil that used to trouble him are no longer limited and kept under control by the gardener's work and the sense of a final yet mysterious order or "design" presiding over nature progressively fades away. At the time of the adult poet's crisis this sense is completely obscured by the overwhelming anxiety he feels in front of decay and death. Only in the aforementioned moments of Grace does nature appear to him as harmonious and permeated by the unitive principle of love.

Like in his work from the thirties, the poet's efforts to heal his condition of radical alienation and escape its dangers result in a prolonged psychic and spiritual seesaw. While in his early poems Roethke's spiritual straggle was marked by constant swings between distress and hope, the same structure of the narratives mirrors the poet's inner ups and downs, presenting a rhythm which once again seems to be brought on by fluctuation of manic depression. Each of the narratives collected in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* traces the poet's harrowing shift from a condition of painful alienation and desperation to a sudden illumination and mystical communion with the universe, through a process in which "dissociation often precedes a new state of clarity" (Roethke 2001: 53).

Although the moments of Grace described in the narratives are always temporary, each of them is different from the previous one and marks a new step in the poet's path toward the ultimate condition of peace with the father

he remembers – the “dead” or “ghost” haunting him throughout the narratives –, God, and nature. As Roethke explains, “each poem [...] is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more” (Roethke 2001: 50). Thus, the structure of experience which shapes most of the narratives is not simply cyclic but progressive, as well. As Roethke explains in “Open Letter”:

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.’ Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound [...] that they repeat themselves, thrust themselves upon us, again and again, with variation and change, each time bringing us closer to our own most particular (and thus most universal) reality?” (Roethke 2001: 51-52)

The psychic and spiritual states described by Roethke in the narratives are evoked through powerful symbolical images and motifs. While, in “Theodore Roethke’s *Minimals*,” William Heyen stresses the originality of Roethke’s symbolism and tries to detect and decode some of the symbols he developed, other scholars insist on Roethke’s retrieval of pre-existing symbols, motifs and narrative patterns. Indeed, although Roethke created new symbols, he also appropriated universal symbols belonging to literary and mythic traditions. In “Open Letter” he clearly reveals that in the narratives he tried to exploit the usual meaning of traditional symbols, while at the same time, adding something to it: “symbols will mean what they usually mean and sometimes something more” (Roethke 2001: 53). La Belle particularly focuses on Roethke’s treatment of recurrent Jungian archetypes in Western literature, which are also analyzed in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* by Maud Bodkin (an heir of Jung whose work Roethke was likely to be more familiar with than Jung’s). According to La Belle, besides building his narration on the fundamental “death-rebirth theme,” Roethke “created new variations

upon and extensions of those literary motifs” and images “which Jung and principally Bodkin singled out as products of the archetypes of the human mind” and which were recurrent in the Classics, from the Greek Tragedy, Virgil’s Aeneid, and Shakespeare, to the work of Romantics like Blake (La Belle 1976: 84-85, 87-88).

In “The Words and their Roaring: Roethke’s Use of the Psalms of David,” M. L. Lewandowska focuses on the influence exerted on the narratives by another fundamental source of archetypes, i.e., the Bible, and the Psalms of David in particular. According to Lewandowska, the Psalms, which recount the “great sorrows and [...] joys” of “the king-poet” – “a lost son who seeks forgiveness and understanding from his Father” – with their “shifts of mode and tone and spiritual condition come through the powerful lyric poetry” could “provide Roethke with just enough structure to shape his account of the restless psyche.” Besides borrowing important rhetorical patterns from the Psalms of David (mostly invocations used for exhortation and supplication, as well as parallelisms), Roethke assimilates from them fundamental themes, motifs and images, investing the latter with new psychological symbolism (Lewandowska 1980: 159-160, 163).

The archetypal symbols employed by Roethke have previously appeared in various classics with different implications and nuances which they unavoidably maintain in the narratives, presenting a multilayered structure of meaning. Nevertheless, as this analysis will demonstrate, the particular meanings which, according to exegetes, these symbols present in the Scriptures play a fundamental role in the sequence, and are crucial to a full understanding of it. Significantly, the Bible is one of the sources of inspiration of the narratives indicated by Roethke in “Open Letter.” When he wrote the narratives, Roethke recovered and revitalized archetypal and non-archetypal motifs and symbols from the Psalms, Job, the Gospels, and the Song of Songs (some already employed in the Greenhouse Poems, others new) in order to highlight precise religious and philosophical implications of the portrayed experiences. More than simply investing these motifs and symbols with new meanings, he brought to the surface their original psychological and existential significance, while enriching them by treating

them in light of the new discoveries of psychoanalysis and developments in philosophical thought.

While most of the recurring symbolical images of the narratives, albeit semantically complex and multilayered, maintain a stable significance, the meaning of the crucial image of the sequence – water – evolves throughout the narration. Originally a symbol of a condition of extreme separation, desperation, and risk of annihilation – as in the Psalms of David – water ultimately becomes a baptismal symbol of spiritual renewal and rebirth – like in the Gospels. The two opposite spiritual states that water comes to symbolize in the narratives are necessary premises to one other, in the context of a “death-and-rebirth” process which strongly evokes the paradoxical reversal from desperation to faith that Kierkegaard and Barth place at the core of the protestant scheme of salvation.

Moreover, water is one of the motifs or “themes often coming alternately, as in music” in the narratives, albeit with variations (Roethke 2001: 50). The water of lakes and rivers that the poet periodically and almost compulsively contemplates is a sort of microcosm mirroring his current view of nature as a whole. It appears as a “disgusting” puddle of death and decay or as “a wealth of biological miracles,” according to the spiritual and psychic state in which he finds himself at the moment of its contemplation (Wolff 1986: 45).

All of these portrayed states of mind are “rendered dramatically, without comment, without allusion, the action often implied or indicated in the interior monologue or dialogue between the self and its mentor, or conscience, or, sometimes, another person.” The meaning conveyed by the often obscure language must be understood intuitively, detecting the “clues [...] scattered richly” in the text (Roethke 2001: 23, 53). Although the overall narration follows a chronological order, the narratives sometimes present shifts in time, and flashbacks through which the poet re-lives past events. The form of the poems thus requires from the reader a highly active participation in the process of interpretation.

The narratives were not published all together, but in three different phases. Published in 1948, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* contains four

narratives which describe the spiritual crisis experienced by the adult poet as past traumas and unresolved inner conflicts begin to haunt him obsessively: “The Lost Son”, “The Long Alley”, “A Field of Light”, “The Shape of Fire.” In 1951 Roethke published the collection entitled *Praise to the End!*, containing seven new narratives – “Where Knock is open Wide”, “I Need, I Need”, “Bring the Day!” , “Give Way, Ye Gates”, “Sensibility! O La!”, “O Lull Me, Lull Me”, “Praise to the End!”, “Unfold! Unfold!”, “I Cry, Love! Love!” –, each of them entitled after verses by Christopher Smart, Henry Vaughan, William Blake, William Wordsworth, William Strode, Robert Herrick, and a Mother Goose nursery rhyme. The new narratives once again tell the story of the poet’s spiritual development and inner struggles, this time beginning with his conception and infancy. In 1953 one last narrative – “O, Thou Opening, O” – was published in *The Waking*. In *Words for the Wind*, published in 1958, all of the previously published narratives were finally arranged in the following order, with the narratives from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* preceded and followed respectively by five and three narratives from *Praise to the End!*, and “O, Thou Opening, O” placed at the end:

Where Knock is open Wide

I Need, I Need

Bring the Day!

Give Way, Ye Gates

Sensibility! O La!

O Lull Me, Lull Me

The Lost Son

1. The Flight
2. The Pit
3. The Gibber
4. The Return
5. ‘It was beginning winter’

The Long Alley

A Field of Light



The Shape of Fire

Praise to the End!

Unfold! Unfold!

I Cry, Love! Love!

O, Thou Opening, O

The complex editorial history of the narratives leads scholars to read them in two different ways. Some analyze the narratives published in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and those published for the first time in *Praise to the End!* separately, as if they formed two distinct sequences. They thus read them in the chronological order in which they were published, and as they are arranged in Roethke's *Collected Poems*. Other scholars choose to read the narratives as a single sequence and in the order in which the poet ultimately arranged them in *Words for the Wind*.

For our purposes, Roethke's narrative poems will be analyzed following the second order, and with a particular focus on the passages that I consider to be most significant at the philosophical and imaginative level. The purpose of this choice is to achieve the most complete possible understanding of the overall process that the poet meant to describe when he assembled the narratives and to show how recurring and evolving motifs and symbols contribute to endowing the entire group of poems with a meaningful narrative structure. The narratives from *Praise to the End!* – including some of the most obscure compositions ever to be written by Roethke – will be analyzed in light of possible clues revealed by the literary quotations and echoes in their titles, as previously done by La Belle. Finally, the narratives will be divided into four groups, each coinciding with a stage of the poet's life.

### 3.2 – Birth and the Fall: “Where Knock is Open Wide” and “I Need, I Need”

The two opening narratives of the sequence, “Where Knock is Open Wide” and “I Need, I Need,” cover a range of time, from the protagonist’s conception to the death of his father. They describe the inner life of the young poet by expressing his emotional and psychological responses to some external events through fragments of an “interior drama” written in the language of a small child (Roethke 2001: 52). In other words, in the first two narratives the author imaginatively “regresses” to his early years of life and adopts an infantile language in order to remember and efficaciously convey inner experiences and feelings that marked his development.

“Where Knock is Open Wide” is a line from a passage of Christopher Smart’s *A Song to David* about the man of prayer:

But stronger still, in earth and air,  
And in the sea, the man of pray'r;  
And far beneath the tide;  
And in the seat to faith assign'd,  
Where ask is have, where seek is find,  
Where knock is open wide. (Fairer, Gerrard 2015: 515)

This stanza describes the ideal condition in which there is no disjunction between desires and their fulfillment. According to La Belle, while in Smart’s opinion such state is only known by the true believer, Roethke associates it with the life of the child before his birth and shortly afterwards. “Where Knock is Open Wide” and “I Need, I Need” describe the process by which the child gradually loses the original condition of identification between desire and fulfillment by realizing that the external world is not always responsive to his wishes (La Belle 1976: 53). More generally, they deal with the loss of fullness coinciding with the birth and the natural beginning of the developments of the existential estrangement previously described in “The Premonition” and “To My Sister.” As the reading of the first narrative shows,

the condition to which Roethke alludes through Smart's lines is, in actuality, never experienced in this life. As soon as we are born it starts to become a vague memory and an unconscious source of melancholia. Significantly, after being conceived ("Once upon a tree / I came across a time") and living in the world outside of time that is the mother's womb ("What's the time, papa-seed? / Everything has been twice. / My father is a fish") the newborn baby starts feeling his incompleteness while still lying in his cradle (Roethke 1991: 67-68). He then begins to feel that his parents cannot satisfy all his needs and his father can "hurt" him by not having the time to listen to his request to sing a lullaby to him:

His ears haven't time  
Sing me a sleep song, please,  
A real hurt is soft. (Roethke 1991: 67)

Although at this stage of his life "a real hurt is soft," the baby is already learning what a hurt is and, through time, he unavoidably suffers new losses and frustrations until, one day, the departure of his uncle reveals to him the existence of death. While this discovery is still lived with an attitude of detachment and emotional denial by the child ("My uncle's away, / He is gone for always, / I don't care either [...] He won't be an angel, / I don't care either") the subsequent death of his father teaches him, for the first time, what a deeply painful loss is (Roethke 1991: 68). This trauma, the crucial event of the poet's early life, marks the emotional climax of the first narrative.

Sections 3, 4, and 5 of "Where Knock is open Wide" do not follow a chronological order. Section 3 and 5 describe the psychological condition in which the child finds himself after his father's death, while section 4 tells of a childhood memory dating back to the time when the father was still alive. The poet recalls a day when they went fishing by the river:

We went by the river.  
Water birds went ching. Went ching.  
Stepped in wet. Over stones.

One, his nose had a frog,  
But he slipped out.

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

Bullheads have whiskers.  
And they bite.

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

That was before. I fell! I fell!  
The worm has moved away.  
My tears are tired. (Roethke 1991: 69)

When these events take place the child has just started to become aware of the presence of evil in nature. He knows that “Bullheads [...] bite” and “water birds” haunt and eat fish and frogs. Still, the reassuring presence of his father somehow gives him the feeling that violence and death are limited and under control. Significantly, the frog caught by a bird succeeds in freeing itself from its beak. Moreover, in order to please his son, the father mercifully spares the life of a fish, tossing it back into the water. Although there is something extremely intimidating in the powerful father deciding the death and the life of the creatures surrounding him, the child seems to admire more so than fear him in this passage. Nevertheless, after the death of his father everything changes:

Nowhere is out. I saw the cold.

Went to visit the wind. Where the birds die.  
How high is have?  
I'll be a bite. You be a wink.  
Sing the snake to sleep. (Roethke 1991: 69)

Evil rapidly spreads in the eyes of the child, who now observes dark scenarios “where the birds die.” The awareness that not simply “Bullheads” but the external world, and life in general, “bite” affects him to such a degree that he wishes to adopt their aggressiveness by defense: he will “be a bite” himself.

The coming of the dark (“dark came early”) which metaphorically accompanies the departure of the father becomes complete in section 3, when the child feels “lost” and is scared of the owls that his infantile imagination associates with night and darkness: “I know it's an owl. He's making it darker” (Roethke 1991: 68). The situation described in this section is a sort of reversal of the childhood memory described in section 4: after seeing his godlike father rescuing a fish by throwing it back in the water, the child feels as though he were drowning, abandoned both by his father and by God. He thus helplessly asks:

Fish me out.  
Please.  
[...]  
God, give me a near. I hear flowers.  
A ghost can't whistle. (Roethke 1991: 68-69)

While Smart's true believer has nothing to fear even “far beneath the tide,” the child now finds himself in a condition of extreme impotence and danger. As Lewandowska points out, these lines call to mind passages from the Psalms of David in which the king asks God to rescue him from deep waters and from the mire, like in Psalm 69:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the

floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God [...] Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink: let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters. Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. (Psalm 69: 1-3, 14-15)<sup>13</sup>

Just as the line from section 5 “my tears are tired” echoes “I am weary of my crying” in Psalm 69, the cry “God, give me a near” sounds like many of David’s supplications: “Hear me when I call, O God” (4:1); “Give hear to my words, O Lord” (5:1); “Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplication” (143:1); “Give hear to my voice, when I cry unto thee” (141:1)... (Lewandowska 1980: 164). The child’s request for “a near” instead of “a ear” does not simply expresses his desire to be listened to, but conveys his need for closeness to God. It is a similar, though much more fervent, request than the one he made to the father in the cradle, when he felt that his ears “had no time.” The line “a ghost can't whistle” appears to echo passages from two psalms in which David asks God to rescue him from the “pit” in order to have the possibility to praise him again (Roethke 1991: 69): “What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?” (30:9) and: “shall the dead arise and praise thee?” (88:10).

Psalm 88 is worth quoting in its entirety as it not only includes many of the aforementioned elements, but it expresses the very feelings Roethke strives to convey in section 5 of the first narrative, through a similar symbolical situation:

O lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee: Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave. I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength: Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou

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<sup>13</sup> See also Psalm 18:16: “He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters.”

rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand. Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah. Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth. Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: Lord, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee. Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah. Shall thy loving kindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But unto thee have I cried, O Lord; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee. Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me? I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted. Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off. They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together. Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness. (Psalm 88)

The pit, like the mire, is an image that Roethke often employs when he describes difficult spiritual and psychic situations. In 1945, in an apparent moment of distress, he writes in his notebooks that he is “in the pits still; in the mire, spiritually...” (cit. in Parini 1979: 46). In the narrative entitled “The Lost Son” the grown up protagonist will descend into a symbolical pit, where, in a moment of “physical and psychic exhaustion,” he will ask himself questions about God and will finally acknowledge: “Fear was my father, Father Fear” (Roethke 2001: 50; 1991: 53). As previously mentioned, according to Lewandowska, in the narratives Roethke invests images from the Psalms with “modern psychological symbolism,” reinventing their meaning. The pit, for example, “is not a place where evildoers are punished, as David saw it, but a dark, subconscious area in the psyche of the boy” (Lewandowska 1980: 163). Although the subconscious nature of the pit cannot be questioned, an attentive reading of the texts quoted above will

show that Roethke also recovered the original psychological meaning of the Biblical pit, which is the same meaning of the deep waters.

In Psalms 69 and 88 both the deep waters and the pit epitomize a condition of desperation in which David does not simply feel abandoned by God but also feels as if he is the victim of His wrath. According to Böhme, the “anger of God” is the name given to that “aching source of anguish” which is “the eternal darkness of the soul” or “hell” (Böhme 2007: 60). As explained in the first chapter, Tillich writes that the wrath of God is a symbol for that desperation, potentially leading to psychic disintegration or self-destruction, experienced by those who are aware of their estrangement from God. Significantly, Luther says about God: “as you believe him, so you have him”: for those who are reconciled with God, He is love; for those who are estranged from Him, He is the threat of ultimate destruction (Tillich 1963: 77). In “Against Disaster” – a poem describing the danger of complete psychic disruption provoked by the poet’s extreme estrangement from the Being – Roethke describes the reversal of his perception of God with the lines: “This flat land has become a pit / Wherein I am beset by harm” (Roethke 1991: 18). The protagonist of the narratives who in “Where Knock is open Wide” begs God to rescue him from the waters and in “The Lost Son” calls Him “Father Fear” from the depths of the pit is the victim of such wrath.

This interpretation of the symbol of the pit is not in conflict with Lewandowska’s. When the poet descends into the pit, he enters a condition of desperation because he faces personal sufferings that are deeply rooted in his subconscious. The pit is thus symbolically more complex than the deep waters in the narratives. While the deep waters symbolize the sufferings of an estranged but still unaware child, the pit is an image for the distress of an adult who has the instruments to explore and elaborate the traumas at the root of such distress.<sup>14</sup>

In the last section the departure of the father coincides with the departure of God:

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<sup>14</sup> In relation to the treatment of the symbol of the pit see also Psalms 28, 30, 143.



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

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

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

Maybe God has a house.  
But not here. (Roethke 1991: 69-70)

The second narrative, "I Need, I Need," goes on to describe the process by which the child's sense of separation and incompleteness slowly increases after his birth. The moment in which he realizes that he will no longer be breastfed by his mother ("A deep dish. / Lumps in it. / I can't taste my mother. / Hoo. I know the spoon. / Sit in my mouth") and definitively loses his original union with her constitutes a crucial stage of such process (Roethke 1991: 70). From now on, he will have to become more and more autonomous in satisfying his own needs.

According to La Belle the title of the narrative echoes the inscription "I Want! I Want!" which accompanies the ninth design of Blake's *The Gates of Paradise*, a book composed of seventeen engravings combining an illustration and a motto, as in the emblem tradition. The engraving shows a child reaching for the moon, expressing an insatiable and unfulfillable desire. This image does not simply evoke that "condition of childhood where there is an awakening of desire for all sorts of things that are out of the child's reach"

(La Belle 1976: 56-57). It symbolizes the impossibility to satisfy the deep desire that is at the root of all the others. Beginning in childhood, no fulfilled desire is able to completely satisfy human beings due to their condition of structural incompleteness in which what they truly long for is to newly conquest the original fullness they have lost.

The following episode takes place after the loss of the father and the experience of death has taught the child that frustrated physical desires and physical pain (previously epitomized by the bullhead's bite) are not the worst things to fear in life. By asking himself "Do the dead bite? / Mamma, she's a sad fat" the child demonstrates his awareness of spiritual frustrations and sufferings (Roethke 1991: 70). The aggressiveness expressed by the child in the previous narrative ("I'll be a bite") after beginning to undergo this realization, as well as the desire at the core of "I Need, I Need," are newly expressed in the songs of two children jumping rope in the following section:

I wish I was a pifflebob  
I wish I was a funny  
I wish I had ten thousand hats,  
And made a lot of money.  
[...]  
Not you I need.  
Go play with your nose.  
Stay in the sun,  
Snake-eyes. (Roethke 1991: 71)

As Roethke himself explains, the "mingled longing and aggressiveness" conveyed by these nursery rhymes "changes, in the next passage, to a vaguely felt, but definite, feeling of love in one of the children" (Roethke 2001: 23). Nevertheless, it is evident that the natural world surrounding him – like his missing father – cannot reciprocate such love:

Stop the larks. Can I have my heart back?  
Today I saw a beard in a cloud.

The ground cried my name:  
Good-bye for being wrong.  
Love helps the sun.  
But not enough. (Roethke 1991: 72)

In this moment of deep discouragement, the child knows that nature cannot make up for the loss of the father, whose shadow he searches for in the sky. He feels that in “the sun” and in nature in general there is not enough love to satisfy his spiritual void or, even more likely, not enough love is directed toward him. The absence of his father and God, which he perceives as an abandonment, and the consequent feeling of not being loved leads him to feel “wrong,” and to imagine that he is judged “wrong” and rejected by nature. In other words, he projects his sense of inadequacy outside himself, where it takes the form of a new rejection or “abandonment,” this time from nature. The world surrounding him, meant as an extension of God, is unavoidably perceived as God himself.

In this particular passage, and in the previous passage, in which he imagines himself being abandoned, if not even tossed, by God in the deep waters, the child, for the first time, suffers the consequences of the crucial trauma of his life, albeit partially consciously. Considering he now feels that “God’s somewhere else,” and too far, the child insists on turning to nature in an attempt to find solace, and soothe his sense of separation and incompleteness (Roethke 1991: 70).

### **3.3 – A Longing for Communion with Nature: “Bring the Day!”, “Give Way, Ye Gates”, “Sensibility! O La!”, “O Lull Me, Lull Me”**

“Bring the Day!”, “Give Way, Ye Gates”, “Sensibility! O La!”, and “O Lull Me, Lull Me” describe the protagonist’s transition from childhood to adolescence, and revolve around the awakening of his desire to overcome his increasing sense of incompleteness by establishing a harmonious relationship with nature. Significantly, “Bring the Day!” derives its title from a line of

“Despondency Corrected,” one of the nine philosophical monologues composing Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*. In the quoted passage, the Wanderer invites the Solitary to overcome his disillusionment and spiritual distress in the face of the failure of the Revolution and human mortality by newly establishing a correct relationship with nature, possibly with the help of his memory of the time when, as a child, he enjoyed such relationship. Though the protagonist of “Bring the Day!” is still a child, albeit on the verge of adolescence, rather than enjoying a happy existential condition deriving from a correct relationship with nature, he, like the Solitary, desires to find relief in it. Such desire is so deep that it takes the form of a longing for fusion, expressed in sexual terms. After wondering: “The green grasses, – would they?”, and, in response, feeling a call from the earth – “She asked her skin / To let me in: / The far leaves were for it” – he soon realizes that his desire cannot be fulfilled: “I can’t marry the dirt.” He nevertheless suspects or hopes that the principle at the heart of creation, regulating the relations between its parts through a harmony symbolically expressed in terms of music, is love: “What’s all the singing between? – / Is it with whispers and kissing? –” (Roethke 1991: 73). His desire to confirm the veracity of this intuition and eventually become an integral part of this overall harmony based on love drives him to start his personal quest (La Belle 1976: 70-71).

In “Give Way, Ye Gates,” the young poet’s desire for communion with nature originally results in his sensual enjoyment of it. The title of the narrative is a quotation from the first line of “The Wassaille” by Robert Herrick. In “The Wassaille,” after wishing prosperity to the reader and inviting him to enjoy earthly things, Herrick melancholically gives voice to the awareness that “all live here with needy Fate”: since everything is frail and transitory, no worldly joy is going to last (Herrick 1971: 179). In Roethke’s poem as well, the original exaltation provoked in the protagonist by the awakening of his sexual instincts (“Such music in a skin! / A bird sings in the bush of your bones”) and the sensual enjoyment of nature is followed by melancholic feelings as he ponders the fleetingness of all things (Roethke 1991: 75):

Touch and arouse. Suck and sob. Curse and mourn.  
It's a cold scrape in a low place.  
The dead crow dries on a pole.  
Shapes in the shade  
Watch. (Roethke 1991: 76)

The image of the dead crow calls to mind the dead birds mentioned at the end of “Where Knock is open Wide” when, after the death of his father, the protagonist observes the proliferation of death in nature.

The bitterness which derives from the acknowledgement of the transience of all earthly things is made even deeper by the poet's realization of the constitutive fleetingness of their very enjoyment. Since our physical desires – which, in the poem, are mainly epitomized by sexual desires – are born from our condition of structural incompleteness, the pleasure deriving from their satisfaction unavoidably fades away as soon as we obtain what we longed for. This leads us to seek new pleasures that will prove to be as fleeting as the previous ones, often arousing in us a sense of emptiness: “But now the instant ages, / And my thought hunts another body. / I'm sad with the little owls.” More generally, the mechanical process by which “the mouth asks. The hand takes” cannot produce true gratification as the desire for fullness at the origin of all our physical desires is essentially spiritual. While in “I Need, I Need” the poet is still unaware of the original desire at the source of all the others, now his awareness of its existence and spiritual nature (“these wings are from the wrong nest”) and his consequent perception of all the other desires in the right perspective allows him to take a new step toward the fulfillment of his deepest aspirations (Roethke 1991: 76).

“Sensibility! O La!” is named after a nineteenth-century nursery rhyme in which the poetic voice mocks a little crying lamb for losing its mother and the lamb, in response, jumps on the mocker's toe. The lack of empathy that the poetic voice shows for the lamb and the grotesque character of their interaction is in sharp contrast with the “mutually” sympathetic relationship the poet now wishes to enduringly establish with all creatures. “Exalted” even “by the lifting of the tail of a neighbor's cat,” he still has the vague feeling that

he will have to tread “a long way to somewhere else” before obtaining what he needs. A “shade” telling him to “love the sun” is the first hint he is given about the direction that he shall take in order to lay deeper, and thus more stable, foundations for his communion with nature: since the sun will appear again as a symbol for both God and nature in the following narratives, “loving” him means establishing a profoundly meaningful relationship with individual beings and their common root (Roethke 1991: 78).

“O Lull Me, Lull Me” marks a significant change in the attitude with which the poet undertakes his quest. The narrative takes its title from William Strode’s “In Commendation of Musick,” a poem attributing to music the power to “connect” the listener with the harmony of the supernatural world and make his soul consonant with it, healing him from all possible grief. The protagonist of the narratives has already expressed his desire to live in a similar condition of spiritual consonance with the rhythm of the life of nature in “Bring the Day!”, but now, for the first time, he feels that his personal strivings to achieve it cannot bear fruit without the intervention of an outer “force” acting on his soul, like Strode’s music. Only after this intervention will the rhythm of nature soothe and lull him:

A wish! A wish!  
O lovely chink, O white  
Way to another grace! -  
[...]  
I'm crazed and graceless,  
A winter leaping frog.  
Soothe me, great groans of underneath,  
I'm still waiting for a foot.  
The poke of the wind's close,  
But I can't go leaping alone. (Roethke 1991: 79)

“Crazed and graceless,” the poet is akin to a small frog, a weak creature that “can’t go leaping alone.” He needs help in order to enter and tread “the white way to another grace.” From now on, he will accompany and alternate his

personal strivings with an attitude of hopeful expectation, sometimes breaking into impassioned invocations. As La Belle points out, interestingly, the “foot” the poet is waiting for calls to mind the metrical foot, the music of poetry (La Belle 2001: 82). Although he is now full of hope regarding the outcomes of his quest (“I could say hello to things; / I could talk to a snail”), he will have to go through the fires of hell before reaching the happiness for which he longs (Roethke 1991: 80)

### **3.4 – The Crisis and the Swings of the Conscience: “The Lost Son”, “The Long Alley”, “A Field of Light”, “The Shape of the Fire”**

The narratives from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* are set in a moment of the poet’s life when the outcomes of his unresolved inner conflicts and the traumas of his childhood violently surface, making him re-experience the sense of abandonment and guilt that he felt as a child. The first narrative, “The Lost Son,” is composed of five subsections entitled “The Flight”, “The Pit”, “The Gibber”, “The Return,” and “It was beginning winter.” Significantly, “The Flight” opens in Woodlawn, where Otto Roethke was buried and the protagonist hears “the dead cry.” The days of the past when he would fish with his father are long gone and he now fishes “in a old wound,” haunted by his memory (Roethke 1991: 50). He undergoes his current crisis as if in a tormented dream or, to use Roethke’s words, during “a terrified running away – with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting (voices etc.)” (Roethke 2001: 50). Feeling completely helpless, he turns to nature and asks for comfort and guidance:

Snail, snail, glister me forward,  
Bird, soft-sigh me home,  
Worm, be with me.  
This is my hard time. (Roethke 1991: 50)

As Roethke explains in “Open Letter,” since “God is above all things by the excellence of his nature” and at the same time “in all things as causing the being of all things, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God” (Roethke 2001: 40). His desire is for God to talk to him through His creatures. In fact, after staring at a fly, in an attempt to find in it what he defines as “a shape of grace” in “Evening Eye,” he addresses God directly (Roethke 1968: 19):

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

Tell me:  
Which is the way I take;  
Out of what door do I go,  
Where and to whom? (Roethke 1991: 51)

The natural elements reject the poet telling him that his “tears are not enough praise” and he “will find no comfort here, / In the kingdom of bang and blab.” The poet’s attempt to sound out water in order to find clues in it is equally unsuccessful. As he goes “hunting along the river,” he only sees vague shapes that his eyes cannot grasp completely (Roethke 1991: 51). At the moment in which nature refuses to renounce its opacity and answer his questions, it also tells him that his current pain is not a sufficient “penitence” for the “guilt” that he harbors in himself.

In the following two sections – “The Pit” and “The Gibber” – the poet descends into a symbolical pit. As previously explained, the pit is a symbol of the area of the psyche where the poet abandons himself to the desperation deriving from his radical estrangement and at the same time where he faces its deepest roots. Here he once again gives voice to his anxieties through questions, this time concerning the origins and the sense of all life and pain, and looks for answers in the natural elements:



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. (Roethke 1991: 52)

These lines appear to echo, both in content and structure, section 38 of the Book of Job, which Roethke goes on to quote shortly after. In the echoed passage of the Scriptures, after hearing Job question His justice, God appears to him and offers an extensive description of the wonders of creation and the ways in which Divine Providence takes care of the individual creatures and the universe as a whole:

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it, And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? [...] Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man; To satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth? Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew? [...] Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart? Who can number the clouds in wisdom? or who can stay the bottles of heaven, When the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together? (Job 38:5-11, 20-28, 36-38)

God's questions are obviously rhetorical. When he asks who created every existing thing and constantly regulates the life of the universe, He implies that He did. Roethke, who is experiencing Job's same uncertainties, re-writes the questions, making them real. Unlike God, he does not see the whole harmony and balance of the universe but focuses on single elements like moss and roots, whose simple existence appears as a mystery to him. Most of all – with the question “Who stunned the dirt into noise?” – he questions the source of the pain pervading nature. Job's anguished doubts give rise to an angry God who reproaches him with words that, despite not answering his questions, ultimately lead him back to his faith. The protagonist of the narratives, on the other hand, after receiving no answer, becomes the victim of the “anger” of nature in “The Gibber”:

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. (Roethke 1991: 52)

The natural elements which in “I Need, I Need” tell the young poet “goodbye for being wrong,” stop being simply unresponsive or judgmental, and become condemning and aggressive. While in “Where Knock is Open Wide” the poet's estrangement from God finds imaginative expression in the experience of His “wrath,” in “The Lost Son” his consequent estrangement from the creation

behind which God hides results in what we might define as “the wrath of nature.” The elements which reject the poet who seeks comfort in them and tell him to die condemn him to the process of psychic disintegration which, as we have seen, is the result of extreme separation.

This particular situation, with all its spiritual and psychic implications, is an amplification and at the same time an evolution of the one described in the Greenhouse poem entitled “Child on the Top of a Greenhouse.” In the poem the resentment and the desire of rebellion conveyed in “Flower Dump” lead the young poet to climb the roof of the Chrysanthemums house, committing an extremely dangerous and forbidden act, bound to be the object of reproach. In a letter to Kenneth Burke dated 1946, Roethke explains that the “act of being up on top of this greenhouse was something that even the most foolhardy older kids condemned because if you dropped you pitched through the glass to if not certain death, a broken back or neck and bad cuts” (Roethke 1968: 119). Nevertheless, the child’s climbing atop the Chrysanthemums house is obviously much more than an act of disobedience against his father. It is a deed of defiance against the rules of the greenhouse world as they were established by the Florist. Most of all, it is a refusal of the fate of decay and death of the plants, especially the neglected and discarded ones with which he feels a deep kinship.

The unavoidable guilt which, within the poet, intertwines with his desire for rebellion involves all things and he sees it mirrored in the condemning attitude of the world surrounding him. Though it would appear the godlike florist is not there to reproach his son, everyone is “pointing up and shouting!” Even the “the half-grown chrysanthemums” are perceived by the young poet as “staring up like accusers” (Roethke 1991: 41). The real danger lies not in the material risk run by the child, but in the psychological implications of the experience. The act of rebellion exhibited by the child – whom perhaps Roethke, ironically, imagined as a young Byronic hero or Ahab –, with all its outcomes, is a fundamental step toward the situation described by “The Gibber.” Although in “The Gibber” the poet is no longer defying the godlike florist and nature, but rather asking for reconciliation, he

is now living the most extreme consequences of a process that began in the era of “Child on the Top of a Greenhouse.”

In both cases nature becomes a mirror of the poet’s estrangement from it, in accordance with typically Romantic imaginative modes and a psychological subtext reminiscent of Melville’s work – which Roethke had read in its entirety – more so than Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s (Roethke 1968: 105). In both the boat episode in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and the sea-storm episode in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the protagonists are threatened by a deified nature for violating its order (for stealing eggs from nests and killing an albatross, respectively). In *Moby Dick* natural order itself is rejected and even defied by Ahab who, instead of trusting the ultimate benevolence of the divine design is indignant towards the particular manifestations of evil in it, which afflicted him in the first place. Like Roethke’s narratives, *Moby Dick* mirrors its authors’ panentheist view of God (Braswell 1973: 24). Once such a view is adopted, Luther’s statement that God is to us as we see him is also applicable to the world that He encompasses. Accordingly, Ahab’s view of God and nature as malevolent and tyrannical makes them malevolent and tyrannical to him. The hostility of God and nature and Ahab’s final annihilation provoked by the whale are all outcomes – as well as a symbols – of his desperation and consequent self-destruction, both deriving from his rejection of the very Being in which he is rooted.

In “Child on the Top of a Greenhouse” natural order is not violated, as it is in *The Prelude* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but rather rejected, just like the deity who “established” it, as in *Moby Dick*. It is the poet’s incapability to accept the world and existence as they are and, most of all, his deep bond with the object of his refusal, that engender the guilt and desperation that he projects into nature in the poem and in the narratives.

In *Moby Dick*, God’s presence is perceived in all the natural elements surrounding the characters, notably in the sea rocking Ishmael in chapter 35 and the sun defied by Ahab in chapter 36, but it is the whale that constitutes God’s most suggestive “mask.” The image of the ambiguous reality behind which an ambiguous deity hides, the blank whale also provides a perfect

example of how both mirror our inner condition. It is Starbuck's obscure awareness of such truth that leads him to define as "blasphemous" Ahab's insistence on being so "enraged with a dumb thing" (Melville 2002: 136). In "The Lost Son" and the Greenhouse Poems, God and nature are not "fused" in one powerful symbol as they are in *Moby Dick*. Nevertheless, the mechanism by which the human being's relationship with God and his relationship with nature affect each other is the same in each of the three.

Significantly enough, as the waters interrogated in the first section go dark, becoming dismal and impenetrable, the Father who supposedly created the rain is associated with a feeling of dread:

What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water.  
Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.  
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. (Roethke 1991: 53)

After using Job's words to wonder, "Hath the rain a father?" (38:28) – the only direct quotation in the narratives – the poet painfully acknowledges that the Father of all creatures now represents a threat to him. The sense of protection and reassurance parents give to their children by satisfying their basic need to feel warm and loved, is now just a memory for the poet, whose plea for love only receives hostility in return. Still, the anticipation of a change is obscurely sensed by the protagonist, who sees "a substance flowing" in the "cold morning" (Roethke 1991: 53).

As Roethke explains, the fourth section is "a return to a memory of childhood, that comes back almost as in a dream, after the agitation and exhaustion of earlier actions." The poet recalls how he once stayed up all night in the greenhouse, listening to the roses "breathing" in the dark, while "the weeds slept," till "the light in the morning came slowly over the white / snow" and the pipes started knocking with steam (Roethke 1991: 54). "After the dark night, the morning brings with it the suggestion of a renewing light:

a coming of ‘Papa’” which, along with the coming of steam and warmth, brings a new “sense of motion in the greenhouse” (Roethke 2001: 50-51):

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. (Roethke 1991: 54)

In a sort of reversal of the previous situation, where the poet was “cold all over,” light and warmth embrace all the creatures of the greenhouse – “even the [...] yellowy weeds” – which, like in “Transplanting,” move upward toward the light, as in a motion of reciprocated love for its source. After recalling this episode, in which he perceives his father, without ambiguities, as a giver of life and love, the poet sees him in a new light in his memory. Such change in perspective also involves God since, as Roethke explains when commenting this passage, “the papa on the earth and heaven are blended” here. In the final section of “The Lost Son,” thanks to the effect the recollection has on the poet, “the illumination, the coming of light suggested at the end of the last passage occurs again, this time to the nearly grown man” (Roethke 2001: 50-51). While contemplating a partially frozen field at a moment in which time itself seems to be frozen, the adult poet sees the nature outside the greenhouse as transfigured:

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.

Light traveled over the wide field;  
Stayed.  
The weeds stopped swinging.  
The mind moved, not alone,  
Through the clear air, in the silence. (Roethke 1991: 55)

Instead of simply focusing on the details of nature he now also observes the entire landscape that they inhabit. Although such landscape is dominated by “surviving bones” of weeds, suspended between death and life (which are most likely destined to die with the arrival of winter), it appears beautiful to him, like the “bones” themselves, as it is traversed by light. The sense of divine visitation is extremely marked in this passage. In spite of the poet’s countless efforts, the illumination is finally apprehended thanks to the intervention of an external agent:

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. (Roethke 1991: 55)

As the last lines of the poem testify, “the illumination is still only partially apprehended” and the poet is still “waiting” for a new visitation in an attitude of passive receptivity (Roethke 2001: 51).

The non-definitive nature of the moment of Grace described in “The Lost Son” is confirmed by the opening of “The Long Alley,” in which the poet has once again relapsed into a condition of spiritual distress which negatively affects his perception of nature. Like at the beginning of “The Lost Son,” where he “heard the dead cry,” now “a dead mouth sings under an old tree” and the poet wonders “how long need the bones mourn?” He again sounds out water, finding it dirty, repulsive, and dominated by death, as his attention is caught by a dead fish that “floats belly upward, / Sliding through the white current, / Slowly turning” (Roethke 1991: 56). This dead fish calls to mind the one with which the young poet sympathized and which his merciful father spared in “Where Knock is Open Wide.” There seems to be no mercy in nature now. What the poet finds in the waters, presenting a “sulphurous,” hellish quality in his eyes, is the manifestation of an indifferent or even malicious deity:

Loo, loo, said the sulphurous water,  
There's no filth on a plateau of cinders.  
This smoke's from the glory of God. (Roethke 1991: 56)

Afflicted by the awareness of his own finitude and precariousness, and by his spiritual sense of incompleteness, the poet gives voice to his frustrated desire for fullness and spiritual union with God: “Lord, what do you require?”; “For whom were you made, sweetness I cannot touch?”; “Luminous one, shall we meet in the bosom of God?” (Roethke 1991: 56). Similar invocations are newly uttered in the fourth section of the poem, where they are addressed both to the deity and to the flowers:

That was a close knock. See what the will wants.  
This air could flesh a dead stick. Sweet Jesus, make me sweat.



Are the flowers here? The birds are.  
Shall I call the flowers?

Come littlest, come tenderest,  
Come whispering over the small waters,  
Reach me rose, sweet one, still moist in the loam,  
Come, come out of the shade, the cool ways,  
The long alleys of string and stem;  
Bend down, small breathers, creepers and winders;  
Lean from the tiers and benches,  
Cyclamen dripping and lilies.  
What fish-ways you have, littlest flowers,  
Swaying over the walks, in the watery air,  
Drowsing in soft light, petals pulsing. (Roethke 1991: 58)

There is a sort of hierarchy in the world of plants as Roethke portrays it, and the rose – once the gardener’s most beloved flower – often seems to be at the top of it. As previously explained, in the narratives Roethke freely appropriates pre-existing symbols making them part of his personal symbolism, while at the same time exploiting the nuances deriving from their traditional meaning. In the case of religious symbols this means that he relies on the reader’s knowledge of their meaning in the Bible and the past literary religious tradition. In this passage, the invocation of the rose uttered right after the invocation of Jesus creates a loose superposition between the two. The rose as a symbol of Christ comes from the Song of Songs, the book of the Old Testament describing an earthly love, which, according to Origen’s interpretation, allegorizes the love between God and the individual soul (Origene 1998: xxix): the bridegroom – who calls himself “the rose of Sharon” in the very first verse of the book – and the bride respectively symbolize Christ and the soul of the believer. Edward Taylor adopts Origen’s interpretation when, in his meditation inspired by the first verse of the Song of Songs entitled “The Reflexion,” speaking as an unhappy lover who longs for the love of God, he invokes both the Lord and the rose:

Lord, art thou at the Table Head above  
Meat, Med'cine, Sweetness, sparkling Beautys, to  
Enamour Souls with Flaming Flakes of Love,  
And not my Trencher, nor my Cup o'reflow?  
Ben't I a bidden guest? Oh! sweat mine Eye:  
O'reflow with Teares: Oh! draw thy fountains dry.

Shall I not smell thy sweet, oh! Sharons Rose?  
Shall not mine Eye salute thy Beauty? Why?  
Shall thy sweet leaves their Beautious sweets upclose?  
As halfe ashamde my sight should on them ly?  
Woe's me! For this my sighs shall be in grain,  
Offer'd on Sorrows Altar for the same. (Taylor 1939: 125)

Although it is not clear whether the rose is a symbol of Jesus, God Himself, or the divine intercession between man and God in "The Reflexion," the flower certainly evokes, among other things, the effects of Grace potentially blossoming in the soul (Clendenning 1964: 208-209). In the poem Taylor compares his soul to a barren garden which cannot be irrigated by the Spirit as mud obstructs the pipes which should nourish it, preventing the Rose of Sharon to bloom. The sexual allusiveness typical of seventeenth-century mystical poetry is mainly conveyed by the image of the pipes in "The Reflexion." Indeed, in his meditations inspired by the Song of Songs, Taylor occasionally compares himself to the bride of Jesus, symbolically acquiring a female gender. "The Reflexion" is entirely dominated by a melancholic mood. The ecstasy experienced by the poet in the past and which he fears he will never experience again, leaves a deep void in his soul, and the poem ends as it began, with unanswered pleas:

Shall Heaven and Earth's bright Glory all up lie,  
Like Sun Beams bundled in the sun in thee?  
Dost thou sit Rose at Table Head, where I

Do sit, and Carv'st no morsell sweet for mee?  
So much before, so little now! Sprindge, Lord,  
Thy Rosie Leaves, and me their Glee afford.

Shall not thy Rose my Garden fresh, perfume?  
Shall not thy Beauty my dull Heart assaile?  
Shall not thy golden gleams run through this gloom?  
Shall my black Velvet Mask thy fair Face Vaile?  
Pass o're my Faults: shine forth, bright sun; arise!  
Enthroned thy Rosy-selfe within mine Eyes. (Taylor 1939: 126)

While the “sweetness” for which Taylor longs remains out of his reach in “The Reflexion,” in “The Long Alley” the poet finally tastes the “sweetness” which he originally “could not touch” and which he later identifies with the sweet rose. Unlike Taylor, who recalls a past mystical experience, Roethke lives a new one, which takes place in nature. After invoking both a real and symbolical rose, he calls upon all flowers in order to envelop them all in a unifying mystical embrace. The line “Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!” is clearly meant to evoke the popular sculpture “The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa” by Lorenzo Bernini, which depicts the mystic being transfixed by the spear of an angel (Roethke 1991: 58). Like Taylor, Roethke creates an indirect superposition between himself and a female figure, in this case by alluding to a work of art in which the ecstasy of the mystic has strong erotic connotations.

It is impossible to know with certainty whether Roethke had only the Song of Songs in mind when he wrote “The Long Alley,” or if he also wished to echo “The Reflexion.” Although Taylor’s poem was discovered in 1936 and published for the first time in 1937, eleven years before the publication of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, there is no evidence that Roethke read it. Still, the fact that both Taylor and Roethke play with the words “sweet” and “sweat” in the first lines of their compositions, is one of the aspects that makes the hypothesis of a conscious echo plausible.

The event described provokes a new change in the poet's perception of nature. As God becomes the "master of water," all the natural elements metaphorically acquire the consistency of this element ("Send down a rush of air, O torrential, / Make the sea flash in the dust") as if everything was "fused" in a new unity in the eyes of the poet. The world around him becomes a "watery world" where the "wind brings many fish" and "the lakes will be happy" (Roethke 1991: 58).

The outcomes of the mystical experience described in "The Long Alley" turn out to be as temporary as those of the previous one. At the opening of "A Field of Light," the waters that the poet contemplates under the rain, "in a watery drowse," have once again become a mirror of the degradation and decay that pervade nature (Roethke 1991: 59):

Came to lakes; came to dead water,  
Ponds with moss and leaves floating,  
Planks sunk in the sand.

A log turned at the touch of a foot;  
A long weed floated upward;  
An eye tilted. (Roethke 1991: 59)

In "The Lost Son," when he is victim of the wrath of God and nature, the poet feels that the sun is "against" him. Now he asks: "did I ever curse the sun?" possibly echoing *Moby Dick*, in which, as we have seen, the sun is a symbol of both nature and God. The poet addresses his question to the "Angel within me" and asks him to "speak and abide," as if he were calling upon the part of himself that is most powerfully capable of love (Roethke 1991: 59). The resentment against his Father and his work which he has carried within himself for so long fades away, as he is overwhelmed by a feeling of love that leads him to kiss the ground and joyously dance. When "some morning thing came, beating its wings" he informs it that he has gone through a sort of purification – "the dirt left my hands, visitor" – and in his eyes nature once

again goes through a transfiguration, under the light of a now benevolent sun (Roethke 1991: 60):

Listen, love,  
The fat lark sang in the field;  
I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,  
The salt laughed and the stones;  
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,  
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,  
The lovely diminutives.  
I could watch! I could watch!  
I saw the separateness of all things!  
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;  
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.  
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak  
of cedars,  
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.  
The worms were delighted as wrens.  
And I walked, I walked through the light air;  
I moved with the morning. (Roethke 1991: 60)

When his senses awaken, the poet rejoices in seeing and hearing individual creatures prospering, laughing, and singing in their “separateness,” as well as the interactions of their lives and voices. He now participates in the overall harmony they create, as his heart “lifts up with the great grasses” and he “moves with the morning.”

Since the wound at the root of the poet’s illness has not yet completely healed, this moment of intense joy is followed by a new dramatic crisis in the next narrative. In the first stanzas of “The Shape of the Fire,” while observing how “water recedes to the crying of spiders,” the poet lives a new moment of discomfort, soon turning into mere distress. Seemingly trapped, once again, in the pit of his desperation he pleads for rescue (Roethke 1991: 61):

Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?  
Will the sea give the wind suck? A toad folds into a stone.  
These flowers are all fangs. Comfort me, fury.  
Wake me, witch, we'll do the dance of rotten sticks.  
(Roethke 1991: 61)

In his state of extreme estrangement, the protagonist feels overwhelmed by both the aggressiveness of nature – epitomized by the “fangs” of the flowers – and the “fury” of God, as if he were now more fully aware of the deep connection between the two. As in “Where Knock is Open Wide,” right after the death of the father, and in the moment of regression described in “The Gibber” – when he re-experiences the infantile condition of helplessness and desire for reassurance – he does not simply ask God to appease His anger. The poet asks Him to listen to him and comfort him. Still, the plea “mother me out of here” is charged with deeper awareness than “fish me out. Please.” The poet feels, or hopes, that, if he overcomes his present crisis, he will finally experience a rebirth, or an “awaking,” as the last line suggests. This also seems to be implied by the following invocation, this time addressed to the “Spirit,” most likely another name for the “visitor” encountered in the previous narrative: “Spirit, come near. This is only the edge of whiteness” (Roethke 1991: 61). Such whiteness – the absence and sum of all colors – unavoidably recalls, in the mind of the reader of American literature, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which takes place in the fullness of the Being and, in the Kierkegaardian “instant” of encounter with the infinite, can engender a reversal from emptiness to fullness, from desperation to faith.

In other words, these lines prefigure the reversal at the heart of the Protestant scheme of salvation whose analysis is crucial to the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Reformed theology and the existentialist thought of the two philosophers share the assumption that the deepest moment of prostration of the soul coincides with the beginning of its deliverance. Indeed Luther’s intuition that Heaven can be reached only through the gates of Hell is fully developed in Kierkegaard’s reflections on the value of despair and Barth’s theology of crisis (Pareyson 1950: 119; Loreto

1999: 51-52). As Kierkegaard explains in *The Sickness unto Death*, only by abandoning oneself to the desperation deriving from the double impossibility to accept or refuse one's predicament can the human being totally abandon himself to God. It is only in the state of complete resignation to one's fallen condition and surrender to one's despair that Grace can come to the rescue of the individual (Kierkegaard 1980: 141-142). The implication of negative and positive that makes such reversal possible is also due to the paradoxical nature of existence, meant as a point of intersection between the finite and the infinite. Indeed such convergence can at times result in the "short circuit" or "instant" in which dying also amounts to undergoing a spiritual rebirth (Pareyson 1950: 119).

According to this view the poet must endure his present crisis all the way through in order to ultimately overcome it. His desire for rest without conflict most likely leads him to self-eroticism ("my meat eats me. Who waits at the gate?") in an attempt to find in the orgasm what Bataille defines as a sort of temporary death (Roethke 1991: 62). Significantly, it is after reaching the climax of his longing for annihilation that the poet experiences the desired reversal. After acknowledging that "the journey from the flesh is longest," he observes how "a rose sways least" and realizes that "the redeemer comes a dark way," both mysteriously and through personal sufferings (Roethke 1991: 63). Like in "The Long Alley," the superimposition between Jesus and the rose precedes a moment of Grace:

Death was not. I lived in a simple drowse:  
Hands and hair moved through a dream of wakening blossoms.  
Rain sweetened the cave and the dove still called;  
The flowers leaned on themselves, the flowers in hollows;  
And love, love sang toward. (Roethke 1991: 63)

The sort of temporary death he underwent is like a past nightmare, now that he experiences the awakening he had awaited. Like in Vaughan's "The Morning-Watch," in which the poet's regeneration allows him to see how everything "Awakes, and sings! [...] sacred hymns" composing the "symphony

of nature,” the protagonist of the narratives observes the “wakening blossoms” and hears all the creatures singing songs of love. Before describing the objects of his perceptive awakening, Vaughan portrays the personal regeneration that made such awakening possible as a gradual and delicate process, describing it in plant terms. He knows that the “shots” with which his “soul breaks and buds” have been fed by a “dew” that “All the long hours / Of night and rest, / Through the still shrouds / Of sleep, and clouds [...] fell on my breast” (Vaughan 1976: 179). After awakening and observing the flowers nurtured by the sun, Roethke employs a similar metaphor of regeneration to describe his spiritual renewal. He sees what it means

To know that light falls and fills, often without our knowing,  
As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick pouring,  
Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow over,  
Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained flower.  
(Roethke 1991: 64)

Now that his spiritual rebirth seems to have finally taken place, the poet feels that it is the result of a process which started long before he could become aware of it.

When *The Lost Son and Other Poems* was published in 1948 it was meant to be the end of the story, an account of the final step in the spiritual progression experienced by the protagonist. Nevertheless, when Roethke assembled his various narratives for *Words for the Wind*, subsequent to “The Shape of the Fire” he placed another poem which, once again, describes a spiritual crisis and its overcoming. It is unclear whether “Praise to the End!” newly recounts the poet’s final regeneration from a different perspective or if it offers an account of a new spiritual rebirth, thereby revealing the partial quality of the preceding one. Either way, as we shall see, all the previously analyzed aspects of the poet’s illness and healing process emerge and intertwine in a most exhaustive and poetically expressive way in “Praise to the End!”, allowing the overall sequence to reach its full accomplishment.



### **3.5 – The Final Reversal: “Praise to the End!”, Unfold! Unfold!”, “I Cry, Love! Love!”, “O, Thou Opening, O”**

“Praise to the End!” opens in a symbolical dark wood where the poet, once again afflicted by his sickness, no longer pleads for rescue, but addresses his Father with a tone of resignation, as if he had finally accepted his spiritual defeat and renounced his struggle:

It's dark in this wood, soft mocker.  
For whom have I swelled like a seed?  
What a bone-ache I have.  
Father of tensions, I'm down to my skin at last. (Roethke 1991: 81)

The poet's “death wish,” once again results in “a particular erotic act” meant to satisfy his desire for annihilation. Indeed, as Roethke himself explains: “Equationally the poem can be represented: onanism equals death” (Roethke 2001: 52). Trapped in a condition of death in life (“I'm dead at both ends”) and discouraged by the failure of all his previous attempts to overcome his predicament (“All risings / Fall”), the poet who was once ready to let the spirit starve “until the dead have been subdued,” now resigns himself to “feed[ing] the ghost alone” (Roethke 1991: 81). The same drive that previously led the poet to seek annihilation in self-eroticism now leads him to desire a dreamless sleep. Still, as he slowly slides into unconsciousness he imagines or dreams of being rocked by a bearded paternal figure who, this time, satisfies his request to be sung to sleep. “Nonsense songs out of the past” now surface from the depths of the poet's memory (Roethke 2001: 52):

Rock me to sleep, the weather's wrong.  
Speak to me, frosty beard.  
Sing to me, sweet.

Mips and ma the mooly moo,  
The likes of him is biting who,

A cow's a care and who's a coo? –  
What footie does is final.

My dearest dear, my fairest fair,  
Your father tossed a cat in air,  
Though neither you nor I was there, –  
What footie does is final.

Be large as an owl, be slick as a frog,  
Be good as a goose, be big as a dog,  
Be sleek as a heifer, be long as a hog, –  
What footie does is final. (Roethke 1991: 82)

Lying on God's breast is a typical motif of mystical poetry and prose. In "He touched me, so I live to know" (J506), adopting an erotic language from the Song of Songs to describe the soul's union with God, like Taylor, Dickinson ambiguously refers to a chest that could belong to the deity, just as much as to a Lover. This complex figure sometimes also acquires paternal connotations in her poetry (Loreto 1999: 79-80). More than an ambiguity, Roethke creates a superposition in this passage, in which the father and God "fuse" into a single figure, like in "The Return." Paradoxically, while the poet falls asleep in the Father's arms, or more likely, enters a new state of consciousness, he begins to live a spiritual awakening and realizes that he has been "asleep in a bower of dead skin" and "I can't stay here": a change must take place (Roethke 1991: 82). While in "The Return" the moment of pacification with the "ghost" of the father takes place thanks to a childhood memory, now the poet re-elaborates, in his dream, the episode of the boat told in "Where Knock is Open Wide":

I dreamt I was all bones;  
The dead slept in my sleeve;  
Sweet Jesus tossed me back:  
I wore the sun with ease.

The several sounds were low;  
The river ebbd and flowed:  
Desire was winter-calm,  
A moon away. (Roethke 1991: 83)

In the beginning, in his dream, the poet finds himself in the same condition in which he was when he fell asleep: “the dead” that haunt him lead him to live in a state of death in life. Jesus then tosses him “back” into the water and he starts to heal thanks to what seems to be a sort of baptism. Jesus’ act does not precipitate the poet into “the deep waters” where, as a child, he feared he would drown in “Where Knock is Open Wide.” This allows him to come back to life, like the fish thrown back into the water by his father in the first narrative. The water is no longer a threat to him, but a source of purification and spiritual rebirth. Thanks to such rebirth, the poet is no longer “down to his skin;” he is now “more than a fish” (Roethke 1991: 83):

Such owly pleasures! Fish come first, sweet bird.  
Skin's the least of me. Kiss this.  
Is the eternal near, fondling?  
I hear the sound of hands.

Can the bones breathe? This grave has an ear.  
It's still enough for the knock of a worm.  
I feel more than a fish.  
Ghost, come closer. (Roethke 1991: 83)

The Kierkegaardian reversal at the core of “The Shape of the Fire” finds in these lines its most effective and poetically mature description, as the poet’s death-and-rebirth process is conveyed through strongly evocative images.

The reconciliation with the Father that takes place while the poet is laying in His arms also implies a reconciliation with the external world and, most of all, himself and his past. He is now “awake all over” and his original

sense of estrangement from nature is replaced by overwhelming feelings of love for the creatures that “wave” and love him in turn. Most of all, it is replaced by a feeling of faith in all of creation. In fact, while in “Bring the Day!” the poet asks himself questions about the nature of the principle at the origin of the harmony of creation, expressed in terms of music (“What’s all the singing between? – / Is it with whispers and kissing? –”), he now clearly perceives and simply believes in the deepest, hidden harmony underlying natural creation, as he hears “the heart of another singing” (Roethke 1991: 73, 84).

I believe! I believe! –  
In the sparrow, happy on gravel;  
In the winter-wasp, pulsing its wings in the sunlight;  
I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced uncles;  
I hear the lizards whistling.  
And I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing,  
Lighter than bells,  
Softer than water. (Roethke 1991: 84)

As the poet’s previous invitation to the “ghost” to “come closer” testifies, he no longer needs to subdue the dead through starvation, nor does he resign to helplessly feeding them. The ghosts that afflicted him for so long are now “all gay,” as he is no longer in conflict with his past, but rather grateful for it: he now sees the light for “the dark showed” him “a face” (Roethke 1991: 84).

The last three narratives focus on the perceptive and spiritual outcomes of the poet’s regeneration, and are essentially celebrative of natural creation. Significantly, “Unfold! Unfold!” takes its title from Vaughan’s “The Revival,” a poem describing the way in which divine Grace affects the perception of nature, allowing the regenerate to feel the love which permeates all of creation. Once again such love is expressed in terms of harmonious sounds exchanged between creatures, and, at the same time, addressed to God:

Hark! how the winds have changed their note,

And with warm whispers call thee out!  
The frosts are past, the storms are gone,  
And backward life at last comes on.  
The lofty groves, in express joyes,  
Reply unto the turtle's voice:  
And here, in dust and dirt,—oh, here,  
The lilies of his love appear! (Vaughan 1976: 370)

Now that a deep change has taken place within him, the protagonist of the narratives hears the same sounds. Moreover, he perceives such sounds as meanings conveyed by the symbols which, in his eyes, pervade nature, making it “a house for wisdom; / a field for revelation” (Roethke 1991: 86):

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

A light song comes from the leaves.  
A slow sigh says yes. And light sighs;  
A low voice, summer-sad.  
Is it you, cold father? Father,  
For whom the minnows sang? (Roethke 1991: 86)

Now the poet knows that the “cold father” who previously threatened him is the same father for whom all of creation sings songs of love, and who guarantees the triumph of life in spite of death: “What the grave says, / The nest denies” (Roethke 1991: 87).

Although the title of “I Cry, Love! Love!” comes from “Visions of the Daughters of Albion” by William Blake, its subject is not romantic love but rather the love the poet feels for the creatures surrounding him. Such feeling is accompanied by an awareness of the original unity and common root of all beings. Like in “The Pit,” the poet asks a new question which echoes and, at the same time, reverses those asked by God in Job 38, but he now feels he

knows the answer:

Who untied the tree? I remember now.

We met in a nest. Before I lived.

The dark hair sighed.

We never enter

Alone. (Roethke 1991: 89)

In “The Long Alley” the protagonist expresses his desire to find “in the bosom of God” a complete union with the Being. He now remembers having enjoyed that union before his birth and he feels that, in spite of the condition of separation unavoidably deriving from our entry into existence, we are not “alone.” A deep bond continues to exist between all beings because they share the same ontological ground and are interconnected by the unifying principle of love.

By virtue of his regeneration, the poet takes on an oracular tone reminiscent of Whitman’s in *Song of Myself* in “O Thou Opening, O.” Nevertheless, in spite of his previous assertion about death and life – “What the grave says, / The nest denies” – he does not go so far as to deny the substantiality of evil as Whitman does. “The devil isn’t dead; he is just away,” because the divisive forces from which the poet apparently succeeded in freeing himself continue to pervade the human world (Roethke 1991: 87, 93).

Although most critics share the opinion that the protagonist of the narratives does go through a personal growth and development throughout the story, the reader of the sequence cannot help but doubt the authenticity of the final character of the spiritual rebirth with which it closes. Interestingly, the continuation of Roethke’s spiritual quest – testified by his later production – is somehow prefigured by the last words uttered by his literary alter-ego in the narratives. In any case, dominating the concluding lines of “O Thou Opening, O” is the poet’s fully acquired confidence in the “true,” trustworthy quality of the drive propelling and guiding his quest, and his will to keep following it:

Going is knowing.

I see; I seek;

I'm near.

Be true,

Skin. (Roethke 1991: 95)

## CONCLUSION

Among the most prominent unifying threads throughout the notebooks that Theodore Roethke kept during his life is an incommensurable and clearly insatiable longing for fullness, sprouting from a radical sense of spiritual incompleteness. The feelings which in the forties led the poet to write “how terrible” is “the need for God,” were the very feelings that shortly before his death made him brood over the “intolerable sadness of longing for too much” (Roethke 1972: 153, 141). In the previous pages I have aimed to demonstrate that, in addition to being persistent in Roethke’s poetry, such feelings and their poetical treatment are rooted in the author’s Protestant culture and essentially Calvinist sensibility, as testified by the fact that they are expressed in his first three collections through poetic modes and motifs recovered from the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition. My exploration of the influence of such tradition on Roethke’s *Open House*, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, and *Praise to the End!* has allowed me to identify – under their superficial differences – recurring philosophical notions and themes that Roethke treated from different perspectives, yet always in light of new accomplishments of psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy.

In his first three volumes, Roethke’s panentheist view of God as both transcendent and immanent leads him to look for Him beyond this world as well as in it, though in both cases he mainly perceives Him as distant and inscrutable. Such distance and inscrutability are at the origin of the sense of incompleteness and fallenness conveyed in his poetry, as well as the feeling of inadequacy which for his sensibility, as for the Calvinist tradition, constitutes the deep root of guilt. The radicalization of the condition of separation or estrangement from God and His creation and the consequent exacerbation of this guilt result in the risk of psychic disruption in the three collections. Another fundamental element of continuity in Roethke’s poetry from the thirties and the forties is the Protestant idea of our “birth in the state of sin” which Roethke translates, in Kierkegaardian terms, as the idea of the



personal fall as a process which begins shortly after birth. Finally, the notion of “regeneration” or “Grace” that starts to surface in Roethke’s first collection plays a crucial role in the subsequent two collections. Described in the narratives, such regeneration eventually takes place through the paradoxical reversal from desperation to faith at the core of the Protestant scheme of salvation as Luther, Kierkegaard, and Barth describe it.

In all three collections the aforementioned philosophical notions and themes are at times accompanied by Scriptural echoes from Job, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the Gospels and treated through symbols and motifs of Biblical origins used for centuries in the literary-philosophical Protestant tradition. The pit and the wrath of God – meant as symbols of desperation – as well as the plant representing a spiritual condition, appear for the first time in *Open House* and are further developed in the Greenhouse Poems and the narratives alongside the image of God as a gardener. While in *Open House* the plant constitutes an abstract metaphor as in Protestant lyric poetry, in the Greenhouse Poems it becomes a concrete being which, in accordance with the philosophical premises and the poetical modes of Calvin’s natural theology and Edwards’ typology of nature, can acquire eschatological meaning in the eyes of the observer in rare moments of illumination. Other Biblical symbols utilized by Roethke in the narratives are the Rose (of Sharon) – an emblem of Grace – and the waters, which alternately represent an image of desperation, as in the Psalms, or regeneration, as in the Gospels.

As we have seen, it is possible to detect two main souls in Roethke’s work: a darker soul, afflicted by the Calvinist sense of human nothingness before the fullness of God, and a more optimistic soul, animated by the faith in a possible spiritual union with Him, akin to the Protestant heresies recovering the original mystical aspirations of reformed spirituality. These two opposite tendencies emerge both in the poems concerning the search for a transcendent God through an Eckhartartian detachment from the world and in the poems describing the attempt to establish a deep communion with Him through the mysterious nature behind which He hides and in which, according to Calvinist theology of nature, He manifests Himself. The

coexistence of these seemingly contradictory aspects in Roethke's work is made possible by the poet's retrieval of their common original philosophical premises, widely analyzed by Kierkegaard and Tillich in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the passages of the narratives which describe moments of Grace Roethke casts aside his melancholic feelings and celebrates the divine ground of all things, revealing an additional soul, akin to that of the American Romantics. These passages, and the context in which they are placed, confirm Elisa New's theory that Emerson's "heirs" didn't simply adopt his positive perspective on the human being and nature but "conquered" it after a spiritual quest which culminates in a final regeneration. Nevertheless, as Roethke's later poetry testifies, although the regeneration experienced by his literary alter-ego in the narratives might be interpreted as final, the poet's spiritual quest never ends. Interestingly, in the author's last, posthumous volume – *The Far Field* – the three aforementioned souls coexist, alternately emerging in different compositions, mirroring the fluctuations of the poet's conscience and the complexity of his inner life.

As Roethke himself stated in 1963, a few months before his death, despite having experienced the feeling of oneness multiple times in his life, "the sense that all is one and one is all," he is unable to "claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. No, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled with" (Roethke 2001: 26). The crucial tension at the core of Roethke's early work, which so many American poets before him inherited from their Calvinist ancestors, never fades; on the contrary, it fuels his poetry until the end.

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