

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,'" <sup>1</sup> 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." <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> ("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"<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup>

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,<sup>8</sup> 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,"<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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