

The Oneness of the Universe of Whitman and Rothke

Kim, Young-Ho*

I

This work is a comparative study of the theme and artistry in the poetry of Walt Whitman(1819~1892) and Theodoore Roethke(1908~1963). As and attempt to discern the analogies between the two poets the emphasis will be put upon the examination of the thematic parallels produced by their common mystic vision of the world. By tracing, thus, the conscious and philosophical backgrounds of the two men a certain direct or indirect influential relationship could be noticed at the end. The most significant affinity of the works is, saying in advance, the transcendental thoughts and artistry which demonstrate the points of concurrence in themes, images and forms. Observing the poetic objects of nature and reality, both metaphorize the image and form of oneness or cycle attained by transcending the inner or outer world.

As Whitman was concerned about the illumination of life, Roethke also reaches into the traumatic problem of the self. Both men struggled with absurd reality, but later they similiary accepted such plights of cir-

* 人文大學 英文科 教授

cumstances, and finally met on the way to a world of salvation. Such salvation was achieved through their common metaphysical or mystic contemplation as mentioned above. The poets were awakened to witness the absolute being, that is the divinity, which operates the universe as one form of cycle. And their vision was expanded to grasp the order of union within the nature. Both felt, in other words, every being is basically one with another.

Whitman and Roethke envisioned, furthermore, the divine or spiritual being, as the absolute truth, which brings together the world of reality and unreality, the internal and external, and the temporal and eternity. Such a vision then broadened their senses to encompass the whole world as one body within the unified scheme, and as a result they created quite similar arts. Their poetry thus represents the celebration of a metaphysical or higher world united with the self and other, the soul and body, and finally man and God. Out of this monistic view each one shows, in common, the images and symbols, especially of a one-in-all theme, in their works.

The poetry of Whitman and Roethke exhibit, therefore, the theme of oneness, the central sense of unity, that is, a paradoxical mixture of the opposite of reality. And the mystic sense of oneness is illustrated in such themes as the self, nature, love, and time. The common treatment of these themes are dedicated to resolve the personal and social problems of each poet in the arts and life. And naturally both used the similar form of catalogue and rhythm of verse libre which accorded to their mystic notions of unity in variety.

II

Whitman and Roethke have an identical image of self in their works, which is attained by their similar attitude toward reality. Each portrays his entry into a state of metaphysical consciousness, the progressively mystic experience and finally his emergence from that world.

It can be shown that Whitman's poetry is the representation of such a mystic journey to search for this ideal self, I as you. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" one actually notices the identity of the poet as man being with the another beyond time and place :

It avails not, time nor place—distancee avails not,
I am with you, you men and woment of a generation, or over so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,¹⁾

Whitman explores his intuitive feeling of oneness with the passengers on a boat that set sail toward the same destination in the new world. Instead of persuading the crowds through intellectual thought or rational speculation, the poet does so through mystical feelings. He inspires people to respond to the same sensation of unity as the poet himself feels. The identity of the poet is, thus, represented as one interfused with you, which means being within one world with you as one entity.

1) Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman, ed. by J.E. Miller (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p.116. In future references this book will be indicated as CPSP.

In "Open House" Roethke also explores the mode of the self which belongs to the world of other people. Like Whitman Roethke opens his "eyes" to see his I who is united with you. Attempting to define his self the poet moves his vision from "the material world to the his best spiritual truth."²⁾ In "The Light Comes Brighter" Roethke illustrates his image of self as one being within the spiritual world :

The leafy mind that long was tightly furled,
Will turn its private substance into green,
And young shorts spread upon our inner world.³⁾

The zenistic poem flashes Roethke's sense of Whitmanesque insight that illuminates the inner association of union in the outer world. In "Night Journey" Roethke sings his achievement of union with the sea and the land, that is the unification and communication between he and the people. Looking out from the window of a running train he envisions his identity in contact with both inner and outer worlds. Then he becomes a part of nature feeling an "iron" tie between I and you :

Bridges of iron lace,
A suddenness of trees.....
And a bleak Wasted place,
And a lake below my knees.
.....

2) Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke : An Introduction to the Poetry(New York & London, Columbia University Press, 1966), p.25. Malkoff mentions that in Roegthke's inner eyes there is a knowing more profound than Blake's "single vision."

3) Theodore Roehtke, Open House(New York, Knopf, 1941), p.19.

The sense of oneness of Whitman and Roethke came out, primarily, in their shared views of God through a mystical experience or philosophy. While Whitman is very confident that God is immanent, the divinity within everyman, Roethke sees God when he is lost, especially as he negates his discovery of a higher self by mystic contemplations. Both sing, thus, of the soul in everything around them, that is the divine soul unified with the physical world. Every being and thing keeps a “disintegrated” individuation as “a part” of the Universe. Whitman thus exclaims of such a joy of divinity within him and others :

In the face of men and women I see God,
 in my own face in the glass,
 I find letters from God dropt in the street,
 and every one is sign'd by God's name (CPSP, 66)

The poet announces however that “nothing, No God, is greater to him than the self,/Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.”(CPSP, 66) Then he is motivated to praise not only the soul but the body :

Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern,
 and includes and is the soul;
 Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body,
 or any part of it. (CPSP, 26)

The strong and proud concept of oneness of man and God is actually illustrated as the essential soil for his social and political idealism namely that of American democracy in his arts.

Believing in God as the Absolute being Roethke also metaphorizes as

the father to his childhood, who saves him from the bondage of reality. In "A Walk in Late Summer" he perceives His presence who guides him toward an eternal world :

Gods in that stone, or I am not a man!
Body and soul transcend appears
Before the caving in of all that is;
I'm dying piecemeal, fervent in decay;
My moments linger—that's eternity. (WW, 179)

Here one notices the Whitmanesque transcendental sense of oneness between man with the Absolute Being, the secular and the divine, and belief in salvation by a spiritual resurrection. Roethke again describes such sensation of a mystic union with God in "The Abyss"; "the mind enters itself, and God the mind,/And one as One, free in the teasing wind."⁶ The word "free" assumes Whitman's ecstasy as grasped by the sudden and immediate sensitivity of self with all in Universe—the true self that is interfused with man, nature and God.

III

Nature is another major object out of which each poet searches the theme of oneness consciously and unconsciously. Viewing the natural world as a vast analogy of an organism both in spirit and body, of man, Whitman and Roethke describe the concept of the oneness of the self

6) Theodore Roethke, Roots of Whitman's Grass(Cranbury, New Jersey, Associated Univ. Press, 1970), p.244.

transmitted to the divinity of common mystical experience. Both see the divine project in every part of river, flower, plant in the whole universe as objects unified with one spirit, namely Emerson's Over-Soul. Holding such belief in cosmic evolution they seek the light and sight of divine revelations, the universal presence in a blade of grass and tree.

While describing the divine soul and body in the deific sense both men also celebrate the body, the beauty of physical form through the sensuous union, both in physical and metaphysical, of the universe. They see that nature and man are the symbolic combination of "equal emanation of the Divine Being."⁷⁾

Whitman presents such view of the oneness of physical and organic structure of the plant world, animal and human in many nature poems. In "Spontaneous Me" he expresses the sensation of fulfillment attained through his mystic apprehension of the sexual experience:

Spontaneous me, Nature,
 The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,
 The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,

The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that
 gripes the full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with
 amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself
 tremulous and tight till he is satisfied;
 The wet of woods through the early hours, (CPSP, 78)

As noticed in the title of the poem, "Spontaneous Me" the central

7) T.R. Rajasekhorainh, rotts of Whitman's Grass (Cranbury, New Jersey, Associated Univ. Press, 1970), p.244.

image is the of man as a part of nature. He is firmly attached to a friend like the sun heat covered mountain. The “arm of the friend” is seen as a part of nature as one of “the blossoms of the mountain ash.” The whole array of natural objects, like animals and plants, are denoting “the human sensual organism.”⁸⁾ The pictures of all these sensual words and images imply the idissoluble linkage between human and more human physical worlds. Such organic unity of man and nature is also depicted in the numerous works of Roethke. Following Whitman’s celebration praiases the fulfilment of sensual experience attained through the mystic observation of natural organisms. The flowers of “Orchards” are compared to “infants” of his childhood in himself; but infacy here is not the age of inno cence, it is rather of demanding, grasping undisciplined sexual urges. Thesemusky “denouring infants” are characterized by fingers, lips, mouth. Also in “Moss Gathering,” his consciousness of growing up is dominated by erotic impulses. He feels guilty when moss gathering takes places in a landscape with clearly sexual overtone:

By pulling off flesh from the living plants,
As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life,
A decreation.⁹⁾

The poem conveys Roethke’s progress from childhood to adolescence

8) Young-Ho Kim, Whitman And Han Yong-Un (Seoul, sa sa-yon co., 1988), pp. 80-82.

9) Beatrice Roethke, “The Lost son and Other Poems” in The collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York, doubleday, 1966), p.40. In future references this book is written as CPTR.

and to his awareness of himself being curious about sexuality in nature. And he feels, at the same time, a sense of guilty at his “unnatural” action. He sees, however, the mystical powers of the flowers and vegetables, which contribute to his growth and creativity of arts. In “Transplanting and Flower Dump” the child is freed from his guilty consciousness and attains the awakening of sexual unity between man and nature. Thus he illustrates his identity as a tree that is loved by rain like the worm and the rose:

When I stand I'm almost a tree

 The worm and the rose
 Both love
 Rain (WW, 71)

And the poet establishes, furthermore, his individuality accomplished by his mystical fulfilment beyond knowledge of reason. His infantile sexuality, “The Ghost,” which seemed to cause separation from union with his father, or God, now is reconciled and becomes more joyful. In “Sensibility! O La!” the poet’s sexual accomplishment comes to a completion. As the “serpent” and “John—of—the thumb” he is alive and jumping. He sees a fantasy of the beloved as Venus rising from the waves. Whole sections of the poem, metaphorize his physical maturity with the shape of “long fish” or “a twig touch.(WW, 75)

The theme of love for Roethke is, therefore, illustrated with a sense of salvation and freedom as in the oppression of reality. Singing a feeling of union, as Whitman does, with his beloved using the image of fire (“several flames in one small fire,” “we abide yet go,”(FF, 73)) the protagonist

aske, "Where was the Question?" This question implies that the lover couldn't be separated from the beloved. Here the poet shows love of flesh and spirit like Whitman's soul and body. Thus sexual union is invoked as a defense mechanism against his lovelessness or frustration in reality. In "The Moment" he actually attempts to use love against fear of death, then achieves a complacent harmony of mind and body: "without, within,/ Body met body....."(FF, 75) The interaction of love is here portrayed as a dynamic challenger for a higher spirituality. Thus his physical love is the symbolic path to spiritual love which may create a world in which his self is fulfilled.

Naturally, the love of eros of both Whitman and Roethke are seemingly the main object by which each metaphorizes the sense of unification and fulfillment more concretely. And they describe eros as the vital forces that ties the self with others and the world. They exalt the love of body as belonging to the "love" in quite an obscene description:

Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love,
breast of love, belies of love, pressed and glued together
with love, (CPSP, 78)

With such sensuality sensation he identifies himself, as one who is on the stage of actual intercourse:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently
Turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom—bone, and plunged
your tongue to my bare—strip heart,
And reached till you

felt my beard, and reach'd till you
felt my feet.(CPSP, 28)

Here one notices that the poem reveals how preoccupied Whitman was with erotic matters or his so-called "amativeness of sexual love."¹⁰⁾

Roethke also expresses Whitmanesque enthusiasm for erotic love embodying the mysterious beauty of the body. He voices and portrays an identical picture of physical passion using sensual imagery. In "I knew a Woman" a reader sees his exaltation of erotic fulfillment:

Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
.....
How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
She taught me Turn, and Counter turn, and Stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
.....
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).
Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
.....
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved). (CPTR, 127)

Taken as a whole, all of these imageries connote the sexual act between the speaker and his beloved. The body, his beloved is metaphorized such as root, rose, leaf, oyster, the incipient star, and many animals, which connote the symbolic union of body and body. And in "Words for the Wind" the speaker kisses "morning mouth" of his beloved and

10) Whitman And Han Yong-Un, p.101.

thousand years, (CPSP, 60)

The voyager here transcends the limitation of time and place that possess each religion and culture. This hold journey is carried out on the sea and that is actualized by the completion of the Suez Canal, which connected West and East by water. Believing India to be the symbolic Eden of the past he vigorously celebrates her as a sea goddess or “mother” who gives birth to his and then bathes him: “Bather me O God in thee, mounting to thee,/I and my soul to range in range of thee.” (“Passage to India,” CPSP, 293) The sea imagery is described here as the symbolic bridge between the two continents, West and East, ancient and modern, and time and geographical boundaries.

The sense of one concerned with Time also appears in the numerous works of Roethke. this poet takes Whitman’s course of adventure toward his early life to replenish himself. He takes, in other words, a regressive trip to meet the past that gave birth to the present, and then a progressive trip for the future that is experienced by the present. He enters, like Whitman, the time world through memory of the past, then he is awakened to see his identity:

“What is the time, Papa, seed?
Everything has been twice
My father is fish” (CPTR, 72)

In this zenistic poem “Where Knock Is Open Wide” Roethke perceives the past paralleled to the now as that of his relationship between his father and himself.

The atavistic image of his father as a fish is the transformed self of the

present. Here the identification of father with a fish brings out, of course, Christian implication, the immortal Being beyond time and place. Roethke perceives, then, ever moment is eternal; "My moments linger—that is eternity" ("Moment," WW, 179) This eternity is attained when he is awakened to be free from a limited time and place, and enters the world of Tillich's so-called "eternal now"¹¹⁾ wherein he is born again, and finally God embraces him.

The Whitmanesque journey of regression to progression is also described in the many poems of Praise to the End and "The Longing" in The Far Field in which Roethke alludes to Jonah who takes a night journey under the sea and slime in search for a renewal of the self—salvation of "I and you." And in "The Long waters" he reaches the place "Where the fresh and salt waters meet," which implies, as Malkoff indicates, the point of intersection between the temporal (flowing streams) and the eternal (sea into which they flow).¹²⁾ The symbolic rose emerges, in the poem "The rose," from the slime to embody the unity and renewal ("childhood paradise; the Eden of the green house") of the self and the world. The earth of the rose is the place met by the sea that makes it possible for him to fulfil his desire—that is now the divine or spiritual desire—"Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire".(FF, 31) Here one sees the symbolic plant that is the renewed and transformed man within the higher world that is fused with temporal and eternal time. The world of the poet is, thus, one world with Whitman's, which

11) Tillich, The Eternal Now (New York, Sciribner, 1963), pp.125, 131.

12) Malkoff, Theodore Roethke, p.182.

transcends the inner and outer, the visible and invisible, near distant, and the temporal and eternal.

The doctrine of the poetry of both poet is, conclusively saying, of the identification of the self and the world. The world as seen by the poets is the real and unreal one that is unified or harmonized with nature and reality, with maintain the order of all-in-one or one-in-all. Such a sense of unity is, of the world is encompassed as one. And such a perception of union with the world is, of course, accompanied by an intuitive feeling of separatedness or individuality. Only when each becomes the true self does there appear the light of the symbolic harmony of individuality with another, Roethke also praises the separatedness in harmony:

I could watch! I chould watch!
 I saw separatedness of all things!
 My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
 The weeds believe'd me, and the neating birds.

 And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked
 honey-suckle. (WW, 92, 93)

When roethke sees a leaf of grass and a bee, like Whitman, he immediately senses his individual identity harmonized with nature or the world, in other words, he is inspired to go into the separatedness-in-unity. roethke actually commented on his sense of oneness of one-in-all:

“It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being—and in some instancess, even and inanimate theing—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. . . . To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you—.”¹³⁾

And he illustrates his mystic experience of oneness when he “kissed the skin of a stone”; “the inanimate itself becomes alive before the final euphoria of this piece.” Then he explains the process of attaining such a feeling; “the second part of this feeling, the ‘oneness,’ of course, the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men had had, and still have; the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitable accompanied by a loss of the ‘I,’ the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocency.”¹⁴⁾

One notices, here, that the poet confidently keeps the sense of oneness of life and death, which awakens him further to foresee immortality of his life after death as that of Whitman.

The absolute faith of the two poets are, therefore, of unity with individuality that is bame, totality with separatedness. The sense of separatedness means for them the freedom or the freed self from the reality. And the faith of freedom is here means transcendence or reconciliation with the conflict of flesh secular within the self and the world. Moreover, such a state of reconciliation is attained through their conscious and unconscious insight to encompass the spiritual phenomena of the seen and unseen, external and internal, soul and body, and earth and heaven.

13) Ralph J. Mills, *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected prose of Theodore Roethke* (Seattle and London, Univ. of Washington Press, 1965), p.25.

14) Mills, p.26.

V

In conclusion, Whitman and Roethke shared a common world view, in each of the nineteenth and twentieth century and society of America. That all is one and one is all attained through his own mystical study or meditation. And each vigorously explored and illustrated such beliefs in his works of art. the achievements of both men are, therefore, the reconstruction of the new world wherein the self, love, time and space, the absolute of everyman are all—in—one, and thus I and you may celebrate a life of “eternal now.”

Finally, whether roethke was influenced or not, directly of indirectly, by Whitman, and even though it may be true, it is not an important matter. This is because the comparative study of an analogy without contact constitutes more academic aestheticism. This study has attempted, therefore, to trace the origins of mystical faiths, the fountain of the sense of oneness, which pervades through the entire poetry of Whitman and Roethke, and further discovers the analogy and parallelism of ideology and artistry between the life and works of the two poets.

Works Cited

1. Kim Young—Ho. whitman And Han Yong—Un. Seoul : Sa sa—Yon Co., 1988.
2. Malkoff, Karl. Theodore Roethke : An Introduction to the Poetry. New Your & London : Columbia University Press, 1966.
3. Miller, J.E. ed. Complete Poetry And Selected Prose by Walt Whitman. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959.
4. Mills, Ralph J. ed. On the Poet And His Craft : Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke. seattle and London : Univ. of Washington Press, 1965.
5. Roethke, Beatrice. The collected Poems of Theodore Roethke. New York : Doubleday, 1966.
6. Roethke, Theodore. Open House. New York : Knopf, 1941.
7. _____ Words for the Wind : the collected Verse of Theodore Roethke. New York : Doubleday, 1951.
8. _____ The Far Field. New York : Doubleday, 1964.
9. Rajasekhoraiah, T.R. Roots of Whitman's Grass. Cranbury, New Jersey : Associated Univ. Press, 1970.
10. Tillich, Paul. The Eternal Now. New York : Scribner, 1963.