

A STUDY OF MOTION
IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S SEQUENCE, SOMETIMES METAPHYSICAL

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The search for a spiritual unity of being, which is the thematic quest of Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical by Theodore Roethke, follows a pattern of motion used in much of his writing. "I believe to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back There is a perpetual slipping back, then a going forward; but there is some 'progress,'" ¹ says the poet in an often-cited prose statement. One must struggle to reach a spiritual illumination, but, having concluded that there is more to know, one must return to the beginning--the dark places, the root, the womb--and, albeit on a higher plane of awareness, retrace one's steps, however painfully, in hope of achieving even further light. If this dark journey is repeated often enough, one may hope finally to reach a stillness within motion, a cosmic dance of the universe, a oneness with being.

Roethke called this oneness "the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all." ² Roethke's poetic mystical journey can be traced from his early verses to his realization that his childhood world of the greenhouse might be his most fruitful source of image and metaphor; from the quest for a spiritual identity within a world of fear to the calm assurance of "I learned not to fear infinity,/ The far field, the windy cliffs of forever." ³ ("The Far

Field"); from the experimentation with form to "the stillness at the heart of form" ("The Rose"); from the willingness to sublimate human ego "to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence"⁴ to the joining with all nature in cosmic unity; and ultimately from doubt to God. Ralph Mills, writing of "The Lost Son" in 1963, commented that Roethke "declines to step into religious orthodoxy" and that the moment of light is not a theological one.⁵ Karl Malkoff, in a later article, however, notes that during the period of his life in which Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical was being written, Roethke had become engrossed in reading theological writings, particularly those of Paul Tillich.⁶ Tillich's influence is especially noticeable in such ideas as the "Godhead above my God" of "The Marrow." Roethke makes a statement on his belief in God in his essay, "On Identity": "For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time He is farther away--that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service, or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lowest forms of life, He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails."⁷

Each of the stages of this mystical journey follows the pattern set forth at the beginning of this report: first, there is a search until a level of enlightenment is reached; then a new search on a higher level to an even greater

illumination; and, again and again, back to the beginning on ever higher planes of awareness, striving always toward "that God who knows what I would know." ("The Decision").

But not only in his writing can the pattern of progress-retrogression-new progress be found. His very life formed such a sequence, his unfortunate recurrent mental breakdowns providing the turmoil through which he had to pass in order to live and write on a progressively higher level of revelation. The canon of his poetry too shows a picture of a poet experimenting with new forms only to return time and again to the simple, formal lyric,⁸ the seed bed of his poetry, and then, once more, adventuring into looser forms, offbeat syntactical constructions, irregular line lengths and metrical units, the North American Sequence being the culmination of his experimental achievement. Within both that sequence and the formal lyrics of Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, the same pattern of progress is discernible. The Roethkean protagonist, which Ian Hamilton has described as a "rhetorical anonymity,"⁹ begins his journey toward spiritual fulfillment; he struggles, achieves a measure of success; he begins anew, and continues his quest, with many new beginnings, until at last he attains "that final condition of grace which is a harmony of the self with all things."¹⁰ It is true that such a reworking of themes has led to the critical accusation that Roethke is a repetitious poet, but the importance of this argument is diminished in proportion to the extent to which his philosophy works.

Stanley Kunitz explains the Roethkean theme thus: "The protagonist, who recurrently undertakes the dark journey into his own underworld, is engaged in a quest for spiritual identity. The quest is simultaneously a flight, for he is being pursued by the man he has become, implacable, lost, soiled, confused. In order to find himself he must lose himself by reexperiencing all the stages of his growth, by reenacting all the transmutations of his being from seed-time to maturity."¹¹ It is not however the intent of this study to stress Roethke's thematic concerns, but rather to investigate techniques of motion that express his theme in Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical.

This sequence of twelve poems, written during the last ten years of Roethke's life and published posthumously in 1964, demonstrates one of Roethke's returns to a simple lyric form which, as has already been noted, characterizes his entire writing career. Such formal structures on introspective spiritual themes of a sometimes metaphysical nature would seem to lend themselves to a thoughtful, quiet treatment, but Roethke's search, although internal, is experienced in the real world, and the real world does not stop rotating while one man tries to find God. In the sequence, likewise, the protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis that is spiritual, but it occurs within a vibrantly alive natural world, with lizards leaping, flies buzzing, partridges drumming, rivers winding, and a snail dipping its horn. Furthermore it is not enough for the protagonist to

recognize God in nature, or even to learn to love the dance in which all nature participates. Instead the protagonist himself must join the dance. Only then can "everything come to One" ("Once More, the Round"). And only then can man find the equilibrium, the peace, for which he yearns. Stillness, but stillness within the motion of a constantly changing universe, is the goal of the protagonist. Similarly, the beauty of lyrical form, but within poetry throbbing with motion, is what Roethke achieves in this sequence--a most successful marriage of form and content.

The medium of motion is used throughout Roethke's career. From his earliest work one can trace his dependence upon motion to make a poem become the experience which is its subject. In one of his best early lyrics, "The Adamant," Roethke deleted adjectives, which he disliked because they slowed the movement of a poem, in order to chop off a foot in the last line of each trimeter quatrain, thus echoing the crushing action of the machine which is the controlling image of the poem:

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

"My Papa's Waltz" is, of course, in trimeter, making the poem move in a triple rhythm, even as the young boy is waltzed joyously yet violently about the room on his papa's toes. The writhing growth images of the greenhouse poems are equivalent to the struggle of their young protagonist,

as in "Cut stems struggling to put down feet," ("Cuttings"). Kenneth Burke makes the point that the greenhouse is especially appropriate as metaphor precisely because its balance between the artificial and natural worlds sets up the tension that allows Roethke to use the natural world as symbolic of struggle. Burke says, "All about one, [are] the lovely straining beings, visibly drawing sustenance from ultimate invisible powers--in a silent blare of vitality--yet as morbid as the caged animals of a zoo." ¹² In Roethke's later poetry he continues to wed motion to his words. The lapping of a wave upon a shoreline is simulated in North American Sequence in such lines as "The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all."

That Roethke makes constant use of all sorts of kinesthetic effects is noted by Peter Casagrande, who says, ". . . in Roethke's poetry no phenomenon, no one effect, is operable in so many different ways as the phenomenon of motion, by which I mean simply physical and psychical movement. Roethke is preeminently a poet of motion." ¹³ Further support for this concept may be found in two of Richard Blessing's recent excellent essays. In "Theodore Roethke: A Celebration," Blessing utilizes some previously unpublished items from Roethke's notebooks which deal with the power of rhythmic energy. Roethke stressed the importance of this energy in his teaching, and the comments both in his notes and in reaction from his students testify to the high regard which Roethke placed on the power of rhythmic movement. Given the value Roethke attached to the movement of a poem,

one can appreciate Blessing's comment that, "Roethke manages to transfer the rhythm, the motion, of life from the pulse to the printed page." ¹⁴ The other Blessing article, "Theodore Roethke's Sometimes Metaphysical Motion," deals specifically with Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical. He mentions the various techniques with which Roethke imparts a strong kinesthetic feeling in these poems and judges the sequence "one of his more successful attempts to create such a symbol, to make words move in myriad ways." ¹⁵

If, then, Roethke is a poet of motion, it must be possible to determine how he achieves this status--how he draws upon meter, sound, imagery, diction to arrive at a poem whose movement also becomes its meaning. And if these techniques are apparent in a meditative mode such as in Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, application of such a study could also be useful in delving into Roethke's more complicated, more experimental writing. Therefore, no new insights into Roethke's use of motion will be found in this report; his techniques are well known to students of his work. Rather, the extent to which Roethke relies on movement to carry the meaning of the poems in Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical will be detailed through a close observation of the twelve poems in the sequence.

The motion of a poem begins inescapably with the meter in which the poet chooses to write. But for Roethke it is only the beginning. He believed "that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature. It involves certainly stress, time, pitch, the texture of the words, the total meaning of the poem."¹⁶ To isolate the metric structure of the poems is thus a kind of vivisection, but clues as to how the poet derives the kinesthetic energy of his poetry may be discerned this way.

The first seven poems are united metrically as well as thematically. They represent the struggle of a protagonist at the edge of despair. Using iambic pentameter as the basic pattern of these poems, Roethke underscores the struggle by pitting his metric substitutions against the iamb. The tilting choriamb with its intrinsic acceleration is the most frequent substitution, as in "A night ^{/ - - /} flowing with birds, a ragged moon" ("In a Dark Time") or "Who but the loved know love's a faring-forth?" ("The Motion"). Less frequently used in these first poems in the sequence is the spondee, as in ^{/ / / /} "Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am" ("The Sequel"). The mainly regular meter of these seven poems is in keeping with the slow progress made by a protagonist whose insights are limited by his awareness of self. "The Motion" contains a line which helps to explain the need for regular meter in the first half of the sequence. The protagonist says, "By striding, I remain." A double meaning here

indicates not only that the strides of metric regularity are necessary for the protagonist to keep secure the knowledge he has already gained, but also that in striding, the ego is present. This line then, foreshadows the later poems in the sequence in which, after the ego becomes submerged, the protagonist is able to make great leaps into awareness to an accompaniment of ever less rigid metrical structures.

The second poem of the sequence is the only one in the first half which breaks briefly from the strict pentameter. This poem, "In Evening Air," is basically iambic, but blends pentameter and trimeter in a 3-5-3-3-3-5 pattern. Thematically, the uneven line lengths represent the protagonist's need to "wake"--to "make a broken music, or I'll die." His decision to go forward, however, is clouded by his fear that he will not have enough time to achieve what he desires. Then he remembers, "Once I transcended time," but as he looks "down the far light" and sees "the dark side of a tree," he is seized by a desire for death--"Night I embrace, a dear proximity." In the last line of the poem, the protagonist is made aware of "How slowly dark comes down on what we do," and he is left in a state of indecision, yet with a glimmer of hope that there may still be enough time left to him. This indecision is portrayed in the poem, which cannot seem to decide if it wants to be pentameter or trimeter. By going immediately in the next poem to the striding pace of iambic pentameter, the poet makes the reader aware of the protagonist's decision to continue the search, to stride again.

Poems three through five, in fairly regular iambic pentameter, represent the protagonist's realization not only that the perils of his quest are, in effect, the purpose of his existence--"This torment is my joy" ("The Motion")--but also that all of nature shares the same drive toward unity, for,

. . . all things alter in the seed
Until they reach this final certitude,
This reach beyond this death, this act of love
In which all creatures share, and thereby live.
("The Motion")

With this new insight he determines, somewhat reluctantly because of the difficulty he faces, to renew his journey. "The Decision" marks his readiness to go back again to the very beginning, this time to "The Marrow," whose last stanza finds a protagonist "flung back from suffering and love . . . I have slain my will." These two poems mark a transition in that, although metrically united to the first half of the sequence, the rhyme scheme begins to be less secure, true rhyme being more obviously interspersed with rhyme by virtue of assonance or consonance, as "forth/earth" or "sun/stone" ("The Motion").

Beginning with the eighth poem, "I Waited," the protagonist renews his search for an ultimate oneness with the universe, and the meter again echoes the forward progress. Still basically iambic pentameter, the poem uses more frequent substitutions--again the choriamb ("Deep in the mow"), but now also other irregularities as in the second line ("But no wind came."). For the first time in

the sequence there is not a firm commitment to stanza length, as verses one, three, and four have five lines and verse two has eight. These irregularities are emphasized by the abandonment of rhyme.

From this point in the sequence, as the protagonist moves ever closer to the cosmic dance, the departure from regular meter and/or rhyme increases. "The Tree, The Bird," a poem containing three unrhymed stanzas of unequal length, may be considered a poem in iambic pentameter, but one line bursts past its bounds to add an extra foot, ("The willow with its bird grew loud, grew louder still."), and the regular iambic line gives way to such variations as the dactylic "Kin to the wind, and the bleak whistling rain."

The tenth poem, "The Restored," has five four-line stanzas in rhyming couplet, but the meter is varied. Malkoff describes this poem as "written in trimeter quatrains with the diminishing of the soul represented by the clipping of a syllable, or even an entire foot, from the appropriate lines."¹⁷ Blessing suggests that this poem has "rhymes essentially those of light verse . . . comic in their linkings."¹⁸ It is the beginning of understanding, the joyous realization that intuition, not reason, is the key the protagonist needs. The soul cries, "I'm maimed; I can't fly," but later the protagonist discovers, "When I raged, when I wailed,/ And my reason failed,/ That delicate thing/ Grew back a new wing,/ And danced . . ." This love

of dance then acts as a prelude to the dancing qualities of the two poems which follow it and end the sequence.

The affirmation of the last two poems is expressed in the cosmic dance which, as Malkoff notes, is the "renaissance metaphor for the workings of the universe."¹⁹ Poem eleven, "The Right Thing," is a dance, a villanelle whose repetitions and cyclical movement reinforce both the cosmic idea and Roethke's advance-return-advance spiral of progression. In this poem the structural requirements of the villanelle momentarily limit the poet's surge toward a freer expression of stanza length and rhyme, but he side-steps this somewhat by altering one refrain line each time it is repeated and by sometimes using assonance rather than true rhyme.²⁰

The final poem, "Once More, The Round," is an exuberant leap forward into full realization as the protagonist takes his place in the dance. It completes the "images of motion in stillness, symbols of intuitive penetration into the nature of reality, of essential oneness in apparent diversity"²¹ of which Malkoff speaks. The poem is written in uneven stanzas, uneven meter and a couplet rhyme scheme containing only one true rhyme. The poet has achieved the "broken music" which he sought, and in so doing has come into a oneness not only with the universe but also perhaps with God, as the upper case used in "everything comes to One," would imply.

Metrically, therefore, the poet has traced the protagonist's path. He has walked with pentameter strides toward the union he seeks, and as he comes closer to his goal, the striding gives way to the skips and leaps of irregular meter, and finally to the abandonment of all regularity. Recognition of the constancy of change is embedded in the final acceptance of the dance of the universe.

Some additional characteristics of Roethke's rhythm add to the total effect of motion in these lyrics. Roethke himself notes that "in the pentameter, I end-stop almost every line . . . part of an effort, however clumsy, to bring the language back to a bare, hard, even terrible statement."²² Such lines from nursery rhymes as, "Hinx, Minx, the old witch winks" were, to Roethke's mind, the most vital, forceful rhythms in the language,²³ and he often cited Mother Goose as one of his rhythmic sources. Yet, as Malkoff says, he "is completely successful in turning a songlike formal structure . . . to solemn purposes by strictly avoiding lilting rhythm."²⁴ An illustration of one of his methods for slowing down the strict pace of the end-stopped line may be seen in the last stanza of "In Evening Air."

I stand by a low fire
Counting the wisps of flame, and I watch how
Light shifts upon the wall.
I bid stillness be still.
I see, in evening air,
How slowly dark comes down on what we do.

Here the three end-stopped lines are followed by the rolling assonance of "How slowly dark comes down on what we do." The

three end-stopped lines contain many short "i" sounds, and the change to open vowels in the final line provides a complete change of rhythmic pace.

The end of a stanza may also be altered by use of assonance combined with a short statement or a repeated effect as in "The Marrow" whose second verse ends:

Pain wanders through my bones like a lost fire;
What burns me now? Desire, desire, desire.

or in "Once More, the Round," whose first stanza ends, "More! O More! visible." and whose last line is, "As we dance on, dance on, dance on."

Enjambement and caesura are also employed by Roethke to give impetus and pause in a regularly metered poem. Both effects are at work in the final stanza of "In a Dark Time,"

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?

The rhythm is varied by the initial spondee, slowed by the assonance and alliteration of the first line, speeded by the continuation of the second into the third line--the speed being augmented by the visual imagery of frenzy contained in the simile--and finally slowed again by the caesural pause in the third line. Such a bursting beyond the boundary of a line is a frequent device in Roethke, as in "The Sequel,"

Pure aimlessness pursued and yet pursued
And all wild longings of the insatiate blood
Brought me down to my knees. O who can be
Both moth and flame? The weak moth blundering by.

The importance of rhythm in Roethke's poetry can hardly be overemphasized. Stanley Kunitz says, ". . . it was beat, above all, that enchanted him."²⁵ Ralph Mills cites "insistent, forceful rhythms" as one of the "lasting trademarks of his style."²⁶ But if meter is the foundation on which Roethke erects his feeling of movement, it is the way in which he combines meter with other poetic effects that builds a kinesthetic superstructure. Even in the foregoing discussion of meter as an entity, it has been impossible to avoid noting the enhancement he gains with additional devices.

Roethke himself noted that factors other than rhythm can contribute energy to a poem. In an interview for an English newspaper syndicate, Zulfiker Ghose quotes Roethke: ". . . try to write in rhythms close to prose, yet rhythms which are not slack To make a poem, you must have a rhythm that is an entity. Rhythms themselves can't be too coarse or too banal: otherwise it's nothing. But it is possible to have good poetry based on power of imagery and power of thinking, and not rhythm."²⁷ Roethke's use of imagery, then, appears to be next in importance as one tries to uncover the secret of kinesthetic energy in his poetry.

Imagery, as it appears in this sequence of poems, deals with the world of nature which had been Roethke's milieu since the early greenhouse poems. Malkoff notes, "We must remember, however, that in Roethke the outer landscape often corresponds to an inner state of mind."²⁸ And so, inevitably the soul

in despair becomes a protagonist confused by the contraries
of nature. He is,

A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.
("In a Dark Time")

Perhaps the simplest way to discover how Roethke's imagery is dependent upon motion is to trace the imagery through a single poem, noting the movement and positioning of the protagonist himself as well as the images he senses. The eighth poem of the sequence, "I Waited," offers a parade of sensory perceptions requiring the use of every line in the poem to demonstrate the richness of Roethke's imagery. Here the protagonist is preparing to move forward toward the oneness which he seeks. The poem reveals clearly Roethke's images of motion in stillness referred to in the earlier discussion of rhythm. At the beginning of the poem the stillness is evident within both the protagonist and his world:

I waited for the wind to move the dust;
But no wind came.

This stillness of man and nature is comingled by:

I seemed to eat the air.

And at once a duality of motion in stillness begins, ever so tentatively, in both the world and the man,

The meadow insects made a level noise.
I rose, a heavy bulk, above the field.

Next Roethke intensifies the beginning of progress by using two contrasting similes--one of motion, one of stillness:

It was as if I tried to walk in hay,
 Deep in the mow, and each step deeper down,
 Or floated on the surface of a pond,
 The slow long ripples winking in my eyes.

There is a short-lived plateau in the movement as the protagonist attains the first stage in the "desire and constant struggle for a continuous state of becoming,"²⁹ in James Southworth's phrase for Roethke's theme. This moment of realization is expressed in the union of man and nature:

I saw all things through water, magnified,
 And shimmering. The sun burned through a haze,
 And I became all that I looked upon.
 I dazzled in the dazzle of a stone.

Not satisfied with this brief illumination, the protagonist is called back to his search by images in the outer world:

And then a jackass brayed. A lizard leaped my foot.

But the progress is still very difficult:

Slowly I came back to the dusty road;
 And when I walked, my feet seemed deep in sand.
 I moved like some heat-weary animal.
 I went, not looking back. I was afraid.

In the final stanza the protagonist's difficult progress is described in terms of the terrain through which he must pass:

The way grew steeper between stony walls,
 Then lost itself down through a rocky gorge.
 A donkey path led to a small plateau.

And, as in the earlier instance of respite, a further insight is earned, again through the coming together of man and nature:

Below, the bright sea was, the level waves,
 And all the winds came toward me. I was glad.

It is not always possible, as it is in this poem, to see an image in every line, but this is by no means the only poem in the sequence which is a constant procession of images. The part that the kinesthetic sense plays is self-evident as one reads the poem. Either the protagonist is moving, or something in the outer landscape is moving, or they are both moving, or they are both still, and even the static state of the last instance can be seen as part of a total picture of "becoming," a not insignificant feature of the Roethkean theme. Mills has noted, "Life, as it is seen in Roethke's poetry, can best be defined as always becoming."³⁰

Roethke's use of metaphor and simile is not frequent, except in the sense that all poetry is metaphor. These devices often augment a feeling of movement when they are used, however. In "The Motion," one finds such metaphors as "love's a faring-forth" or "the close dirt dancing;" in "Infirmity," he writes, "The great day balances upon the leaves;" or "how body from spirit slowly does unwind." Those metaphors which are not specifically kinesthetic by virtue of motion, however, often are strongly positional in effect, either resolving a preceding movement or preparing for the next action. Such a metaphor is found in "In a Dark Time": "My shadow pinned against a sweating wall"--a metaphor whose immobility also contains overtones of struggle and frustration, of a need to move toward escape.

Fourteen similes appear in the sequence. Nine have to do with motion; three have already been used as examples.

The five which do not deal with movement per se sometimes fall into the category of positioning or of stillness within motion, which has already been demonstrated as part of Roethke's scheme of progress. Such a simile is "She stayed in light, as leaves live in the wind" ("The Sequel"). All but three of the fourteen make a comparison with the natural world, as in "Swaying in air, like some long water weed." ("The Sequel") or "By dying inward, like an aging tree." ("Infirmity"). The three similes which are neither motion nor nature similes all occur in the same poem, "The Restored." Here he uses "small as an elf," and, twice, "My hand like a bowl." Only six of the poems contain similes at all, and the effect of motion is prominent among the few similes present in the sequence.

Roethke considered William Blake an influence on his writing, a debt he acknowledges in the last poem of this sequence. Like Blake he sees a "steady storm of correspondences" ("In a Dark Time") and, as has been seen in the stillness/motion theme, approaches understanding "When opposites come suddenly in place" ("Infirmity")--a premise not so far removed from Blake's "contraries." The use of opposites, providing a special kind of imagery, deals many times, often paradoxically, with motion. "Infirmity" contains such contradictions as, "The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal," and later,

Things without hands take hands
 I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
 How body from spirit slowly does unwind
 Until we are pure spirit at the end.

The union of opposites does not come about through reason, however, for in "The Restored" the soul is "maimed" when he thinks and "grew back a new wing" only after his "reason failed." And finally the soul dances

. . . at high noon,
 On a hot, dusty stone,
 In the still point of light
 Of my last midnight.

More opposites move into place in "The Right Thing"--again using motion imagery--

The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;
 The hill becomes the valley, and is still
 Body and soul are one!

until the final unity is reached, "And everything comes to One." ("Once More, The Round").

Closely related to the idea of opposites is Roethke's use of repeated words, but of words which in their repetition are used as different parts of speech.³¹ Not only does the repetition of the word lend an impetus to the movement of a line, but often the words themselves deal with motion: "A bud broke to a rose,/ And I rose from a last diminishing." ("In Evening Air") or "My ears still hear the bird when all is still;/ My soul is still my soul, and still the Son." ("Infirmity"). Sometimes the effect of repetition for its own sake without changing the part of speech is used: "I am a man, a man at intervals/ Pacing a room, a room with dead-white walls" ("The Sequel"). Here the repetition

combines with meter to provide an unusual effect. Just as the man is pacing, so the poetic line itself is pacing and turning. This combination of image, meter, caesura and repetition both describes and creates a motion.

Roethke's use of alliteration and assonance was touched upon briefly in the discussion of meter, but his use of sound to quicken or slow the pace of a poem deserves further mention. In "Some Remarks on Rhythm," Roethke notes that the use of "light 'i' and short 'i' and feminine endings can make for speed, rhythmical quickness, and velocity."³² There is no marked usage of feminine endings in this sequence, though they do occur; but illustrations of the "i" sounds to change the tempo of a poem are abundant. The last stanza of "The Decision" offers an example in which the speed of the "i" sounds contrasts sharply with the open vowels of the last two lines. Characteristically, the sound shift corresponds with the point of decision in the protagonist's mind:

Rising or falling's all one discipline!
The line of my horizon's growing thin!
Which is the way? I cry to the dread black,
The shifting shade, the cinders at my back.
Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go,
As a man turns to face on-coming snow.

William Meredith points out that the use of assonance or alliteration gives a sense of urgency.³³ Both of these devices are at work in the agonizing statement: "I bleed my bones, their marrow to bestow/ Upon that God who knows what I would know." ("The Marrow") or "Denied in me who has denied desire." ("The Sequel").

Another effect which Roethke occasionally achieves through the combination of assonance, repetition and meter is the undulating movement of "The present falls, the present falls away;" ("The Tree, The Bird"). Here, as in the similar example used in the introduction to this report, one can feel the lapping of a wave upon a shoreline as the protagonist stands overlooking the sea "widening on a farther shore." Again the line of poetry becomes the experience it describes.

It would appear that even without Roethke's own statements in prose, recorded conversation, or notebooks on the power of imagery as it relates to energy and motion, one would find enough internal evidence in the poems themselves to substantiate a claim for a heavy reliance on kinesthetic imagery. The figurative devices of metaphor and sound emphasize the sensory and rhythmic impressions of motion in the poetry. Yet there are still other devices that Roethke uses, more subtle in effect. These have to do with diction and the use of the imperative and interrogative.

Monosyllabic diction has already been mentioned as a characteristic trait of Roethke's writing. Exactly how this contributes to movement is more difficult to pinpoint, except that his desire to bring the language close to that of childhood is part of his concept of giving life and momentum to his writing. Burke says, "He goes as far as humanly possible in quest of a speech wholly devoid of abstractions."³⁴ Closely allied with this is his reluctance to use adjectives and adverbs which, he believed, tend to

slow down the movement of a poem. How monosyllabic is Roethke's diction? A word count may be enlightening. The following table reveals clearly that, in this sequence at least, Roethke did indeed follow his belief in the power of the single-syllable word and in the avoidance of adjectives and adverbs. This tabulation shows that only 17.5% of the words in the entire sequence are of more than one syllable, and that with eight parts of speech to choose from, only 10% of the words are adjectives or adverbs.

<u>Poem</u>	<u>Total Words</u>	<u>Polysyllabic Words</u>	<u>Adjectives</u>	<u>Adverbs</u>
1	192	37	15	3
2	142	23	10	8
3	262	42	22	8
4	196	38	8	4
5	286	57	13	15
6	99	15	8	0
7	204	30	9	11
8	183	31	15	6
9	184	39	22	3
10	93	6	9	3
11	153	32	14	8
12	68	10	1	3

Whether or not this data is significant depends upon how willing the reader is to submit to Roethke's belief that energy can be generated by a childlike language. Roethke's own words may be helpful in understanding how important this idea was to him. In a critical review of Ben Bellitt, whose work Roethke admired, he makes this statement: "The best short poems are being written by those writers who impose on themselves the strictest limitations. Such poets regard inversion as a device to be handled with extreme caution; they hate adjectives; they prefer a homely, the bold, to

the decorative. Sometimes their work may be arid, but it is rarely artificial; it may be rough, but it is often powerful." ³⁵

Many adjectives in this sequence are in participial form. In a conversation with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Roethke mentions this as a device to energize a poem, "that device being, simply, participial or verbal forms that keep the action going." ³⁶ It is in the movement contained in verbs and verbals that one sees Roethke's greatest strength in diction. Since the thematic concerns of the poem deal with "waiting" or "remaining" as well as strictly motion verbs, those verbs whose function as positioning adds to the journey concept have been counted separately. Positioning is not of any significance, however, among the verbals. Since the endings that form the verbals and verb tenses often account for multi-syllable words, one presumes that Roethke is deliberately sacrificing the power of the monosyllable for the force of a verb. By analyzing the poems one learns that 22% of the total wordage is in the form of verbs or verbals. Of these, 61.5% of the verb usages are motion words and another 14% deal with positioning in some way.

<u>Poem</u>	<u>Total Verbs</u>	<u>Motion Verbs</u>	<u>Position Verbs</u>	<u>Total Verbals</u>	<u>Motion Verbals</u>
1	21	8	5	11	7
2	29	21	5	8	5
3	46	35	5	13	8
4	41	29	5	11	8
5	45	33	4	13	1
6	17	8	3	8	8
7	30	22	3	11	7
8	36	20	9	7	4
9	21	12	9	15	10
10	21	12	6	3	1
11	31	14	6	5	0
12	16	9	6	3	2

This chart indicates both a reliance on verbs to carry the action of the poem and, since adjectives are uncommon in Roethke's writing, a double burden on the participial form to carry the weight of description as well as action. Burke remarks on Roethke's use of participles to give a sense "of action, of form unfolding."³⁷ Such a feeling is obvious when one traces the participial use in "The Tree, The Bird":

a small voice calling . . . a drifting
cloud . . . a finger pointing . . .
riding the air . . . bearing its life
. . . whistling rain . . . those beat-
ing wings . . . the rising day . . .
the white sea widening . . . the beat-
ing bird . . . extending wings

The "ing" endings used so repeatedly through the poem contain much of the "becomingness" of Roethke's poetry.

The theme of becoming in this sequence deals both with the motion of the protagonist as he develops increasing awareness of his world and with the cosmic dance in which all nature participates, for this dance is unending. The last line of the sequence, "Dance on, dance on, dance on," suggests that quality of everlasting motion. In "The Tree,

The Bird," everything seems to be involved in performing its role in the workings of the universe, and the poem is placed strategically in the sequence as the protagonist is ready once again to assume his own place in the cosmic dance. The last lines with their "widening sea" and "extending wings" are very like welcoming arms as the protagonist begins to learn the steps of the dance.

The final lines also foreshadow the next poem, "The Restored," in which the poet learns to trust his senses rather than his mind, for the actions in "The Tree, The Bird" are not reasoned actions. The bird does not investigate wind currents before extending his wings; he simply soars. The sea does not chart out its channels; it goes where it must. Roethke chooses the word "pure" to describe these motions--of the day, the sea, and the bird--and he closes his poem with the protagonist finding "that last pure stretch of joy." Surely a stretch of joy is more than a static pleasure. It must rather be an outward and upward reaching of the spirit for something beyond ordinary human comprehension. The emotion of joy is, here at least, emotion in its most literal sense--a moving out of the human soul. And Roethke achieves this connotation largely through the string of simple, participial forms which precede it.

Roethke says, "the command, the hortatory often makes for the memorable. We're caught up, involved. It is implied we do something, at least vicariously. But . . . the emotion must be strong and legitimate and not fabricated." ³⁸ Such

exhortations occur regularly throughout the sequence, from such direct commands as "Ye littles, lie more close!" ("In Evening Air") or "God bless the roots!" ("The Right Thing") to the simple statement, "The day's on fire!" ("In a Dark Time") or "I bid stillness be still." ("In Evening Air"). Sometimes they take the form of a question, "Was nature kind?" ("The Sequel") or "What burns me now?" ("The Marrow"). Other times they are poignantly simple, "I was afraid." ("I Waited"). Occasionally two are juxtaposed to form a question-answer, "What can be known? The unknown." ("Once More, The Round").

Whether or not these statements contain motion in themselves, and they often do, they always have the effect of change in the movement of the poem itself and thus contribute to the total kinesthetic effect. Roethke uses them to set the rhythm of a poem at the beginning; he breaks the lilt of a pentameter verse with a strongly end-stopped command or question; he uses a short question to provide a caesural pause; he introduces a new idea with one of these short statements and picks up what may have been a lagging pace. The change they provide may be as subtle as a falling leaf or as dramatic as a storm, but they always do something to the momentum of a poem, and they are a recognizable characteristic of Roethke's work.

Just as Roethke watched the plants being tended in his father's Saginaw greenhouse and learned from them the

tortuous growth from seed through soil to blossom, he saw also that the first bloom can be cut back to renew itself more luxuriantly than ever. So, for him, does the human soul rise, fall back, and turn to climb again to greater heights. To live is to move--either backward or forward--the deeper one is willing to retrace his origins, the greater the potential for higher attainment. In Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical the poet leads the reader from the brink of dark despair to the "broad day" of "hope," back again to the very marrow of being to the infinite beauty of perfect oneness. That he painstakingly weaves a fabric composed of verbs and metaphors, images and exhortations may be fascinating for the student to unravel, but it is not the end of the lesson. As the poet's soul flourishes when he leaves reason behind, so is it now time to celebrate, as Roethke does, the poem itself--the dance.

FOOTNOTES

¹ On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington, 1965), p. 39.

² On the Poet and His Craft, p. 26.

³ Quotations from Roethke's poetry used in this paper are all from The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

⁴ On the Poet and His Craft, p. 26.

⁵ Theodore Roethke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pamphlets Series, 1963), p. 28.

⁶ "Cleansing the Doors of Perception," Minnesota Review, 5 (1965), 346.

⁷ On the Poet and His Craft, p. 27.

⁸ Mills, p. 9.

⁹ "Theodore Roethke," Agenda, 3, (1964), 9.

¹⁰ Mills, p. 17.

¹¹ "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," New Republic, 23 January 1965, p. 24.

¹² "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," Sewanee Review, 58 (1950), 82.

¹³ "'By swoops . . . by leaps': An Approach to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Kansas English, 57 (1972), 18.

¹⁴ Tulane Studies in English, 20 (1972), 180.

¹⁵ Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 14 (1972), 731.

¹⁶ On the Poet and His Craft, p. 78.

¹⁷ Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), p. 218.

¹⁸ "Theodore Roethke's Sometimes Metaphysical Motion," 745.

¹⁹ p. 222.

²⁰ See Blessing's "Theodore Roethke's Sometimes Metaphysical Motion" for a thorough discussion of the various ways in which Roethke eludes the prescribed limits of the villanelle form in this poem.

²¹ Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry, p. 212.

²² On the Poet and His Craft, p. 70.

²³ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Conversations on the Craft of Poetry (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1961), p. 48 (transcript of the tape recording).

²⁴ Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry, p. 212.

²⁵ "An Evening with Ted Roethke," Michigan Quarterly Review, 6 (1967), 235.

²⁶ p. 9.

²⁷ Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 269.

²⁸ p. 91.

²⁹ "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," College English, 21 (1960), 330.

³⁰ p. 22.

³¹ The punning intent of Roethke's use of repetition is discussed at length in Blessing's "Theodore Roethke's Sometimes Metaphysical Motion."

³² On the Poet and His Craft, p. 73.

³³ "A Steady Storm of Correspondences: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self," Shenandoah, 16 (1964), 48.

³⁴ p. 73.

³⁵ "Ben Bellitt's First Volume," Poetry, 53 (1939), 217.

³⁶ p. 62.

³⁷ p. 71.

³⁸ On the Poet and His Craft, p. 77.

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A STUDY OF MOTION
IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S SEQUENCE, SOMETIMES METAPHYSICAL

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical marks a return by Theodore Roethke to the simple lyric form, although he is a poet who is perhaps better known for his experimentation with free poetic structures. Within these twelve short lyrics, however, reside the same techniques of rhythmic energy and kinesthetic imagery that have given Roethke his reputation as a poet of motion.

The sequence describes the journey of a protagonist from the edge of despair to an ultimate oneness with Being. The journey is slow and difficult, but periodically there comes a moment of insight which encourages the protagonist to continue his quest. Finally he becomes aware of all nature's participation in the cosmic dance of the universe, and the sequence closes as the protagonist himself joins joyously in the dance.

The poems reveal the movement of the protagonist in their rhythms and imagery. In the early stages of the journey the rhythms are strict, the rhyme schemes are regular, the imagery is that of slow, plodding progress, with occasional glimpses of frustrated motion portrayed in metaphor and simile. As the protagonist gains insights, the poems underscore his new-found understanding by departing from regularity in rhythm or rhyme or stanza length. When the protagonist nears his goal, restrictions of patterned form are gradually cast aside until the final poem appears

with uneven meter, uneven stanzas, and a couplet rhyme scheme containing only one true rhyme.

This report contains a detailed exploration into these and other devices by which Roethke achieves this wedding of form and content insofar as it is achieved through the medium of motion. The metrical structure of the poems, the use of frequent end-stopping of lines to add force to the poetry, the employment of enjambement and caesura to add impetus and pause, and the combination of alliterative and assonant effects with metrics to slow or speed the movement of a line are all discussed in the first section of the report.

Roethke's motion imagery is illustrated by the use of a single poem from the sequence, "I Waited"--a poem so rich in imagery that every line must be cited in order to fully reveal it. The part that motion plays in the imagery becomes obvious in this discussion. Roethke's rather infrequent use of metaphor and simile are dealt with briefly, but, here, too, motion is important in his choice of comparisons. At this point the idea of position--either as a resting place or as a take-off point for further motion--enters the discussion. As a special kind of imagery, the Roethkean use of opposites as they deal with motion is also introduced, as are his frequent repetitive effects. Images evoked by sound effect, especially alliteration and assonance, are described

in their supporting roles as parts of the total picture of motion.

The last section of the report deals with effects of diction through which Roethke felt he gained poetic energy. These include his heavily monosyllabic diction, his reliance on verbs and participles to keep the motion going, and his use of short imperative and interrogative sentences for breaks or changes in the rhythmic pattern of a poem.

Throughout the report an attempt is made to demonstrate how all of these techniques, characteristic within the Roethke canon, provide a constant poetic portrayal of, and accompaniment to, his mystical theme. They show clearly why students of his poetry regard him as a poet of motion.