Existential Elements in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke

by

Leigh-Ann Duke ©

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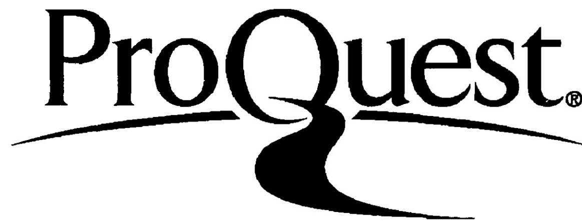

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to past, present, and future students interested in the work of Theodore Roethke. It is my hope that this thesis may encourage others to read and enjoy this significant, but often disregarded, American poet.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Rodney and Sandra Duke. I could not have arrived at this stage in my career without their continued wholehearted support of my academic endeavours.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to illustrate, through a chronological reading of The Collected Poems, the existential elements in the poetry of Theodore Roethke (1908 - 1963). Though he was by no means a rigorous philosopher, Roethke's particular responses to human life in the 20th century constitute a meaningful and unique philosophy of existence. These particular responses are bound up in Roethke's language, his dominant images, and his primary thematic concerns. The intent of this study is to examine these responses in light of the general concerns of existentialism in order to ascertain to what degree Roethke can be considered an existential poet.

Existentialism is commonly accepted to be the philosophy of influence in the 20th century. All artists of this era, therefore, demonstrate a growing concern for the meaning of their personal existences. To examine the language, images, and thematic concerns of Roethke's poetry in light of a generally accepted definition of existentialism is to discover what makes him more blatantly existential than many of his contemporaries. For the purpose of clarity, I shall use the term "existentialism" to denote only the most general characteristics of the doctrine.

As a philosophical movement in general, existentialism can be defined as "a philosophy of subjectivity, or selfhood, whose fundamental doctrine proclaims man's freedom in the accomplishment of his destiny, ... whose principal method is consequently that of description, or phenomenology" (Troisfontaines 5). All existentialists, despite their affiliation with particular schools, would agree that the existentialist has subjectivity as his starting point, expresses his personal freedom and responsibility, and confronts his own finitude. The fundamental tenet of subjectivity refers to the individual's personal engagement with external reality. It is through this engagement that the individual determines what the objects of reality mean or signify with regard to his own existence. Roger Troisfontaines explains:

> Subjectivity ... is the realm of those realities which belong most profoundly to my personal being, those which constitute it in its innermost reality, and which, for that very reason, I cannot separate from myself. It is the mystery in which I am immersed.... (Troisfontaines 13).

Human existence is realized in personal being (Blackham 161), hence the existential belief in the primacy of subjectivity.

The tenet of freedom and responsibility refers to the individual's subjectivity and his consequent responsibility for the course of his own existence. The freedom we have as human beings is the freedom to exercise our wills and make our

personal choices based only on the circumstances of the particular situations we encounter in life. To the existentialist, this signifies self-creation: the individual, through his engagement with his internal and external realities, "forms his own personality" (Troisfontaines 8) and determines the value of his own life. In the context of our personal freedoms can be found our own "reasons for both living and dying" (Troisfontaines 14). Responsibility is inherent in such a concept of freedom because, if the individual has the freedom to exercise his will and choose his manner of being, then he must also be held accountable for his decisions. He can neither blame his bad luck on nor credit his good fortune to an external power or being, because he himself chose the course of his own existence. In a world where knowledge is incomplete and uncertain, "the weight of responsibility [is thrown] upon personal decision" (Blackham 150).

Personal confrontation with one's own finitude or mortality is a characteristic of existentialism (Harper 38). The implications of such a confrontation are manifold; the individual recognizes the absurdity of human existence and must personally respond to this absurdity in order to render his life meaningful. This confrontation with personal finitude is often marked by a horrific glimpse of one's self as a living and dying human being and is marked in the

existentialist by the distinctions he makes between existence and essence, life and thought, and feeling and conceptualizing (Harper 34-5). Existentialism is "lived first, talked about afterward" (Harper 26); the emphasis must therefore be placed on existence, life, and feeling.

Roethke's poetry is characterized by a general anxiety of living, with a marked concentration on personal identity and the meaning of this identity in the face of 20th century ambiguity and chaos. Although this is Roethke's major thematic concern, he is also concerned with the complex nature of modern life, the fact of death, the question of God, the nature of creation (in terms of the physical world as well as the process of creation in man), and the ability of love and the imagination to respond to the ambiguity and chaos of modern life. These themes manifest themselves in Roethke's language and images.

His pattern of images arises chiefly from the natural, physical world. He often employs images of plants, animals, and elements in order to come to a better understanding of his own existence. It is not surprising, therefore, that the very language of his poems is generally concrete. It is clear from his use of many monosyllabic and evocative words, such as "dark", "light", "field", and "water", that Roethke's poetic language is fraught with appeals to the unconscious. Their meanings are relative to the Self, or the "I" of the poems,

and begin to form, in a cumulative sense, Roethke's own intuitive and intellectual pattern of responses to his external and internal realities.

Although he may certainly have been influenced by those existentialists writing during his lifetime, Roethke did not become the follower or supporter of any one philosopher. He cannot be considered an atheistic existentialist in the manner of Sartre, nor can he be considered a Christian existentialist in the manner of Marcel. These two philosophers represent the two poles of existential thought; Sartre uses his freedom to reject God and to isolate himself (Troisfontaines 25) while Marcel uses his freedom to pass from "the initial participation in which he is immersed independently of his own will, to a new participation, this time conscious and freely willed, with the world, himself, other men, and God" (Troisfontaines 27). Roethke seems to present, in _The Collected Poems_, somewhat of a reconciliation of these two radically different existentialist perspectives. He does not reject God but rather the orthodox notion of God; he neither isolated himself from nor opened himself to the world during his personal lifetime.

If, indeed, any existential philosophers can be pointed to as exerting major philosophical influences on Roethke, they would be Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich. Roethke's own notebooks and poetry provide the hard evidence that he was not

only aware of these two philosophers but that he had read (and continued to read) around in their major works.

He refers to Kierkegaard by name in his notebooks and in the poem "Duet" (CP 264). He also quoted Kierkegaard's memorable aphorism "All knowledge lives in paradox" (Wagoner 225). Kierkegaard must have influenced Roethke's very poetic style as the rhetoric in The Collected Poems exists mainly in aphorism and paradox. Richard Blessing (23) and Neal Bowers (176) remark Roethke's interest in and connection to Kierkegaard in their critical appraisals of his poetry.

Many other critics note the influence of Tillich. Jay Parini states that "Tillich exercized a subtle, but profound influence on the later Roethke, who drew on The Courage To Be [Tillich's best known work] for ideas and corroboration of his own instincts" (143). The conclusion to the poem "Four For Sir John Davies" is, according to Parini, supported by "Tillich's basic existentialism" (Parini 143). Rosemary Sullivan states that Roethke was "deeply affected by Tillich's analysis of existential anxiety as the desperate awareness of the threat of non-being which is inherent in existence itself" (126) and points to "The Pure Fury" and "In a Dark Time" as two poems which clearly demonstrate Tillich's influence on Roethke. Walter Kalaidjian agrees with Roethke's earlier critics by noting that the poet's "catalogue of philosophers who theorized nothingness ... is itself based on a passage he

read in Tillich" (Kalaidjian 107).

Although it is clear then that Roethke, in his collected work, reveals his affinities to certain existentialists, he was not schooled in philosophy nor did he take more than a casual interest in it until after he began to publish. In a letter to Kenneth Burke dated 1946, Roethke mentions that he is going, "sometime soon, to send a long typed letter [to whom is not specified] asking for advice in reading in one or two very particular areas in philosophical thought" (Selected Letters 121). Since this is one of the first dated references to Roethke's interest in philosophy, I assume that his serious readings in these "one or two very particular areas" did not commence until around this time. It is my intent, however, to show that, although his poetry "rests on a body of sentiment rather than an articulated network of ideas", the reader can "glimpse through his poetic formulations some of the philosophical elements of existentialism" (Molesworth 26).

It is generally accepted that a sensitive artist at work in a particular age will necessarily reflect, to some degree, the climate of that age in his work. Artistic creation does not occur in a vacuum; the artist consciously and unconsciously draws from the historical, sociological, intellectual, and spiritual ideas astir in his era. It must be likewise accepted that the artist comments, either directly or indirectly, on these particular currents of his era.

Roethke, the man and the poet, must be understood according to such a fundamental framework. He was born in 1908 in Saginaw, Michigan and grew up in a period marked by transition. The Gilded Age of the 19th century saw many important changes which did not have their full impact on the Western world until the early 20th century (The United States 234). The industrial revolution of the mid 19th century, for example, led directly to the increase in technology and the industrialization of the Western world. Unprecedented urban growth in the United States caused ensuing problems, such as the dehumanization of man through the increased use of machinery. In fact, between 1866 and 1915, "some 25 million immigrants came to the United States" (The United States 232), a figure to which Roethke's family belongs, having immigrated in 1872 (Seager 9). Darwin's 1859 publication of On The Origin Of The Species brought on that doubt about orthodox religious beliefs which had characterized the Victorian period of the 19th century. The ensuing generation of the 20th century was profoundly disturbed by the disorder and reckless violence of the Gilded Age (The United States 281). Artists who tried to express this difficult transition of belief, morality, and philosophy include British poet and novelist Thomas Hardy (1840 - 1928) and Polish-born British novelist Joseph Conrad (1857 - 1924). Even a superficial reading of their creative output would reveal a pervading sense of man at

odds with faith in a world of chaos and chance.

It is clear that the early 20th century is characterized by disillusionment, despair, and moral confusion. Disillusionment came with the World Wars, despair with the Stock Market crash and the Great Depression, and moral confusion with the conflicting desires of the Jazz Age. The young Roethke growing up in Michigan could not help but be influenced by, and even partially created in the image of, the gloomy atmosphere of the early 20th century. In highschool, Roethke was known to drink alcohol with varying degrees of fervour (Seager 37-8), and his delusions of mob affiliation have been connected with the sheer romanticization of what actually occurred during the Prohibition years (Seager 56-8). The Great Depression impinged little on Roethke's personal life except to delay his graduate degree (Seager 70), but it is evident from some of his early letters that poetry was not an easy commodity to peddle, particularly given the economic circumstances of the country at the time. By World War II Roethke was an adult, 31 years of age. However, he was rejected by the draft, as was his friend and fellow poet John Berryman, due to their mental breakdowns previous to the outbreak of the war (Meyers 3).

Although it is accepted that an artist cannot escape the influence of his age, some critics feel that Roethke's poetry is not sufficiently representative of his age. Randall

Stiffler, in his book entitled Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Critics, states that critics "continue to find in the poetry too little reference to external circumstances and thus conclude that Roethke's poetic vision remains, to the end, essentially self-involved" (158). While this is one way of interpreting the lack of explicit reference to the events of his era in Roethke's poetry, Stiffler suggests another. He writes:

> In fact, examples [of explicit references to external events] do exist in the poetry and the prose, but most of Roethke's defenders agree that Roethke was not a topical poet or a poet of occasions. Though he did not write poems about war or politics or poverty, Roethke was aware of those things, and the poems he did write were affected by them. Roethke responded to his times by indirection (Stiffler 165).

Stiffler also states that the lack of explicit references does not diminish the value of Roethke's poetry (165). This is a major point I wish to take up in this study: it is Roethke's subjectivity which sincerely reveals the impact the events of his age had upon him as a poet. His subjective poetry, in fact, renders such events meaningful, particularly in the existential manner of thinking. In a world that is neither ordered nor inherently possessed of value, it is up to the individual to create order, meaning, and value by responding as best he can to his environment. Roethke accomplished this personal task in The Collected Poems by communicating the subjective nature of the whole of man's existence.

Roethke's poetry is unavoidably of the 20th century. What makes his poetry valid is that he took himself as subject and showed that his concern was with the way external realities affected him (and all humankind), not with why they affected him. This dichotomy between the "way" and the "why" distinguishes the creative artist concerned with effect from the philosopher concerned with cause. Roethke is undeniably the former. Even so, his particular method of dealing with the general absurdity and anxiety of living necessarily contains a series of responses to the circumstances of his own existence and hence creates a unique formula for living or, if you will, a unique philosophy of existence.

The focus of this study is on the existential nature of Roethke's poetry. The fact that he created his own being in a world he perceived as chaotic and ambiguous is a fundamentally existential act and is apparent upon a first reading of The Collected Poems. It also serves as evidence enough to justify an investigation into the existential nature of his poetry. The following chapters will deal with the existential elements of Roethke's poetry as they manifest themselves in language, image, and theme.[1]

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[1] There is an unavoidable area of overlap between my three chapters. "Language" (chapter 1) is the building block for "Images" (chapter 2) and images are the building blocks for "Themes" (chapter three). Although I will try to keep these as separate as possible, the reader will notice that certain key poems are discussed under all three headings, resulting in a relatively

From the publication of _Open House_ in 1941 to the posthumously published _The Far Field_ in 1964, Roethke offers a series of existential responses to the mystery of his own existence. These postulated responses serve as Roethke's way of accepting the dreadful fact of his own mortality and indeed the mortality of all living beings.

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minor amount of overlap.

CHAPTER ONE

ROETHKE'S EXISTENTIAL VOCABULARY AND USE OF LANGUAGE

While it is true that the language of The Collected Poems is "never gravely philosophical" (Stein xvii), Roethke's vocabulary and use of language can be considered highly existential. Richard Blessing states that "Roethke is never careless with words" (69) and this is evident through the poet's very "struggle with language" (Wagoner 206). The "sheer intuition" (Burke 87) of his poetic language is evidence of Roethke's personal, existential engagement with his internal and external realities.

John Wain, in his essay "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," hints at Roethke's existential writing process when he suggests that, for Roethke, "the concern for inner reality took over for the concern for outer reality" (Stein 71). Roethke's poetic language focuses on the Self, the only realm over which he could exercise some control: "Coming well after the discovery of psychoanalysis, Roethke had available a vocabulary and technique for invading the unconscious dimension" (Parini 7).

His vocabulary begins in the intellectual realm of

abstraction, evident in Open House, and shifts dramatically to the intuitive realm of description and concreteness with the publication of The Lost Son and Other Poems. Throughout The Collected Poems, Roethke's use of language exists in the subtle linguistic strategies of opposition, aphorism, paradox, and inquiry. These techniques define his existential use of language and effectively convey his subjective encounters with internal and external reality.

As he matures as a poet, Roethke begins to further consider the abstract ideas he began with in Open House. By the publication of The Waking, his readings in theology and philosophy become obvious and thereafter continue to manifest themselves in his poetry sporadically until the very end of his career. Such philosophical readings clearly indicate that Roethke's poetry was deeply influenced by the work of Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, both of whom are considered to be existential theologians. It is clear, therefore, that Roethke's vocabulary and use of poetic language evolves in order to better express his growing concerns over his personal identity and the chaos of modern life. It is through these fundamental existential concerns that Roethke establishes a unique method of expression that can be best described as existential due to its focus on the unique and personal existence of the poet.

Roethke's vocabulary is characterized by descriptiveness.

Although he began his poetic career by employing many abstract nouns, he discovered, in The Lost Son and Other Poems, "That anguish of concreteness" (CP 88) which would afford him an authentic poetic style and voice. The use of concrete nouns in lieu of abstract nouns allows Roethke to describe his inner and outer realities through metaphors, which are subtle and intuitive, rather than through overt statements concerning his ideas and emotions. While the poems in Open House contain many abstract nouns which depict the poet's emotional responses to his inner and outer realities, there are few concrete nouns used to actually portray these emotions. Once Roethke shifts the focus of his vocabulary to concrete nouns in the Greenhouse Poems, his language becomes more descriptive, "symbolic and associative" (Lane iii). What he accomplishes through such descriptive language is somewhat of an phenomenological view of external reality.

Phenomenology is generally considered "the precursor of contemporary Existentialism" (Nauman 141) because it is a descriptive philosophy whose intent it is to denote "the structure of experience as it appears" (Nauman 141). It is, therefore, a subjective encounter with external reality based on how the individual perceives it through his senses. That Roethke conveys external reality in a phenomenological manner is beyond dispute; the images of external reality in The Collected Poems exist as such because Roethke records his

sensual apprehension of them. In fact, the poet's sensual apprehensions of external reality are consistent with his emotional states at the time of the experiences and, as a result, vary from poem to poem. Karl Malkoff, in his book Escape From the Self, explains why external reality is only subjectively knowable and why these subjective perceptions cannot be consistent, even in the same individual:

> Phenomenology, defining reality as a relationship between observer and observed, placing the emphasis on the phenomenon itself rather than the source or recorder of that phenomenon, undermined not only the notion of an objectively knowable universe, but of a coherent and consistent perceiving self as well. Existentialism, an immediate descendant of phenomenology, envisions a meaningless universe to which the individual can give form only by the assertion of his unsupported self (2).

It is, perhaps, Roethke's unintentional leaning to phenomenology that causes difficulties in interpreting the meaning of his concrete and imagistic language. Neal Bowers states that interpretation difficulties arise because the poet provides little commentary and his language is "supercharged" (94). This intensity of language results from Roethke's use of concrete nouns, nouns which intuitively reveal what Frederick Hoffman calls "a deep sense of the most elementary agonies attending the process and necessity of living" (Stein 96). Such agonies are readily felt in the Greenhouse Poems, a sequence in which the reader must provide the abstractions (Blessing 69). In "Cuttings", for example, the pure

description of new plant life is evident in the lines "One nub of growth/Nudges a sand-crumb loose,/Pokes through a musty sheath/Its pale tendrilous horn" (CP 35). One is given only this pictorial expression of birth and beginnings and must, as Blessing states, supply the above abstractions oneself.

George Wolff suggests that such pictorial or imagistic portrayals of ideas and emotions constitute an intuitive rather than a systematic form of philosophy (52). Roethke himself writes, in his notebooks, that "I have to be concrete. Everything else scares the hell out of me" (Wagoner 208). The fact that Roethke takes hold of the very nature of Being in such a concrete manner makes him, in Nathan A. Scott's words, "not a 'transcendental analytic' but an 'existential analytic'" (The Wild Prayer of Longing 62). As such, Roethke's vocabulary and use of language reveals a "literary craftsmanship ... wholly dedicated to the disclosure of the things and creatures of this world in their sheer specificity" (Scott 74). It is precisely this "sheer specificity" that demonstrates Roethke's unintentional and wholly phenomenological method of poetic expression.

A closer examination of Roethke's poetic vocabulary reveals his existential emphasis on concrete nouns and specific use of abstractions. In his Concordance to the Poems of Theodore Roethke, editor Gary Lane outlines the frequency of usage for almost every single word that Roethke employs in The Collected

Poems. Although it is not feasible to recount such occurrences here, it is important to note that Roethke's poems emphasize concrete objects over abstract ideas. In fact, most of these objects are from nature; stones, trees, leaves, water, fields, weeds, flowers, roots, birds, fish, and worms are among the most frequent concrete nouns employed. This tendency to use the objects of nature as poetic material is, in fact, Roethke's way of determining the meaning such objects of reality have to his own existence. His treatment of these objects is phenomenological in that, for example, a tree is always a tree, but the associations of these objects, as they are perceived by the poet, reveal his existential relationship to them. In the poem "The Visitant", for example, Roethke writes that "A wind stirred in a web of appleworms;/The tree, the close willow, swayed" (CP 97). The tree, like all trees, sways in the wind; however, the intuitive implication here is that, like the tree, the Self (or "spirit" as Roethke calls it) must sway, must adjust itself according to external circumstances if it is to sustain its individual integrity. It is in this manner that Roethke uses concrete language to convey the condition of and his responses to modern existence.

The abstractions Roethke employs are likewise aimed at expressing his existential circumstances and responses. They do, however, state, rather than reveal, the poet's emotional and intellectual concerns. Lane's concordance suggests that

the abstractions most frequently employed by Roethke include time, mind, being, life, death, light, dark, obscurity, finality, self, God, nothing, knowledge, reason, and choice. There is also a multitude of abstract nouns focused on emotion: love, joy, fear, pain, loneliness, rage, and confusion. These sets of abstractions represent a fairly broad concern with the nature of human existence and, more specifically, a concern with the poet's own personal existence. Roethke even uses terms such as chaos, absurd, nothingness, dread, anxiety, despair, and will which are all either blatantly existential terms or terms employed by existential thinkers and writers.

Chaos is a term often employed by existentialists to denote the utter confusion and unorganized state of the universe into which man has been flung. It also denotes the absence of an ultimate destiny for man; without such an assured destiny, man lives his life according to chance. It is this condition of chance that leads the existentialist, and often Roethke, to feel that his life (and the life of his fellow man) is absurd. This feeling arises from the individual's arrival at the conclusion that life itself is without sense and that "man in particular is unnecessary and superfluous" (Nauman 3).

Nothingness is an existential term which reflects man's vision of his destiny in the chaotic state of the world. It describes his ultimate fate as a human being: to become a

nothing in the Nothingness which exists all around him. This existential revelation often leads Roethke, and most existentialists, to respond emotionally to the knowledge that he will eventually die and hence no longer exist in any recognizable form. These emotional responses are initially overwhelming feelings of dread, anxiety, and despair. They cause the individual to feel as though he were lost and wandering in a world he can neither control nor predict.

Dread manifests itself in the individual as a great fear and uneasiness over the imminent prospect of his own death. Once the individual realizes that he must die, he begins to dread his own existence because living simply means dying. In "The Dying Man", Roethke states the dread he feels for his own mortality: "In heaven's praise, I dread the thing I am" (CP 150). This existential realization leads Roethke to become engulfed in a more powerful emotional condition known as existential anxiety.

Existential anxiety refers to the state in which man lives. Paul Tillich distinguishes three types of anxiety (or anguish), all of which Roethke clearly experiences in many of his poems. These three types of existential anxiety are delineated by Tillich according to the three ways in which the idea of Nothingness (often referred to as the threat of nonbeing) threatens the individual's sense of being:

> Non being threatens man's ontic self-affirmation,

> relatively in terms of fate, absolutely in terms of death. It threatens man's spiritual self-affirmation, relatively in terms of emptiness, absolutely in terms of meaninglessness. It threatens man's moral self-affirmation, relatively in terms of guilt, absolutely in terms of condemnation (Tillich 41).

In the poem "What Can I Tell My Bones?", Roethke writes that "It is difficult to say all things are well,/When the worst is about to arrive;/It is fatal to woo yourself,/However graceful the posture" (CP 166). Such lines clearly point to the poet's moments of existential anxiety.

The result of such existential anxiety, as can be seen in some of Roethke's hopelessly bitter lines, is known as existential despair. Despair is to Roethke as it is to Kierkegaard: a loss of faith in the eternal. To Kierkegaard, "To despair is to lose the eternal" (Nauman 33) and whenever Roethke loses faith in the God of his own creation, he is not only hopeless, but desperately so. One of the most poignant examples of Roethke's existential desperation is found in the poem "In a Dark Time". In the lines "I know the purity of pure despair,/My shadow pinned against a sweating wall" (CP 231), it is clear that Roethke intuitively realizes the hopelessly absurd conditions of his own human existence.

To combat the absurdity of his human existence and his own existential anxiety, Roethke, in the tradition of many existentialists, emphasizes the human will as a way of controlling at least internal realities. In a chaotic and

meaningless world, man is forced to create his own order and meaning; he wills order and meaning in his own existence. Roethke's emphasis on the human will is focused primarily on human creativity and imagination. In the realm of the imagination, a wholly subjective order and set of values can be created by the mind. The mind of man wills this order and set of values to be true, hence man is capable of creating his own reality. In "Four For Sir John Davies", the faith Roethke has in his will (particularly in his imaginative will) is clear; he states that "All lovers live by longing and endure:/Summon a vision and declare it pure" (CP 103). The purity of the vision is irrelevant; it is what the lovers have declared or accepted to be true that is important to their existences. What is true, therefore, is what we will to be true: "truth is not something that can be proved or disproved: it is something which you determine upon, which, in the language of the old psychology, you will ... it is something you create" (Nietzsche 25).

The main existential concerns in Roethke's poetry arise from the basic fact of human existence: death. It is Roethke's fundamental anxiety over his own mortality that invests his poetry with elements of existentialism. His poetic vision is shaped by existential anxiety; Blessing notes that "Poem after poem begins with the thought of death and the language of death" (115). This is especially true of the

poems in Open House, which focus on the subject of death chiefly through the use of abstractions. In these poems, Roethke uses such words as "murdered," "undone," "destroy," "dead," "poisoned," "funeral," "ghost," "oblivion," "despair," "phobias," "blood," and "death". For example, in the line "Your hopes are murdered and undone" (CP 4), Roethke's abstract poetics is clear. Collections after Open House tend to contain images of death rather than the abstract terms of death. Such images include darkness, the abyss, pits, holes, caves, graves, decaying plant life, and the various images of autumn and winter. This shift to a more concrete form of poetic expression is evident in later poems, such as "What Can I Tell My Bones?" wherein Roethke writes "My desire's a wind trapped in a cave" (CP 166).

Roethke's use of language demonstrates his existential process of writing. His linguistic techniques are aimed at expressing his personal engagement with existence and therefore emphasize his extremely subjective internal and external realities. These techniques, as stated earlier, include Roethke's use of opposition, aphorism, paradox, and inquiry; they emphasize the poet's subjective view of the world and the significance it has to his own existence.

The tension of opposites in Roethke's poetry arises from the poet's own experiences of the conflicting forces of external reality. What he realizes is that the world is

composed of opposites and that the tension created by such opposites results in the chaotic nature of life in the modern world. Roethke uses the opposition of forces in the natural world in order to portray the conditions with which human beings must personally struggle and attempt to resolve or reconcile if their lives are to have any order or meaning. Such natural oppositions occur in Roethke's poems in the form of day versus night, motion versus stillness, and life versus death. These opposing elements in nature are used by the poet to reveal the manifold tensions at work in each individual, tensions such as beginnings/endings, joy/despair, imagination/reason, wisdom/knowledge, faith/doubt, and clarity/obscurity. It is Roethke's poetic portrayal of this tension of opposites that characterizes his implicit existential outlook on life.

In the poem "The Abyss", for example, the above existential tensions are suggested; the juxtaposition of images that convey the poet's opposition of abstract ideas intuitively indicates the chaotic nature of human existence. Beginnings and endings are presented in the lines "'The stair's right there,/But it goes nowhere'" (<u>CP</u> 211). The image of the stair, perhaps an image of life itself, implies the beginning of a passageway and the word "nowhere" suggests the end of the passageway, perhaps the end of life which is often depicted by Roethke as culminating in oblivion or "nowhere".

The lines "Yet if we wait, unafraid, beyond the fearful instant,/The burning lake turns into a forest pool" (CP 213) reveal the tension of despair and joy through the sensual images of a "burning lake", which connotes a sort of hellish realm, and a "forest pool", which connotes a type of paradise.

The line "How can I dream except beyond this life?" suggests the opposition of imagination and reason; reason can not allow the dream, but the imagination requires that the individual dream because it is one way of coming to terms with his often doubtful existence.

Wisdom and knowledge are juxtaposed in the lines "In this, my half-rest,/Knowing slows for a moment,/And not-knowing enters, silent,/Bearing being itself" wherein the wisdom or truth of existence is contained in the "not-knowing" and seems preferable to "Knowing" because it bears "being itself". This type of wisdom is appropriate for Roethke who, in the same poem, claims that "Being, not doing, is my first joy" (CP 214).

The line "Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?" is perhaps Roethke's most obvious example of the existential tension between faith and doubt. The mere phrasing of the line in the form of a question underscores the poet's dubious belief in the existence of God; this is one of the first issues an existentialist must confront.

Finally, the opposition of clarity and obscurity is

revealed in the lines "Such quiet under the small leaves! --/Near the stem, whiter at root,/A luminous stillness" (CP 213). The darkness "under the small leaves" reveals not only a white root, but an image of clarity in its "luminous stillness". Here, Roethke expresses the natural and meaningful opposition of light and dark, words that often indicate the poet's sudden clear-sightedness in the midst of his existential confusion.

It is clear then that Roethke endows this poem with the oppositions he himself is struggling with as a poet and as a man who must come to terms with the meaning (and meaninglessness) of his own existence. James Dickey notes that Roethke often arrives at a balanced awareness which "is ... the product of a terrible tension not far from madness at times, not far from total despair, but also not far from total joy" (151). This joy occasionally emerges when Roethke is able to accept the negative implications in these oppositions as necessary; this acceptance allows him to joyously affirm his existence and his Self.

Roethke's use of aphorism is a linguistic strategy also used to establish a poetic tone of authority. Because aphorisms generally contain some truth, Roethke's use of this device can be viewed as an attempt to convey the truths he has arrived at through personal and empirical experience. Through aphorisms, Roethke is able to state succinctly the value of

his existential experiences. He does not, however, affirm these truths or ideals as eternal or as suitable for anyone else except himself. Roethke, in the manner of a true existentialist, relies on the here and now; he accepts the places, objects, and circumstances of the present as his intuitive guides for living (Kalaidjian 139). For example, Roethke's preference for wide, open, natural places over restrictive man-made enclosures is revealed in his aphorism "A house for wisdom; a field for revelation" (CP 86). This maxim suggests a tone of authority; the poet wishes to appear authoritative in his pronouncement of "a field" as the place to go for self-knowledge or "revelation", for what sort of truth is more personally profound and absolute -- wisdom or revelation?

Many of Roethke's aphorisms resound with an existentialist perspective. Such is true of his notable proverb "I learn by going where I have to go" (CP 104) from "The Waking". Here, Roethke asserts that his life is determined only through his actions; he learns where he has to go by intuitively going there, by following the dictates of his instinct rather than his reason. This position is similar to the existential view that there is no foreknowable destiny for man; an individual's life is entirely in his own hands and, through his wilful actions, he creates his own future. This perspective is more concisely expressed in Roethke's aphorism "We live by what we

do" (<u>CP</u> 205), for man can only be judged by his actions within the framework of existentialism.

Roethke's most existential linguistic strategy is apparent in his use of paradox. In his notebooks, he quotes one of Kierkegaard's celebrated aphorisms: "All knowledge lives in paradox" (Wagoner 225). It is evident, in <u>The Collected Poems</u>, that he values this Kierkegaardian maxim, for he uses paradox in the manner of Kierkegaard as a poetic tool "for the <u>via negativa</u>; logic is used to transcend the limits of logic" (Libby 7). For Roethke, paradox erodes the barriers of rational thought and allows for a more appropriate manner of determining truth: intuitive responses to subjective experience. While the use of paradox is not exclusive to existentialism, Roethke employs it in an existential manner; through paradox, he subverts traditional reasoning to come to an understanding of his particular engagement with his Self and the realities of his existence.

The underlying paradox of <u>The Collected Poems</u> is noted by Neal Bowers; he states that "Roethke discovered that in order to find himself he had to lose himself" (209). This paradox is the foundation of Roethke's existential quest for Selfhood; it is evident from the moment he, as "the lost son", embarks on his search for personal identity. Based on this generative paradox, Roethke begins to rely on a paradoxical manner of thinking in order to establish the meaning of his existence

and his responses to the chaotic conditions of his inner life.

This existential use of paradox is apparent, for example, in the line "We think by feeling" (CP 104). Roethke suggests that true thought is instinct or intuition, a mode of thinking that is extremely subjective. Each man must, it seems, determine his manner of being through his own intuition. In the line "The ground needs the abyss" (CP 116), Roethke suggests the necessary co-existence of opposites, here portrayed as solidity and safety versus insubstantiality and obscurity. The "ground" and the "abyss" are necessarily co-existent because the experience of each is enhanced by the awareness of the other. It seems that Roethke is proposing that, in order to arrive at any security or certainty in life, we "need" the threat and trial of the "abyss", that existential symbol of Nothingness.

Roethke's most notable paradox, however, can be found in the poem "In a Dark Time". This poem is held together by the paradox of the very first line: "In a dark time, the eye beings to see" (CP 231). This line suggests that darkness and confusion can sometimes allow for a form of clear sightedness otherwise unattainable. What "the eye begins to see" in this darkness is, in fact, a dazzling truth: "The mind enters itself, and God the mind,/And one is One, free in the tearing wind" (CP 231). This illumination reveals Roethke's existential view of man and the human concept of God: God

exists only in the mind of man; the mind is God and is free to will, choose, and create the individual's manner of being in the chaotic circumstances of human existence. This existential stance will be more clearly demonstrated by my discussion of Roethke's themes (chapter 3).

Roethke employs paradox often because, as Roy Harvey Pearce suggests, his strategy is to see all things "in the natural order, to turn inward and backward upon himself and establish his truest involvement in that order, and ... to affirm that involvement" (Stein 188). Only in this way could Roethke understand the illogical but necessary co-existence of opposing forces in the natural world and in his very Self.

Inquiry is a linguistic strategy used by Roethke as a way of knowing (Blessing 102). Roethke does not employ the technique of inquiry as a poetic tool until the publication of "The Lost Son" poem, after which he frequently uses questions to indicate the uncertainty of modern existence, the instability of personal identity, the problematic question of religion and the existence of God, the indeterminate nature of external reality, and the inability of human knowledge to satisfy the individual's need for answers to the mysteries of personal existence.

Questions concerning modern existence abound in <u>The Collected Poems</u>. As early as "The Lost Son" poem, Roethke reveals his doubt concerning his future. He begins to portray

modern existence as a confusing condition wherein man is thrust and left alone to seek his way. This is evident in the lines "Tell me:/Which is the way I take;/Out of what door do I go,/Where and to whom?" (CP 51). The same sentiment is echoed in "The Decision", a poem from The Far Field collection: "Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go./As a man turns to face on-coming snow" (CP 237). The very diction involved in constructing such questions emphasizes Roethke's existential uncertainty; images such as the "on-coming snow" suggest disorientation.

Some of Roethke's most poignant questions are, of course, turned upon himself and therefore express the instability and uncertainty of his personal identity. In "The Other", he asks if an enduring personal identity is found through another being: "Is she what I become?/Is this my final Face?" (CP 125). This question is somewhat rhetorical for Roethke is well aware of the fact that personal identity is found within and is, in fact, created by the individual. However, this question points to the uncertainty the poet feels regarding the integrity of his Self. In "The Dying Man", Roethke asks "Am I but nothing leaning towards a thing?" (CP 150). This question reveals an existentialist view that "Man is nothing but what he makes of himself" (Human Emotions 15). According to the tenets of existentialism, the response to Roethke's above question is "yes", but Roethke, by this time, has

already forged a personal identity and is merely unsure of its ability to endure. This uncertainty plagues Roethke and, even in The Far Field, he feels the need to ask "Which I is I?" (CP 231). Perhaps this question indicates Roethke's lifelong conflict between the desire for faith in God and the absolute, reasonable doubt of His existence.

Roethke does, in fact, question orthodox religion and the existence of God throughout The Collected Poems. His poems reveal the fundamental existentialist dilemma of being torn between faith in and doubt of the Christian concept of God. He asks questions in order to resolve this unresolvable issue: "The cause of God in me -- has it gone?" (CP 166), "Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?" (CP 213), and "Was I too glib about eternal things,/An intimate of air and all its songs?" (CP 233). These questions suggest Roethke's religious irresolution; he can not respond to them with certitude because the facts of his existence often seem to undermine any moments of faith he may have.

External reality itself is often questioned by Roethke. It seems that he frequently feels that the appearances of reality are deceptive, that the objects of the natural world contain clues to all existence and therefore must be considered more than mere phenomena. Although this view is at odds with his more phenomenological stance, Roethke's questions concerning the nature of external reality involve both perspectives and

suggest the poet's uncertainty as to the extent to which outer reality can be objectively known. Roethke asks questions that may sound quite simplistic, but they have a profundity to them that the poet is, I believe, intuitively aware of. Questions, such as "What is a seed?" (CP 159), "Is there a wisdom in objects?" (CP 160), and "What do they tell us, sound and silence?" (CP 198) all focus on determining what, if anything, is beneath the appearances that constitute external reality.

Although he seems to accept the basic premises of phenomenology, Roethke seeks more from the natural world; he has very convincing moments that depict the things of nature as mediums for his personal transcendental experiences. These moments, however, can often be accounted for in terms of Roethke's intense identification with the things of external reality. It is when he defers his sympathies with other existents and begins to question that Roethke becomes uncertain as to the significance external reality has to his existential experiences.

It is also important to note that Roethke questions the ability of human knowledge to provide answers to the enigma of human existence. These inquiries suggest Roethke's distrust of reason, of institutionalized learning, and of the academic process in general. Wisdom is often shown to be superior to knowledge, for wisdom connotes the philosophical sage, not the merely learned man. Roethke often implies that true wisdom,

true knowledge is an understanding of one's self; this is an existential tenet that can be traced back to Socrates and his experience with the Delphic oracle whose inscription read "KNOW THYSELF". In his question "Wisdom, where is it found?" (CP 120), it is evident that the poet has sought, and not discovered, wisdom in all of the conventional sources of knowledge. He further denigrates the conventional conception of knowledge when he sarcastically inquires "What book, O learned man, will set me right?" (CP 128). Though wisdom is superior to knowledge, existential revelation, as shown earlier, is superior to both knowledge and wisdom.

By the time of The Far Field collection, Roethke reduces such philosophical questions to a simple, yet poignant, one: "What can be known?" (CP 243). This question indicates the inconclusiveness of all human knowledge; it asks what we, as human beings, can really claim as irrefutable knowledge. It is ironic that the one known aspect of human existence is death and that this fact inspires all other questions related to Roethke's existential experiences in The Collected Poems. It is, indeed, Roethke's strategy of inquiry that gives his poetry the philosophical tone it often has, for philosophy begins with inquiry. Through inquiry, Roethke aims to understand the nature of human existence and the meaning of his own existence just as much as he aims to discover viable personal responses to it.

While some of his vocabulary has been influenced by his interest and readings in the work of Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, Roethke's use of language can be construed as existential in many other ways. It is clear that Roethke renders his experiences through the use of detailed and often non-judgemental description, which shows these collective experiences to be his subjective and authentic engagement with existence. For example, in the poem "The Snake", Roethke describes the snake in such a non-judgemental manner that the reader is left to deduce the poet's envy of the snake's purity: "I saw a young snake glide/Out of the mottled shade/And hang, limp on a stone:/A thin mouth, and a tongue/Stayed, in the still air" (CP 144). Furthermore, Roethke employs linguistic techniques that strengthen the authenticity and subjectivity of the poems, techniques such as opposition and aphorism. The linguistic strategies of paradox and inquiry reveal not only the philosophical side of the poet, but his indebtedness to the existentialists who attempt to create, out of their own subjective experiences, sound methods with which the individual can confront and embrace his own existence. That Roethke confronts and finally embraces his Self and his existence is evident in his unintentionally existential testimony of The Collected Poems.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXISTENTIAL IMAGERY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

Roethke's use of existential images in The Collected Poems can easily be divided into three categories: images of the Self, images of death, and life-affirming images. The most significant images of the first category are those of the greenhouse, the lost son, the journey (including roads, paths, doors, and gates), trees, minimals (especially snakes, worms, and snails), wind, water, light, and dark. Included in the second category are the images of death and oblivion, the most significant of which, for Roethke, are the mire (including pits, holes, and the marsh), the abyss, and caves and graves. The third category includes images of the edge, the dance, and the song/poem.

What is blatantly existential about Roethke's use of images is that he employs them to indicate something about his subjective confrontation with external reality; they are used to reveal something about the poet's existence rather than something objective about the world. Roethke's critics agree that his chief images derive from his childhood in Michigan (Parini 4) and many of these chief images, as listed above, are shown by Roethke's critics to be intimations of the poet's

struggle with his own troublesome existence. For example, Parini states that Roethke's greenhouse image and the open field signify the poet's moments of illumination, that the tree is an image of selfhood, and that the lost son image represents Roethke himself (Parini 4).

Denis Donoghue, avoiding Parini's method of classification, simply orders Roethke's images as those which are either positive or negative. In Connoisseurs of Chaos, Donoghue writes that:

> Roethke's symbolism is common enough. The life-enhancing images are rain, rivers, flowers, seed, grain, birds, fish, veins. The danger signals are wind, storm, darkness, drought, shadow. And the great event is growth, in full light (232).

However, the world is full of ambiguities, and Donoghue does not allow for the vagaries of life, of which I think Roethke was only too well aware. While I cannot deny that many of Roethke's images are either positive or negative, I would suggest that some of them can be viewed as both, particularly the images of wind and darkness which Donoghue relegates to the "danger signals" category.

For the critics, the difficulties inherent in Roethke's use of images are now apparent. Each of these critics contributes something to the overall understanding of Roethke's use of images but each theory, on its own, is too limited to appreciate the range of meaning for which Roethke allows. He expresses, in an early notebook entry, the wish "that from

each image some profound truth might be grasped" (Wagoner 147). He does not say that each image holds a specific truth and hence we must assume that each image has manifold meanings and truths.

The fact that the poet recognizes that nature holds significance and meaning for him is implied in a notebook entry which states "We take from nature what we cannot see" (Wagoner 134). Nathan A. Scott, in The Wild Prayer of Longing, writes that "things do not even begin to exhibit any sort of significant meaning or value until we identify ourselves with them in one way or another" (82). His belief offers an explanation for Roethke's profound sense of communion with the things of nature; Roethke identifies with nature so that nature might provide him with some clues as to the meaning of his own existence, indeed, to all existence. Although the natural images of Roethke's collected poems do not lend themselves to any strict interpretation, they do signify the poet's external and internal realities; they exist as clues on the map of the poet's existence. In this way, Roethke's use of natural images can at least be construed as existential in that they exist in the poems both as concrete realities and as indicators of the poet's responses to his existence. His natural imagery becomes, indeed, a correspondence "between the operations of his unconscious and those of the outer, natural world" (Malkoff 100). In fact,

George Wolff argues that Roethke's use of natural images attests to his interest in the pictorial and emotional counterparts of philosophy (52). In order to illustrate Roethke's particular pictorial and emotional philosophy of existence, it becomes necessary to examine his dominant images of the Self, of death, and of life.

Existential Images of the Self

The greenhouse, as an existential image of the Self, exists in Roethke's poetry as a construct which enables man to grow and nurture vegetation throughout the year regardless of season. It is, therefore, an artificial environment and a protective enclosure for the delicate life forms within. Since he grew up in and near greenhouses, Roethke has a vision of these man-made structures which signifies all this and more. In his own words, the greenhouse is:

> both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan, where austere German-Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful. It was a universe, several worlds, which, even as a child, one worried about, and struggled to keep alive (SP 8-9).

In his notebook from 1943-47, Roethke is more specific. He writes "What was the greenhouse? It was a jungle, and it was paradise; it was order and disorder: Was it an escape? No,

for it was a reality harsher than reality" (Wagoner 150).

Roethke's critics further interpret the significance of the greenhouse image; however, these interpretations merely expand on Roethke's own view of the greenhouse as his private world of both terror and joy. Walter Kalaidjian calls Roethke's greenhouse the "dominant symbol of the self's interior, existential world" (Kalaidjian 8). Jay Parini views it as an image of archetypal opposites: "The greenhouse, literally, provides just the right contrarieties: light against darkness, order against chaos, life against death" (Parini 70). Rosemary Sullivan states that Roethke used "the greenhouse symbol [as] an objective correlative for his own disgust and hatred of life and his feeling of defilement by organic process, emotions inextricably woven with desperate insecurities which were the legacies of childhood" (Sullivan 24). She notes that Roethke's poetic attention "was riveted on growth, on the wilful, tenacious struggle of plants into being in a drive against death" (Sullivan 23). Randall Stiffler, too, notes Roethke uses the greenhouse as an image whose features correspond to the larger aspects of human existence and that this correspondent relationship "does not easily translate into any traditional or religious view" (Stiffler 57).

Roethke's use of this image, then, is clearly one which embodies reality on a very immediate level and contains,

therefore, all aspects of modern existence in the form of a microcosm of the world. That is, the greenhouse is a scaled-down model of life and, as such, reveals the tensions inherent in existence. The Greenhouse Poems provide, of course, the best examination of the functions of the greenhouse image in The Collected Poems. They explore the existential tensions between light and darkness, life and death, chaos and order and validate Roethke's description of the greenhouse as being both a "heaven and hell" (SP 8).

The poem "Root Cellar" clearly reveals this fundamentally existential tension between light and darkness. In the line "Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark" (CP 36), the poet expresses the need for light (illumination, knowledge) in a world permeated by darkness (mystery, ignorance). In "Weed Puller", Roethke creates a scene that reveals the struggle for order in a realm of veritable chaos. He compares the chaotic growth of weeds to the planned and ordered growth of flowers. In the same poem, therefore, we have "Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes" and the "lovely and inviolate" fields of "Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses" (CP 37) -- two very different images of growth. The first signifies the absurdly chaotic and disordered; the second signifies the existential human need for order.

"Big Wind" reveals the functions of the greenhouse image as a scaled-down version of the world wherein the poet exists in

a daily struggle to come to terms with the chaotic and absurd condition of his existence. The greenhouse becomes a testing ground of sorts in which man's will to exist is continually threatened, and often thwarted, by the usually harsh forces of reality. The poem relates this in a drama wherein the wind batters the greenhouse and the people concerned must do all they can to ensure the safety of the roses within: "We stayed all night,/Stuffing the holes with burlap;/But she rode it out" (CP 39).

"Flower Dump" poignantly reveals the existential tension between life and death in the greenhouse realm. In the lines "Everything limp/But one tulip on top,/One swaggering head/Over the dying, the newly dead" (CP 41), we see that the struggle for life exists among the ravages of death. Here, the poet suggests that life and death exist not only as opposites, but as near opposites, for all life implies death and all occurrences of death, particularly in the vegetal realm, nourishes other life. In this way, the poet is able to intellectually grasp, at least for the moment, the nature of his own seemingly absurd existence.

In "Child On Top of a Greenhouse", the greenhouse is revealed as an image of the poet's existential world. The greenhouse is all the child knows and, by climbing atop it, he asserts himself, his identity in this world that has hitherto enveloped him: "And everyone, everyone pointing up and

shouting" (CP 41).

Although the greenhouse continues to be an important existential image for Roethke, he rarely refers directly to it after the Greenhouse Poems. In some poems, such as "The Lost Son", "The Shape of the Fire", and "Praise to the End!", the greenhouse environment is obliquely alluded to and serves, if nothing else, as a reference to the poet's early memories, which can be viewed as signifying the key existential experiences in Roethke's formative years. For example, in "The Rose", the poet is transported by a rose to thoughts of his childhood. This rose immediately causes him "to think of roses, roses,/White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouse" (CP 197) and, consequently, of how his father used to lift him over the "four-foot stems." He also recalls, by looking at the actual rose, "how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself" (CP 197). The existential image of the greenhouse is used as a reference point by the poet because, having already examined the various meanings of it, he is now able to describe new things and feelings in terms of it.

"Otto" is perhaps Roethke's last direct reference to the existential realm of the greenhouse. The poem, about Roethke's father and his business, ends in longing; the poet longs for his "lost world" because it signifies carefree memories, childhood innocence, and physical and emotional

security -- security he is altogether without as an adult in a existentially terrifying world. As a mature poet reflecting on the reason for the greenhouses, Roethke writes: "A house for flowers! House upon house they built,/Whether for love or out of obscure guilt" (CP 216). He remembers them as "fields of glass", as his "father's world", and essentially as his "lost world!" (CP 217). As such, the greenhouse continues in its role as the subjective, indeed existential, realm of the poet as a child wherein the realities of life are close at hand and able to impress themselves and their associations upon him, both in the past and in the present.

Roethke's image of the lost son is, perhaps, one of his most existential images of the Self. It exists in his poetry, above all else, as an image of the poet (Parini 4). Within the framework of existentialism, the image of the lost son represents a variety of Roethke's intuitive responses to the conditions of his childhood and adult existence. The fact that Roethke envisions himself as the lost son is readily acceptable given the early death of his father. The poet often unites the figure of his father and the figure of God in his poetry (Stein 97), and this seems to express his existential feelings of alienation and isolation from the two most powerful figures he could conceive. Nathan A. Scott states that "Roethke's poetic personality is very much of an isole" (106); this concisely describes the poet's intuitive

expression of feelings of existential estrangement, especially from his father and God, throughout The Collected Poems.

George Wolff notes that Roethke came to terms with the anguish of his father's death by expressing it in his poetry and transforming the trauma into a universally significant experience. Roethke achieves a recognizably universal theme by "making the painful absence of his father symbolize the absence of God from his own life and the lives of his contemporaries" (Wolff Preface). Wolff also suggests that Roethke's search for his own identity arises out of his "search for his father, or for God" (Preface). Neal Bowers notes the paradox at work in the poet's use of the lost son image: "Roethke discovered that in order to find himself he had to lose himself" (209). Roethke loses himself in a variety of ways: in his childhood, searching for his dead father; in nature with its primordial allure, searching for his own identity, and in his mind, searching for God. These efforts of discovery are part of one driving search which is, in fact, Roethke's existential journey toward Selfhood. He embarks poetically upon this critical journey through the existential image of the lost son.

Throughout The Collected Poems Roethke attempts to come to terms with his father's death and his troubled feelings toward God; he is thrust into the role of the lost son and must embark on a journey toward Selfhood in order to overcome his

existential feelings of alienation and estrangement. The journey begins with the poem "The Lost Son". The poem is divided into five sections, each explicitly a part of the lost son's journey toward his father, towards his Self. The first section is appropriately entitled "The Flight", a section in which the poet is clearly expressing feelings of existential estrangement and fear.

In the poem, the poet's feelings of existential alienation and isolation are apparent: he calls these initial moments his "hard time" (CP 50). In the third stanza, the poet is found to be sitting "in an empty house". The images of this poem are foreboding; there is an abundance of darkness, solitude, silence, fear and menacing aspects of nature: "The weeds whined,/The snakes cried,/The cows and briars/Said to me: Die" (CP 52). Roethke mentions his father in a line fraught with the existential anguish of the lost son: "Fear was my father, Father Fear" (CP 53).

Roethke's existential use of the image of the lost son continues through many of the poems in The Collected Poems. In the poem "Where Knock Is Open Wide", Roethke writes "Kisses come back,/I said to Papa;/He was all whitey bones/And skin like paper" (CP 69) in a poetic appeal to regain personal security by regaining his dead father. In "Praise to the End!", Roethke asserts his lost condition in the line "Many astounds before, I lost my identity to a pebble" (CP 84).

Roethke also searches for God the Father in the course of his existential journey as the lost son. Through the mask of the old woman in the poem "What Can I Tell My Bones?", Roethke attempts to relieve his feelings of existential alienation by recovering God. He states that "To try to become like God/Is far from becoming God./O, but I seek and care!" (CP 166). His search for God is, therefore, a quest to "become like God" or, if you will, to become the creator and master of his own life. How one "becomes like God" is evident in the poem "In a Dark Time". The lines "The mind enters itself, and God the mind,/And one is One, free in the tearing wind" (CP 231) support Roethke's prose statement that "If we think long enough about God, we may create him" (Wagoner 225). The fact that "God [enters] the mind" suggests that God is a product of the mind -- that the individual creates God out of some existential need for wholeness of Self. This existential recovery or creation of God is reiterated in "The Marrow" wherein Roethke writes that "Brooding on God, I may become a man" (CP 238). Here he suggests that the more we think about God, the more we "become like God" because we become independent individuals in control of our own existences.

Although it is difficult to conclude if Roethke ever managed to completely overcome his existential feelings of estrangement and alienation from Otto Roethke and God, he seems to experience moments when everything in the universe,

including himself, is in harmony. He seems to accept his father's death and the absence of God in his life and concerns himself more fully with the particular circumstances of his true existence -- his inner Self. In "The Right Thing", he writes that "His being single, and that being all:/The right thing happens to the happy man" (CP 242) and in "Once More The Round" that "everything comes to One" (CP 243). By this point in his life, Roethke has most certainly discovered his own viable responses to existential alienation and isolation, his own divinity, and comfort and security in his own personal identity as a man whose journey as the lost son has come to a wholly existential conclusion.

The image of the journey is another dominant existential image of the Self in Roethke's poetry. As the lost son, Roethke embarks on a journey toward Selfhood (the "spiritual journey" Roethke often refers to in his prose) whose events and experiences make up The Collected Poems. His quest for wholeness of Self is often manifested in actual journeys, yet they always seems to signify inward journeying. Rosemary Sullivan notes that "The spirit's journey is objectified in metaphors of frenzied, aimless mobility" (Sullivan 133) so that, while always on his figurative quest, the speaker in the poems is often depicted in cars or on trains or buses. Nathan A. Scott describes the poet's quest as a journey:

> along the underside of things -- the disquiet of

> the dead father's ghost, the unease consequent upon sexual sins and alienations, the dismay provoked by an industrial society's desecration of air and water and earth, [and by] the haunting awareness of death as the ultimate and unavoidable emergency of life (The Wild Prayer 100).

The very concept of a journey suggests the existential quest for Selfhood and its obstacles and discoveries (both of which can be material and immaterial).

The existential image of the journey is used implicitly throughout Roethke's collected poems but manifests itself explicitly only on occasion. There are never any direct references to specific destinations; this may explain Sullivan's description of Roethke's poetic journeys as "frenzied, aimless mobility." In "Night Journey", where the speaker is on a train going west, the connection between himself and the train as a body in motion is made quite clear: "Full on my neck I feel/The straining at a curve;/My muscles move with steel,/I wake in every nerve" (CP 32). What Roethke seems to suggest here is that, like the train, when man moves toward a destination, the terrain that is covered merely represents the experiences of an individual's life. The poet stays "up half the night/To see the land I love" (CP 32) because "the land" goes by like his life goes by -- both are simply a momentous progression of scenes blurring into one another.

In the persona of the old woman, Roethke's existential

journey manifests itself as a bus ride, again through western country, in the poem "First Meditation". In accordance with his belief "that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward" (SP 12), Roethke says, in this poem, that "All journeys, I think, are the same:/The movement is forward, after a few wavers" (CP 152). He does, in fact, "go back" in an imaginative sense in this poem; back through his childhood memories, stating that "I seem to go backward,/Backward in time" (CP 152). The poet depicts such movements as a "Journey within a journey" (CP 152).

In "Journey to the Interior" (a significant title considering the thematic concern of the poem), the poet journeys inwardly, deep into his own consciousness so that he can come to terms with the facts of his existence and his mortality. In the poem, this is manifested as a journey by car. Roethke introduces the two levels of this journey in the first two lines: "In the long journey out of the self,/There are many detours, washed-out interrupted places" (CP 187). The image is sustained until the end where Roethke writes "I rehearse myself for this:/The stand at the stretch in the face of death" (CP 189), the word "stretch" indicating the final part of the journey: coming to terms with his personal death by comprehending the significance of his life. James Michael notes that "It is the journey to the exterior -- the absolute journey out of the self that comes with death -- that

[Roethke] fears" (Michael 91) and this is perhaps why the poet must make the existential "journey to the interior" -- to overcome his final fear.

In "The Far Field", the existential image of the journey is likewise represented as a trip by car. The poet begins by informing the reader that he dreams "of journeys repeatedly" so that the exploration of such journeys will be understood as figurative, not literal. One of his dreams is "Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula" (CP 193). The dream journey ends "at last in a hopeless sand-rut," perhaps indicating psychological obstacles. This poem investigates the main thematic concern of "Journey to the Interior" but does not sustain the dual image of the journey as both physical and psychological (or spiritual). In fact, after the introductory section, the physical journey is repressed in favour of blatant existentialism and, in the final part, reveals the anguished Roethke as "A man faced with his own immensity" (CP 195). When Roethke chooses to concentrate more fully on this philosophical psychological/spiritual journey, he does so because he firmly believes that the individual must take measures to discover who he really is. Roethke embarks, in The Collected Poem, on a psychologically oriented quest for Selfhood and concludes, in the poem "In a Dark Time", that "A man goes far to find out what he is-" (CP 231).

Roads and paths are indeed very important existential

images of the poet's journey in Roethke's poems. As common images of direction, they function as possible routes to Selfhood. The road is an image of public mobility because most people travel it to arrive at their destinations. The path, on the other hand, is a private, unmaintained route that not only makes detours but makes for a more speedy progress to a destination. It is also marked for its ability to provide solitude and peace because it is frequented by fewer people.

For Roethke's purposes, the nature of the road is unsuitable; he is on an existential journey and hence requires, most often, the solitude and seemingly aimless direction of the path. He writes that "My indirection found direction out" (CP 126) to suggest that the way of the path, although it appears to offer "indirection", is actually a way of finding one's true "direction out." Why Roethke often rejects the road as a valid spiritual route is apparent in his depiction of most roads as over-populated by "prisoners of speed" (CP 31). Roads are implicitly negative and dangerous in many of these poems as revealed in the line "The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,/Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut" (CP 193). If this "sand-rut" were to signify a path, the poet might take hope in his journey rather than portray himself as caught in a "hopeless" position.

The road images in The Collected Poems occur sporadically

and when depicted as positive spiritual routes are uncharacteristically quiet and unfrequented except by the poet. In "Journey to the Interior", the speaker is travelling by car down a barren road. It is an inward existential journey as Roethke ensures that the reader knows when he writes that "the road was part of me" (CP 187). The image of the road in this poem serves as the poet's way or route for coming to terms, at least psychologically and spiritually, with his own mortality. He writes, near the end of the poem, that he prepares himself for "The stand at the stretch in the face of death" (CP 189), using the word "stretch" to sustain the road image.

In the poem "I Waited", Roethke employs the image of the road to signify not only the possibility of progress in his existential journey, but also to signify the end of the physical, spiritual, and imaginative lethargy he experiences at the beginning of the piece. He writes that "It was as if I tried to walk in hay" (CP 239) and suggests that he slowly recovers from this feeling when "Slowly I came back to the dusty road". However, the road becomes "steeper" and "Then lost itself down through a rocky gorge" to become "A donkey path". It is this path that enables him to arrive at "a small plateau" which seems to represent a positive phase in his journey: "And all the winds came toward me. I was glad" (CP 239).

It is interesting to note that not all paths are safe routes for the poet's existential journey to his own interior. In an earlier poem called "The Abyss", Roethke admits that he has often taken "the dangerous path,/The vague, the arid,/Neither in nor out of this life" (CP 212). Here, the poet seems to suggest that there are many paths to choose from and that, when one is in search of one's true identity, there is a chance that one will often choose routes or paths that test or challenge the individual's ability to cope with the absurd aspects of existence. Roethke suggests that we must take the risks inherent in this spiritual journey; we must travel through "That place among the rocks" and risk encountering "a cave/Or winding path" (CP 231).

The poet's encounters with doors and gates in The Collected Poems seem to represent aspects of his existential journey toward Selfhood. Roethke uses the image of doors and gates for all of their connotative value; they signify not only entrances, exits, and passageways, but suggest accessibility, friendliness and reception when open and inaccessibility, despair, helplessness, and rejection when closed. A door that is open or capable of being opened may indicate progress in the poet's journey toward Selfhood as well as positive spiritual/emotional states, while closed doors or doors that will not yield may represent the obstacles and frustrations inherent in such a journey as well as negative

spiritual/emotional states. In "The Lost Son", the door is an image of the choices the poet must necessarily make on his existential journey. The lost son queries "Out of which door do I go,/Where and to whom?" (CP 51) essentially asking for some direction on his spiritual journey. In "The Long Alley", Roethke writes that "My gates are all caves" (CP 56) as if to suggest that all of his potential routes or passageways are dead-ends. The cave image creates a fear that the journey will merely end in oblivion and death. In this sense, although the gate is not closed, it represents an obstacle on the poet's existential journey and hence gives rise to the speaker's feelings of despair.

The image of doors and gates in Roethke's poems also seem to signify the unknown and uncertain aspects of existence. It is possible that he explores the idea of death as passing through a door/gate. What Roethke wishes to know is "Who waits at the gate?" (CP 62) -- if anyone waits at all. Could it be God? Or is it the Void waiting to swallow up man? In "Sensibility! O La!", the image of the door seems to signify an exit, perhaps from the poet's existential confusion and fear, as in the line "Has the dark a door?" (CP 78).

In "First Meditation", Roethke, in the persona of the old woman, speaks of his existential journey toward Selfhood. He calls this a "Journey within a journey" and says that "the gate/[is] inaccessible" (CP 152). Here, Roethke encounters

yet another obstacle on his quest for Selfhood and is forced to take an alternate route.

It is clear, then, that doors and gates represent the existential choices in the poet's life; they appear as entrances and exits along his journey toward Selfhood, providing some direction but often frustrating the poet, forcing him to rely on his intuitive ability to interpret the signs that will give him direction along the road to Selfhood. Roethke's encounters with doors, gates, roads, and paths reveal, throughout The Collected Poems, his ability to trust in his true self and truly "learn by going" where he has to go (CP 104).

The image of the tree, somewhat more symbolic than the image of the lost son, is almost always associated in Roethke's poems with the existential Self. Although the tree is first and foremost a tree, it usually indicates qualities of the existential Self such as strength and endurance, qualities which one normally associates with a tree. In some poems, Roethke actually states the connection between his Self and the tree. In "Bring The Day", he writes that "When I stand, I'm almost a tree" (CP 74). Also, in "What Can I Tell My Bones?", Roethke writes "Dare I blaze like a tree?" (CP 165) as if to ask "Dare I assert my identity?" It is clear then that the primary value of this image in our existential frame-work can be found in its use as a representation of the

poet's Self, and more specifically, of his identity.

Roethke's existential use of the tree image in his poems reveals many things about identity itself. In "O, Thou Opening, O", Roethke writes that he sways "Like a sapling tree" (CP 94) to imply that identity, like the sapling, makes motions and is, therefore, not a static thing. In "The Renewal", the image of the tree is employed as one of stability so that, yoked to the Self, it suggests the strength of the poet's identity. In the lines "I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs,/Yet, like a tree, endure the shift of things" (CP 130) the poet implies the belief that the Self will endure its existence; it will retain its integrity in the chaos of modern life by adjusting to the conditions it finds itself in. These implications of the swaying image is echoed clearly in the second meditation of the old woman called "I'm Here" where Roethke writes "I stayed: a willow to the wind" (CP 156). Roethke suggests that, if it is strong, the truly existential Self will persist against such forces as the wind.

Perhaps the most poignant existential use of the tree image can be found in the poem "Infirmity". In this piece, Roethke uses the tree to signify the human experience of death. He writes "Thus I conform to my divinity/By dying inward, like an aging tree" (CP 236) implying that man dies, like the tree, "inward" and that the physical body manifests this death only after it has occurred. These lines imply that when man dies,

he is merely a vacant body untenanted by pure Being. When Roethke says that this sort of death "conforms to his divinity", he suggests that the spirit, having left the body, brings itself into harmony with pure Being or God. Therefore, the death of "an aging tree" has revealed something to Roethke about the nature of human death. The image of the tree, although chiefly used as one that signifies the poet's Self, manifests its "open-endedness" in that it elucidates many different aspects of the poet's existential identity and reveals his personal responses to existence.

The minimals figure prominently as existential images of the Self in The Collected Poems. They serve primarily as figurative models for the self's spiritual development (Kalaidjian 13) and as a "gateway to ultimate reality" (Bowers 78), to the infinite, to pure Being, to God. The main creatures Roethke uses in this fashion include the snake, the worm, and the snail. Through his identification with them and his imaginative participation in their tiny lives, Roethke clearly reveals his envy for the forms of pure Being because they are, he believes, closer to eternity and to the Absolute as it is embodied in the notion of God. He envies them because their lives appear uncomplicated by the fact of existence and death; as an existent composed not only of being but of thought as well, Roethke sees himself as cursed by a complicated existence.

The poem "The Minimal" is the one poem in the collection which focuses solely on Roethke's existential view of the minimals. Roethke's method of involvement is to "study the lives on a leaf" (CP 48), to acquaint himself intimately with the microcosmic world of the small. In the poem, he reveals how studying these tiny lives offers intuitive knowledge to man about his own existence. In the lines "Wriggling through wounds,/Like elvers in ponds,/Their wan mouths kissing the warm sutures,/Cleaning and caressing,/Creeping and healing" Roethke makes it clear how the minimals manage to exist. His intense studying of their activities brings him closer to their mode of being, which is felt, in the poem, to be pure.

The best example of Roethke's use of the snake image as an existential image of the Self can be found in his poem simply called "The Snake". Here, it becomes clear that the poet envies "the pure, sensuous form" (CP 144) of the creature and, as is often the case, he suggests that what he truly envies is the snake's pure mode of being. He "longed to be that thing" and ends the poem with the line "And I may be, some time" to express the hope that his own being will at some point become pure.

Roethke also pursues existential authenticity (or what he seems to refer to as this purity of being) through the image of the worm. In "Unfold! Unfold!", he writes that "I was pure as a worm on a leaf" (CP 85). Of course, purity is

experienced only imaginatively here, but Roethke can make this claim simply because he is intimately acquainted with the lives of these minimals. In "The Waking", he uses the image of the worm to signify man's existence: "The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair" (CP 104). Robert Ely, in an article concerning this particular poem, states that the worm is "both corrupting and phallic, a symbol of death and sexual regeneration" and that the winding stair signifies the "death-rebirth cycle", which is "a progressing evolutionary spiral". If this is so, then this image suggests that, as with all life forms, man progresses through the natural cycle and need not see death as an end to life but rather as its beginning. Such an identification leads Roethke to proclaim, in "Slug" that "With bats, weasels, worms--I rejoice in the kinship" (CP 145). I believe, however, that he rejoices mainly because he is experiencing, vicariously, that purity of being or existential authenticity that he speaks of so often.

The snail functions in much the same way as an existential image of Self in that it embodies both pure being and elements of human existence. In "The Lost Son", Roethke calls on the snail to aid him on his existential journey: "Snail, snail, glister me forward" (CP 50). It is because the snail is a creature of pure being that it can offer some assistance to the poet. In "A Light Breather", the snail is equated to the spirit or true Self of the individual: "The spirit moves,/Yet

stays:/ ... Moves like the snail,/Still inward,/Taking and embracing its surroundings,/Never wishing itself away,/Unafraid of what it is,/A music in a hood,/A small thing,/Singing" (CP 97). From these lines it is evident that Roethke uses what he knows about the snail to comment on human existence. Our true Selves exist, or should exist, as the snail does: "Taking and embracing its surroundings,/Never wishing itself away,/Unafraid of what it is". Existentialists would view this as an expression of authentic existence because the individual, recognizing who and what he is, chooses to confront the world and embrace his life.

The image of the wind is one of the most existential images of the Self in The Collected Poems. It signifies many different elements of the individual Self, with particular emphasis on the principle of Self (called "spirit" in Roethke's poems) and the will. The wind is also used as an image of the external, chaotic forces of life which the individual must combat in order to maintain his place in the existential scheme of things.

This latter usage of the wind is evident in one of Roethke's most existential poems, entitled "Big Wind". In this poem, the wind is portrayed as a natural element that often is at odds with the desires and activities of man. It represents a tension between man and the natural world and evinces the idea that only through the sheer force of his will

can man hope to combat the chaos: "Where the worst wind was,/Creaking the cypress window-frames,/Cracking so much thing glass/We stayed all night,/Stuffing the holes with burlap" (CP 39). This is echoed in "I'm Here" wherein Roethke writes "I stayed: a willow to the wind" (CP 156) to suggest that the wind represents the forces of life which continually test all living things.

As an image of the existential Self or spirit, the wind is often either present or absent in Roethke's poems; when there is wind, it often signifies a positive state of the poet's existence; no wind often signifies a negative state. In "Her Becoming", the poet writes that "A spirit plays before me like a child,/A child at play, a wind-excited bird" (CP 159) to emphasize the connection between the Self and wind. The positive overtones of the above lines indicate, as I've suggested, that the presence of wind signifies Roethke's poetic moments of joyful existence. This idea is made quite clear in the poem "What Can I Tell My Bones?" when Roethke writes "My spirit rises with the rising wind" (CP 167). In "The Far Field", this sentiment is echoed in the line "His spirit moved like the monumental wind" (CP 195) to further stress Roethke's belief that the wind can signify the movement and progress of the existential Self on its journey toward purity or authenticity of being.

As an existential image of the poet's will, the wind's

movement alone is often used to indicate states of mind. When there is movement, action becomes possible; when there is no wind, the poet is overcome by helplessness, confusion, and the inability to effectively exercise his will. In "A Walk in Late Summer", Roethke writes that "my will dies with the wind" (CP 143) to reveal a state of inactivity and mental impotence. This negative state of mind is echoed clearly in "What Can I Tell My Bones?" wherein the poet states "My desire's a wind trapped in a cave" (CP 166). In the poem "I Waited", the wind is absent in the first three stanzas: "I waited for the wind to move the dust;/But no wind came" (CP 239). This seems to suggest a sort of mental lethargy which is manifested in a physical way; because his will is low, the poet says that "when I walked, my feet seemed deep in sand." However, at the end of the poem the wind suddenly begins and the poet's confusion is replaced by increased mental activity: "all the winds came toward me. I was glad."

Water, as an existential image of Self, operates in much the same fashion as the wind does. The nature of water gives Roethke some very apt associations with the Self (or spirit) in his poetry: it is a clear fluid that can be still or moving and that has the natural ability to reflect objects. These qualities of water provide Roethke with several different uses for the image of water. He employs it as signifying the Self's principle (spirit), the mind/will, and

that which can provide man with many revelations about his own existence.

In the "First Meditation", the image of water is used to indicate the movement of the Self as part of the poet's existential journey. In the lines "Still swimming forward--/So, I suppose, the spirit journeys" (CP 153), the poet clearly reveals that, like water, the spiritual Self can move easily because it is fluid. However, the utter depth of the spiritual Self can pose difficulties; it can become lost or obscure just as deep water can render itself dark and obscure. Roethke states as much in the line "I lose and find myself in the long water" (CP 192).

As an existential image of the poet's Self, water and its motions also indicate in Roethke's poems the movement of the mind and the nature of the will. In "The Sententious Man", he writes that "Small waves repeat the mind's slow sensual play" (CP 126) to suggest that the mind's processes are akin to the motion of small waves. In "Meditation at Oyster River", he states that "Water's my will, and my way" (CP 186). What the poet implies here is that, like water, his will is clear and moving toward a certain end and that his existential "way", or mode of being, is pure motion or activity which is, according to the existentialists, true or authentic existence.

As an existential image of epiphany or revelation, water occurs in many of Roethke's poem to reveal truths to him about

the nature of his (perhaps all) existence and to provide him with the opportunity for self-contemplation. In "Bring The Day!", Roethke writes: "Begin with the rock;/End with water" (CP 73). He implies that by engaging the concrete world (the rock), true revelation (water) comes to man. In "Give Way, Ye Gates", the idea of water as existential revelation is echoed. In the lines "The deep stream remembers:/Once I was a pond./What slides away/Provides" (CP 76), Roethke makes it clear that water connects all living things because it is the basis of all life and, as such, it provides a major clue to the nature of existence. In fact, to "Stand by a slow stream" is to "Hear the sigh of what is" (CP 94) according to Roethke. The fact that man can learn by contemplating water is evident in "The Sententious Man" wherein Roethke writes that "water moves until it's purified" (CP 127); the poet, too, must move, must take an active part in his existential journey in order to become pure, to live authentically.

Water also provides man with opportunities for existential self-reflection because of its very reflective qualities. It provides a respite from the chaos of life as revealed in "What Can I Tell My Bones?" In the line "I need a pool; I need a puddle's calm" (CP 165), it is evident that water allows Roethke to truly encounter himself through self-reflection. While looking into a body of water, one's own image is reflected, thus allowing for introspection. This idea is

evinced in "Infirmity" wherein Roethke writes "I stare and stare into a deepening pool/And tell myself my image cannot die" (CP 236). Here, the poet makes the existential realization that his Self is all he has in this life; however, he tells himself his "image cannot die" because he is not yet prepared to face his own mortality.

The final chief existential images of Self in The Collected Poems are the images of darkness and light. Denis Donoghue states that "Nature, seldom a friend to man, at least offers him a few saving analogies; one being that of darkness and light" (Stein 151). He also points out that "The good man takes the risk of darkness" and "If reason's click-clack is useless there remains in man a primitive striving toward the light" (Stein 151). James Dickey, in fact, uses the images of darkness and light to expresses the appeal of Roethke's poetry: "The best of Roethke's poems are very nearly as frightening as 'darkness was upon the face of the deep,' and as simple and awesome as 'let there be light'" (Dickey 148).

That the images of light and darkness appeal to our unconsciousness is a known fact of human psychology. This natural analogy fundamentally evokes many feelings and ideas in the human mind: "Light always refers to the consciousness .... The centre is ... the dark cave, and to enter it is obviously to set the conflict going" (Jung 260). Jung states that the self is manifested through such opposites and in the

conflict between them and concludes that "the way to the self begins with conflict" (260). Thus Roethke's existential journey to selfhood is inextricably bound to the existence of opposites he observes around him; the journey begins when the poet attempts to reconcile the basic pervasive opposition of light and darkness.

It is helpful to understand the full significance of the images of light and darkness in order to ascertain how they function as existential images of the Self in Roethke's work. Although the word "light" signifies the physical presence of a source of illumination, such as the sun, the moon, fire, and artificial sources such as lamps and lightbulbs, it suggests more than simply the conditions for visibility. The presence of illumination in nature also evokes the ideas of mental clarity, understanding, knowledge, truth, warmth, comfort, life, and, traditionally, the presence of God. Darkness, on the other hand, signifies the absence of light, such as night, and therefore the absence of all that light implies. It connotes, instead, fear, ignorance, obscurity, mystery, confusion, evil, hell, and the nothingness which is death. However, darkness is not always a negative image in Roethke's poems for, as will be illustrated, he is forced to encounter his true Self in the dark and discover his intuitive abilities in order to confront the negative emotions and circumstances of his existential journey.

Images of light pervade The Collected Poems and become increasingly significant to Roethke's existential journey as he matures as a poet who is capable of exploiting the images of consciousness and unconsciousness. In an early poem called "Prayer", Roethke decides, by examining the nature of each of his sense, which he would choose to retain if he had to make a choice. His decision and the reason for it is apparent in the latter half of the poem: "In truth, the Eye's the abettor of/The holiest platonic love:/ ... Let Light attend me to the grave!" (CP 8). His emphasis on light is clearly based on a fundamental human need to feel secure and to literally and figuratively see what the Self experiences.

The image of light also signifies his existential states of mental and spiritual illumination. In "The Lost Son", Roethke attempts to explain his illumination in terms of light: "Was it light?/Was it light within?/Was it light within light?" (CP 55). The revelatory experience he undergoes in this section is symbolized by joined images of light and field: "Light travelled over the field;/Stayed" (CP 55). The combined meanings of these two images suggest a profound existential experience. Light also appears as the source of spiritual illumination in "Unfold! Unfold!" In the lines "At first the visible obscures:/Go where light is" (CP 86), the poet suggests that the actual sight of objects can cloud their essential truths; in order to discover the meanings of things

the individual must seek illumination of a different sort. The truth of existence can only be understood when the individual is intuitively, that is authentically, engaged with the things of this world. The importance of such spiritual and intellectual clarity is evident in Roethke's belief that "light is all" (CP 103).

In "The Pure Fury", Roethke juxtaposes existential images of light and darkness in order to express the belief that insight into the absurdity of human existence can only be obtained by embracing the very tensions that create this absurdity. In the lines "I live near the abyss. I hope to stay/Until my eyes look at a brighter sun/As the thick shade of night comes on" (CP 129), the tensions are clear: we live "near the abyss" or death until a "brighter sun" (perhaps truth or God) manifests itself to us. After we experience such illumination, death is rendered impotent and can no longer frighten us with its darkness.

In fact, in "The Renewal" such a clear vision of reality reveals the very nature of human existence and the movement of the soul. Here, Roethke writes that "Illumination brought to such a pitch/I see the rubblestones begin to stretch/As if reality had split apart/And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:/I find that love, and I am everywhere" (CP 130). He suggests that such intense existential illumination brings him to a love which underlies all creation. This sense of love

enables him to at least feel temporarily as though he were a transcendent being, therefore beyond the dangers and worries of his problematic existence.

In "The Shimmer of Evil", Roethke employs the existential image of light in a negative manner. He writes that "There is no light, there is no light at all" (CP 137) as if to imply that there is no ultimate truth, no God, only a "Cold evil twinkled tighter than a string; a fire/Hung down: And I was only I" (CP 137). The fact that the poet feels alone and without the possibility of existential revelation points to a spiritual darkness. In this poem, Roethke reveals that the near absence of light has negative existential implications for the imagination and the spirit.

On the other hand, the absolute presence of light affords the poet many positive feelings. In "Meditation at Oyster River", Roethke writes that "Now, in this waning of light,/I rock with the motion of morning;/...In the first of the moon,/All's a scattering,/A shining" (CP 185-6). He implies that light expresses the connectedness of all life and that this is the existential revelation he experiences in the poem.

The existential image of darkness, as naturally opposed to light, is often represented in Roethke's poems as existential uncertainty and confusion. In "The Renewal", he says that "Dark hangs upon the waters of the soul" (CP 130) to express that darkness of the soul is natural given the condition of

man. This uncertainty can explain man's deepest fears of existence. In "The Surly One", Roethke says "I fear those shadows most/That start from my own feet" (CP 133). He suggests that the mystery and horror of life are not just external but in man as well. What man fears most in life is the darkness within himself -- the uncertainty, the ignorance, the terrible truths. To encounter one's own being is to encounter the mystery and horror of life.

Roethke, recognizing his own darkness and the darkness without, longs to be "Where shadow can change into flame,/And the dark be forgotten" (CP 182). In this poem, "The Longing", the poet wishes the negative aspects of existence away; he longs for answers, knowledge, security, and truth which are implicitly embodied in the image of light.

In "The Abyss", Roethke clearly states the human condition of uncertainty, of the lack of self-knowledge. In the line "I rock between dark and dark" (CP 213), he suggests that he is trapped between spiritual darkness and the darkness of reality. However, the image of darkness is not utterly negative here. Because the poet is "trapped" in darkness, he is thrown back upon his intuition as a way of engaging reality. He writes that "The shade speaks slowly:/'Adore and draw near./Who knows this -/Knows all'" (CP 214). What Roethke is implying in this poem is that the individual who takes this risk of darkness shall discover the truth of all

life. These truths are found deep in the darkest crevices of the Self and, once confronted, actually serve as a form of personal enlightenment. This existential sentiment is echoed in the poem "In a Dark Time" wherein Roethke writes, from experience, that "In a dark time, the eye begins to see" (CP 231). What this paradox does for the reader is state the fact that illumination can occur in times of existential darkness or confusion. One actually only begins to see the truth of existence at such times and, once the darkness is explored, one experiences the ultimate illumination of meeting oneself "in the deepening shade" (CP 231).

This paradox of light in darkness reveals Roethke's existential awareness of the natural tension between light and dark. Even before his experience as recorded in "In a Dark Time", Roethke had employed the paradox of light and darkness. For example, in "O, Thou Opening, O", Roethke says that "The dark has its own light" (CP 94) and, in "The Dying Man", that "I breathe alone until my dark is bright./Who would know the dawn/When there's a dazzling dark behind the sun?" (CP 149). In these two early poems, Roethke had explored the paradoxical co-existence of darkness and light to conclude that, although they are diametrically opposed elements, they necessarily co-exist; light implies the absence of darkness and darkness implies the absence of light. Roethke portrays these twin images as co-existents which signify many different spiritual

and mental states. Although the image of the light usually signifies existential illumination, it can also imply an attendant darkness; while darkness generally signifies psychological and mental stultification, it can also provide a deeply intuitive mode of being for existential enlightenment.

Existential Images of Death and Oblivion

Roethke's major existential images of death and oblivion occur frequently throughout The Collected Poems. They include images of the mire (also in the guise of pits, holes, bogs, and marshes), the abyss, and caves and graves. The mire is naturally associated with danger, a fundamental association which Roethke uses to further endow this existential image with the threat of oblivion, the utter disappearance or obscurity of personal identity. The fear of non-being itself is connected to the existential notion of anguish which, at least for Paul Tillich, is felt in terms of death, emptiness, and meaninglessness (Nauman 10).

Roethke's image of the mire is clearly an image of the existential Void; he asserts this association in his essay "Open Letter" when he groups the images of the marsh, the mire, and the Void together, calling the whole presence of absolute Nothingness "immediate and terrifying" (SP 40). When

employing the image of Nothingness, Roethke makes use of many different words that can be grouped together because they all indicate the Void; he uses the words "mire", "pit", "hole" and "bog" most frequently. What these natural images suggest to the poet is what he fears most: the Void which is absolute Nothingness. To Roethke, they imply the utter obliteration through death of the Self. The mire/pit/hole/bog/marsh seem to fundamentally signify the fact of death and the threat of non-being. This particular cluster of images, then, can be viewed as the most existential symbolic representation of Roethke's worst fears as a living being.

The mire, the pit, the hole, the bog, and the marsh function in Roethke's poems as existential images of danger, of confinement, and of the possible oblivion associated with death. In "The Dying Man", Roethke writes that "Places great with their dead,/The mire, sodden wood,/Remind me to stay alive" (CP 148). The mire in this poem seems to be a repository for the dead; the poet is reminded by such places that he must continue to live because living is the only stay against his being consumed by death, by the Void.

One of the first intimations we have from Roethke that reveals the existential value he ascribes to this cluster of images is in an early poem entitled "Against Disaster". In the lines "This flat land becomes a pit/Wherein I am beset by harm" (CP 18), the pit is an obvious image of danger. The

hole, an image akin to the pit, is not usually associated with danger in as much as it is associated with confinement or containment as can be seen in the aphoristic line "Who stands in a hole/Never spills" (CP 76). When combined with the mire, however, the hole seems to become an image of oblivion. In "The Sententious Man", Roethke writes that "Small waters run toward a miry hole-" (CP 127) as if to suggest that everything leads to the existential Void, that realm of absolute obscurity.

The bog and marsh are closely related natural images of the great existential Void or Nothingness which Roethke blatantly fears in his poems. In "The Shape of The Fire", he writes that "Who, careless, slips/In coiling ooze/Is trapped to the lips,/Leaves more than shoes;/Must pull off clothes/To jerk like a frog/On belly and nose/From the sucking bog" (CP 62). These two small stanzas concisely express the poet's fear of being trapped or caught in the Void of Nothingness, for the Void can literally strip man of his identity, his "clothes". The fact that the marsh is a "sucking bog" seems to indicate its power to undermine the very existence of the poet.

The abyss, which denotes a bottomless chasm or hole, figures prominently in Roethke's poems as the existential idea of Nothingness, though it frequently appears as a concrete image of danger in the guise of pits and holes. Denis Donoghue, in his essay "Roethke's Broken Music", claims that

the abyss is the very substance of Roethke's poetry. As such, it is representative "partly of the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch, partly a ditch of his own contriving, partly the fate of being human in a hard time, partly the poet's weather .... Better to think of it as the heart of each man's darkness" (Stein 138). Donoghue's reference to Conrad's Heart of Darkness further implies that the abyss is, above all else, an image for the individual's personal confrontation with existence and the fact of death. Walter Kalaidjian expands on Donoghue's claim for the abyss as "the heart of each man's darkness" by explicitly stating that Roethke's use of this image functions as a way to "plumb the existential despair inaugurated by the proclamation of God's death in Nietzsche's The Gay Science" and states that Roethke viewed himself as one of Eliot's "twentieth-century's 'hollow men'" who survived (Kalaidjian 176). What the image of the abyss held for Roethke is made quite plain by William Heyen who writes that "The substance of the abyss ... is the fear of personal extinction and the horror of alienation in a world in which the individual has lost communion with any transcendental reality" (100). The abyss is, then, a representation of Roethke's moments of existential despair, moments which often led, as Heyen suggests, to "intimations of the divine" (100). In his notebooks, Roethke himself says that the "first sense of the abyss" comes when "reason [is] thrown back on itself"

(Wagoner 217). The abyss is, in fact, "the heart of each man's darkness" (Stein 138). It is clear that Roethke's critics are alert to the symbolic weight of this blatantly existential image and that the abyss does indeed function in Roethke's poetry as an image of death and oblivion.

Although the image of the abyss figures implicitly in many of Roethke's poems, such as "The Lost Son", "The Shape of the Fire", and "Praise to the End!", it manifests itself more explicitly in others, particularly in "The Pure Fury", "The Abyss", and "The Moment". In each of these poems the image of the abyss is used to indicate, as Kalaidjian states, the poet's "existential despair" because it signifies the depth and darkness denoted by the word "abyss". The image also takes on broader significance in this philosophical context; it comes to signify the Void of Nothingness, death, oblivion, and the hellish torments and terrors that plague us in this life.

In "The Pure Fury", Roethke writes "I live near the abyss" (CP 129) to suggest that he continually lives his life in the face of death, with the threat of non-being as ever-present in the image of the abyss. J. Glenn Gray, in his essay "The Problem of Death in Modern Philosophy", states that "spiritually, we are all exposed to the yawning abyss, the primal night which originates all and to which we all return" (52) and that "human existence, as one form of Being, is

suspended over the abyss of Non-being" (51). The fact that human beings are so poised over the abyss causes the general anguish of existence to manifest itself in those, like Roethke, who recognize their precarious position "near the abyss" (CP 129). William Heyen, in the essay called "The Divine Abyss: Theodore Roethke's Mysticism", writes that "Roethke saw himself as standing at the brink of an abyss, and during the course of his poetry this image becomes symbolic of man's condition" (100).

In the explicitly existential poem "The Abyss", Roethke examines the anguish he experiences after realizing the absurdity of his own existence. He asks "The abyss? the abyss" and responds "'The abyss you can't miss/It's right where you are-" (CP 211). In this poem, the image of the stair is used to indicate human existence as in "'The stair's right there,/But it goes nowhere'" (CP 211). Roethke experiences the anguish of his position which manifests itself in the lines "the world invades me again" and "Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit" (CP 212). He wonders if "we move toward God, or merely another condition?" (CP 213) once we plunge into the abyss which is death. George Wolff says that, in this poem, "Roethke is dramatizing [the] epistemological conflict between different ways of answering questions about the soul's immortality and God's existence" (Wolff 116). This is, in our existential framework, the

fundamental mystery of human existence which must be responded to, in some manner, by the individual if he is to be able to make any sense of or give any meaning to his life.

In "The Moment", the existential image of the abyss again signifies the fixed end of human existence: death. In the line "The wide, the bleak abyss/Shifted with our slow kiss" (CP 230), Roethke illustrates his attempt, through sexual love, to alter or shift the inevitable fact of death. Of course, this shifting of the facts only temporarily defers human mortality and after the "slow kiss" is over, the abyss reappears as that "dark ravine" into which we shall all fall at the end of our lives.

Caves and graves exist as important existential images of death and oblivion in Roethke's poems. Although the cave is a natural image, it approximates the associations and symbolic meanings connected with the grave, which is an image of human civilization. George Wolff calls such images "threatening enclosures" and states that they embody the theme of alienation, which, for Roethke, is from his father and his God (51). Wolff also calls the grave the archetypal image of threatening enclosures and contrasts it with the archetypal image of protective enclosures which are the womb and nests (51). Rosemary Sullivan, however, links the womb image to the images of caves and graves and states that Roethke experiences intense states of "spiritual introversion" when he places

himself imaginatively in the realm of these images (41). She notes that Roethke transcends these negative conditions either "by means of a healing memory from the past or through sheer exertion of will" (41). This last response is decidedly existential because it requires a wholly individual effort. It is clear then that Roethke's use of and confrontation with such images is decidedly existential, for he intuits the Void in such images of the cave and the grave and is consciously aware that temporarily escaping or dealing with the oblivion of the Void is up to him: he wilfully responds to the existential Void and is therefore able to get on with the business of living.

One of the first poignantly existential uses of the grave image is in "Weed Puller". Here, Roethke conveys his childhood fear of being utterly consumed by the weeds in his father's greenhouse: "Me down in that fetor of weeds,/Crawling on all fours,/Alive, in a slippery grave" (CP 37). This fear is translated into the image of being alive while trapped in a grave and supports Wolff's statement that the grave is the archetypal image of threatening enclosures. What is more terrifying, especially for a child, than the grave, a symbol of death?

In "The Long Alley", Roethke asks "What does the grave say?" (CP 56) and the line that follows is "My gates are all caves." It is clear what the implications are for the poet.

The grave tells man that he must die and that death is a descent into Nothingness because no one who enters the grave ever returns; it is the final obliteration of a life in the way that the cave is the end of a particular path or route. This accounts for Roethke's existential use of the grave and the cave as images of finality.

In the poem "Unfold! Unfold!", this existential use of the grave image is repeated. Roethke constructs the final section of this poem around several juxtapositions so that it becomes clear what he believes about life and death. In his characteristically aphoristic style, Roethke writes that "What the grave says,/The nest denies" (CP 87). What the grave says in this poem is exactly what it said in "The Long Alley". However, there is an optimistic note in that the nest, an image of birth and beginnings belonging to Wolff's "protective enclosure" category, denies the fact of death by implying that out of death comes new life. That is, the occurrence of birth actually seems to negate, in Roethke's mind, the fact of death. The juxtaposition focuses on an existential affirmation of life through the nest image, not on the oblivion of the grave that is death.

The existential image of the cave fortifies the associations Roethke makes between natural and artificial enclosures and death and oblivion. He uses the phrase "cave of sorrow" in "The Shape of the Fire" (CP 61) to signify the

suffocating effect that a negative emotion can exert on the individual. In "What Can I Tell My Bones?", the cave image reaffirms Roethke's view that such enclosures are responsible for psychological stultification: "My desire's a wind trapped in a cave" (CP 166). Both the grave and cave images imply the threat of non-being and point to the absurd reality that man lives his life in the face of death.

Existential Life-Affirming Images

The third major category of Roethke's existential images collects life-affirming images. The most significant of this group include the edge, the dance, and the song/poem. Each of these images has, in fact, its counterpart in the realm of Roethke's existential images of death and oblivion. The edge can be viewed as the counterpart to the abyss, the dance as the counterpart to the mire (movement versus sluggish inactivity), and the song/poem as the counterparts to the grave and cave (life and creativity versus death and Nothingness).

The edge is an existential image which is closely associated to that of the abyss. As such, it comes to represent the imaginary boundary line between life and death, being and non-being. It manifests itself in Roethke's poems as that brink or rim of the abyss (or of any type of pit or

hole), that stretch which separates life from death. Ralph J. Mills, in his book Cry of the Human, states that the edge is "that precarious border in Roethke's poems between ecstasy and the void" (59). The image of this edge is generally a literal edge in the poems, but it always seems to signify the existential boundary line between existence and oblivion. Roethke's existential connection between the abyss and the edge is evident in the fact that the image of the edge generally occurs in his poems in the company of words which at least imply the death and oblivion of the abyss. For example, in "Song", Roethke writes "When I stayed for breath, I lay/With the saxifrage and fern/At the edge of a raw field./I stared at a fissure of ground" (CP 140). The proximity of the edge to the fissure suggests the poet's existentially uncertain footing on the narrow bit of ground between the safety of life and the perils of the abyss.

In "Fourth Meditation", the existential image of the edge signifies the poet's position on the threshold of revelation. In the lines "At the edge of the field waiting for the pure moment" (CP 162), it is clear that the image of the edge, because it is yoked to the image of the field (Roethke's usual image for revelation and illumination), signifies the poet's anticipation of existential revelation; he is on the verge of experiencing a "pure moment" of being.

In the poems "In a Dark Time" and "Song", Roethke uses the

existential image of the edge in one of his most memorable aphorisms -- memorable because it concisely states his view of human existence. This aphorism appears, in the first poem, as "The edge is what I have" (CP 231) and, in the second poem, as "The edge is what we have" (CP 250). The change from "I" to "we" is important, for Roethke first speaks subjectively of his own position and later concludes that all human beings have this one thing in common: we all live "near the abyss" (CP 129). What this aphorism also implies is that we actually have "the edge" in that we exist on that border between life and death; if we let go this "edge", this life, we would plunge headlong into the nothingness of the "yawning abyss" (Gray 52). In fact, to "have the edge" is to have life, but as we can see in "The Dying Man", this life is temporary at best for: "The edges of the summit still appall/When we brood on the dead or the beloved" (CP 150). Stanley Kunitz implicitly discusses Roethke's use of and response to the edge when he writes that "if [the poet] for a moment despairs of his identity, he still has the strength and will enough to drag himself over the threshold of annihilation" (Kunitz 76). Kunitz remarks that even when Roethke is appalled by "the summit" of his life, he is still able to existentially will himself to remain at the edge and not plunge over it. This wilful act is a fundamentally positive and life-affirming response on behalf of the poet to the inevitability of his own

death.

The existential life-affirming image of the dance signifies, in Roethke's poetry, the poet's physical celebration and affirmation of life. It is an image of physical energy and motion and implies the efforts of human beings to respond to the absurdity of life. When employed in connection with two people, such as the lovers of The Collected Poems, the dance can convey sexual love as an existential way of affirming life and denying death. Neal Bowers cites the image of the dance as "a way of knowing, a way of creating a harmonious relationship with the One and bringing oneself into proper alignment with that which he seeks" (Bowers 142). This additional consideration bears particularly on such poems as "Four For Sir John Davies" (especially "The Dance") and "Once More, The Round". In the other poems, which figure the existential dance image explicitly, the image functions chiefly as that which signifies the affirmation of the poet's life.

In "My Papa's Waltz", Roethke uses the existential dance image to affirm his relationship with his father. He describes his father's drunken movements and says that, although "such waltzing was not easy", he "hung on like death" (CP 43). The celebratory and fun-loving antics of his father must have intrigued and amused Roethke, the child; thus the poem ends on a positive note: "Then waltzed me off to

bed/Still clinging to your shirt". This last line reveals Roethke's life-long attachment to his father, affirming this attachment through the image of the waltz they do on the child's way to bed. By dancing, the two are, in fact, celebrating their lives.

In the poem "I Knew a Woman", the existential image of the dance is also used as an image of celebration. The poet celebrates his love (and implicitly his sexual love) for his wife, Beatrice. He writes that "She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand" (CP 122) to suggest that this woman has taught him a way of celebrating life. The fact that he loves her and believes this love can endure is evident in the lines "I'm martyr to a motion not my own;/ ... These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:/(I measure time by how a body sways)" (CP 122). In these lines, the image of the dance reveals itself as an existential response to the inevitable passing of time and to the fact of death; Roethke views time according to the motion of bodies so that time is significant only insofar as it is marked by the experience of love.

Let us return now to Bowers' view of the dance and how it represents the poet's approach to creativity, knowledge, and God. The poems that clearly illustrate this particular function of the existential dance image both focus on the poet's attempt to align himself with some eternal, and hence life-affirming, truth. In the first section of "Four For Sir

John Davies" entitled "The Dance", Roethke uses the existential image of the dance to signify the creative process of poetry. He claims to have had no dancing "master" and yet admits he takes his "cadence from a man named Yeats" (CP 101). Roethke existentially acquires knowledge through "dancing all alone"; hence he figuratively returns the cadence to Yeats in the fourth stanza. As an approach to God, the image of the dance, especially as related to the bears in the poem, reveals to Roethke that man must, like these animals, remember "to be gay"; he must remember to affirm his life, indeed, all forms of creation, if he is to acquire any clues to the mystery of God. It should also be noted that Roethke's lack of a dancing "master" may indicate his existential recognition of the utter absence of God, that he is solely responsible for coming to terms with the question of existence (The Wild Prayer 88).

In "Once More, The Round", Roethke uses the existential dance image in the same manner. What he seeks in this poem is alignment with the One or God. He writes that "everything comes to One,/As we dance on, dance on, dance on" (CP 243). The image of the dance, then, suggests that continual motion and sustained energy will eventually bring all things into harmony with God. In this particular poem, the dance also implies love; that is, the poet dances "For love, for Love's sake" because he is postulating, in an existential manner, that "Love" is the unifying element of life.

The existential image of the song as a life-affirming image in Roethke's poetry operates much the same way it does in the poetry of Whitman. In fact, one might view all modern poetry featuring the image of the song as somewhat influenced by Whitman's affirmative poetry, especially the lengthy celebratory poem "Song of Myself" wherein the image of singing is explicitly connected to the celebration of all life: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman 25). The song image in the poetry of Roethke is employed to a similar end in that he feels he must sing in order to affirm his existence and to comfort himself in the face of death. On occasion, the song also functions implicitly as an image for the ordering of the individual's existential experiences. In The Collected Poems, it functions both as a literal song (and the activity of singing) and, more importantly, it signifies the creative principle in humankind, particularly in the poet himself. As a manifestation of the creative imagination, the song signifies the celebration of life's positive experiences and serves as an existential response to the times of negative experience. The nature of the song itself places an emphasis on sound over sense; it is a poem of sorts which, in subjective terms, orders thought, emotion, and experience. Therefore, when Roethke employs the existential image of the song, he refers to actual song, the writing of poetry, and the

fundamental urge in man to create, to be the God of his existence. Man becomes God through the creative act because he existentially creates his own order and meaning and thereby becomes the author of his own existence.

Stein states that the creative act seems "to be a force" which held Roethke, the man, together (xi-xii). Jeffrey Meyers phrases this in a different manner, stating that Roethke, Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman all "sought salvation in art" as compensation "for the anguish of their existence" (23). Creativity itself, writes Jay Parini, is portrayed in Roethke's work "as one sure way of overcoming the threat of non-being" (Parini 143); he says this function of the creative act parallels the views of Paul Tillich, especially in Roethke's poem "Four For Sir John Davies" wherein Roethke states "All lovers live by longing, and endure:/Summon a vision and declare it pure" (CP 103). Kalaidjian calls the imagination a "redemptive presence" and suggests that in its absence Roethke's poetic moods are characterized by "Abandonment, lifelessness, monotony, and despair" (53). Wolff echoes this sentiment when he suggests that the song is a comforting existential response to hard times because it has the ability to "lull" the poet, especially when the poet learns "that he must die" (55).

The existential images of the song and the poem, then, function predominantly as the poet's way of engaging his own

existence; through the creation of songs and poems, the poet orders and gives meaning to his experiences. Through the existential images of the song and poem, Roethke responds imaginatively to the absurdity of his existence. The most poignant example of Roethke's use of the existential song image as that which affirms is in "Four For Sir John Davies" in section four. It is this section to which Parini refers when he notes that Roethke views the creative act as a way of "overcoming the threat of non-being" (143). Creativity, the song, is capable of responding to this threat because it is its opposite: an affirmation. If one summons "a vision" and declares it "pure" (CP 103), the threat of non-being is invalidated; the creative vision nullifies the vision of nothingness. In fact, the affirmation becomes an external one in the image of the poem: "The word outleaps the world" (CP 103). Because the "word" or poem cannot die, it manages to outlast "the world"; the immortality of the poem then affords the poet, through his work, a glimpse of immortality. He then overcomes this threat of non-being because he realizes that he will figuratively continue to live in his poetry.

The existential choices that the individual is presented with in life are delineated by Roethke in terms of a juxtaposition of the song with the sigh; if the song is an image of affirmation, celebration, order, and comfort, the sigh must represent existential despair, chaos, and sadness.

This juxtaposition manifests itself explicitly in "The Renewal" and part five of "The Dying Man". In the first poem, Roethke writes "I teach my sighs to lengthen into songs" (CP 130) to suggest his recognition that the sigh is not a valid mode of being and, if life is to have any meaning whatsoever, the individual must create "songs" out of his sadnesses. This sentiment is reiterated in the line "I'll scare myself with sighing, or I'll sing" (CP 150). Here, the poet presents his view more clearly: the sigh "scare[s]" because it brings into focus man's absurd existence; the song, especially the act of singing, is shown to do the opposite. The fact of our existence gives us this choice: to sigh or to sing. Roethke's existential use of the song image expresses his basic human need to sing.

The value Roethke places on the song as an image of his existential response to modern existence is evident at the end of the "Fourth Meditation". He simply states, in the persona of the old woman, that "By singing we defend" (CP 164). This demonstrates that the song is a defense for or reply to the question of existence. The fact that the song is one of Roethke's replies to life's absurdity is clearly expressed in the poem "In Evening Air" wherein he reveals to the reader the necessary reason why he must sing: "I'll make a broken music, or I'll die" (CP 232). It seems that Roethke's existential choice is to affirm himself in this life, for he conceives

that the only other alternative is a sort of death in life. His choice to sing is what existentialists would call "authentic" living.

CHAPTER THREE

ROETHKE'S EXISTENTIAL THEMES

A thorough and sensitive reading of The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke reveals Roethke's preoccupation with certain themes. Although his poetic output is substantial, his thematic concerns can be generally ascribed to seven different areas: 1) the chaos of modern life; 2) the Self (the struggle for personal identity); 3) the fact of death as a problem of life; 4) the question of God as a problem of life; 5) the connection between the human and the things of Nature as both a problem of life and a potential answer to life's problems; 6) love as a response to the problems of living and identity, and 7) the imagination as a response to the same two problems.

The Existential Chaos of Modern Life

The first premise of existentialism is that life is absurd, or chaotic if you will, because man has no hand in his own being. The fact that we cannot choose to be (we simply are) is called absurd. This initial absurdity, from the very beginning, simultaneously raises a host of problems. Such

problems are called the problems of living and, although the initial or generative problem of absurd existence cannot be resolved (except, of course, by ceasing to exist altogether), the problems of living can be responded to in order to render existence less problematic, anxious, and chaotic.

I believe that Roethke feels this, on an unconscious level, and the fact that his collected poems reveal a pattern of problems and responses, beginning in anxiety and ending in joy, attest to his intuitive existentialism. Roethke did not set out to answer the riddle of being, but to respond, on a personal level, to the problems which the fact of his existence raises. His poetic themes are a testimony to his personal and professional attempts to live with and express the absurdity and chaos of modern life. The few poems in which Roethke actually focuses his attention on the theme of the existential chaos and absurdity of modern life use bleak images and language. Poems that obviously refer to the absurdity of the external social world are "Highway: Michigan", "Dolor", and "The Longing".

The first poem is merely an objective description of the chaos caused by modern society's mania for getting places. The image of drivers as racers who "jockey for position" (31) and as "prisoners of speed" reveals the chaos and absurdity of modern transportation. However, Roethke seems to be only an observer, not one of these "prisoners", and his commentary is

therefore less credible because he does not truly examine the problem -- he just reports it. The only shred of emotional response in the poem is in the line "We shiver at the siren's blast". There is no evidence as to how Roethke himself responds to the mania for speed or to the problems inherent in modern transportation.

"Dolor", a poem from The Lost Son and Other Poems collection, is, according to Roethke himself, "an exposition of one of the modern hells: the institution that overwhelms the individual man" (SP 20). In this poem, however, Roethke renders this existential dehumanization in rather abstract terms, spelling out his meaning rather than letting it emerge from concrete images. He refers to "Desolation in immaculate public places,/Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,/ ... Endless duplication of lives and objects./ ... the duplicate grey standard faces" (CP 44). It is a poem charged with the existential realization that modern society is slowly depersonalizing the individual; it appeals to our minds, not our emotions, for too much is stated and too little revealed.

"The Longing" (181), on the other hand, contains not only a relatively detailed description of modern life, but also the poet's commentary on how it affects him personally. Mills, in his essay "In the Way of Becoming", also notes that, in this poem, Roethke is treating his own emotional responses to the absurdity of modern existence. Mills writes that "The

Longing" contains lines which

> do more than convey the living death of modern existence, they reveal the poet's feeling of disaffection from his true or spiritual nature .... actuality surrounds him everywhere in images of industrial urban landscape, dead and locked in itself (Stein 120).

The poem has three sections, with the references to this social actuality primarily contained in the first. Here, Roethke renders the chaos of modern life in bleak and hopeless imagery and language to show how those living in this chaos react. He calls modern life "A kingdom of stinks and sighs" characterized by the "Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum". Here, he writes, "Happiness [is] left to dogs and children" because anyone aware of the absurdity of it all must be unhappy. Thus, modern life is "this sensual emptiness", "a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year" and "The slag-heaps fume at the edge of the raw cities". The problem of the chaos/absurdity of life becomes "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?"

Clearly, Roethke has established that the existential chaos of modern life must be responded to if life is to have any meaning whatsoever. Since he personally views the chaos/absurdity of modern life as a problem, he ventures to respond to it in a personal way. For Roethke, the answer to chaos is order: "I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form". Order, however, is not a natural endowment of

our world and hence must be created by the individual. Roethke reveals his path to order at the end of the poem when he says "I'll be an Indian./Ogalala?/Iroquois." Here, Roethke seems to be saying that he shall seek meaning and order by using his intuitive abilities. The order he achieves through his intuition as a poet is blatant in the arrangement of poems in his Collected Poems.

The decision to rely upon his subjective realities and truths is indisputably existential, for the existentialist begins the quest for meaning and order with the one thing he knows he can trust: himself. It is Kierkegaard who first places the emphasis on the individual by claiming that "whatever one believes with certainty is true" because we are each enclosed within the perimeters of our consciousness and therefore unable to identify our Selves with the Self of another (Kern viii). Nietzsche put the matter more clearly when he states that subjectivity is truth: "truth is not something that can be proved or disproved: it is something which you determine upon, ... it is something you create, it is the expression of a particular kind of life and being which has, in you, ventured to assert itself" (25). Roethke himself realizes that the poet, indeed the human being, must "create an actuality" (SP 42).

In Wagoner's book Straw for the Fire: from the notebooks of Theodore Roethke 1943-63, there are some indications that

Roethke is aware of the conditions of existence and that he must respond to the problems of life if he is to live. He writes "If there is not another life, there is at least another way to live" (104). Once the poet has accepted that he cannot alter the fact of his being or the fact of the world, he must then respond to these unchanging facts in a personal manner, thereby creating himself and his life in the manner of an existentialist.

According to Sartre, the first principle of existentialism is just this: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (<u>Existential and Human Emotions</u> 15). For Roethke, accepting the first premises of being means accepting the fact that if he is alive in an absurd world, then his first choice is to live or not. Existentialists such as Sartre and Camus agree that suicide is the ultimate response to the absurdity of existence, but they continue to argue against it as a valid response to the problem of living (Finkelstein 112). After all, death only eliminates the problem of living; it does not solve it. An entry in Roethke's notebooks from 1948-9 reads "I am; therefore, I continue" (Wagoner 192), which seems to reveal Roethke's decision to continue living despite the absurdity of this world.

In his essay "On 'Identity'", Roethke states the initial problem we are faced with as human beings: "The human problem is to find out what one really is; whether one exists, whether

existence is possible" (SP 20). After making the decision to confront this initial problem, Roethke had to determine the responses he would make to the fact of his existence. The patterns of these responses create, in Roethke's poetry, a rather existential view of the world and life because they begin subjectively and yet ultimately transcend the individual by coming to represent the existential predicament of all beings. In fact, Denis Donoghue, in Connoisseurs of Chaos, writes that "When Roethke searches for value and meaning he assumes that this is interesting insofar as it is representative" (234). That these responses are particular to Roethke and yet represent the predicament of all humankind is evident in his Collected Poems. The value and meaning he ultimately gives to his life comprises the other six areas of thematic concern in his collected works and shall be shown to be existential in the poet's treatment of them.

The Existential Struggle For Personal Identity

The theme of selfhood or identity is undeniably Roethke's central existential concern. The majority of his poems are about the Self (often a persona but always intensely personal) and the meaning of identity or selfhood. According to Roethke, the true Self, once perceived, is equivalent to spirit or soul (SP 21). Perception of the true Self is

arrived at only through an intense spiritual journey -- a journey which is circuitous, but necessary. Roethke believes that "the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward" (SP 12), that is, that he must embark on a journey to the very beginning of his life, indeed all life, in order to truly order his existence and discover who and what he is. This regression, made necessary by the sheer absurdity and chaos of life, enables Roethke to perceive his true Self and to face his present and future.

Roethke embarks on this existential journey in the Greenhouse Poems of The Lost Son and Other Poems collection. It is within these fourteen poems that he is able to discover his true Self by tracing his physical and spiritual evolution from the egocentricity of childhood to the mature self-reflection of adulthood. These poems are, in many ways, direct recreations of Roethke's own early life. They trace the evolution of the Self from "Cuttings" to "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze", each of the 14 poems deliberately marking a stage in the physical, spiritual, and psychological growth of the speaker who is, at most times, Roethke himself. George Wolff notes that "Roethke lets his reader know that the Greenhouse Poems have more than a literal meaning ... by their arrangement in a sequence from birth to death" (34).

"Cuttings" and "Cuttings (later)" both represent the

beginnings of life as seen through the metaphor of "Cut stems struggling to put down feet" (CP 35). In these poems, we see the poet identifying, at least psychologically, with the process of birth, the very beginnings of being. He writes: "I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,/In my veins, in my bones I feel it,--/ ... I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet." This identification with the beginning of life puts Roethke, in an imaginative sense, at the birth stage. He cannot, realistically, recreate the circumstances of his own birth, but he can place himself in the imaginative position of the "Cut stems struggling to put down feet." In these two poems, Roethke has imaginatively gone back to his moment of birth so that he will be able to order and give meaning to his life and Self.

In the poems "Root Cellar" and "Forcing House" (CP 36), the stage of growth represented is that of early childhood. Here, the poet reconstructs, in his adult vocabulary, the egocentric world of the child. Everything the child encounters is viewed from a very subjective perspective, creating the feeling that everything that exists does so only as it relates to the child. In "Root Cellar", the child persona notes that "Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch," a line which indicates to the reader that the child sees the root cellar and its inhabitants in relation to himself, for *he* could not sleep in that cellar. Here, Roethke begins to

imaginatively relive his early childhood experiences in his family's greenhouses. In "Forcing House", the child notes that the plants "All pulse with the knocking pipes/That drip and sweat,/ Sweat and drip," concentrating on the sounds he hears and the movement he sees. These external movements and sounds are filtered through his young senses and exist only because he is there to see and hear them.

In the poems "Weed Puller" and "Orchids" (CP 37), we find the child maturing in the sense that those things which exist outside of himself begin to take on larger meanings, still however, as they relate to the child. In the first poem, the child is under a bench pulling weeds, "Crawling on all fours,/Alive, in a slippery grave." The child experiences feelings that the older poet manages to indicate in this line: feelings related to abundance and growth, perversity and indignity, and finally, the threat of death. The same feelings are generated in the poem "Orchids". Here the child becomes aware of the orchids as not only beautiful flowers; he also sees them as "Loose ghostly mouths/Breathing." This marks a stage in his maturation because he is able to view external reality in its various forms, rather than just as it relates to himself. He sees the orchids as containing a heady combination of beauty and subtle violence as expressed in his remembered vision of them as "soft and deceptive".

In the poem "Moss Gathering" (CP 38), the child reaches

another stage in his development that goes beyond the physical self. The fact that he is now old enough to go moss gathering suggests that he has grown physically, but his experience with the task at hand holds implications of spiritual and psychological growth as well. In these lines, the poet recalls how he felt as this child gathering moss: "And afterwards I always felt mean ... /As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swampland". What the child experiences is confusion between his responsibility for moss gathering and his love of nature. Such confusion marks a definite stage in psychological growth since, for perhaps the first time, the child is not only viewing external reality as something separate from himself, but he is viewing it as something living, something for which he has love and respect. The moss gathering leaves the youth with the unmistakable feeling of guilt, expressed in these last two lines of the poem: "By pulling off flesh from the living planet;/[I felt] As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration." This stage of personal growth is not only marked by the acquisition of new feelings, but by feelings that are characteristic of a developing mind. The boy's feelings have moved away from egocentricity towards a sort of altruism.

In the eighth of the Greenhouse Poems, "Big Wind" (CP 39), we find the boy in a situation that reveals how much he has

grown. The poem demonstrates the boy's concern for things other than himself and implies a sense of responsibility. The poem deals with the danger the greenhouse of roses is in from the threat of the big wind. As a member of the family and as a part of the greenhouse operations, the boy plays a role in seeing the greenhouse of roses through the storm: "We stayed all night,/Stuffing the holes with burlap;/But she rode it out". The fact that the boy is involved in a team effort to save the roses is also a pivotal point in his personal development; he has now transcended the egocentricity and innocence of childhood and is able to accept responsibility and recognize that he is not the only thing of importance in this world.

In the poems "Old Florist" and "Transplanting" (CP 40), the poet renders, for the first time, the boy's recognition of his father, through the father-figure image of the old florist, for what he is. These poems both suggest not only a view of the father but also the boy's respect for him as a man. In "Old Florist", the father-figure is viewed as "That hump of a man" who works, while the boy watches, "Tamping and stamping dirt into pots,--/How he could flick and pick/Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,/ ... Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat,/Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue in rubber boots." Respect for his own father as a florist is evident in the way the boy marvels over all the things the old

florist is able to do with the plants.

In "Transplanting", the boy reiterates the feelings which he has for his father. The poem places the boy in the position of wonder; he watches the father-figure florist work swiftly and without hesitation with the plants. The poem suggests that the boy views his own father as a miracle-worker, a man capable of bringing young plants into full maturity. In the first stanza, the boy is "Watching hands transplanting,/Turning and tamping,/Lifting the young plants with two fingers,/Sifting in a palm-full of fresh loam,--/One swift movement,-" and in the second stanza, the boy sees the result of the florist's expertise when he witnesses "The blossoms extending/Out into the sweet air,/The whole flower extending outward,/Stretching and reaching."

Of course, both of these poems can also be viewed as the poet's attempt at describing the whole process of growth and nurturing, with the poems inviting the reader to make the connection between the young plants and the young boy, both nurtured by the father-figure into maturity. If so, then the poet is suggesting that, to some degree, our personal growth into selfhood is somewhat related to the environment in which we grow as well as to the influences other beings, such as our mothers and fathers, unconsciously exert on us. If he is correct, then his imaginatively existential journey back to his childhood is the key to discovering who he is as an adult.

"Child on Top of a Greenhouse" (CP 41) marks the stage of the child's development most commonly associated with adolescence. Although there are no direct indications that the child on the greenhouse is an adolescent, the phase of adolescence is implied. That is, once the child climbs on top of the greenhouse, he is capable of seeing beyond the realm of his family, beyond the world he knew as a child. The very act of positioning himself on the roof of the greenhouse is an adolescent act of defiance; he is not supposed to be up there but chooses to be in order to assert his identity. He notices, from the roof, "A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,/And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!" Everyone is forced to take notice of him, not only as the foolish boy who has climbed to the roof of the greenhouse, but as a person and an individual.

The poems "Flower Dump" and "Carnations" (CP 41), represent a mature view of external reality, somewhat like the view expressed in "Weed Puller" and "Orchids", only more philosophical. It is this philosophical turn of mind that distinguishes these two later poems. In "Flower Dump", the young man is meditating on a pile of discarded flowers, dead and dying. The poem is a description of what he sees: "Molds, weeds, dead leaves,/Turned-over roots/With bleached veins/Twined like fine hair". The description becomes philosophical because it invites associations with humanity

through such metaphors as "Twined like fine hair". By the end of the poem, the young man's perceptions have become blatantly philosophical in that he intuitively discovers a meaning in the last four lines: "Everything limp/ But one tulip on top,/One swaggering head/Over the dying, the newly dead." The tulip, although dumped on this compost, asserts its being much like the boy had asserted his being in "Child on Top of the Greenhouse". As a maturing adolescent, the young man is able to make intuitive associations between nature and humanity. These associations are made possible by the meditative strains in the poem and mark the young man's ability to completely escape the limitations of his childhood egocentricity in favour of a broader and more mature existential perspective.

"Carnations" (CP 41) echoes this philosophical maturity. Also a meditative poem, "Carnations" clearly demonstrates the young man's capacity for intuitive associations and reflection. He sees the carnations and feels that the cool air about them is "Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,/The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud." Although these are the older poet's words, they capture the essence of the young man's feelings and therefore attest to his arrival at a decidedly adult level of emotional and psychological maturity.

In the last of the Greenhouse poems, "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze" (CP 42), we find that the child

has become a grown adult who is reflecting on his childhood in the family greenhouse business and who is, through recollection, preparing to die. He recalls the three German ladies who worked in the greenhouse and how "They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep,--/All the coils, loops, and whorls./They trellised the sun; they plotted for more than themselves." After recalling their work in the greenhouse, he remembers "how they picked me up, a spindly kid,/Pinching and poking my thin ribs" as if he too were a plant in need of nurturing. The last six lines of the poem are dedicated to the present; the speaker realizes that "Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,/They still hover over me,/These ancient leathery crones," and that they too helped shape him into the mature adult that he is in the poem. They hover over the child as old man and blow "lightly over me in my first sleep" which is, of course, his entrance into death, the final stage of existence.

This poem, as the last in the Greenhouse series, marks the final stage of the child's growth and life: the stage at which the man acquires the ability to reflect on the past and recognize its meaning to his life as well as to allow these recollections escort him into the sleep which is death. The grown adult who is speaking in this poem has finally merged with the poet: a merger which signifies that the child whose evolution of self we have been following is truly the poet

after all. There can be no doubt that we have been closely following the maturation of Roethke himself, as he remembers it, in these fourteen poems called the Greenhouse Poems. Thus, we can see there is a deliberateness to the arrangement of these particular poems, a pattern of growth intended to demonstrate, poetically, the evolution of the self, the slow existential striving toward personal identity.

The evolution of the self is, according to Roethke, bound up with the matter of ancestors, both literary and blood ancestors. In his essay "On 'Identity'", Roethke writes: "In any quest for identity today ... we run up inevitably against this problem: What to do with our ancestors?" (SP 23). In an attempt to resolve this problem, Roethke confronts his literary ancestors, for the first time, in Open House and his blood ancestors, for the first time, in The Lost Son and Other Poems collection.

In Open House, Roethke sees his literary ancestors as those "Exhausted fathers" which thin the blood of younger poets. He writes, in the poem "Feud", that "This ancient feud/Is seldom won. The spirit starves/Until the dead have been subdued." (CP 4). Not only did Roethke subdue these dead literary fathers and mothers, but he did so as a young poet by accepting the gifts they had to offer him. He began his career borrowing traditional forms, metres, and rhythms -- borrowing them in order to learn from them and to gradually establish his own

poetic identity. For example, he borrowed one of Gerald Manley Hopkins' phrases for the title of one of his earlier poems, a poem from Open House called "Long Live the Weeds".

Once Roethke managed to discover his own personal poetic identity with the Greenhouse Poems, he felt confident enough to no longer fear "the menace of ancestral eyes" (CP 4). In fact, he began, with the publication of The Waking in 1953, to honour a few of his literary ancestors and teachers in his own verse. He wrote a poem, in this collection, called "Four For Sir John Davies" which contains references to both Yeats and Dante. Roethke acknowledges his debt to Yeats in the line "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;/I take it, and I give it back again", implying that he has learned a great deal from this man whom he suggests is his "dancing master". His reference to Dante is one of respect for "Dante attained the purgatorial hill,/Trembled at hidden virtue without flaw," something for which Roethke himself was trying in his poetry.

Also, in Words for the Wind, Roethke wrote pieces for three of his literary family: Louise Bogan, Dylan Thomas, and W. B. Yeats. The poems to Bogan and Yeats are dedications and, although the one to Thomas was meant to be, it bears no dedication. Allan Seager points out in his biography of Roethke, that Roethke couldn't decide whether to dedicate the poem to his Aunt Julia or Thomas, who died November 5, 1953 and to whom Roethke felt very close (220). All three poems

acknowledge the debts that Roethke felt he owed these poets.

Although most of Roethke's poems acknowledge his poetic ancestors implicitly, he also makes explicit references to some of his literary ancestors (aside from those already mentioned). In a love poem from Words from the Wind called "The Swan", Roethke writes: "I am my father's son, I am John Donne/Whenever I see her with nothing on" (CP 135). Although this reference invites association with Donne's metaphysical love poetry, Roethke employs it to elevate the physical love he experiences in the poem. In the same ironic manner, he refers indirectly to Eliot in the poem "The Longing" from The Far Field collection. Here, Roethke turns Eliot's noted statement into a question: "Old men should be explorers?" (CP 181).

In the poem "The Happy Three" (CP 206), Roethke mentions his good friend and poet Marianne Moore in a light poem about the relationship Roethke and his wife, Beatrice, had with Moore. In the poem "The Abyss", he invokes the father of modern American poetry in the line: "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues:/For the world invades me again" (CP 212). Roethke also makes references to Dante again (CP 209) and to William Blake, Christopher Smart, and John Clare in the poem "Heard in a Violent Ward" (CP 220). Roethke imagines them, in the poem, as eating and swearing in heaven; it is, I suppose, his way of mythologizing their literary achievements. Even in

the small number of poems included in his Collected Poems under the heading "Previously Uncollected Poems", there are references to Roethke's literary ancestors. He refers to Wallace Stevens in the poem "A Rouse for Stevens", calling him "imagination's prince" and writing "Wallace Stevens--are we for him?/Brother, he's our father!" (CP 258). Roethke also refers to Blake, Whitman, John Ransom, and Rene Char in a poem entitled "Supper with Lindsay" (CP 265-6).

The task of dealing with his more immediate ancestors, his blood ancestors, was much more of a burden to Roethke, the man. He first began confronting kin in the Greenhouse poems, namely his father and the Roethke family history his father represented. For Roethke, this initial confrontation would last a lifetime. "My Papa's Waltz" (CP 43) depicts Roethke's memory of his father. Roethke saw his father as somewhat of a harsh man. The frenzied and violent "waltz" of the poem clearly illustrates this: "We romped until the pans/Slid from the kitchen shelf;/ ....You beat time on my head/With a palm caked hard by dirt,/Then waltzed me off to bed/Still clinging to your shirt" (CP 43). Finally, in a poem called "Otto" from The Far Field collection, Roethke came to terms with his father and his heritage. He recognized his father for what he was: a man of infinite tenderness and coarseness whose hand could simultaneously "fit into a woman's glove" and assault the poachers who had "slaughtered game" on his land (CP 216).

Roethke also accepted his Prussian heritage and "ancestors who loved a warlike show" (CP 216) -- ancestors to whom he refers, at the beginning of the poem, as "a strange brood". Accepting this heritage meant, to Roethke, accepting a certain temperament, a temperament characterized by a "love of order and ... terrifying efficiency" (SP 8). His Collected Poems attest to his acceptance of this ancestral inheritance. As another clue to discovering one's identity, Roethke writes, in his essay,"On 'Identity'", "If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity, so can the living--and I mean all living things, including the sub-human" (SP 24). He lives by this claim, explicitly, in the poems "Unfold! Unfold!" and "I Cry, Love! Love!". In the first, he writes that "In their harsh thickets/The dead thrash./They can help" (CP 87). In the second, he demonstrates how the sub-human help lead him to discover his true Self, his spirit: "Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!/The hedgewren's song says something else./ ... Now the gills are beginning to cry./Such a sweet noise: I can't sleep for it./ ... Hello, thingy spirit" (CP 88).

The process by which external things can aid the poet/man in his quest for identity is outlined by Roethke himself in the "On 'Identity'" essay. He writes that:

> It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances, even an inanimate thing--brings a

> corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe (SP 25).

The way of arriving at this heightening of awareness is through looking "at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you" (SP 25).

There is more than an abundance of evidence in his Collected Poems to validate Roethke's ability. He claims, in the poem, "What Can I Tell My Bones?", that "I recover my tenderness by long looking" (CP 167), and the majority of his poems support this recovery, especially the ones that find the poet looking long at nature. For example, in the poem "The Sequel", Roethke calls upon nature to aid him in his existential quest for selfhood: "Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am" (CP 234). His calls go out to all natural life, especially the minimals.

Not only does the poet say that the living and the dead can aid him in his existential quest for identity, but he also says that the true Self can be discovered through both the creative act and the feeling of love (SP 26). In the poem "The Moment", Roethke writes: "we created what's to be./What else to say?/We end in joy." (CP 230). Thus, it is the very act of creation itself, be it the creation of the future, of a poem, or of meaning, that helps shape the poet's identity because creativity is an expression of individuality. The

feeling of and expression of love, especially mutual human love, can also help form the poet's identity. Roethke writes, in the poem "The Dream", that when "I came to love, I came into my own." (CP 115). He suggests that the act of loving (and being loved by) another is a way of continually being aware of his own identity because it now exists in relation to something, or in this case someone, which is not his Self -- that is, the Self of another being.

Despite the external elements that can aid in the existential quest for identity, there exists a more personal element that helps bring us closer to our true Selves. In his essay "Open Letter", Roethke suggests that our own experiences, when examined, can elucidate our true identities, especially if they are powerful experiences that recur throughout our lifetimes: "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 ... reality?" (SP 39). The pattern of such experiences manifests itself in Roethke's poetry as the pattern of spiritual regression and progression. This pattern is directly related to Roethke's belief "that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward" and that "The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned to" (SP 12).

Poetically, Roethke expresses this belief through the persona of the old woman in his poem "First Meditation". He writes: "All journeys, I think, are the same:/The movement is forward, after a few wavers" (CP 152). It is expressed even more explicitly in the poem "Journey to the Interior" in the first two lines: "In the long journey out of the self,/There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places" (CP 187). In keeping with the existential image of the journey as it relates to the quest for self-identity, Roethke says, in the poem "A Dark Time", that "A man goes far to find out what he is--"(CP 231). That Roethke travelled and retravelled this circuitous path to discover his true Self is beyond doubt; he did, indeed, go far to find out what he is.

The journey in search of his true Self began, for Roethke, on the winding road back through his ancestral and racial past to the beginnings of life. He admits, in "Open Letter", that some of his pieces "begin in the mire; as if man is no more than a shape writhing from the old rock .... Sometimes one gets the feeling that not even the animals have been there before; but the marsh, the mire, the Void, is always there, immediate and terrifying" (SP 40). This mire, symbol of the Void, the Nothingness that existed before life, becomes Roethke's symbolic place of beginnings. It is an apt image then for the vital theme of personal identity.

In "The Shape of the Fire", Roethke writes "Must pull off

clothes/To jerk like a frog/On belly and nose/From the sucking bog" (CP 62) to express the necessity of stripping ourselves down to the minimal in order to establish our identities and therefore escape the existential bog which threatens to consume us. In "Praise to the End!", he reiterates the image of the bog of beginnings in the line "I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog" (CP 84) in order to signal his safe return from the Void and his readiness to establish his identity. Of course, the true Self can only be discovered if the poet can progress through the necessary levels of being to arrive at the human level. In "Unfold! Unfold!", he tells his Self (his spirit) how he came to be: "By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit" (CP 85).

The best expression of Roethke's discovery of his true Self is, of course, his Collected Poems. He wrote these poems with himself as subject and seems to justify this practice in his essay "On 'Identity'":

> I take it as the poet, the intuitive man, I am entitled to, am expected to, throw out what suggestions, what hints I can from my own work, from my own life. I think of this life as an instrument, as an example; and I am perfectly willing to appear ridiculous, absurd, if a real point can be established, a real dent can be made (SP 19).

It is because his personal experiences were able to become, in his poetry, representative of the human experience with existence that Roethke's particular concerns become our own.

Roethke's existential treatment of the theme of personal

identity is one of the most remarkable existential elements in his Collected Poems. It is one of those problems of living that Roethke knew himself to be faced with, a problem to which he had to respond in order to be true to himself. The moment he recognizes the initial problem that identity poses for human beings, Roethke becomes concerned with existence and hence, prepares to develop a recipe for his own existence. It is this recipe, this response to his being, that is his own personal philosophy of existence.

His philosophy of existence begins with facing the fact of his being. Roethke asks, parenthetically, in the poem "The Exorcism": "(Father of flowers, who/Dares face the thing he is?)" (CP 141). He manages to face what he is, but then the question becomes "Which I is I?" (CP 231). In "The Dying Man" (CP 150), he asks: "Am I but nothing leaning towards a thing?" All he can be certain of is that he exists. Who he is and why he is become questions that he, himself, must create the answers to. These answers are determined by his manner of existing, his manner of being. Roethke chooses his manner of being and this, in itself, is an existential act for, as Sartre once said, "I choose myself, not in my being, but in my manner of being" (Maurois 307). That is, Roethke can not choose to exist, but he can choose how he will exist.

Although his recipe for existence is a personal one, it suggests certain connections to existentialism. Not only is

the matter of the individual self at the core of existentialism, but it is the foundation for the existential tenet of subjectivity. According to Sartre in his book Existentialism and Human Emotions, the starting point of existentialism, whether Christian or atheistic, is subjectivity (13). He writes that: "by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" (10). Thus, Roethke's treatment of the theme of personal identity supports the fundamental existential doctrine: each individual must create him/herself. To the atheists such as Sartre, this is so because "if values are vague, and if they are always too broad for the concrete and specific case that we are considering, the only thing left for us to trust is our instinct" (26). Roethke intuits this path of instinct in his statement "I'll be an Indian." (CP 183). To follow our instincts means that, as different individuals, we are each responsible for creating the value and meaning in our lives. Sartre explains this by saying "that we invent values means nothing else but this: life has no meaning a priori. Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning you choose" (49).

Thus self-creation is the initial existential response

Roethke offers to the problem of living. That he was formed somewhat according to his environment is undeniable, yet it becomes self-evident as he matures as a poet that it is he who is shaping his own personal identity. In fact, Roethke goes so far as to insist that, with particular regard to his manic episodes, he creates or nurtures certain elements of his personality. It is well-documented that Roethke believed that he brought on these episodes, episodes he says he induced for the purpose of poetry (Meyers 19). Why we must forge our Selves is understood in the existential framework of "existence precedes essence". That is, the existentialists assert that "there is no single essence of humanity to which we may logically turn as a standard or model for making ourselves thus or so" (Introduction to Existentialism 41); hence self-creation is demanded of each individual.

The Existential Fact of Death

The third theme Roethke examines in his Collected Poems is one which is inextricably bound to the theme of Selfhood: death. He attempts to determine not only the nature of death but also the meaning of it. His is an attempt to put the reality of death into perspective once he truly realizes that he is constantly living in the face of it. Death, as Roethke well knows, is literally the cessation of life in an animate

organism but it is also, in the broader sense, the epitome of finitude, of absolute Nothingness. Because we can only know that death marks the end of life and not what, if anything, comes after it, we naturally become fearful and anxious over the prospect of death.

In his poetry, Roethke responds existentially to his personal fears and anxieties over death. He does this by examining the nature of death and by casting death as the lead in both real and imagined scenarios, reconstructing, for the purpose of analysis, the feelings he experienced while the scenarios unfolded. In some poems, Roethke views death as the threshold into a more fully spiritual mode of existence (a manifestation of his greatest hope) and then, in other poems, as the existential void of Nothingness (a manifestation of what he fears most). Why he is able to feel the pull of these diametrically opposed philosophies is evident in the poem "Lull". Here, Roethke writes that "Reason embraces death,/While out of frightened eyes/Still stares the wish to love" (CP 29). That is, the mind admits the reality and finality of death, but the eyes betray the heart's hope that life will not end. In order to ascertain what death is and what it means, Roethke experiments by giving death a number of imaginative roles.

As a poet and as a man, Roethke views death, in the Collected Poems, in its various guises, for "A man sees, as he

dies,/Death's possibilities" (CP 147). Therefore, in his poems, Roethke sees death as 1) a deep sleep, 2) absolute obscurity, 3) part of the natural cycle for all living things, man included, 4) the state of being lost, 5) the ultimate absurdity, and 6) joyful oneness. Above all else, however, Roethke realizes that death is the one existential certainty; he calls it the "final certitude" (CP 235).

It is clear, in his poems, that Roethke is aware that he lives in the face of death, of existential Nothingness. He equates his position to the sensation of hovering near the threshold of Nothingness. For example, in "The Pure Fury", he says that "I live near the abyss" (CP 129), the abyss acting as a symbol for the Nothingness of death. In the poem "In a Dark Time", the same sentiment is expressed in the line "The edge is what I have" (CP 231). This sensation of constantly living with the fear that he may plunge into the depths of Nothingness prompts Roethke to discover what death really is. He begins by questioning. In the poem "All The Earth, All The Air", he asks "Where are the dead?" (CP 117). If he could only have a specific answer, he could be certain as to where he would be going when he dies. He also asks, in "Song", "What's to come? What's to come?" (CP 204) and, in "The Abyss", "Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?" (CP 213). Since there can be no absolute answer, Roethke can only determine upon one that, after several experiments with

the possibilities, best satisfies his questions. There were a few instances in Roethke's life, that prompted him to think in a very real way about the nature of death. He wrote a few poems, all with the word "elegy" in their titles, to confront the deaths of people he had personally known. The first of these real scenarios unfolds in "Elegy for Jane", a poem in memory of one of Roethke's students who, as he explains in the sub-title, was thrown by a horse (CP 98). In this poem, Roethke realizes that death has actually taken Jane away, for he writes "My sparrow, you are not here". As a manifestation of his hope about the nature of death, he refers to its condition as a sleep, wishing that he could bring Jane back from her residence in "this damp grave" by nudging her "from this sleep" (CP 98).

The poem "Elegy", from Words for the Wind, was written for the doubly-sad occasion of the deaths of Roethke's friend Dylan Thomas and his Aunt Julia Roethke. Although the poem bears no dedication, it is accepted that the poem is a sincere rendering of Roethke's feelings over the death of two very loved and very real people (Seager 220). In the poem, Roethke uses the line "I have myself an inner weight of woe" as a sort of chant that connects the four verses, a line which reveals his attitude toward death particularly in its last usage: "I have myself, and bear its weight of woe" (CP 138). This line suggests that the very fact of life is a burden or a "weight

of woe" because it implies its opposite: death. The implication of death in life creates an existential fear in Roethke, fear related to his own inevitable death. The fact that God figures in this poem as one who "can scarcely bear" this burden suggests that Roethke is again venturing to hope that death will be merely a passage into the realm of God, the comforter. Roethke postulates "that God leans down His heart to hear" this woe and will, perhaps, lift the burden from the living by granting them an end to their existential hardships.

In the poem "Elegy" from The Far Field collection, Roethke writes about the death of his Aunt Tilly. He remembers how she was when she was alive and, through this meditation, arrives at the conclusion that she remains the same in death, only in some sort of heaven. He expresses this sentiment in the lines "I see you in some celestial supermarket,/Moving serenely among the leeks and cabbages" (CP 215). As with the other real incidents of death he experiences, Roethke renders the death of Aunt Tilly in a hopeful manner, suggesting that death is nothing other than an extension of life in another place.

In his examination of the nature of death in imagined scenarios, Roethke views death in various ways. As in "Elegy for Jane", death is viewed, euphemistically, as a sleep. It is also viewed as a sleep in "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze" and in the poem "Plain", where the poet

ventures to say "Death is a deeper sleep,/And I delight in sleep" (CP 134). In the poem "Her Becoming", he writes "Is it the sea we wish? The sleep of the changeless?" (CP 159) in an effort to see death as a state of comfort and certainty, a state which could potentially protect us from the fears and anxieties we experienced in life.

This view, however, is decidedly different from the view in many of Roethke's poems of death as existential obscurity. Again, he casts death in this role to discover how he would feel if death meant obliteration. He refers to death explicitly as "obscurity" in "Four For Sir John Davies" (CP 102) and implicitly as such in "The Kitty-Cat Bird" wherein he warns "Be sure that whatever you are is you/--Or you'll end like the Kitty-Cat Bird" (CP 171). In this poem, the Kitty-Cat Bird has no idea who he is and hops inside the mouth of a real cat hoping to find his true identity. Of course, this act leads directly to the poor Bird's being consumed by the cat. Roethke suggests here that if you have not come to terms with your true Self, then you could suffer the same fate of the Kitty-Cat Bird: absolute obscurity. In "Wish For A Young Wife", Roethke also implies that death means nothing other than the obliteration of the Self. He expresses wishes for his young wife in the event of his fall into obscurity: "May you live out your life/Without hate, without grief,/ ... When I am undone,/When I am no one" (CP 210).

Perhaps Roethke's most existentially logical view of death is that which places death in the natural cycle for all living things. In "The Waking", he writes: "Great Nature has another thing to do/To you and me; so take the lively air,/And, lovely, learn by going where to go" (CP 104). In this poem, Roethke suggests that death is a part of the natural cycle that begins with birth. By going through the cycle, we can intuit its stages and realize that birth becomes death and death leads back to birth. Even though we may not return as ourselves, there is the implication that we will return as something, or at least that we will nurture the beginning of another life when we are committed to the earth. This suggestion is echoed in the poem "A Walk in Late Summer": "Existence moves toward a certain end--/A thing all earthly lovers understand./That dove's elaborate way of coming near/Reminds me I am dying with the year" (CP 143). It is clear, in this poem, that Roethke is aware of the natural cycle of life and death. Because he is also a living creature, like the dove, he must include himself in the existential cycle.

In another of its guises, death is viewed by Roethke as the state of being lost. However, there is some hope implicit in this view because, in many instances, what is lost can be found again. In "The Renewal", Roethke expresses this view in the line "Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?" (CP

130). If death makes the self lost, and it is then recovered, how will it appear? Roethke seems to ask this question because he realizes that death changes the condition of the self. He asks, hopefully, if it will be found "In form?" because, if it is, then death may be only a change in one's state of being. In "The Far Field", Roethke reiterates his belief that "The lost self changes" (CP 195) but does not propose what the lost self changes into because this can never be known.

The absolute absurdity of the nature of death is hinted at in the poem "The Meadow Mouse". Here, Roethke wonders where the little mouse he has been harbouring has gone. When he considers the possibilities of what may have happened to the mouse, his mind conjures up images of death: "I think of the nestling fallen into the deep grass,/The turtle gasping in the dusty rubble of the highway,/The paralytic stunned in the tub, and the water rising,--/All things innocent, hapless, forsaken" (CP 219). The fact that the death does not discriminate between those deserving and undeserving leads Roethke to suggest that death is the epitome of injustice, of absolute absurdity.

In a more hopeful guise, death is also viewed as that state of joyful oneness of everything in the universe. Roethke states this simply in "The Moment" in the lines "What else to say?/We end in joy" (CP 230). In "The Tree, The Bird", this

statement is echoed: "Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy,/The dire dimension of a final thing" (CP 240). Here, Roethke suggests that death is both an exciting and horrifying aspect of life, an aspect that, once confronted, launches one into a "pure stretch of joy". The reason that death is viewed as such is hinted at in "Once More, The Round". In this poem, Roethke writes: "My true self runs toward a Hill/ ... And everything comes to One,/As we dance on, dance one, dance on" (CP 243).

It is clear that by viewing death simultaneously as a something and a nothing, Roethke invites the use of juxtaposition to fully examine the soundness of each proposal. In the end, Roethke opts for hope, not despair, and this hope involves the notion of a god. He hopes only because it allows him to live with the knowledge that one day he will die. In fact, in the poem "Duet" he pokes fun at the whole existential of despair and anxiety over death. The poem is a dialogue between a man and a woman who, in the course of their exchanges, decide to dismiss Soren Kierkegaard and his notions of the Divine Absurd in his book Either/Or. They decide to live in hope and "give each other a box on the ear" "Should Dame Anxiety ever come near" (CP 264). The woman punctuates their dismissal of Kierkegaard by calling the man "My ex-existentialist darling dear".

This poem clearly demonstrates Roethke's awareness of

Kierkegaard's existentialism. Although he may have decided to do away with Kierkegaard's notions, his treatment of the theme of death is, next to his treatment of identity, the most existential element in his poetry. It becomes obvious, through his assorted views of death, that Roethke's attitude toward death vacillates between ardent existentialism and Christian mysticism, the former marked by his visions of death as Nothingness, and the latter by his visions that absolute love for the things which share in the principle of Being Itself (God) makes man capable of enduring the trials of life. It is his focus on the Nothingness of death which sheds some light on Roethke as somewhat of an existential poet because it is this existential Nothingness to which all questions of living must be addressed. That is, all the poet's responses are conditioned by the fact that he lives with the knowledge that he will die. He creates an identity for himself and gives meaning to his life based on this knowledge.

Roethke's treatment of the theme of death can also be considered existential based on the feelings of fear and anxiety that he expresses toward it. As Paul Tillich writes in his book The Courage To Be:

> anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible non-being ... anxiety is the existential awareness of non-being. 'Existential' in this sentence means that it is not the abstract knowledge of nonbeing which produces anxiety but the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being .... Anxiety is finitude, experienced as one's own

finitude (35).

Roethke begins in anxiety, as we can see in the poem "Open House" when he writes "Rage warps my clearest cry/To witless agony" (CP 3), and ends in joy, as he states in the poem "The Moment": "We end in joy" (CP 230). The progression he makes from anxiety to joy is marked by his response to the awareness of his own death: when he becomes aware of his own finitude, he is plunged into anxiety; when he existentially resolves to confront this finitude and hopefully affirm it, he is blessed with joy.

The affirmation of the finitude of death has its roots in existentialism. Paul Tillich, an existential theologian with whose work Roethke was acquainted (Parini 143), calls this paradoxical affirmation absurd optimism. Tillich believes that: "In man, the positive aspect is seen in the courage which affirms life in spite of a knowledge of final loss. Even though he knows that everything ultimately perishes, man nonetheless affirms his life, his work, his fellows, and his loves" (Mahan 15). This concept of absurd optimism is supported by J. Glenn Gray in his essay "The Problem of Death in Modern Philosophy" in which he writes: "To recognize this fact, the painful fact of human finitude, the inevitability of death, can alone make living meaningful and significant" (53). Once Roethke was able to accept the inevitability of his own death, he became capable of rendering his life meaningful and

of affirming this meaning. This is evident is the passage from "The Rose" which reads: "And I stood outside myself,/Beyond becoming and perishing,/A something wholly other,/As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,/And yet was still./And I rejoiced in being what I was" (CP 199).

The Existential Question of God

The question of God is an integral part of the theme of death and, to a lesser degree, of the theme of identity. Roethke's concern with the idea of God is directly related to his attempts at determining the nature of death, especially on a personal level. His treatment of the theme of God then, is one which attempts to examine the human need for God and the various human conceptions of God. Because he lives in an age of agnosticism, if not atheism, Roethke's poetry is characterized by both doubt and hope because it attempts, on a very intimate level, to confront the very question of God's existence.

In fact, the question of God presents itself to Roethke at a very crucial point in his life: when he was just fifteen, Roethke's father died. Many critics, including Rosemary Sullivan, see the death of Otto Roethke as central to all of Roethke's work. Sullivan goes so far as to say that his father's death damaged Roethke's "crucial sense of inner

security" and resulted in "an existential anxiety" that would define the patterns of his future life (7). Indeed, the death of Otto Roethke defined the patterns of Roethke's poetic life, in that Roethke associates his father with the idea of God. As Allan Seager writes: "For a while every boy's father is a god to him. Then, slowly, as the boy makes his own discoveries, he dwindles into a man. For better or worse, Ted was spared this gloomy declension. Otto Roethke died when he was still the untainted source of power, love, and the lightnings of his anger" (43). Seager notes that Roethke was concerned with the idea of God, "not necessarily a Christian God, [but] his own relation to HIM, and his relationship to what he believed to be God's primary creation, nature" (225). This concern manifests itself in Roethke's poetry, says Seager, where "a profound desire for a personal wholeness grows clearer and clearer, a desire for harmony with all created beings, and an elevation of his father, the dead god, into an identity with God" (199).

Man's existential need for God is clearly expressed in Roethke's poetry and prose. In a notebook entry from March, 1944, Roethke wrote: "I am bored with the moral curse, yet anything otherwise produces anxiety" (Seager 165). He realizes here that without morality (God), there is nothing except existential anxiety. The dilemma leads him to exclaim, in the same notebook entry, "How terrible the need for God!"

(Seager 165). In this light, God is seen as a mechanism of hope needed by human beings to believe that there exists something after death. As the epitome of hope, God is conceived of as everything good; He is the father and creator, the judge and the redeemer, and the comforting end to which we, as living things, come after death. In his poetry, Roethke portrays God in these various roles in order to come to some personal conclusions about the nature of God.

In his role as Father, God is associated closely with Roethke's own father, Otto Roethke. This association is borne out in the poems because Roethke saw both God and Otto as powerful creators of beauty. He admits, in "O, Thou Opening, O", that "A son has many fathers" (CP 94). As creators, both fathers are addressed in the line "(Father of flowers, who/Dares face the thing he is?)" (CP 141) and the lines "He watered the roses./His thumb had a rainbow" (CP 69) and, as powerful beings, in the lines "Fear was my father. Father fear./His look drained the stones" (CP 53). His longing to be reunited with Otto and united with God is expressed in the line "Father, I'm far from home" (CP 132). In "The Long Alley", Roethke casts God in the role of judge, one who demands certain things from humanity before accepting us as fit creatures. Roethke asks "Lord, what do you require?" (CP 56). As the redeemer, God is viewed as one who is capable of forgiving sins and lifting the burden of existence from those

who have faith. In "The Abyss", Roethke writes: "I am most immoderately married:/The Lord God has taken my heaviness away" (CP 214). The burden that Roethke wishes to have lifted, however, is the burden of his mortality, the element that, ironically, creates in him the need for God. He almost pleads with God in the poem "In Evening Air" to: "Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing/Time cannot overwhelm" (CP 232).

In His last conventional role, God is viewed as that comforting end to which everything moves. The comfort of our final end is conveyed in the line "shall we meet on the bosom of God?" (CP 56). Also, the use of the word "house", in the line "Maybe God has a house" (CP 70), creates a feeling of comfort and security; a feeling that the poet believes he will live with God when he dies.

Roethke's initial existential question concerning this major theme is "Where is the knowledge that/Could bring me to my God?" (CP 134). Here, Roethke seems to be asking for both proof of God's existence and the path to Him, if he exists. How does one begin the search for God? Roethke responds to this by asking "Is there a wisdom in objects?" and answering "Few objects praise the Lord" (CP 160). However, in Roethke's opinion, nature does praise the Lord and, in fact, creates a path to knowing God. He says, in a notebook entry from 1954-58, that "Truth, like God, is known only by manifestations" (Wagoner 224). He supports this belief in the poem, "The

Manifestation", wherein he writes: "We come to something without knowing why" (CP 227).

That fact that in his poetry Roethke actively sought God is undeniable. Furthermore, he implies that the existential journey to God is also somewhat of an existential journey to become like God. He writes, in "What Can I Tell My Bones", that "To try to become like God/Is far from becoming God./O, but I seek and care!" (CP 166). However, he realizes that trying to become like God is a futile attempt based on the fact that the idea of Godhood expresses everything that man knows he cannot attain. In "The Long Waters", Roethke demonstrates his incapacity for Godhood in the lines "And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,/My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists/Changing with every twist of wind" (CP 190).

Once Roethke makes the existential realization that God may be only a psychological fulfilment of humanity's greatest needs, he begins to doubt the conventional notion of God as father, redeemer, and judge of human existence. He writes, in a notebook entry dated 1954-58, that "If we think long enough about God, we may create Him" (Wagoner 225). That is, if individuals consider intelligently what we wish from this life and after death, we end up with our own personal versions of God. What they all have in common, however, is the wish to be delivered from life into a state of comfort and peace. Thus,

Roethke embarks on a period of serious theological doubt and questioning.

The doubt he feels with regard to God's existence is blatant in "The Abyss" in the line "Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?" (CP 213). It is also clear in the "The Marrow" wherein Roethke asks, "Godhead above my God, are you still there?" (CP 238) and in "What Can I Tell My Bones?" in the line "The cause of God in me -- has it gone?" (CP 166). The whole phase of godlessness that Roethke experiences, at least poetically, is generated by a feeling of frustration with religion. In "The Sententious Man", he sighs "I'm tired of brooding on my neighbor's soul:/My friends become more Christian year by year" (CP 127).

Roethke's phase of existential atheism clearly reveals itself in a few of his poems. In "The Exorcism", he refers to the speaker (probably himself) as "A cold God-furious man" (CP 141). Perhaps he is furious that God has not responded to his existential need for wisdom and assurance. Whatever the source of the anger, Roethke resolves his negative feelings through the persona of the old woman in "First Meditation". At the end of this poem, Roethke is heard, in the voice of a crone, to conclude that "In such times, lacking a god,/I am still happy" (CP 154). He suggests here that not only is life possible without a god, but happiness is too. The pervasive feeling throughout the poem is that life is made meaningful by

the individual and that happiness is merely a by-product of the individual's effort. The old woman delights in nature, in her memories, and in her own being, concluding, in the above lines, that happiness is possible without a god. In the poem "The Tranced", Roethke views "Divinity itself malign, absurd" (CP 229) in an obvious effort to deny the conventional concept of God and to existentially place the responsibility for life and happiness on the individual.

By the time of "The Sequel", Roethke has irrevocably rejected the traditional and orthodox God and begins to wonder if there isn't something to make sense of existence after all. In the line "Was I too glib about eternal things" (CP 233) he all but admits his hasty decision to reject all notions about eternity. In fact, in "The Decision" he acknowledges that he has been merely avoiding the thought of God (whatever He may be): "Running from God's the longest race of all" (CP 237). Because the thought of God is with us as much as the thought of death is, we delude ourselves if we fail to consider what meaning our lives have. Roethke reconsiders his need for God, a god, in "The Marrow". In fact, he addresses God as if to plead for forgiveness for his lack of patience and faith: "Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day:/From me to Thee's a long and terrible way" (CP 238).

Roethke was determined to travel this "long and terrible way" to come to some personal conclusions about God. The way

to knowing God becomes, for Roethke, a double-laned road: he considers nature, particularly the minimals, and human creativity as routes to God. In his essay "On 'Identity'", Roethke expresses his belief that "Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life .... Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God" (SP 24-25). In the same essay, he ventures to say that human creativity also makes God accessible: "it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine--in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem .... For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible" (SP 27).

Denis Donoghue inadvertently expands on Roethke's attitude toward the nature of God in his book Connoisseurs of Chaos. Donoghue views the search for God, in general, as an attempt to "heal the breach between God, nature, and man" and this attempt involves "becoming God and rearranging things according to your own 'light.' The occasion for doing so is provided ... by the breakdown of supernatural belief and the confusions of epistemology. Hence we say, God and the human imagination are one" (15). If this can explain Roethke's existential need for God and need for "becoming like God", then Roethke managed to become, after all, a thing that "Time cannot overwhelm" (CP 232). He does, I believe, "become like God" in his poetry; he arranges the things of his world according to the value he perceives them to have. He plays

the role of God by giving life and significance to the things of nature, imaginatively becoming those things of purest being in order to vicariously experience pure Being.

Jay Parini states that, although Roethke never found institutionalized religion appealing, he was "nonetheless a deeply religious man" (122). I would modify Parini's description, changing the word "religious" to the word "spiritual", believing it the more apt word for Roethke's nature. In fact, I believe his sense of spirituality makes all orthodox religions inaccessible to him; what he seems to need from God is bound to his intensely personal existence. There can be no doubt that Roethke knew this for himself and was therefore aware that it was necessary for him to create his own God.

Richard Blessing's theory regarding Roethke and God supports my belief. He proposes that "Roethke seems to have invented a God according to his need, a God especially for poets; and, having created God, the poet began to live by Him and found him, at least on one occasion, to be there" (61). The occasion Blessing refers to is the writing of "The Dance" segment of the poem "Four For Sir John Davies" at which time Roethke claims to have been in the presence of something terrifyingly joyful, a psychic presence (SP 24). This God of Roethke's own invention is, according to Rosemary Sullivan, actually "an emotional hypothesis built out of the sheerest

force of will, an act of faith" (185) which Roethke was forced to continually renew in each new poem.

Roethke's final vision of God is one of pure Being, pure energy. Blessing attributes Roethke's arrival at this notion to his interest in and attraction to Vaughan's poetry wherein "God manifests Himself as pure motion" (26). In "The Motion", Roethke writes: "God's night and day: down this space He has smiled,/Hope has its hush: we move through its broad day,--/O who would take the vision from the child?--/O, motion O, our chance is still to be!" (CP 235). This implies that God is the principle of energy underlying existence and that every thing that exists is motivated by this principle. In "Once More, The Round", Roethke says that "everything comes to One" (CP 243), suggesting that God, as pure Being, participates in all things. This would also indicate that all things participate in God and that being can never be lost: being is sustained by the principle of pure Being which is God.

Roethke's treatment of the theme of God can be considered somewhat existential in that he attempts to ferret out, using reason and instinct, any proof for God's existence. Roethke also attempts to discover what God's existence or absence signifies for human life. Perhaps the most existential aspect of Roethke's treatment of God is his conclusion that there is an underlying principle, called personal choice, to life. Roethke used the name of God to signify the pure Being, pure

energy he saw as this underlying principle. He claims, in his essay "On 'Identity'", that "God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled with" (SP 26). That is, once he died, Roethke would confront not the Christian God but the God that is pure Being. Perhaps he viewed this inevitable confrontation as a "duel" because, in the existential framework that he has constructed, death indicates a final struggle for knowledge, a struggle pitting the energy of Roethke's being against the pure energy and Being of God.

Positioned on the theological spectrum between atheism and orthodox Christianity, Roethke professes what is often called an "existential theology" (Stiffler 55). The critic who most ardently argues for Roethke's existential theology is Nathan A. Scott. In his book, The Wild Prayer of Longing, Scott writes that, although Roethke was interested in many systems of thought, he probably never read any of Heidegger's work (Heidegger is considered the founder of modern existentialism and many of his ideas were developed by Jean-Paul Sartre). Even so, Scott believes that Roethke's "placement in the context of these reflections is made possible, ... only by reason of the high congruence between the essential shape and thrust of his vision and that general pattern of which Heidegger has been taken to be the great exemplar in recent philosophic tradition" (75). Scott makes reference to Roethke's poem "The Dance", stating that "being without a

dancing-master is Roethke's way of remarking his sense of having nothing but his own unaided imagination to depend upon for reckoning with the ultimate mysteries and astonishments of life" which lead him to feel "himself to be alone with the universe and therefore under the necessity himself of building up out of his own experiences such coordinating principles as might give coherence and meaning to that experience" (88).

Randall Stiffler calls Scott's discussion of Roethke's poetry "unique ... in that he approaches the poet's vision through the avenue of existential theology rather than through traditional literary criticism" (55). George Wolff also makes reference to Scott's treatment of Roethke, specifically to the chapter "The Example of Theodore Roethke", as that which "Develops in full detail the idea that Roethke's plants and animals should be understood in the context of existential theology, which reveals their constant evocation of Being itself and their avoidance of systematic moralizing and traditional mysticism" (147).

Sartre, in his book Existentialism and Human Emotion, clarifies the reason that Roethke's treatment of God is decidedly existential:

> The best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God .... God, value and supreme end of transcendence, represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is. To be man means to reach toward God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is

the desire to be God (63).

Hence, Roethke's desire to "become like God" is one which attempts to determine on a very personal level what believing or disbelieving in God means to him. Existentialists hold that in responding to the question of God, "A total personal response is called for, ... not merely a learned response" (Reality, Man and Existence 5) and that "facing the God who is really God means facing also the absolute threat of nonbeing" (Tillich 9).

That Roethke responds in a personal way to the question of God is beyond dispute. He moves, in his poetry, from traditional belief to doubt and rejection and, finally, to a form of belief that best satisfies his personal needs. In fact, Roethke's thematic interest in God transcends the personal by developing into a universally acceptable form of existentialism. The need to give meaning to his life while still accepting the Nothingness that is, his emphasis on the will as that which determines the individual's life, and the ultimate rejection of the conventional notions of God in favour of his Self all clearly invite connections with existentialism.

The Existential Question of External Reality

Roethke's preoccupation with nature is an attempt to come

to terms, poetically, with external reality. He explores elements of nature in order to acquire intuitive knowledge about himself, the nature of God, and the nature of the creative principle in mankind. In other words, the whole of nature represents, in Roethke's poems, a massive correspondence to the human wherein nature can act as a macrocosm of an individual's internal reality. Although this treatment of nature can be viewed as Romantic, Roethke did not romanticize nature; he used it as a map to his own existence. In this framework, the elements of nature are found to correspond to, or at least indicate, the complexities of human life, particularly in a spiritual or existential sense of being.

What he attempts to discover in nature is some understanding of his humanity and, more specifically, his personal identity as Theodore Huebner Roethke. Also, he attempts to examine the very existence of nature and determine whether it is a chaotic jumble of life or whether there is an ordering principle operating it or underlying it. In his close examination of the things of nature, he often resists the feeling that external reality is chaotic by discovering an underlying principle of natural order. This principle of nature, he comes to conclude, is the motion of spirit or being originating in the pure Being and energy of a thing Roethke calls God.

External reality, because it is confronted through our individual consciousnesses, is truly a subjective reality; only what is significant to the individual becomes accepted as real. Therefore, in order for Roethke to actualize an external reality, it becomes necessary for him to determine what outside himself truly exists. It is clear, from a reading of _The Collected Poems_, that what Roethke saw as external reality existed only insofar as it was significant to him. He admits, in "Her Becoming", that his perception of nature is really his perception of reality: "There are times when reality comes closer:/In a field, in the actual air" (_CP_ 160). What begins to emerge, therefore, is a world chiefly populated by the things of nature because these things appear infinitely more significant to his existence than do the facts of civilization. Roethke orders his view of external reality by calling upon the elements of nature, calling them by name for them to become parts of his world. It is clear, then, that external reality or nature was, to Roethke a symbolic map with which to engage his individual existence. Roy Harvey Pearce, in his article "Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy", says that "The natural world is not the emblem of self-knowledge and self-realization, but the source and occasion of their being. One sees, one hears, one knows, and one is. Or at least, one begins to be" (Stein 176). Pearce also states that Roethke, using the power of sympathy with

nature, "began to comprehend the full range of the other, that chain of being which moves from the minimal to God" (Stein 190). This symbolic map of nature, then, provides Roethke with the opportunity to interpret nature's clues to the very mystery of life, human and non-human. It also allows him to gain intuitive knowledge of the need for order, the existence of God, the creative principle in humanity, and his true Self.

What nature tells Roethke about existence is that nature (including man) is ordered around the principle of pure Being and energy. In the poem "The Lost Son", Roethke imagines this principle as a sort of illumination of the basic force of life: "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" (CP 55). Nature also tells Roethke that "What falls away is always. And is near" (CP 104), suggesting to him that this principle of Being and energy is conserved, after death, in other forms of matter. This process is also known as the cycle of life. Because he believes that all the things of nature share a fundamental quality, Roethke deduces that there must be a correspondence between the things of nature and humanity: "All natural shapes become symbolical" (CP 160).

This belief is, in fact, the underlying message in the poems about the connection between nature and humanity. In

"River Incident", for example, Roethke uses his powers of sympathy to emphasize the connection between humanity and nature and his belief in the conservation of the energy that is Being. He writes: "Sea water stood in my veins,/The elements I kept warm/Crumbled and flowed away,/And I knew I had been there before,/In that cold, granite slime,/In the dark, in the rolling water" (CP 47). In other poems, Roethke suggests that the element of water indicates states of mind and that the wind indicates the conditions of the spirit. For example, in "The Sententious Man", Roethke writes "Small waves repeat the mind's slow sensual play" (CP 126) and in "Her Becoming" he writes "A light wind rises: I become the wind" (CP 161).

More specifically, the existence of nature tells Roethke that there exists an apparent chaotic jumble of natural life. This superficially chaotic aspect of nature is revealed quite explicitly in the Greenhouse poems where, among the plots that man creates, weeds proliferate. In "Weed Puller", Roethke refers to this jumble of beauty and ugliness: "Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes,--/ ... Webs and weeds,/Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,/ ... The indignity of it!-/With everything blooming above me,/Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses" (CP 37). The suggestion is made, throughout this sequence of poems, that humanity is disturbed by the seemingly chaotic growth of things and so acquires a need to

create order. The greenhouse is a fitting symbol of this need; inside, the natural growth of weeds is checked so that the only thriving vegetation is that which has been preordained by man. The greenhouse is a symbol of the order man feels he must impose on his surroundings and, as such, all but denies any natural order that may exist.

Although he is profoundly affected by the apparent chaos of nature, Roethke believes that there is a natural order to existence; an order which is determined by the principle of pure Being or God. The very existence of the natural world tells him, in Pearce's words, that there is a "chain of being which moves from the minimal to God" (Stein 190). That the existence of natural life can lead to the intuitive knowledge of God is evident in many of Roethke's poems. In "O, Thou Opening, O", Roethke says that "The Depth calls to the Height" (CP 93) suggesting that the minimals of nature do, indeed, reveal the existence of God, the pure Being. In "A Walk in Late Summer", he exclaims "God's in that stone, or I am not a man!" (CP 143) in an effort to express his belief that God, the principle of pure energy and Being, causes all things to be.

For Roethke, the existence of nature also helps explain human creativity. As he observes the creative principle at work in nature, Roethke comes to understand that the existential urge for creation is really the urge to define

one's Self, to celebrate this life, and to cope with the inevitable end of one's existence. He expresses, in "I Cry, Love! Love!", the ineffectual ability of reason to accomplish the same tasks: "Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!/The hedgewren's song says something else" (CP 88). What the hedgewren's song says is to celebrate, to sing in order to truly live. Roethke receives this message through his intuitive relationship with the elements of nature.

Perhaps the most important thing that this relationship with nature bestows on Roethke is an intuitively existential knowledge of his own identity. In "The Exorcism", his sympathy with the small beings of nature allows him to say that "In a dark wood I saw--/I saw my several selves/Come running from the leaves,/Lewd, tiny, careless lives/That scuttled under stones" (CP 141). Here, he realizes that all things share in the principle of Being and are, hence, reflections of one another. In "A Light Breather", he compares the spirit's movement to that of a snail and concludes that both, despite their apparent differences, are, at core, merely beings who celebrate Being: "The spirit moves,/ ... Moves, like the snail,/Still inward,/Taking and embracing its surroundings,/Never wishing itself away,/Unafraid of what it is,/A music in a hood,/A small thing,/Singing" (CP 97). To this extent, the things of

nature, when he observes them closely, reveal to Roethke what he is.

Roethke's treatment of the theme of nature is probably the least obvious existential element in his Collected Poems. While it is true that Roethke expresses the apparent chaos of the natural world and comes to terms with it as his external reality, it is his fundamental interaction with the natural that reveals his connection to existentialism. Roethke employs nature as that which can give him clues to the inherent problems of existence, particularly the problem of individual identity. According to Sartre, in his book Being and Nothingness, an object of external reality is reducible:

> In it we aim at its being through its mode of being or quality. Quality --particularly a material quality like the fluidity of water or the density of a stone -- is a mode of being and so can only be present in one certain way. What we choose is a certain way in which being reveals itself and lets itself be possessed (764).

Nature becomes, in this existential view, "the ontological expression of the entire world; that is, which offers itself as a rubric for classifying all the "thises" in the world" (Being and Nothingness 773). Thus, when Roethke says "I touched the stones, and they had my own skin" (CP 128), he is suggesting that he chooses his mode of being by participating in the things of nature and that such natural things express the very nature of Being to him.

Nathan A. Scott suggests that such an existential

interaction with the things of nature is one which operates on "the sacramental principle" (The Wild Prayer of Longing 49), hence his view of Roethke's poetry as a system of existential theology. This principle, writes Scott, is one that posits

> that certain objects or actions or words or places belonging to the ordinary spheres of life may convey to us a unique illumination of the whole mystery of our existence, because in these actions and realities ... something 'numinous' is resident, something holy and gracious (49).

Scott cites Roethke's method of "hailing the world with song and his listening to the melodies which are everywhere" (84) as a manifestation of this sacramental principle. This sort of reality "rests not upon the world's being invested with human qualities but, rather, upon a lively intuition that both the human and the non-human modes of existence are animated and empowered by some primal reality, which may be denominated simply as Being itself" (85). He says that:

> To move down, ... into the deep inwardness of things is to know ... the presence of Being itself. Thus the things of the earth are to be approached in a spirit of homage, not aggressively or exploitatively but reverently, since it is in them and through them that the advent of Being becomes manifest to him who waits (Negative Capability 84).

That Roethke's involvement with nature is sacramental is beyond doubt. Roethke approaches nature reverently, he moves into the inwardness of things (at least imaginatively), and he often experiences the manifestation of Being itself as a result. The last verse in "The Lost Son" not only expresses

Roethke's sacramental relationship with nature, but it also reveals the extent to which Scott himself was influenced by Roethke's vision: "A lively understandable spirit/Once entertained you./It will come again./Be still./Wait" (CP 55).

Love as an Existential Response

Roethke's treatment of the final two themes under discussion rests on his vision of them as existential responses to the problem of living. Love and creativity/imagination create meaning and give value to the poet's life. Also, as responses to the threat of non-being or Nothingness, they become stays against the apparent chaos of modern existence and against the inevitability of his own death.

Roethke's treatment of love can be divided into two separate parts: sexual love (concentrated in the image of a woman) and spiritual love (encompassing life itself, especially in images of nature). Both aspects of love offer Roethke responses to the meaninglessness of living and the apparent chaos of external reality and can be viewed as his answers to the inevitable Nothingness in death that he faces as an individual.

The theme of sexual love is particularly evident in section II of *Words for the Wind* and section II of *The Far Field*.

Roethke's sexual love poems are the poems which feature a female lover as the serious object of love. They enter Roethke's _oeuvre_ around 1953, about the time he met and married Beatrice O'Connell (_Selected Letters_ xxi). He had written a poem called "For an Amorous Lady" for the _Open House_ collection, but it demonstrates little true passion or emotion and therefore reveals itself to be merely an exercise in praise of some ideal. In the more serious poems, however, sexual love is viewed by Roethke as a way of halting time and, ultimately, as a stay against his own mortality.

To love another person in a sensual and sexual way is to existentially affirm life and feel so alive as to temporarily banish the anguish of passing time and the prospect of death, or in Roethke's words, to take "arms against our own obscurity" (_CP_ 102). In "Words for the Wind", Roethke writes that "Passion's enough to give/Shape to a random joy:/...I bear, but not alone,/The burden of this joy" (_CP_ 119) to express his belief that sexual love suffices as happiness. It also expresses the idea that happiness cannot last and knowing this makes it a "burden". Often, Roethke wills himself to believe that the joy of such love will endure, that it will create its own sense of Time. In the poem "I Knew A Woman", he says that "But who would count eternity in days?/These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:/(I measure time by how a body sways)" (_CP_ 122). Despite his will to believe in sexual

love as an eternal stay against the inexorable process of life, Roethke comes to realize that sexual love is only a temporary respite from reality, albeit a pleasant one. In "The Sensualists", he comes to this realization in the last stanza: "'The bed itself begins to quake,/I hate this sensual pen;/My neck, if not my heart, will break/If we do this again,'--/Then each fell back, limp as a sack,/Into the world of men" (CP 131). The love poems from The Far Field expand on Roethke's initial realizations about the limitations of sexual love. The poems are more philosophically in touch with the whole illusion that sexual love seemingly invalidates Time and death. In "Song", Roethke asks "O love, you who hear/The slow tick of time/In your sea-buried ear,/Tell me now, tell me now" (CP 204), an apostrophe to wrath, rage, and love. What he asks for are answers to his future fate and these, of course, cannot come from without, but only from within. He comes to some sort of acceptance of Time and death in "Wish For a Young Wife" wherein he assumes that his wife will outlive him. He offers her blessings in the form of a long and happy life: "May you live out your life/Without hate, without grief,/And your hair ever blaze,/In the sun, in the sun,/When I am undone,/When I am no one" (CP 210) and has made the obvious realization that the passion of their sexual love is not enough to create an eternity. What Roethke is left to conclude is that sexual love is but an avoidance of death as

in the line "All sensual love's but dancing on a grave" (CP 148) but that the moments of joy he has shared with his lover are enough to at least give value to his life: "I lie here...thinking, 'I am not alone.'" (CP 209).

After realizing the limitations of sexual love, Roethke puts his faith in a more spiritual sort of love: the feeling of a deep-seated emotional connection to all animate and inanimate things, a connection that renders life meaningful in relation to other living things. Although he shares this sort of love with people, it is more profoundly revealed in his existential relationship to the things of nature. By embracing the world and its inhabitants, Roethke affirms his own life. Although his senses and his mind tell him that he is alive, it is his participation in the earthly that confirms it.

In "The Small", Roethke demonstrates his ability to participate in and identify with the creatures of nature. He says that "What moves in the grass I love--/The dead will not lie still,/And things throw light on things,/And all the stones have wings" (CP 142) which expresses his belief that it is in loving the things of nature that we begin to live. In "The Long Waters", this sentiment is expressed more clearly: "I lose and find myself in the long water;/I am gathered together once more;/I embrace the world" (CP 192). Roethke chooses to "embrace the world" because it is all that he can

reasonably expect to have; he can never experience the conventional notion of eternity and hence must think of eternity in earthly terms. This leads him to proclaim that "Eternity is Now" (CP 147) and that "Now I adore my life/With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,/With the Fish, the questing Snail,/And the Eye altering all;/And I dance with William Blake/For love, for Love's sake" (CP 243). This love is viewed as the ordering principle of life: that which nullifies the apparent chaos we exist in and the anxiety it produces. The participation in all life brings the sort of love that can only be described as the ecstasy of being. Roethke knew not only the despair of modern existence but came to know this joy as well.

Aside from the obvious role love plays as an existential response to the problem of living, it is also existential because it is an individual's attempt to relate to the world. According to Sartre, emotion is a subjective attempt at transforming the world into a bearable arena for existence and, although it can be temporarily gratifying, "it is fundamentally ineffective and transient with no power to affect the environment" (Being and Nothingness xix). Although Roethke seeks stability and eternity in love, he instead discovers a happiness and joy that will endure only as long as he does. Despite the fact that neither form of his love can be eternal, he finds that they can, at least during his

lifetime, render his life significant and therefore partially alleviate the anxiety thrust upon him by his own existence.

Imagination as an Existential Response

The theme of imagination (human creativity) is perhaps Roethke's best-formulated response to the problem of living. It became the focus of his life once he discovered through the writing of verse his own imaginative gifts. His emphasis on the imagination as a response to the chaos and meaninglessness of modern life is characterized by his attempt to establish his own sort of order and meaning rather than accept the existential status quo. Of course, the act of writing poetry, the very fact of his collected works, attests to his strong commitment to the creative principle. He aims, with his imagination, to create something to combat the Nothingness that is. To this extent, he examines the need that the creative principle in mankind fills.

Writing verse means, for Roethke, the expression and maintenance of the Self, the creation of his own brand of order, and the closure of the gap between man and God. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., the editor of Roethke's Selected Prose, remarks that "a constant, unflagging attention to matters of craft and form" mark the poetic life of Theodore Roethke (xiii). Roethke himself calls art "our defense against hysteria and

death" (Wagoner 171) and sees it as a way to maintain the "self against the disruptive whole" (Wagoner 235). He views the poem as "one more triumph over chaos" (Wagoner 172). Writing poems enables him to arrange his perceptions of the world according to his subjective view of reality. Not only does he manage to create a self-evident order in The Collected Poems, but he also manages to assert his true identity and bring himself closer to his God.

The creative act, because it is peculiar to humankind, must be viewed as an attempt to assert one's identity, one's being. To write a poem is therefore to say "I AM!" as Roethke does through the lamb in the light poem called "The Lamb" (CP 176). As Denis Donoghue states in his essay "Roethke's Broken Music", "Roethke committed himself to his own life, such as it was. He thought of it as a human event of some representative interest. And he set himself to work toward lucidity and order" (Stein 163-4). This becomes quite clear in many of Roethke's poems; his "life-long defense of the imagination" (Parini 36) becomes a life-long attempt to assert himself. In the poem "In Evening Air", Roethke states "I'll make a broken music, or I'll die" (CP 232) suggesting that he must continue to create because creating is his life; he felt he would literally and spiritually "die" if he ceased to create.

In such poems as "The Motion", Roethke expresses how the imagination can order an individual's reality: "To meet the

world, I rise up in my mind" (CP 235). Here, he implies that the world is viewed through our minds and, because our minds differ from one another, each person's version of reality will be different. The imagination makes possible the improbable. I believe that Roethke knew this intuitively, and when he thought that "Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit" (CP 212), he set about altering it with the use of his imaginative abilities. In "The Dying Man" he expresses this ability as "I think a bird, and it begins to fly", implying that whatever one desires, the imagination can always provide it.

According to Roethke, the imagination can also project a path to God. In his essay "On 'Identity'", Roethke calls "the really good poem" "one of the ways man at least approaches the divine" (SP 27). In his fifth meditation in the persona of the old woman, Roethke's final revelation is the revelation of the pure Being he calls God: "What came to me vaguely is now clear,/As if release by a spirit,/Or agency outside me./Unprayed-for,/And final" (CP 167). This truly is a revelation, for the old woman, in her confrontation with mortality, has adopted several spiritual poses, including atheism. At last, at the end of the mediative sequence, she concludes that there is something out there to make sense of the world. Roethke, through the old woman, comes to realize this poetically; through this "really good poem" he has approached knowledge of the divine.

Although he expresses a sincere wish to believe that "The word outleaps the world", Roethke had to come to terms with the limitations of the imagination. He recognized it as the perfect avenue for the assertion of his identity and for the achievement of Godhood, but he also comes to recognize it as a potentially escapist tactic. At the end of "The Dying Man", he says "Nor can imagination do it all/In this last place of light: he dares to live/Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings/Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things" (CP 150). Here, Roethke warns that, although the creative act has the potential to endure, the creator does not. He advises that in order to truly live, we must surrender our claims to the eternal and continue to rage against Nothingness in the here and now.

The treatment of the theme of imagination is decidedly existential in that Roethke uses the imagination as a response to the absurdity of existence. With the help of his innate creative ability, Roethke orders his experiences in an attempt to come to terms with the world, his own identity and mortality. According to the existentialists, "Every one of us is engaged through his actions" in existence and, because "literature is engaged" (Maurois 306), one of the most authentic realms of involvement in existence is writing. The fact that Roethke felt the need to write verse in order to come to terms with his existence points to his conscious

existential engagement. Not only does he view his imaginative faculty as that with which to arrange and understand his world, he views it as a way of creating an emblem of immortality or eternity in that "the really good poem" approaches the divine and may even "outleap the world" as a lasting fragment of his creative self.

CONCLUSION

Theodore Roethke is fundamentally an existential writer. His poems reveal the lack of immanent meaning and order in the world, while their arrangement shows an underlying need to create meaning and give order.

The Open House poems reveal an overwhelming sense of chaos, a lack of personal and poetic identity, and an indirection characteristic of an existential universe. The Lost Son collection, however, is Roethke's attempt to wilfully control and direct his human impulses. Here, the poet arranges "The Greenhouse Poems" to move from birth to death. The collection marks the beginning of Roethke's existential journey toward Selfhood and authentic existence.

Both Praise to the End! and The Waking are Roethke's attempts to discover his true Self and a sense of meaning and order in an absurd world. In these collections he assumes various shapes and identities to finally discover his own. Both works examine the ability of nature, love, and the imagination to give significance and design to the poet's world. Here he concludes that the creative act alone can afford him the personal and poetic identity he seeks.

The Far Field, Roethke's last collection, aptly deals with

his existential Self on its journey toward death. With his Self as his sole guide, Roethke faces his mortality "As a man turns to face on-coming snow" (CP 237). What ultimately makes Roethke an existential poet is the faith he places in his creative identity rather than in uncertain doctrines such as found in orthodox religion. This last collection is a remarkable record of not only his own unique existence, but of the essence of human existence itself.

Roethke's linguistic usages and strategies, his images, and his thematic concerns place him among the most significant poets of this century. He felt deeply the confusion of human life and sought to discover what might lie beyond its superficial chaos. The Collected Poems is, at its barest, Roethke's philosophy of existence; what is poetically revealed within are the profound moments of being in one human life.

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