Roethke's "Meditations of an Old Woman": A Myth and Ritual for Dying

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ROETHKE'S "MEDITATIONS OF AN OLD WOMAN":  
A MYTH AND RITUAL FOR DYING

by

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in partial fulfillment of the
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In "Meditations of an Old Woman," Theodore Roethke poetically encountered death, speaking through the persona of an old woman approaching the end of life. The pattern she follows, wandering through her memory in search of the maiden she once was, is also found in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which was ritualized in the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece. The poem, myth, and ritual taken together reflect a single archetypal pattern for approaching death; comparing them will reveal the essence of each. Through recollection, the old woman finally unites with her lost youthful self in an epiphany similar to that experienced by the initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries. In their epiphany, a Divine Child was born, represented in the myth by a youth who carries Demeter's gift of grain to humankind after her reunion with Persephone. For Roethke's old woman, the child manifests as a new state of consciousness, freed from the "dreary dance of opposites," sending love to the world, and unafraid of death, perceiving it as part of the divine plan at the heart of life.
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Christopher K. Bennett
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I have no mind at all: I just remember.

Theodore Roethke, from a late notebook

In 1956, when he was 47, Theodore Roethke wrote to a friend, "Love and death, the two themes I seem to be occupied with, I find are exhausting: you can't fool around or just be 'witty,' once you are playing for keeps."¹ These serious efforts produced, besides his first love poems, two works in which he artistically faced death: "The Dying Man" and "Meditations of an Old Woman," the last being one of his finest poems. Roethke chose to approach dying through voices other than his own, and in "The Dying Man" we hear Yeats almost exclusively, which accounts for its lack of success, but the "Meditations," though owing a debt to Eliot, are much freer and more natural in form and sound. As one critic says, "One feels that the personality behind them really is feminine, really does feel life ebbing away."² The Yeats mask, with its high language and willful intensity, kept Roethke an actor on a stage, whereas the simpler, humbler voice of the old woman persona allowed for


the kind of depth the subject matter required, so that "Meditations"
is possibly his finest work, ultimately combining the themes of love
and death in a poetic transformation unsurpassed in the rest of his
works.

The sequence takes place within the reverie of an old woman near-
ing the end of her life. Memories, fantasies, and thoughts flow
through one another in her meditations, which are entirely divorced
from the physical world, occurring instead in what might be called
the soul's realm, where the needs and concerns of the soul are fore-
most. Each poem in the sequence moves between mourning and exalta-
tion, matter-boundedness and spiritual release as the old woman finds
equilibrium within herself in facing death. In "First Meditation"
the old woman sees her life running down, and she balks at beginning
the journey to Hades, lacking a god to guide and comfort her; yet she
can still perceive an outward sign of spirit that hints at transfor-
mation. "I'm Here" introduces a new voice — the old woman's memory
of herself as a maiden. These are the two aspects of the old woman
which gradually merge into one: her youth is somehow more closely
connected with divinity, and by recollecting the ideal image of her
past self, locating the lost maiden within, she discovers a source
of divinity in herself. The poem thus ends with her awaiting fur-
ther manifestations of the divine. "Her Becoming" brings the old
woman and recollected self together in one timeless moment as she
reexperiences a spiritual illumination as if for the first time.
Then, in "Fourth Meditation," she turns her refreshed consciousness
toward those who have not begun their own soul-journeys and undergone
such transformation as hers, in this way reaffirming the value of her own experience. "What Can I Tell My Bones?" is a last confrontation between her old attitude and her new state of consciousness, which seems to lead her away from the God of her culture to something else, a new godhead that can help her face death. The old woman's journey through the soul realm brings her not to the Christian Paradiso but to a new attitude that is at home in the Underworld, 'below' morality, seeking the darkness, not as evil, but as essence.

Roethke wrote that the speaker of "Meditations" was "modelled, in part, after my own mother, now dead, whose favorite reading was the Bible, Jane Austen, and Dostoyevsky -- in other words, a gentle, highly articulate old lady believing in the glories of the world, yet fully conscious of its evils." This bibliographic image probably fit the poet's literary designs more than the person described; to Alan Seager, his friend and biographer, this description is "an exaggeration, one of Roethke's characteristic bits of retrospective self-inflation, although his mother did read a great deal." Helen Roethke actually had little formal education and was bound to a Teutonic regime of housework much of her life. Yet, she could still follow her reverie, and the way that her rich inner life, nurtured by constant reading, offset her undramatic outer existence might well have served as a model to her son for approaching the leveling process of death.

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Roethke completed the first of the "Meditations" just six months after Helen died, in 1954.

The old woman of these poems, however, is too large a figure to be seen in the limited terms of a character study, for the kind of transformation she undergoes is possible for all human beings, regardless of personality or sex. The pattern of experience that leads to such transformation may be termed archetypal, and is reflected mythologically in the figures of Demeter and Persephone, the mother and daughter goddesses separated by death but finally reunited, whose myth formed the basis of the Eleusinian Mysteries celebrated in ancient Greece. This brings us to the purpose of this study: by considering Roethke's poem, the myth of Demeter and Persephone, and the Eleusinian Mysteries all as reflections of the same archetypal pattern, the essence of that pattern may begin to show through their interaction, and in return reveal the depth of the poem we are trying to understand.

Since the Demeter-Persephone mythologem has been preserved in its entirety in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, and in turn was given a highly ritualized form in the Eleusinian Mysteries for some two thousand years, we have two reference points, complete in themselves, from which to approach the "Meditations." The myth provides the basic image, a picture through which the archetypal pattern may be viewed from different angles, just as we follow the various lines and shapes in a painting, finding different connections and relationships depending on where we start looking. In the ritual the pattern is acted out by human beings who must leave their everyday lives for a while in order to give primacy to the needs of the soul, just as the old woman gives
her full attention to the soul realm of her meditations. Thus the myth and ritual provide structural and experiential bases for comparison with Roethke's poem.

In the Hymn to Demeter, the maiden goddess Persephone is abducted by Hades, who wishes to make her rule with him, as his wife, over the dead in the Underworld. Her mother Demeter, the grain goddess, discovers the loss and leaves Olympus to search for her daughter on earth; when she learns of the rape, she wanders in mourning among mortal beings disguised as an old woman. Finally, "found out" by her human hosts to be the goddess she is, Demeter causes all plant life to wither, and allows nothing new to sprout. Zeus and the other gods, concerned that they will receive no more sacrifices if all human beings perish, eventually arranges for Persephone's return to her mother. Hades, however, causes his Queen to eat some pomegranate seeds before she leaves him, which ensures that she will have to return to the Underworld for part of every year. Yet Demeter is satisfied, and upon her reunion with Persephone the earth springs back to life, though it will henceforth turn to waste when the Daughter Goddess spends her required time in the Underworld each year.

The naturalistic interpretation of this myth is that it represents the change of the seasons, the first winter resulting from Persephone's abduction by Hades. She is in this view the grain, which in ancient times was stored underground each winter in jars similar to those in which the dead were buried. However, this view does not take into account the separation of the Underworld from the earth. James Hillman writes, "From Hesiod onward the Tartaros region belong-
ing to Hades is a chasm below the earth and as far removed from the earth as is heaven above."⁵ Even more to the point here is Erwin Rohde's statement that the realm of Hades and Persephone is so "distant and unapproachable" that "They can have no influence on the lives and doings of men on earth."⁶ Though Rohde does not stick to the logic of this observation, Hillman⁷ does: as Queen of the Dead, Persephone's separation from earthly matters precludes any relation she might have with the earth's fertility. Persephone cannot be the seed because it is part of the world from which she was taken, Demeter's world, and even after her return to earth it is still Demeter who replenishes the life of the ground. Of the two goddesses, Demeter, then, is solely involved with fertility or the lack of it, being herself a seed-figure, for when she leaves the home of the gods she wanders the earth in the guise of an old woman, her former glory hidden in a withered shell as she mourns the loss of her daughter.

This finds a parallel in Roethke's old woman, who has seen her youthful radiance ("I was queen of the vale") lost within an aged body:

I've become a strange piece of flesh,
Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
With a cheek soft as a hound's ear. ⁸
What's left is light as a seed . . .


The old woman is also a kind of seed, and just as Demeter wanders over the earth searching for Persephone, the old woman begins to wander through the soul realm of memory, finally encountering there the maiden she once was, and experiencing a rebirth.

In the Underworld, Persephone rules over the dead, who have been deprived of the passions and the involvement in material concerns of earthly, living beings. According to Homer (Iliad, xxiii, 100), what remains of a person after death is the eidolon and psyche, the image and the soul; the Underworld is thus the realm of souls or soul, inhabited by images of the dead, the past which exists only in memory. When these images are recollected by the living, then soul, psyche, is found, or perhaps more accurately, soul "happens." As Hillman observes, the term psyche was no more clear to the ancients than its English counterpart "soul" is to us, and "... the word [either in Greek or English] was and is a symbol, a metaphor, that cannot be grasped in its depth. ... Psyche is the subject of our experience, that which experiences, as Jung said, and not an object of experience to be defined."9 Once the old woman withdraws her consciousness from outer life and begins to wander into the Underworld realm of memory, she is able, through fantasied interaction with the dead images of her past, to participate in her soul, or, put another way, to become a participant in her soul.

One way of attaining this soul experience is found in the Eleusinian Mysteries. C. Kerényi, in his major work on these rites, shows

9"Dream," p. 269, n. 55.
that both male and female initiates "became" the Goddess Demeter, ritually imitating the deity in search of her lost daughter. Demeter was "more accessible" than her "rather ghostly and transcendent" daughter, and therefore "a mythological figure into which a man approaching Persephone could enter more easily." The initiates acted as Demeter had: they gave up their worldly involvements and donned "the simplest sort of dress, that worn by beggars and wayfarers," in this way becoming anonymous, as the Goddess had when she left Olympus; they mourned, denying themselves food and drink, as she had done; and they experienced an epiphany of the Daughter returning from the soul-realm and bearing a Divine Child in the sacred fire.

Roethke's "Meditations" develop in a similar way. The old woman, outwardly humbled by age and circumstance, wanders through her memories, and discovers that her past maiden self is the most prominent image in this soul realm, climaxing, in "Her Becoming," in the memory of a youthful epiphany that shifts, at the moment of illumination, from the past to present tense. In that moment the two -- old woman and maiden -- become rejoined into one speaker, one experience. What has been born, in "a small place all in flame," is the verification of the Divine Child within the old woman, an awareness she had only tentatively perceived earlier as "a shape, lighted with love," a "ghost from my own breast," or "from the soul's house." It is her sense of

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11. Ibid., p. 33.

12. Ibid., p. 64.
divinity in herself and in everything around her, a sense of soul.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were accorded great value in the ancient world. As late as the fourth century A.D. their celebration was considered necessary to "hold the whole human race together." Sophocles wrote of the initiates, "Thrice blessed are those among men, who, after beholding these rites, go down to Hades. Only for them is there life; all the rest will suffer an evil lot." Such praise was common, and even the Roman Cicero said that, thanks to the Mysteries, "We have been given a reason not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope." The reason these rites were held in such esteem, Kerényi suggests, is that "Participation in the Mysteries offered a guarantee of life without fear of death, of confidence in the face of death. That is why the poets looked upon the initiates as so superior to other mortals."

The old woman's consciousness undergoes a transformation similar to the initiates', for by the end of the "Meditations" she has been "released from the dreary dance of opposites." C. G. Jung, describing the psychic unity of the Demeter-Persephone image, writes, "We could . . . say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her

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13 Kerényi, Eleusis, p. 12.
16 Eleusis, p. 15.
mother and forwards into her daughter", in the same way, by uniting
with the maiden she once was, the old woman is able to transcend the
limitations of time, of past, present and future: "I breathe what I
am: / The first and last of things" (p. 164). The maiden of her mem-
ory remains ideal, unchanged, just as Persephone, once she is Queen of
the Underworld, is always Queen of that realm. Memory images, like
the Underworld soul-images, generate no hope of change; they are what
they will always be, the essence of what they represent, the soul-
psyche. It is the old woman's relationship to the images that changes.
The transformed consciousness of the old woman must be able to lead
her through the realm of memory so that she may discover there her
soul, so that soul can "happen" for her. This event results in an out-
pouring of spirit into her life, comparable to Demeter's renewal of the
earth after her reunion with Persephone, and according to the ancient
poets, experienced also by the initiates as they returned to their
daily lives from the Mysteries at Eleusis.

The image for what has been born in the old woman is the Child,
signifying a child-like attitude which allows for ambivalence. Thus
she wishes to be "delivered from the rational into the realm of pure
song," to become "A learned nimble girl, / Not drearily bewitched, /
But sweetly daft" (p. 166). As a mythological figure, the Child is

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17"The Psychological Aspects of the Kore," C. G. Jung and C.
Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology, trans. R. F. C. Hull

18Kerényi, Eleusis, p. 148.

undifferentiated, connected with the primal water from which all things are born, and inherently bisexual. One of its manifestations is the hermaphrodite, which in the Middle Ages came to be "a symbol of the creative union of opposites." Hillman sees the hermaphrodite expressed in the legendary blind seer Tiresias, who had spent part of his life as a woman, and in himself combined life and death as a form of consciousness:

He alone "kept his wits in the House of Hades." He plays an extraordinary role in many myths — those of Oedipus, Pentheus, Narcissus, Ulysses — representing a function that can see through life into death. Tiresias was of both sexes, implying that only his kind of consciousness can penetrate into the invisible world of Thanatos and all those psychic components of human nature that derive from death and can only be understood in terms of the soul's one certainty: death. To put it more clearly and more enigmatically: approximation to the hermaphrodite is a death experience; the movement into death proceeds through bisexual consciousness.

Moving into a state of child-like ambivalence means leaving behind the old personality, causing the death of the previous one-sided and limited state of being, and this movement is described in another of Roethke's poems, contemporaneous with the "Meditations":

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.  
"In a Dark Time," p. 231.

Roethke described the mind entering itself as "an androgynous act, a hole disappearing into itself, 'crawling into your hole and pulling

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your hole after you,' the folk saying has it." This is what the old woman has done by drawing into herself, and is the equivalent of what Kerényi calls "the abyss of the nucleus," the point at which the absolute and the relative meet, as in the old woman's epiphany; once this point is reached, "the world itself breaks in," flooding the seer with a sense of his and the world's divinity. In this way we remember our own soul's divinity, an experience attained through the hermaphroditic Child, whose divine and enigmatic qualities Wordsworth expresses thus:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read' st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind —
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods, like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave, A Presence which is not to be put by. . . .

In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Child formed a triad with the Mother and Daughter Goddesses, being born in the flames during the epiphany of Kore (Persephone's name in the Mysteries) that was experienced by the initiates as they imitated Demeter; in myth another triad forms between the Goddesses and the Child as Triptolemos, the youth

sent by Demeter to bestow her gift of grain to the world after the return of Persephone. Riding a fantastic winged chariot drawn by serpents, Triptolemos is an agent of the soul, and the wealth he distributes is expressed in the image of grain, an ear of which was silently held up for the initiates to see following their epiphany of Kore/Persephone. They experienced this wealth as an outpouring of love and divinity into their lives, the same kind of spiritual abundance the old woman feels after her illumination:

What lover keeps his song?
I sigh before I sing.
I love because I am
A rapt thing with a name. (p. 161)

Thus Roethke, "playing for keeps" as he wrote about death, was able to approach his subject by poetically "becoming" the old woman, for her seed-like qualities are found also in the figure of Demeter, who, like the old woman, must search for her lost maiden half. This other half exists in the Underworld realm of memory images, the recollection of which makes soul "happen" for her; such an experience opens the "abyss of the nucleus," letting the world break in just as the deepest point of inward-turning has been reached. This point is reflected in the coming together of Mother, Daughter, and Child in a single image: Mother and Daughter reunited transcend the barriers of time, of absolute and relative, and the Child is the fruit of this unity, in which all opposites are reconciled. By sending the Child out into life as love, the divine can once again be discovered in all things, as the old woman finds, depriving death of its sting.
CHAPTER II

FIRST MEDITATION

The dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades.

C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, Collected Works, 12, par. 439

Three years before completing the first of the "Meditations" Roethke wrote a poem called "Old Lady's Winter Words" (pp. 99-100), which in retrospect can be considered the seed from which the later sequence grew. Many of the "Meditations"' ideas and images are found in their germinal state in the earlier poem: the old woman's sense of life ebbing away; the need to remember; her wish for some sign of the divine; the memory of herself when young; images like seed, bird, boat, chimney, flash, wind, etc. But, unlike the later sequence, there is no journey, for these are the old lady's winter words, expressing the state preceding spring and rebirth, and the poem ends accordingly:

I fall, more and more,
Into my own silences.
In the cold air
The spirit hardens. (p. 100)

"Hardening" is antithetical to spirit, and will lead to "love's worst ugly day," the point at which the old lady's attitude becomes so frozen that there is no sign of life in it. At this point some movement back toward life and spirit must begin, and she thus starts her "Meditations" in an attempt to recollect her soul in the Underworld.
realm of memory.

The "First Meditation" is concerned with the forces that set the old woman in motion towards the transformation she so badly needs. On this "worst ugly day of love," amid a landscape of dry rock and cold, bleak wind, a tree "tilts from its roots,/Toppling down an embankment" (p. 151); the tree suggests a reverse to the biblical Tree of Life, and implies that what had represented life and divinity in the world to the old woman has now collapsed. The spirit is no longer moving outward into life, but down and inward, withdrawing from the surface of experience. "The rind, often, hates the life within" for having retreated so completely from sight, and the old woman feels herself to be a rind of sorts, a "strange piece of flesh" that can show little of her inner vitality.

"What's left is light as a seed," and as a seed the old woman begins her inward journey, like Demeter leaving her place with the gods to wander the earth in human form. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter the mourning Goddess keeps the sown seed hidden in the earth (1. 307), and the speaker of "Old Lady's Winter Words" is in similar fashion "a sentry of small seeds" (p. 99) which will lie dormant until spring; for each figure the inner life-germ, which is no longer manifested in experience but exists as potential, is reflected in the image of seed entrusted to the earth without sprouting. The earth may not be merely a receptacle, however, for in the Hymn to Demeter it is Gaia, the earth itself, who creates the narcissus that lures Persephone into Hades' trap (11. 7-9, 427-28). By performing such a function in the divine plan of Persephone's rape, the earth is thus permitted a
deeper knowledge than Demeter of the secret purposes behind existence. Perhaps it is this wisdom contained in the earth that the old woman means by the "old crone's knowing" she feels she needs, an awareness that perceives the divine plan in its own barrenness.

The old woman's journey of the spirit begins with her fantasy of "riding -- / Alone, on a bus through western country" (p. 152). Western country is where the sun sets, and where the ancient Greeks placed the entrance to Hades, and here it implies an excursion into death and the Underworld realm of the soul. Remembering the landscape described in part one, we might imagine the bus travelling through the dry American West, yet the old woman's ride is more like a journey over water:

The light tilting up, skyward, as we come over a little rise, Then down, as we roll like a boat from a wave-crest. (p. 152)

The journey towards death perceived as a sea voyage finds a parallel in D.H. Lawrence's "The Ship of Death," which portrays "the voyage of oblivion" one must take towards death. This poem opens much like "First Meditation" in feeling and purpose:

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit and the long journey towards oblivion.

The apples falling like great drops of dew to bruise themselves an exit from themselves.

And it is time to go, to bid farewell to one's own self, and find an exit from the fallen self.¹


The apples in connection with the "fallen self" suggest the fall from grace in Genesis, and the old woman has experienced such a fall through the loss of her youth and vital involvement with life, as does Demeter after her daughter's abduction. Their consequent in-turning of consciousness is also described by Lawrence: "And in the bruised body, the frightened soul/ finds itself shrinking, wincing from the cold/ that blows upon it from the orifices" (p. 717). The old woman feels this "cold" as "The small winds make their chilly indictments" (p. 151).

In Lawrence's poem a journey must be made at such a time, and it must be made alone, in "A little ship, with oars and food/ and little dishes, and all accoutrements/ fitting and ready for the departing soul" (p. 718), yet the experience is shared by all: "We are dying, we are dying, we are all of us dying/ and nothing will stay the death-flood rising within us/ and soon it will rise on the world, on the outside world" (p. 718). This is equally expressed in the old woman's fantasy of the bus ride, for all the passengers travel westward together, to the realm of death, while still being individually self-contained: "... for a while we are all alone, / Busy, obvious with ourselves" (p. 152), as if each is a seed-soul, the bus itself a kind of seed, floating on the "death-flood" like the ship of death. The bus journeys in darkness in the wandering manner of Demeter, or as in Lawrence's poem, "upon the waters of the end/ upon the sea of death, where still we sail/ darkly, for we cannot steer, and have no port" (p. 719).

A wind-clap from the "black shape" of a passing truck suddenly throws the old woman's thoughts backward in time, and the bus-ship-
seed becomes a greenhouse. Roethke had once before compared the
 greenhouse of his childhood with a ship in a poem fittingly called
 "Big Wind" (p. 39): the wind actually stops the local river in mid-
 winter, so the roses in his father's greenhouse must be kept alive
 by running water from a manure processor into the steam pipes, de-
 spite the odor — an instance of opposites (manure and roses)
 uniting — and the greenhouse becomes a ship riding out the night's
 storm. In both poems this dark, blasting wind thus serves as a
 transformative and challenging force.

 The wind is omnipresent in Roethke's poetry, sharing the
 multiple meanings of the Hebrew word *ruach* of the Old Testament which
 could refer to a movement of air, wind, breath, or spirit. In the
 poems it sometimes appears as a power in nature, as in "Big Wind";
 it is a Yahweh-like supportive presence, as in "Child on Top of a
 Greenhouse" (p. 41) in which the wind billows out the seat of the
 daring boy's britches, and can represent transcendent power: "A
 fallen man, I climb out of my fear. / The mind enters itself, and
 God the mind,/ And one is one, free in the tearing wind" (p. 231);
 it sometimes behaves, often in multiple form, like a nature spirit,
 such as the "small winds" that make their "chilly indictments" or
 the wind that can "sharpen" itself on a rock, and "wreathes round a
 tree" (p. 121); in the love poems the wind serves as a companionable
 extension of the speaker's new expansiveness of soul, or carries the
 loved one's soul: "She loved the wind because the wind loved me"
 (p. 114), "The wind's white with her name, / And I walk with the wind"
(p. 119); it is also an image of fertility: "The wind brings many fish" (p. 58). In all these manifestations the wind is analogous to spirit, following Jung's description: "In keeping with its original wind-nature, spirit is always an active, winged, swift-moving being as well as that which vivifies, stimulates, incites, fires, and inspires. To put it in modern language, spirit is the dynamic principle, forming for that reason the classical antithesis of matter -- the antithesis, that is, of its stasis and inertia. Basically it is the contrast between life and death." Accordingly, the wind's presence in Roethke's poetry is a sign that some transformation is close at hand.

In "First Meditation" the "small winds" serve as a hint of the old woman's need for change, and the dark wind-blast is a catalyst that sends her into a deeper layer of her memory. She remembers a greenhouse at which two song-sparrows sing back and forth, one inside, "perched on a wind-vent," the other "outside, in the bright day." The west wind setting "all the trees in motion" suggests a resolution of the threatening dark wind-blast into an animating breeze in the realm of memory, of soul and the Underworld, which in Greek thought "became more and more a pneumatic region, of air and wind." Birds are common images of the soul, or also serve as psychopomps, guides of souls, and Roethke's use of "shuttling" for

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the one bird's singing emphasizes the give and take of breath, again pneumā, or soul. Perched in the wind-vent, this sparrow exchanges pneumā with its companion outside through song; inside and below, as if in the Underworld, is a scene of rather chthonic activity. The men wheel dirt to cement benches, which in this context could imply burial rites, the benches reminiscent of stone sarcophagi. Also, the upswinging plank has a phallic character that could be related to the Egyptian god Osiris, who suffered death, was symbolized by a wooden pillar, and journeyed to the realm of death in a coffin-ship, inspiring Lawrence's "Ship of Death"⁵ and possibly the old woman's fantasy bus-ship that journeys through "western country." At least, the activity inside equals that outside; the plank even suggests a fertility in the interior darkness matching that of the gusting wind through the sunlit trees outside. The image as a whole seems to bring together the opposites of inner and outer, light and dark, life and death, as the bird-souls and their song indicate a point at which the barrier between the two realms is fluid, the equivalent of Kerényi's "abyss of the nucleus."

Perhaps the presentiment of change in this memory is unsettling, for next come other memories of journeys that cannot proceed past their launchings, ending in the image of two horses pulling a sleigh that momentarily "stand above" the old woman, "their black skins shuddering," before plunging down a hillside. These animals appear with the same

kind of violence and energy as the "black shapes" of the trucks, whose passing had wind-blasted the windows of the old woman's imagined bus. Jung\(^6\) finds strong connections between horses and wind in folklore and mythology, and we have seen already the transformative role wind plays in Roethke's poetry. Thus the horses and sleigh might be seen as the crystallization of the trucks' dark, amorphous presences: the image forcing the old woman's attention deeper into the soul-realm has finally established itself clearly in these beasts.

As with birds, the horse performs the function of psychopomp. According to Eliade, "The dominant aspect of the mythology of the horse is not infernal but funerary; the horse is a mythical image of death and hence is incorporated into the ideologies and techniques of ecstasy. The horse carries the deceased to the beyond; it produces the 'break-through in plane,' the passage from this world to other worlds," and is therefore employed by shamans in their soul-trips to the realm of the dead.\(^7\) The horse is accordingly connected with Hades,\(^8\) and the black horses of the poem, "plunging in the snow, their lines tangled, / A great wooden sleigh careening behind them" (p. 152) reflect the chaos and shock of Persephone's rape, capturing that moment of pause after Hades has pulled the maiden goddess onto his chariot, just before plunging into the abyss of the Underworld.

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\(^8\) Rose, pp. 91-2.
This image of sleigh and horses serves a pivotal function in the poem, for it ends the scenes of unsuccessful departure ("The ticket mislaid or lost," etc.) and converts the old woman's fantasy of journeying into an awareness of "the spirit," her spirit, as it "tries for another life" and "journeys." The violation scene in the Hymn to Demeter is equally pivotal, for though she knows her daughter is missing, Demeter does not take on human form until she actually hears the rape described, and thus has an image of it. The image makes the loss of her daughter real, or conscious, to her, and at that point her searching becomes aimless wandering, and her agitation gives way to hopeless mourning. The old woman's restlessness ("How can I rest in the days of my slowness?"), after finding direction in the fantasy journey to the west, also ends suddenly with the horses and sleigh vision, for the section that follows conveys a strangely calm, detached mood. The horses, which "stand above" her, apparently enable her to "under-stand," through their mythical reflection, the completeness and reality of her loss of youth and spirit, of value in life.

The gate to Dante's Inferno reads "Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here" (III,9), for, as we have seen, the Underworld realm of image and soul must be entered with no hopes or expectations. Just as Demeter had to "reduce" herself to human form in order to regain her lost daughter, and as the initiates at the Eleusinian Mysteries had to trade their everyday clothes for humble pilgrims' garments, the old woman undergoes a kind of self-reduction by imagining her "spirit" or soul (Roethke uses the terms somewhat interchangeably) "trying for another life" as if it were a tentative, backsliding crab, "Grotesque,
awkward, his extended eyes looking at nothing in particular" in the "muddy pond-water." By such reduction of the personal self the old woman is able to imagine the soul's journey as resembling a weary salmon's struggle upstream to its destiny, an instinctual and ultimately hopeless act which yet demands to be accomplished. The lowly, cold-blooded nature of the crab and fish imply that the soul's movement begins at a level far below and apart from consciousness, just as the Underworld is so far removed from the daily lives of men.

The peculiar calm of this section after the old woman's restless dissatisfaction with her life's stasis bears out Heraclitus' dictum, "It is in changing that things find repose." Her altered, now hopeless attitude gives her the distance and inner calm that allow her to enter the soul realm, "the waste lonely places / Behind the eye," without tension or complaint. Here nothing changes:

What's beyond never crumbles like an embankment,
Explodes like a rose, or thrusts wings over the Caribbean.
(p. 153)

In the Underworld realm of memory, there are "no pursuing forms," images connected with the "pursuits" of daily life, for here all physical, passionate acting-out is unsuitable. Travelers to Hades, like Odysseus, Aeneus and Dante, are warned they must show restraint, otherwise their journeys will be in vain; in Dante's case, periodic fainting spells are necessary when his emotions threaten to overwhelm him, otherwise he might lose his consciousness altogether. Here the

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vines, Roethke's emblem for Dionysian zol, life-force, are "graying to a fine powder," infertile and out of place. In such a realm the old woman can expect "no riven tree, or lamb dropped by an eagle," signs which might occur in the Bible to indicate the Lord's comforting presence. She remains as unenlightened as Demeter after her daughter's loss, to whom "... no one was willing, / Either of gods or mortals, to tell her the truth, / Nor did any prophetic bird fly to her with a true message."10

Yet the old woman has left the stasis of "love's worst ugly day" to journey to the Underworld, a change which involves what Jung calls the "dynamic principle" of spirit. She perceives spirit's presence as a mystic might, in the form of "uncreated light" which "manifests itself in and through created things":11

A flame, intense, visible,  
Runs fitfully along the stubble,  
Moves over the field,  
Without burning. (p. 154)

Such a heatless, "uncreated" light belongs to the Underworld experience, and has parallels in the vision shared by the initiates at Eleusis, which involved a "birth" within a great fire by the returning Persephone, herself a goddess of the fire.

The experience is brought on by birds' singing; birds are messen-

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12 Kerényi, Eleusis, pp. 101-02.
gers to the "other world" and, "like angels, are symbolic of thought, of imagination and of the swiftness of spiritual processes and relationships," so it is fitting that the old woman, "bird-furtive" herself, receives her illumination with the song-birds' aid. She first hears the cerulean, an elusive warbler that keeps to the highest treetops, then the phoebe's distant lonely song, followed by a whippoorwill, singing "along the smoky ridges / A single bird calling and calling" (p. 154). The movement is from above in the sky down to the earth, as in the image of the eagle dropping the lamb, and the last call, at ground level, ushers in the illumination, coming from a bird that sings mainly at dusk, dawn, and on moonlit nights. At such times physical reality becomes a shifting world in which shapes lose their edges and begin to flow into one another — an atmosphere for transformation, in which the gates of Hell can be found, as in Dante's *Inferno*. The repeated call of the whippoorwill has a chantlike effect; and its connection with the "smoky ridges" and the fume that "reminds" the old woman ("re-minds" — brings on a different state of consciousness) gives the scene the quality of a shamanistic ceremony, in which smoke would be used to achieve states of ecstasy.\(^{14}\) Such rites might also result in the "feminization" of those involved, a change not too different from that of the initiates at Eleusis "becoming" the Goddess Demeter.

Thus from the stasis of her "Winter Words" the old woman has


followed the pattern of Demeter: restless from a sense of loss, she searches her own psychic world until the loss has been "made real" by the image of black horses "lunging down a hillside," echoing the mythical rape of Persephone. The hopelessness and aimlessness that follow, however, enable her to enter the Underworld realm of memory, an inner change or movement which is affirmed by the presence of spirit in a vision. So far the old woman is "lacking a god," for the traditional, patriarchal God of Christianity seems unable to help her here in the Underworld, and no other god has yet come forth for her. Like Dante and Odysseus she must rely upon the shades around her for guidance, not, it seems, the Father above.
CHAPTER III

I'M HERE

In her next meditation the old woman casts a cold eye on life and death, asking, "Is it enough?" (p. 155). Her Demeter-like attitude of hopelessness without despair provides her the distance to see through the endlessly cyclic nature of life. Following the same winter-to-spring pattern as found between "Old Lady's Winter Words" and "First Meditation," she sees that external, daily-life signs of renewal are inadequate: "Outside, the same sparrows bicker in the eaves" (p. 155). These are hardly the bird-psychopomps of her greenhouse memory, leading her to the Underworld realm of image and soul. "Behind the child's archness" the old woman senses "the bad animal," which is graphically illustrated in a minor tale of Demeter, who, thirsty after denying herself sustenance while mourning, asks drink from a mortal woman; as the Goddess eagerly drinks, the woman's son laughs at her abandon, and she throws a glance at him, changing him into a lizard.\(^1\) In the Hymn to Demeter the disguised Goddess becomes nurse to a human boy, and at night holds him "like a brand / Deep in the heart of the fire" (ll. 240-41) in order to make him immortal by burning off his mortal qualities, the passionate, "bad animal" in his nature that prevents him from seeing through the daily round of existence enough to free

\(^1\)Rose, p. 94.
himself of it. Both Demeter and the old woman seem to direct their dissatisfaction with mundane reality through the child, who is crucial to their transformations, as we will see.

"Needles and corners" — sharp, painful insights and approaching transformations — perplex the old woman now, for she can now perceive a darker side of Demeter's nature in herself. She wonders, "Dare I shrink to a hag, / The worst surprise a corner could have, / A witch who sleeps with her horse?" (p. 155). As nurse to the mortal child, Demeter states she knows "a lucky charm against baneful magic and witchcraft" (l. 230), implying she has magical powers of her own. Kerényi finds a "second Demeter" in the figure of Hecate, who has connections with the moon, therefore rain and fertility, and with the Underworld, and thus Persephone. She is, like Persephone, "queen of the ghosts, and therefore of all manner of magic, the blacker the better," yet she is also the three faced Goddess who is mistress of the three realms — earth, heaven, and sea — and more particularly of crossroads, which are "great centres of ghostly and magical activity in well nigh all countries." She is therefore connected with transforma-

3 Rose, p. 121.
4 In this form she serves as the prototype of Robert Graves' The White Goddess.
5 Kerényi, "Kore," p. 112.
6 Rose, p. 121.
tion in its darkest, most fearful aspect, and if some fates are worse, it is because they are untransformative.

Demeter's dark side is manifested also in an Arcadian myth that she herself was raped by Poseidon in stallion form after she had taken the shape of a mare to avoid the god's advances. She was worshipped there as Demeter Erinys ("Raging"), the Black Demeter, represented as a woman with a horse's head, an image not far removed from "A witch who sleeps with her horse" (p. 155). Since here Demeter suffers the same fate as her daughter, there is the implication that rape is the principle mode of transformation within the Demeter-Persephone image, for even in the Homeric Hymn, where Demeter suffers no such violation, she explains her presence on Earth as a lone old woman through a story of having been kidnapped by pirates. In "Meditations" the appearance of spirit as wind-blasts from dark trucks and the wild rearing of black horses shows the shocking and overwhelming quality of the old woman's transformation, making it a kind of psychic abduction. As Kerényi puts it, "... by entering into the figure of Demeter we realize the universal principle of life, which is to be pursued, robbed, raped, to fail to understand, to rage and grieve, but then get everything back and be born again." The old woman has been given no rest


8 For a psychological discussion of this archetypal pattern, see Patricia Berry, "The Rape of Demeter/Persephone and Neurosis," Spring, (1975), 186-98.

9 "Kore," p. 137.
by the "pursuing forms" of daily life, has been robbed, raped of her youth, her sense of spirit and value in life; now she fails to understand, rages and grieves, but has yet to be reborn.

Part two introduces a new "voice," that of the old woman as a maiden, her Persephone half. Kerényi sees in Persephone a form of the Kore ("Maiden") figure, as are Athena and Artemis, each a virgin Goddess with "a budlike capacity to unfold and yet contain a compact world in itself." In the poem, the one-in-oneself quality of the maiden is made quite obvious, though not without reference to its ephemeral nature:

I was queen of the vale
For a short while,
Living all my heart's summer alone,
Ward of my spirit. (p. 157)

To the ancients the term "virginity" did not refer to sexuality, but to the woman's act of giving herself in marriage,¹¹ and thus Persephone's fate as the Kore can be seen as "an allegory of woman's fate: the borders of Hades an allegory of the border-line between maidenhood and the 'other' life, and the seducer, King of the Underworld, an allegory of the earthly bridegroom and husband."¹² Yet as Kerényi points out, Persephone was honored primarily as Queen of the Dead, so that in her figure "lost maidenhood and


crossing the borders of Hades are allegorical equivalents -- one can stand for the other equally well. ¹³ Her rape is thus a marriage to death, a fulfillment of her other role as Queen of the Dead. In the figure of Persephone there are two forms of being which are carried to extremes and balanced against one another. "One of the forms (daughter and mother) appears as life; the other (young girl with husband) as death. Mother and daughter form a living unity in a borderline situation -- a natural unit which, equally naturally, carries within it the seeds of its own destruction."¹⁴

As the old woman's other half, the remembered maiden-self is as close to the new fertility of spring ("My thighs brushing against flower-crowns) as the old woman is to autumn (What's left is light as a seed"), and in both cases are poised on the edge of life, singing "to the edges of flame," or transformation. The girl is "pleased to be," yet at the same time aware of something absent:

So much of adolescence is an ill-defined dying,
An intolerable waiting,
A longing for another place and time,
Another condition. ¹⁵

Before the rape, Persephone is hardly distinguishable from her mother, and when the two Goddesses are pictured together in ancient art, "one cannot make out at first their attributes that make the distinction possible. One is often characterized as a maiden only by the flower

¹⁴Ibid.
¹⁵(p. 156)
she wears, the other as the mature goddess by the fruit. "15 Persephone must establish her uniqueness by suffering the death of marriage and becoming Queen of Souls, "the eternally unique one who is no more."16

The old woman as maiden is "Flesh-awkward, half-alive," waiting for that "other condition" to appear, the nature of which is seen in her preference for horses, with their Underworld connotations, over "high places," which are in the direction opposite to her destiny, and perhaps carry a hint of the Christian Father of her culture, who never quite became her god.17 It is in Persephone's nature to be passive, however, and similarly the old woman/maiden merely waits, "a willow to the wind," while the imagery suddenly carries omens of her state to come: the willow is sacred to Hecate and Persephone, and the bats at noon, which would be hanging by their feet in sleep, reflect the reversal of things that occurs in Hades.18 The chimney through which swallows fly has qualities of both phallus and birth canal, but lacks

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17"Rubbing my nose in the wool of blankets" might be compared to an Orphic version of Persephone's rape in which she is violated by her father, the subterranean Zeus, Hades, or Dionysos, while she was working on wool (Kerényi, Eleusis, p. 66). In the Homeric Hymn (11. 196-97) Demeter is offered a white sheepskin on which to sit when she enters the Eleusinian family's house, disguised as an old woman.

18In ancient Egyptian thought, "the realm of the dead is situated on the underside of the disk of the earth. People there walk with their feet against the ceiling." J. Zandee, Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 73.
smoke, the presence of spirit; finally, the maiden "whitens," her voice softens, as if already taking on some of the characteristics of one who exists in a state of non-being in the Underworld.

Part three moves closer to the abduction by introducing the motif of the flower which Gaia, the earth, had produced to lure Persephone to Hades. The old woman-maiden remembers catching her dress on a rose-briar: "When I bent to untangle myself, / The scent of the half-opened buds came over me. / I thought I was going to smother" (p. 156). In Christian tradition the rose has become emblematic of spiritual wholeness, as in the mandala of the white Mystic Rose in Dante's Paradiso, but the roses of the young woman's experience seem more like the red roses of passion and death; she is caught on the thorns, also images of death and pain, and Christian symbols of sin.19 The deadly, smothering effect of these flowers presages the maiden's "death," but also her transformation, for the word "rose" equates with "Eros, Horus, iris, hoss (horse), urus (great bull), and yielding fire essence,"20 images combining death, regeneration, and spirit.

The red rose can also stand for "the vanities of this world,"21 and as such is connected with the narcissus, the narcotic flower that lures Persephone in Hades. In the Homeric Hymn this flower is "hun-

20Ibid.
21Ibid.
dred-headed," suggesting the multiplicity of material life, as well as its repetitive qualities. Connected with this is the figure of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in the water and died of his hopeless longing, afterwards commemorated by the flower named after him. Narcissism is Persephone's one act, her fascination with the image drawing her from life and enabling Hades to steal her away to the realm of non-being. It is possible that the narcissus was used at the Eleusinian Mysteries\(^{22}\) as was the poppy, sacred to Demeter,\(^{23}\) and the special kykeon mixture drunk by the initiates, possibly alchoholic or hallucinogenic or both; this implies a sleepy, drugged aspect of Persephone, for the "heavy and narcotic aroma of spring flowers hangs about her, and about the actual spring."\(^{24}\) Thus the old woman muses on "the slow coming-out of sleep" after the flower incident, and how "The body, delighting in thresholds, / Rocks in and out of itself" (p. 157). Her "sleep" will end when she suffers her "marriage to death," so that these could be considered images of "covert and unselfconscious death eroticism, inviting death, courting it, flirting with it and longing for its embrace -- longing to be united with one's umbra [shadow or reflection]," as in the case of Narcissus.\(^{25}\)


The next images in the poem, the vision of dancing rats and the singing bird behind the eye, are the old woman's acknowledgement of the source of spirit within herself. She remembers how once when sick, "The whole place shook whenever I got a chill," yet when she closed her eyes, thus opening the eye of imagination, there was a vision of small creatures dancing anthropomorphically around a fire, and they "seemed very happy." As before she projects her own condition onto the world around her in Demeter fashion, so that it suffers her chill with her, yet now the "flame, intense, visible," she had viewed as outside herself is imagined inside, an inner source of life and heat, the comfort it provides reflected in the joy of the tiny dancers. Just as the greenhouse birds function as psychopomps for the old woman, these rats and tree-shrews are likewise "helping spirits," such as shamans depend upon for assistance,26 showing the old woman the vital germ of her central seed-self. These creatures also resemble the dwarfish, dancing Korybantes of ancient Greece, and the subhuman satyrs attending the Divine Child Dionysos.27 The bird in her grandmother's "inner eye," the eye of imagination, serves the same function, the bird being a symbol of the soul, which never stops singing.

Part four restates the central duality of the Demeter-Persephone

26 Eliade, Shamanism, pp. 88-95.

relationship. The geranium that persists in dying reflects the rather anonymous, cyclic flow of material existence — it faces where the sun was, mechanically obeying the physical forces. The roses, however, though representing passion and death for the maiden, express for the old woman an undying essence which does not rely on matter for its existence; thus she "can wear them by looking away." This seems to be the proper approach to the invisible realm of memory and soul, for in Greece "people who sacrificed to the beings of the Underworld [who are only images of the psyche] had to do so with averted gaze." 28

The geranium also reflects Demeter's and thus the old woman's own form of narcissism, described by Pat Berry as "the ceaseless self-indulgence of her suffering. Her dry tears erode the soil, her suffering engenders suffering for all the world, her mourning, mourning " (p. 191). The constant repetition — as with the ever-dying geranium — seems to imitate "the endless cycle by which essence is expressed" in the Underworld by such figures as Sisyphus unsuccessfully rolling his stone up a hill, or Axion impaled on an ever-revolving wheel, for crimes no longer remembered. The old woman now prefers "the still joy" of a moment caught out of time and being, an image that exists, in its uniqueness, in the Underworld realm of memory:

The wasp drinking at the edge of my cup;
A snake lifting its head;
A snail's music. (p. 157)

The old woman's backsliding, her fear of the journey to Hades, ends in part five. She has sensed the presence of spirit within her, the sign of god within, and knows she can survive any struggle of the soul: "What's weather to me?" (p. 158). Now she yearns for transformation, for the fertilizing force that will cause her seed-being to spring to life, the return of spirit to the surface of her life. She seeks the fertilizing water ("a pond with eels"), the spirit-wind that engenders the fruit of the orchard. She will no longer remain anonymous, a "midge of that and this," but wishes to connect with soul-images she has projected around herself: the ground "glitters like salt," the alchemical symbol for soul, and above, all around, the singing birds. Her narcissistic mourning ended, she wants now to include the world in her transformation, holding the valley in her lap and calling on the wind as if aware of herself for the first time:

If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here. (p. 158)

CHAPTER IV

HER BECOMING

In "Her Becoming" the old woman revels in the freedom from limitation engendered by her fresh awareness of spirit. No longer "a strange piece of flesh, / Nervous and cold, bird-furtive" and at odds with herself, she has "learned to sit quietly," echoing Eliot's *Four Quartets*, without attachment to a limited self caught in matter: "My shape a levity -- Yes!" (p. 159). She doesn't feel old now, and delights in her own nakedness, which shows the clarity of her being as her soul shines through it, so that the young body she busies herself with reflects the ageless qualities of the soul. The seed is beginning to sprout, and inside she finds natural forces flowing through her, her breast "wild as the waves." This imagery suggests a moistening within the old woman, such as Heraclitus describes in fragment 77: "Souls take pleasure in becoming moist," even though "It is death to souls to become water . . ." (frag. 36), a phenomenon we have already seen in the old woman's bus-ship and "Lawrence's "Ship of Death." This watery "death" dissolves the distinctions and limitations imposed by daily life, so that all that was "real" now suffers a sea-change. Heraclitus (who took soul as his first principle, according to Aristotle)\(^1\) says we can find no boundaries to the soul; accordingly the old woman, in a reversal of

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\(^1\)De Anima, a2, 405a25.
her previous withdrawal from the world, sees her soul reflected in all around her; the earth itself has been transformed into a "tune," spirit as a principle of motion, of life, mobilizing the very matter on which she walks. She asks "What's a seed?" as if she has never been in a seed-state herself, but has been blossoming forth eternally, and as a flower-being feels herself in the company of "maimed gods," figures life Attis, Adonis, and Osiris who, though divine and therefore immortal, periodically must die and be reborn again, their existence as ephemeral and ideal in form as blossoms. The old woman thus becomes lost in the rose, the undying image that leads her into the Underworld.

For the first time the old woman speaks of love, which lights the "shape . . . Light as a petal falling upon stone" (p. 159), that she perceives, the "ghost" from her own breast, that "plays before me like a child." By sitting quietly, allowing her soul to "moisten," the old woman has discovered within herself the image of the Divine Child in "the soul's house," the House of Hades. This is the image Demeter tries to refine from the mortal infant she holds in the fire, and which the initiates at Eleusis found in a vision of the child born to Persephone in a great fire as a climax of the Mysteries. Being "lighted with love," this child-shape suggests Eros, whose winged, airy appearance in ancient art so often resembles "A child at play, a wind-excited bird." "Light as a petal," Eros often carries blossoms, and "Plays boy-like with light feet upon the
flowers," reminding us again of those flower-beings, the "maimed
gods." Orphic cosmogony made Eros the oldest of the gods and
connected him with dancing and the harmony of the spheres, which
the old woman perceives as "the ground alive, / The earth itself
a tune" (p. 159). His winged form, Jane Harrison shows, is bor­
rowed from the Keres, spirit-daemons connected with fertility,
though more often with sleep and death, and "In essence, as in
art-form, Keres and Erotes are near akin." Thus Eros has an
Underworld aspect, appearing to the old woman as an airy, spirit­
like "ghost from the soul's house," the pneumatic, windy House
of Hades.

Eros, then, can be seen as an image of spirit in both its
upward and downward aspects, as that which gives life and that which
leads to death. These qualities of Eros are found in two figures of
the Eleusinian Mysteries, Triptolemos and Ploutos, each an outward
manifestation of that holy image, the Divine Child. In his cult,
Triptolemos was a mortal hero sent by Demeter to dispense her gift
of grain to the world, once she had reunited with Persephone. In
art he was popularly portrayed as an ever more youthful figure riding
a fantastic winged chariot drawn by dragons, and carrying the gift

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3 Harrison, p. 656.

4 Harrison, p. 631.
of grain. In this form he has "something, rather, of the movement of delicate wind or fire, about him and his chariot," having taken on the life promoting, ethereal qualities of spirit. However, Ploutos, "riches," has a darker, Underworld nature, being the child of Persephone and Plouton, "giver of wealth," also known as Hades. Ploutos appears as a child holding a cornucopia, showing the benefits of entering the "lower" realm, an idea Kerenyi finds expressed in John 12:24: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth much fruit." Thus, as Kerenyi points out, "Names and images of wealth -- the name Plouton is one of them -- surround the Mysteries." Ploutos and Triptolemos together express the source of this wealth and the effect such plenty has upon the world, experienced by those who have made the Underground journey. These riches can also be expressed through Eros as love, that which gives value to life. The old woman, having yet to experience this wealth completely, can only wonder at this "ghost from the soul's house" which she intuitively senses is "lighted with love."

Plato mythologizes Eros as "neither mortal nor immortal, for in the space of a day he will be now, when all goes well with him, alive and blooming, and now dying, to be born again by virtue of his father's


6 Pater, p. 107.

[Plenty's] nature, while what he gains will always ebb away as fast.\textsuperscript{8}

This expresses the old woman's experience of Eros, or spirit, for it seems to constantly flow into and out of her "Meditations" without warning, leaving her alternately mystified and frustrated. At the end of part one her vision vanishes, bringing her consciousness back down to earth:

I'm where I always was.
The lily broods. Who knows
The way out of a rose? (p. 159)

Now, in part two, she begins to ask which of her experiences, dreaming or waking, is the more real, which matters more. Is it the "sea" of unconsciousness, the sleep of the changeless gods that we really wish? The "jauntier principle of order" in her dreams and meditations makes everyday reality seem "shadows": she wonders "What else can I steal from sleep?" (p. 160). Her "great praise" for the other, spiritual reality, causes the old woman to feel intensely the ignorance and suffering of life without spirit, Eros, involved only with material reality: "Is there a wisdom in objects? Few objects praise the Lord" (p. 160). She can't live "the dangerous life of an insect," automatic, reactive, mindless. The material life consists of "the cold fleshless kiss of contraries," an earthly hell, a terrible sleep:

Machines, machines, loveless, temporal;  
Mutilated souls in cold morques of obligation. (p. 160)

The old woman's nightmare vision of the material world is powerful enough to send her to the opposite extreme in part three—a time "when reality comes closer," a remembered epiphany. She recalls her maiden, "Kore," self again, who is not so passive as Persephone, being "A raw tumultuous girl." Instead of the grassy meadow where Persephone met her "death," this maiden runs into "a little wood," which is more the realm of Artemis, another Kore figure. Goddess of the hunt, Artemis is fiercely virginal, yet her maidenhood, says Kerényi, "presupposes" the possibility of her rape, so that her companion nymphs, who seem very close to the Goddess in nature, often become mothers by the Gods, and Artemis is Goddess of childbirth. This suggests a particular tension within the one figure. The nymphs who make this mistake of union with the Gods must suffer the penalty of death, which is what happens to the maiden Persephone, while Artemis is present (Hymn to Demeter, l. 424). Kerényi calls this first form of Persephone an "Artemisian" figure, saying, "Artemis and Persephone are like two sides to the same reality. Artemis is the active one. She carries death in herself in the form of murder as a huntress . . . Persephone is completely passive. She was picking flowers when she was raped by the Lord of the Dead."  

This shift in the poem sequence from the passive to the active

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Kore figure places more emphasis on its childbearing function, to show the origin of the "ghost from the soul's house" envisioned by the old woman. Persephone's bringing forth of a Divine Child in the fire was the major epiphany of the Eleusinian Mysteries, yet this action falls more clearly in the realm of her "other side," Artemis, who presided over childbearing, and thus would be present at this divine birth, just as she was at Persephone's abduction. Hence the "Lesser Mystery" from which the procession of initiates to Eleusis began was held in Agrai, a district sacred to Artemis, and within the sanctuary of Eleusis was a small temple to "Artemis guardian of the gate." Artemis is "especially close to Hekate," being by some accounts her cousin, and the two share connections with the moon, within whose light the epiphany to be experienced by the old woman takes place.

The spiritual experience begins in the "actual air," the "real" spiritual air ready to "act" towards her transformation. The girl steps with care, "like a new-shod horse" over wet stones as if they were sacred, or alive: anointed stones were in ancient times thought to be alive, or seats of inspiration such as the omphalos, where communications took place between the Gods and earth, and thus they

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11 Eleusis, pp. 48-49.
12 Ibid., p. 70.
13 Gods, p. 132.
14 Richard Broxton Onians, The Origins of European Thought About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pres., 1951), pp. 280-281.
represent a kind of moistening transformation. The horse image suggests another such transformation, for Demeter was said to be raped by Poseidon, the sea god, after she took the form of a mare to elude him. The girl, fittingly enough, follows this image with running, like a pursued nymph, into the wood, so that she asks, "Where was I going? Where? / What was I running from?" (p. 160). She has waited "until the day burned down" as if undergoing a refinement, having its mortality burned off like the child Demeter placed in the fire, and now it is "not night or day" but a twilight scene potent for transformation. Natural shapes have become "symbolical," like the soul-images of the Underworld, so that she is "The only thing alive in heaven's eye." Her actions thus reflect the reaction of a living thing in the realm of the Dead.

She sheds her clothes to satisfy her "daemon," the force of spirit within her, the dark Eros driving her to this "death"; casting off clothes, as a shaman might before entering a trance state, is a way of removing the everyday conscious attitude, for the girl's epiphany requires her to forsake all attachment to her personal, limited self. Similarly, she cries her life to the "loved" fox, a "helpful animal" connected with spirit, and the wren, which European peasants annually sacrifice like a maimed god, as if shedding it, too, along with her clothes. Suddenly, all stops:

silence becomes a "thing," the scene shrinks, along with her individual being, "to a pin." At this point she experiences the death of her conscious attitude ("Did my will die? Did I?") and says goodbye to its attributes: Narcissistic sighs, her flowing thighs, and the toad and frog, cold, moist creatures reflecting, perhaps, such qualities in herself. The last of her personal being thus dropping away, the girl experiences a vision:

Who can believe the moon?
I have seen! I have seen!
The line! The holy line!
A small place all in flame. (p. 161)

This turning-away from the cold, damp moon toward the flame implies that the fertilizing moisture so much needed at the beginning of the "Meditations" must be converted at some point to fire, or spirit. Jung writes that "Spirit in alchemy almost invariably has a relation to water or to the radical moisture, a fact that may be explained simply as the empirical nature of the oldest form of 'chemistry,' namely the art of cooking. The steam arising from boiling water conveys the first vivid impressions of 'metasomatosis,' the transformation of the corporeal into the incorporeal, into spirit or pneuma. The relation of spirit to water resides in the fact that the spirit is hidden in the water, like a fish. This connection between spirit and water is found within the figure Kerényi calls "the Primordial Child, whose home is the

primal water, and the best-known of whose many names is "Eros."18

The old woman shares in the moistening of her memory-self until their two natures dissolve together, releasing the "small place all in flame," the fire of spirit, or Eros. Now she speaks in the present tense, for past and present, maiden and old woman, have been merged into one, an emphatic one: "One follows fire. One does, /
My breath is more than yours" (p. 161). Like Demeter, who rushes like "A maenad, frenzied" to become reunited with her other half, Persephone, regaining her inner unity, the old woman now enjoys "The grandeur of a crazy one alone!"

Spirit means Eros for the old woman ("I love because I am /
A rapt thing with a name"), and in part four she is herself an expression of spirit: "A shape without a shade, or almost none, /
I hum in pure vibration, like a saw" (p. 161). She dares "caress the stones, the field my friend," and like Eros and his fellow daemons, she lives in the air, having "the long light" for home, "becoming" the wind. The "small place all in flame" of her vision was the awakening of the divine "Primal" Child within her soul, possible only upon her "death," and now, appearing as dark Ploutos with cornucopia and as fiery, airborn Triptolemos, the riches of her transformation enter her life.

CHAPTER V

FOURTH MEDITATION

In "Her Becoming" the old woman, through remembering and finally reuniting with her maiden self, has a high spiritual experience, such as the initiates appear to have shared at Eleusis. Now she must, like the initiates, return that experience to the earth, the material world she had come to view so bitterly as a place of "Machines, machines, loveless, temporal." Though after her epiphany the old woman dared to "caress the stones," this was as a wind daemon acting as pure spirit. Jung calls this "world-spurning passion of the 'spirit'" a "natural instinct to cleave to the realities of the soul," but that the soul's reality cannot be embraced at the expense of physical reality, or vice versa: "Whoever loves the earth and its glory, and forgets the 'dark realm' [the Underworld], or confuses the two (which is mostly what happens), has spirit for his enemy; and whoever flees from the earth and falls into the 'eternal arms' [spirit] has life for an enemy." Thus the final two "Meditations" are concerned with the balance between these two realities.

The "Fourth Meditation" begins as the old woman locates herself in relation to the realities of world and spirit:

1 *Symbols of Transformation*, p. 396.

2 Ibid.
I was always one for being alone, 
Seeking in my own way, eternal purpose; 
At the edge of the field waiting for the pure moment; (p. 162)

She finds herself continually at the "edge" between this and the soul's worlds, "A drop of the night rain still in me," the germinal sense of her last "moistening" in the realm of soul. She once more remembers her maiden (Persephone) state, when she could still stretch out "the thin bones of my innocence" -- at the same time implying the death, the laying out of that innocence. She was "A pensive petal" like the flower child Narcissus, hiding her songs to sing only to herself: "Once I could touch my shadow, and be happy" (p. 162). But this "vague life of the mouth" gives way to the "more impossible demands" of the silent Underworld, forcing her again to wait at the edge of the two realms. This edge-life, however, offers no guarantees; sometimes there are signs and images -- "the shape of a lark rises from a stone" (p. 162) -- but no song, no soul. And yet, because of such images, one waits.

In part two the old woman begins a tirade against those women who have not moved toward the "edge," asking if women must only be waiting vessels who cannot set in motion their own transformations, becoming "lost in a love," but remaining "only half aware of the intransient glory" of the presence of Eros. Hillman suggests that since in Plato's myth Eros is said to be the son of Penia, poverty or need, the sense of lacking Eros is therefore responsible for in-

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3 [Myth of Analysis, p. 62, n. 59.](#)
stigating transformation within a person; a vague awareness of the 
glory of Eros thus would result in an insufficient sense of the need 
for inner change and rebirth, such as the old woman sees in the 
women she rails against. These are the narcissistically self-involved, 
"The ritualists of the mirror," and those who, like Demeter does for 
a time, lose themselves completely in the world of matter, women "who 
become their possessions, / Shapes stiffening into metal. . . . Those 
cat-like immaculate creatures / For whom the world works" (p. 163) 
who have never known "the soul's authentic hunger," the absence of 
Eros, the son of Poverty.

These women need to act in their own behalf, so that a "roaring 
boy," as an outside force, would not help, and the old woman "wishes 
them awake" with a chantlike prayer that details this awakening. 
First they must move towards their own Persephone nature, the "high 
flower of the hay" climbing into their hearts; hence they become like 
flowers, leaning into the light, sleeping "in robes of green, among 
the ancient ferns," letting their flower-sense draw them into the 
Kore role. This act of identification with the flower-like Persephone 
within brings their ravishment by spirit, implied in the image of 
a sun-gilded worm, which carries both phallic and Underworld conno-
tations; thus the women can be "taken by the true burning" of Eros, 
experiencing their own birth in the fire as they "flame into being."

Finally the old woman contrasts an image of these "gentle and 
beautiful still-to-be-born women" walking formally and artificially 
in "a greeny garden" with the crude and violent beginnings of human-
kind. We began in the lowly tree-shrew, which in "I'm Here" represented
the old woman's inner source of spirit, and here is an image of humankind's germinal spirit: it barely survives, yet from that survival we somehow develop. Man is a "prince of small beginnings" who "Made from his terror and dismay a grave to the point of being dead philosophical language" (p. 164), yet Eros can turn him into a "lion of flame" who still "moves gently among the birds." The greatness of humankind is due to the presence of Eros; by turning away from the still-to-be-born, the old woman reaffirms Eros, and thus human life.

This affirmation of the value of human life and love returns the old woman to the unattached, receptive state of the "edge" — "What's become of care?" Her transformation has not been a "fall" but a release from limitation: though a "husk" she "lives on, ardent as a seed," her being set in motion by spirit, so that "My whole forehead's a noise!" She loves the great dead, Underworld beings such as Persephone and Hades, because these figures contain implications of soul, and their memory allows her to partake of immortality: "I breathe what I am: / The first and last of all things" (p. 164),
CHAPTER VI

WHAT CAN I TELL MY BONES?

Throughout the "Meditations" sequence spirit, Eros, flows in and out, causing in the old woman alternately ecstasy and despair. In "First Meditation" she is relieved of her Demetrian mourning and inspired by her vision of fire in the field; "I'm Here" continues her movement out of matter-boundedness, ending in memories that locate spirit for the old woman within herself; "Her Becoming" shows the birth of Eros within her through a remembered epiphany; and the "Fourth Meditation" affirms the value of Eros in the old woman's life through comparison with those who lack it. In the final poem, "What Can I Tell My Bones?", these last questions must be answered: with what God does Eros connect me? What does this God want of me?

The title sets the tone of this questioning by echoing a passage from Ezekiel (37:1-14) in which Yahweh shows the prophet a valley of dry bones. Asked whether these bones can live, Ezekiel places himself in Yahweh's hands: "You know, Lord Yahweh." Faced with her own "dry bones" the old woman has no such I-Thou relationship on which to rely. The images of her transformations do not belong to the Christian tradition, but follow the pattern of the Mysteries of Eleusis. Her epiphanies occur in nature, not in churches, involving the assault of Underworld Gods and dissolving of consciousness. Roethke claimed that his old woman character would prefer a "congeries of eels" over a
"hassle of bishops."¹ All this implies that the old woman, a humble housewife in a patriarchal culture, must finally leave the Christian tradition to find a pattern allowing for the "lower" experience of the Underworld, the realm of soul. The God that she lacks in the "First Meditation" is the God that can lead her through the Underworld journey of death; Dante, too had to rely upon the pagan shade of Virgil, rather than a Christian figure, to make his trip through the Inferno.

She at first considers the apparently endless beginnings she seems fated to undertake, living on the edge as she does. "The soul knows not what to believe" confronted by such change; yet another part of her speaks:

Before the moon draws back,
Dare I blaze like a tree? (p. 165)

The moon, with its Underworld connections, represents the very transformation that confuses her soul so much, although she seems to concentrate on nothing but this kind of change, living in "a world always late afternoon," on the very edge of death, "Longing for absolutes that never come." She has lost her confidence, and is fearful of the world of matter, the "dance of natural objects in the mind" which in its alluring way causes her to devalue the realities of the soul.

Eros and the vision gone, she despairs over existence that is physical only: "The day dies in a child. / How close we are to the sad animals!" (p. 165). Without Eros the "perpetual beginnings" seem less like transformation or partaking of immortality than as sheer drain, "thinning

¹Selected Letters, p. 231.
the soul's substance." We only sing, experience soul, at the moment of our death, as swans were thought to do, yet fear the "darkening shore" which shows that moment is near; or, like the mechanical insects, so helplessly caught on the "spiral tree" of unending cycles. After two images of dry infertility, the wind but no wind, the phallic vine "lashing in dry fury," comes a third, more obviously directed to the human condition, as the old woman now sees it:

A man chasing a cat,
With a broken umbrella,
Crying softly. (p. 165)

But, something has to be said to her bones, in spite of her despair, and in part two she begins. According to Cirlot, in Jewish tradition the word for "bone" also referred to "... an indestructible, corporeal particle, represented by a piece of very hard bone; it is, then, symbolic of the belief in resurrection, and is comparable with the symbol of the chrysalis from which the butterfly emerges."\(^2\) Ezekiel is able to resurrect the bones by "prophesying" over them, as Yahweh instructs him to do, for breath is also spirit: likewise, the old woman's speech to her own bones causes her self-renewal. This, again, is essentially what the old woman is concerned with throughout the "Meditations," talking to herself in order to remember her soul through the Gods that she had forgotten.

After some misgivings, she starts with basics: "When I was a lark, I sang; / When I was a worm, I devoured," thus fulfilling

her proper function at the time. But now she is a human being, who can speak, and can also share in the immortality of the Gods by being able to communicate them to herself, allowing her various parts to speak:

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing. (p. 166)

"Mist alters the rocks," so more basics are needed. Here the old woman pictures her desire as a wind (spirit) trapped in a cave, something like the unenlightened mortals of Plato's allegory of the cave, who see only shadows and consider them reality. Eros, however, "is midway between ignorance and knowledge," and cannot be entirely understood; thus it is sufficient that the old woman says, "Love is my wound" (p. 166).

Then the central question arises: "The cause of God in me -- is it gone?" meaning that which makes God "happen" in her seems suddenly absent. The God experience is a soul experience, which for the old woman involves moistening, just as Ezekiel's dry bones lack the moisture identified in his time with "Youth, the fullness of life and strength." In this anguished moment she turns to a figure connected with the primal water: "Mother, Mother of us all, tell me where I am!" (p. 166). Asking the question provides the answer, for the old woman has taken the role of Child as she asks it, the Child of the Mother, of Gaia, with her "old crone's knowing," and not the Christian Father.

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3 Plato, Symposium [203 E], p. 556.
4 Onians, p. 287.
Now she wants "to be delivered from the rational [the Logos world of the Father] into the realm of pure song," to be

A learned nimble girl,
Not drearily bewitched,
But sweetly daft. (p. 166)

By accepting her "sweetly daft" nature the old woman loosens the hold of rationalism on her mind, for this belongs more to her patriarchal culture than to her own being. Her logic is now more of the soul than of the mind, and it is her soul, through Eros, that causes her to "seek and care" as she follows her image of God, however short of it she may fall. Guided now by Eros, halfway between knowledge and ignorance, she "rocks" in her own dark, as she has done throughout the sequence, following the comings and goings of Love in herself.

God needs her, too, in order to be remembered, just as the gods feared Demeter would destroy all human beings, meaning no more sacrifices would be made in their behalf. The dead, the images outside of life, love the unborn, those who can enter those images and be transformed by them, like the old woman becoming "like God" and finding her soul.

The final section opens with the powerful presence of death, weed-skeletons, bird-souls disappearing into the dying, darkening moon, against which the human soul seems but "A wedge of heaven's light, autumnal song" (p. 167). She feels that her soul exists according to a "more vast permission," a divine plan. Regarding Persephone's fate, Kerényi reminds us that in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter "... it was Zeus who gave his daughter [Persephone] to the lord of the underworld (3), and it was dios boules, 'according to the counsels of Zeus,' that the Great Goddess Earth [Gaia] helped the ravisher (9) [by
providing the hundred-blossomed narcissus]. Boule means 'counsel' (also in the sense of taking counsel with oneself), 'decision,' 'will,' Boule was needed to lure Persephone into a marriage which was so like death that all dying began with it, though through it life lost none of its radiance but, on the contrary, was enriched. It was held to be the consequence of a divine plan, a boule, that everything had come to pass as the divine tale related. Thus through Persephone's fate, death was seen as a "well counselled" plan, a mystical process needed to awaken us to life. As the old woman says, "Mercy has many arms" (p. 167), for even death has its purpose.

The old woman's consciousness has now changed. To become a "learned, nimble girl" who is "sweetly daft" means returning to a more child-like state, and since she seeks and cares so much to become like God, that God must have a child-like image. This returns us to the "ghost from the soul's house" that appears in "Her Becoming," a spirit that appears before the old woman "like a child, / A child at play," and is born within the old woman/maiden through her epiphany of the "small place all in flame." This Divine Child figure, represented at the Mysteries by Triptolemos and Ploutos, found its most common expression in the figure of Eros, Love. Love has become the old woman's "wound," which goes too deep to heal. Eros was said to be born of Chaos, which originally meant "yawning," so that his source is in the boundless depths; having Love for a wound is thus a deepening experience, lead-

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5 Kleusis, pp. 169-70.
6 __________, Gods, p. 17.

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ing to the boundless, ever deeper realm of soul, where the rules of rational, everyday consciousness, don't apply. Accepting the child as her wound, the old woman experiences its wounding effects on her consciousness, becoming ambivalent, "sweetly daft." As Jung describes it, "The 'child' is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning, and the triumphal end. The 'eternal child' in man [and woman] is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative; an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality."^ By altering her conscious attitude to accommodate the Child, the old woman experiences a weakening of her rational nature which at the same time allows her to nimbly avoid "the dreary dance of opposites."

She expresses her new consciousness as a credo showing her freedom from Christianity's concern with polarities such as good and evil: "Instead of a devil with horns I prefer a serpent with scales" (p. 167). Serpents are images of spirit and transformation, and Persephone holds a snake as Queen of the Underworld. The next two statements, "In temptation, I rarely seek counsel; / A prisoner of smells, I would rather eat than pray" (p. 167), reflect her new body-consciousness: if she is to "remember" God through her body, then temptation is but a means for this remembering, and eating, in this sense, is praying. Being "A prisoner of smells" might in this case refer to an Underworld consciousness, for Heraclitus states that "In Hades souls perceive by

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smelling" (frag. 98), implying that the proper mode of perception in that realm is less direct, visible, and more diffuse, suggestive. Hillman says that the Child "refers to a view of reality that is not divided," quoting Plato who says, "Like a child begging for 'both,' he must declare that Reality or the sum of all things is both at once" (Sophist 249 D). The "dance of opposites" can't limit the old woman now that the Child has been born within her, and she feels aided and protected as a part of Nature, as the Child of Gaia, able to "stretch in all directions." Such expansiveness finally breaks down the monomania of ego: "Sometimes I think I'm several" (p. 167).

She cries "The sun! The sun! And all we can become!" (p. 167), expressing the sense of limitless potential so fundamental to the Child figure. She leaves her "father's eye" to run to the moon, the seat of darkness, not as a heroic conquest, but with meekness, tenderness, so that "By midnight I love everything alive" (p. 167). This loving, gentle attitude leads her to illumination ("Who took the darkness from the air?") and the moistening death that transforms her ("I'm wet with another life"). Reversing the Christian concern for leaving the Father's flock and going astray, the old woman, speaking as a prophet might, says, "Yea, I have gone and stayed" (p. 167). She has found the mysteries in her own being, and with them a consciousness that allows opposites to exist together in harmony. The birth of this consciousness, experienced through the image of the Child, now enables the old woman to face her own death without fear, while send-

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8 Myth of Analysis, p. 263.
ing her love to the world. As Jung writes, "... only he remains alive who is ready to die with life." As the old woman puts it,

What is come to me vaguely is now clear,
As if released by a spirit,
Or agency outside me.
Unprayed-for
And final. (p. 167)

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