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Samuel Baity Garren
Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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QUEST FOR VALUE:
A STUDY OF THE COLLECTED LONGER POEMS
OF KENNETH REXROTH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Samuel Baity Garren
B.A., Davidson College, 1965
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1967
August, 1976

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I am indebted to Professor Thomas L. Watson for his guidance and encouragement in the completion of this work. I am also grateful to Professor Donald E. Stanford and Professor Fabian Gudas for their helpful criticisms.
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ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis and evaluation of the five poems included in The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (1968). The dissertation examines separately each poem and traces the basic development of the entire series.

The subject of Kenneth Rexroth's first longer poem, The Homestead Called Damascus (1920-1925), is the adventures of twin brothers, Thomas and Sebastian Damascan, and in his search for personal identity, Rexroth uses these twins to embody contrasting aspects of his personality. The first chapter identifies the major conflicts within Rexroth presented by this poem and determines whether or not he achieves any lasting resolution.

The theme of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927) is the attempt to achieve and maintain a transcendent experience. Chapter II analyzes the steps in this progress toward illumination and analyzes and evaluates the aims, methods, and effectiveness of the style of literary Cubism used throughout A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy.

Chapter III examines Rexroth's search in the third longer poem, The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1940-1944), for an enduring value amidst personal despair and social catastrophe. This chapter focuses primarily on Rexroth's meditation upon the meaning of history, the value which he finally affirms, and the reassessment of this position in the pendant to The Phoenix and the Tortoise entitled "Past and Future Turn About."

Rexroth's fourth longer poem, The Dragon and the Unicorn (1944-1950), presents a trip across the United States to Great Britain, France,
and Italy, and back to California. Rexroth intersperses concrete
descriptions of this trip with the exposition of a comprehensive philos-
ophy of life. Chapter IV analyzes the interpretation of Western culture
which unfolds during these travels and discusses the principal elements
of Rexroth's world view.

Rexroth's fifth longer poem, The Heart's Garden, The Garden's
Heart (1967), describes his activities in and around the Zen Buddhist
temple of Daikotu-ji in Kyoto, Japan. The settings of the two addenda
to this poem are Mount Calvary Monastery near Santa Barbara, California,
and the chapel of the Cowley Fathers Order in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
The theme of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart is the relationship
between visionary experience and objective reality, between permanence
and change. Chapter V examines the aging poet's attitudes toward human
existence, death, and enlightenment, the influence of the Japanese Nō
theatre on the composition of the poem, and the major theme of The
Collected Longer Poems summarized in the two additional poems.

A brief critical evaluation concludes this study and focuses on the
most important influences on Rexroth's philosophy of life, his view of
poetry, and the stylistic quality of the longer poems. In his personal
quest for integrity, Rexroth manages a positive response to the doubt and
destructiveness of the modern world.
INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems, Kenneth Rexroth says, "all the sections of this book now seem to me almost as much one long poem as The Cantos or Paterson . . . . Most poets resemble Whitman in one regard—they write only one book and that an interior autobiography."1 Rexroth is typical, in many ways, of the modern artist who judges and evaluates his age in terms of his own experience and embodies that experience in his art as a religious quest. The development of the poet's personality is the subject of each of the five poems which comprise The Collected Longer Poems, and in my study I intend to show that the search for a value which can give meaning to life is the unifying theme of the complete work. This study is important because in the process of achieving personal integrity, Rexroth establishes a comprehensive philosophy of life which makes a positive response to the crisis of belief in the modern world and maintains the importance of spiritual experience in human life.

I shall examine each poem separately and as a stage in Rexroth's quest for an integrated character and an enduring system of value. My critical approach is both analytical and evaluative. I shall analyze the meaning of each poem and attempt to determine its artistic quality, concentrating on the unity of the individual work and Rexroth's use of language. Because of my major concern with the development of the theme

of The Collected Longer Poems, I shall emphasize the changes in Rexroth's personality and the evolution of his beliefs as presented by each poem.

Kenneth Rexroth wrote the first longer poem, The Homestead Called Damascus (1920-1925), between his fifteenth and twentieth years, although he did not publish it until 1957. Rexroth creates twin brothers, Thomas and Sebastian Damascan, who grow up at the family mansion, "On the upper Hudson in the Catskills, Called Damascus" (p. 3). Rexroth introduces the basic components of his personality by using the twins to embody antagonistic elements within his own self. My analysis will reveal that the dual aspects of Rexroth's personality are not balanced and that he seeks at the end of the poem an experience powerful enough to overcome the inner conflicts inhibiting personal growth. The frustration of this desire, however, mars the unity of The Homestead Called Damascus, because the opposing forces introduced by Rexroth remain unresolved. Consequently, The Homestead Called Damascus, largely because of the author's youth, lacks the organization and finish of the later works.

A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927) immediately follows in date of composition The Homestead Called Damascus and presents Rexroth's successful effort to obtain a transcendent religious experience. A prolegomenon is usually a critical essay or formal discussion introducing a more extended work, and a theodicy is a vindication of God's justice,


3Kenneth Rexroth, The Homestead Called Damascus, in The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 3. All quotations from the longer poems of Kenneth Rexroth are from this edition, and page numbers appearing in the text refer to it.
dealing especially with the apparent existence of evil. However, Rexroth's poem does not consist of observations logically organized and prefacing a discussion of the nature of God. Instead, *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* concerns the persistent labor to achieve and maintain transcendence. Rexroth apparently believes that the prolegomenon is the enlightenment, that the transcendent experience must occur before the defense of God's creation. Rexroth's theodicy, therefore, follows in the third and fourth longer poems, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and *The Dragon and the Unicorn*. Rexroth attempts to adapt the methods and aims of Cubism to his poetic style, but the effort proves to be an ambitious failure.

The third longer poem, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1940-1944), occurs on a beach along the California coast where Rexroth and his wife camp from the evening of Maundy Thursday to the dawn of Good Friday in 1942. In this poem, the focus shifts from a search for the ultimate ground of being to the establishment of a system of values. Trapped in the midst of World War II, Rexroth meditates upon the apparent destruction of almost all human values by the passage of time. The poem dramatizes the reasons for Rexroth's initial despair and traces the steps in his discovery of the basis for a philosophy of life in the personal assumption of "unlimited liability" for realizing the content of each moment. Although *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* is more tightly organized than either of the preceding works, its overall effect is considerably diminished by Rexroth's reliance on private associations, numerous obscure allusions, and a highly elliptical style. In "Past and Future Turn About," a short

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poem written as a pendant to *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth returns in autumn to the same location and harshly criticizes the conclusions of the preceding spring. The reason for this rapid reversal of opinion is the extreme burden Rexroth had placed, in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, on the individual as the sole source of value.

By the time of the writing of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (1944-1950), the reservations expressed in "Past and Future Turn About" concerning the conclusions of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* have subsided. The setting of this fourth, and by far the longest of the poems, is a trip across the United States to Great Britain, France, and Italy, and back to California, lasting from the spring of 1949 to the summer of 1950. Rexroth alternates descriptions of his travels with the presentation of a comprehensive philosophy of life. This world view appears to evolve from the doctrine of unlimited personal responsibility presented in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and eventually acquires the broader, more stable base of a community of love. The basis of this philosophy is direct knowledge of another person acquired most intensely through the sexual relationship and sacramentalized by the institution of marriage. Rexroth believes that the direct knowledge of the beloved leads to an increasingly direct knowledge of other persons and to contemplation of the ultimate nature of reality. Most of my discussion of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* consists of a detailed analysis of Rexroth's philosophy. Of special importance is the relationship between this idealistic view of existence and Rexroth's actual conduct during his travels. I shall explain why breadth of interest, a more harmonious personality, and greater poetic clarity make *The Dragon and the Unicorn* Rexroth's finest artistic
accomplishment within The Collected Longer Poems.

Seventeen years separate the completion of The Dragon and the Unicorn (1950) and the publication of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart (1967). Rexroth, now in his early sixties, turns away for the most part from making general value judgments and seeks to achieve a constant state of enlightenment. The settings of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart reflect Rexroth's increased disengagement from life. The main part of the poem presents his activities at the Zen Buddhist temple of Daikotu-ji in Kyoto, Japan; the settings of two addenda are Mount Calvary Monastery near Santa Barbara, California, and the chapel of the Cowley Fathers Order in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, Rexroth concentrates on those moments of vision which form the core of the systematic view of life elaborated in The Dragon and the Unicorn. My intention is to examine Rexroth's shifting viewpoint in this last longer poem concerning the relationship between visionary experience and objective reality, the conflict between his desire for self-renewal and his longing for release from the cycle of life and death, and the restatement of the major theme of The Collected Longer Poems in the two addenda which close the volume.

A brief final critical section evaluates the important influence of three men on Rexroth's philosophy: Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, and D. H. Lawrence; describes how Rexroth's belief that poetry is direct communication affects the style of the poems; and points out the ironic discrepancy between Rexroth's advocacy of a spontaneous, uncomplicated poetry and the erudite, highly elliptical quality of much of his own verse. Rexroth shares the concerns and goals of those modern poets like
D. H. Lawrence and Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder of the Beat Generation who believe that the primary role of the artist is religious. Standing firmly within this tradition, Rexroth appears in The Collected Longer Poems both as a prophet denouncing the abuses of contemporary society and as a visionary in quest of a system of values capable of enhancing the meaning of life.
CHAPTER I

THE HOMESTEAD CALLED DAMASCUS (1920-1925)

Introduction

Kenneth Rexroth wrote The Homestead Called Damascus when he was fifteen to twenty years of age (1920-1925). The poem is a search for the basic patterns emerging in the poet's life as he enters adulthood. Rexroth creates twin brothers, Sebastian and Thomas Damascan, to represent different facets of his personality.

One source for the name Sebastian is a third century Christian saint and martyr. According to legend, Sebastian was a captain in the imperial army and a favorite of the Emperor Diocletian. When Sebastian converted to Christianity and began preaching to others his new religion, the Emperor ordered him killed by arrows. After being left for dead by the soldiers, Sebastian was found and restored to health by a Christian widow. When Sebastian confronted and accused the Emperor, Diocletian had him beaten to death and his body thrown into a sewer. Although legend claims that Sebastian survived being shot by arrows, artistic representations of his life almost invariably render this episode. The

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1Kenneth Rexroth, The Homestead Called Damascus, in The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 1. All quotations of this poem are from this edition, and page numbers appearing in the text refer to it. In An Autobiographical Novel (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), Rexroth gives slightly different dates when he recalls that he "worked on [The Homestead Called Damascus] for at least three years . . . when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen" (p. 256).

tradition of depicting Sebastian as a handsome young man began in the Renaissance, and during this period he became a popular subject of painting. Like all martyrs, Sebastian willingly undergoes great suffering to achieve eventual bliss and eternal life in heaven. What distinguishes this martyrdom is Sebastian's youth, great beauty, and physical mutilation by arrows.

The legend of St. Sebastian signifies in modern art the persecution of the artist by society. After he left prison, Oscar Wilde chose the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth, and an appreciation of John Keats written when Wilde was still a student at Oxford helps explain his selection of the name Sebastian. Standing beside Keats's grave, Wilde thought of the dead poet as a "Priest of Beauty slain before his time." Wilde then identifies Keats with a portrait of St. Sebastian, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced with arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens.

In a later poem entitled "Thou Shalt Not Kill" (1956), Rexroth uses St. Sebastian to symbolize the young artist martyred by his society.

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6 Wilde, in Sherard, pp. 143-44.
In this poem, the death of Dylan Thomas occasions a fervid lament for the artists who have died because of a hostile or indifferent society. Rexroth directly accuses this heartless culture:

You are murdering the young men.
You are shooting Sebastian with arrows.
He kept the faithful steadfast under persecution.

... You fear nothing more than courage.
You who turn away your eyes
At the bravery of the young men. 7

The martyrdom of St. Sebastian also represents a conflict between physical and spiritual desires. Although sensual frustration is not a part of the original legend, the tradition begun during the Renaissance of portraying Sebastian as a handsome and sometimes delicate youth, often bound to a post or tree, his body pierced with arrows, gazing towards heaven, emphasizes the physical pain he suffers for a spiritual purpose. Carl Jung notes that the arrow is a symbol of the libido and the image of a body pierced by arrows represents the "onslaught of unconscious desires." 8 Jung says that "It is our own repressed desires that stick like arrows in our flesh" and cites as an illustration of this image the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. 9

9 Ibid., pp. 287, 290.
choice of the name Sebastian in *The Homestead Called Damascus* seemingly symbolizes the torments of adolescence, especially the sense of persecution and the frustrations and uncertainties accompanying sexual matur- 

tion.

The choice of Thomas for the name of the other brother reflects the poem's concern with dual aspects of the personality because the name means in Hebrew "twin." One source for the name Thomas is the disciple who demanded proof before accepting Christ's resurrection (John 20:24- 

29). The apostle was also called Didymus (John 20:24), which is the Greek equivalent for "twin." Thomas refused to believe reports of Christ's resurrection until he had seen the empirical evidence of the crucifixion in Christ's hands, side, and feet. Thomas thus seems to represent a skeptical side of the poet which bases knowledge upon evidence validated by the senses. Thomas would be that aspect of Rexroth which brings back to the hard ground of actuality the idealis-

tic, spiritual flights of Sebastian.

Another source for the name Thomas is Tammuz, an ancient Mesopotamian god. When Tammuz mysteriously dies, his lover, the goddess Ishtar, pursues him below the earth to the land of the dead ruled by another goddess named Allatu. Other gods must intercede in the quarrel between the goddesses because life on earth cannot replenish itself while Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, remains in the underworld. The gods decree that Tammuz shall spend part of each year on the earth with Ishtar and part in the realm of the dead with Allatu.\(^\text{10}\) This

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arrangement explains the annual decay and regeneration of vegetation upon the earth. A counterpart to Tammuz is Adonis, who lives a portion of each year with Aphrodite, goddess of love, and a portion with Persephone, queen of the lower world.\(^{11}\)

Certain weaknesses characterize Rexroth's presentation of the twins. In some sections, he fails to identify the person involved (e.g., pp. 7-8, 13-15, 25, 27), and Sebastian has a much larger role than Thomas. The disproportionate part that Sebastian plays may indicate a lack of integration within the poet's personality. Another problem in grasping the exact meaning of the brothers is that they share some qualities rather than exclusively embody conflicting forces. For example, both Sebastian and Thomas find sexuality to some degree repellent.

Similarities between the myth of Tammuz and the legend of St. Sebastian show the occasional merging of the symbolic roles of the Damascare brothers. Both Tammuz and Sebastian are beautiful youths who suffer extremely bloody deaths and rise from death later in full glory. The exact circumstances of Tammuz's death are obscure, but other annually dying vegetation gods experience mutilation or dismemberment. According to some versions, a fierce boar attacks and kills with his tusk both Adonis and Attis, the Phrygian counterpart of this god.\(^{12}\)

A modern version of the legend of St. Sebastian, The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian by Gabriele d'Annunzio, set to music by Claude Debussy

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 327.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., pp. 327, 347.
and performed in 1911, stresses the similarity between Sebastian and such vegetation deities as Adonis and Tammuz. D'Annunzio calls his work a mystery play because the events of Sebastian's life closely parallel the death and resurrection of Christ, and part of the action in the play presents Sebastian's death in a manner that echoes the worship of ancient vegetation gods. In The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, arrows mutilate the body of a beautiful youth, a group of women mourn for him, and great exultation greets the eventual resurrection of the slain youth.

The Homestead Called Damascus also refers to Baldur, a Scandinavian god whose life resembles these Mediterranean deities. Baldur, a young god noted for the special radiance of his body and thought to be physically invulnerable, was used at times for the other gods' target practice, but the jealous god Loki discovered Baldur's one susceptibility, mistletoe. Another god named Hoder pierced Baldur's skin with the mistletoe given him by Loki, and he quickly bled to death. A grief-stricken Odin granted Baldur rebirth at the end of this universe and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Tammuz represents the great cycles of nature, especially those of the seasons and vegetation. This cyclical aspect distinguishes the legends of gods like Tammuz from the myths involving such figures as St.

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Sebastian, Baldur, and Christ. Although the legend of Tammuz promises a kind of victory over death, it is tied to the ever-repeating processes of life. Sebastian, Baldur, and Christ, however, experience only one resurrection, a rebirth that breaks the dominance of the cycles of nature through an eternal transcendence. The legends of Tammuz and St. Sebastian also differ in that while Tammuz is the lover of Ishtar and Alli'tu, the story of St. Sebastian can convey the theme of sexual frustration.

Therefore, although the legends of Tammuz and St. Sebastian are in some regards similar, that of Tammuz relates directly to the reproductive forces of earthly life, while the life of St. Sebastian represents physical torment for a spiritual reward. Thomas Damascen thus seems to stand for the more physical side of the poet, engaged in the life of the body with its attendant fate of eventual decay. Sebastian, in contrast, signifies that part of the poet which seeks a spiritual goal free from the inevitable corruption of physical life.

Rexroth uses the twins to present other antagonistic forces. Several contrasting qualities confront the poet in his search for identity: the life of action versus that of contemplation; immersion in society versus solitary withdrawal; sexual desire versus spiritual love or the love of wisdom; change versus permanence; and actual versus potential existence. In general, Sebastian symbolizes the spiritual, meditative, idealistic, and self-denying part of Rexroth, and Thomas signifies the skeptical, active, pragmatic, and sensual side. The dual aspects of the poet's personality represented by the Damascan brothers, however, are not balanced. The tendency towards idealism,
world-weariness, and martyrdom prevails over pragmatism, affirmation of life and sensual gratification. Rexroth apparently realizes this imbalance and seeks an experience powerful enough to transform the negative aspects of his life into positive forces.

Several allusions in the poem to experiences of conversion support this interpretation. The title refers to such a moment in the life of Paul when his character was changed radically on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). When Paul was approaching Damascus in order to persecute Christians, a light from heaven blinded him, and the voice of Jesus told him to await in Damascus a further command. Three days later, Paul converted to Christianity, regained his sight, and preached the new religion he formerly had oppressed. As was the custom in that area, Paul had a Hebrew name, Saul, as well as his Latin name. But in recognition of the decisive change in his life, Paul forsook the name Saul after becoming an apostle for Christianity. The allusion in the title of the poem to the conversion of Paul reflects Rexroth's desire for a reconciliation of his inner conflicts.

The theme in The Homestead Called Damascus of the quest for reunion with the father can be related to the life of Paul because his conversion opens the way to the Father through faith in Christ. Although the revelation of this course is traumatic for Paul, such an emotional shock seems necessary for a radical change in the personality. The choice of the word "homestead" in the title of Rexroth's poem implies that one result of Paul's illumination was a return to the family home, specifically in the sense of the son being reunited with the father.
Sources for the names of both Damascen brothers also include the experience of conversion. While serving in the Roman army, Sebastian became a Christian and preached until his death the new religion. Thomas would not accept the resurrection of Christ until he saw the marks of the wounds. After giving Thomas concrete proof, Jesus admonished his doubting apostle to "be not faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). Thomas responds with a simple statement of the loss of all doubt: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

These allusions to conversion indicate that acceptance of Christianity is one possible means for changing radically the personality. However, The Homestead Called Damascus does not culminate in the adoption of a new religion or the achievement of a startlingly new adjustment within the personality. This occurs instead in the second longer poem, A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927). The Homestead Called Damascus introduces major conflicts in the poet and presents some possible solutions, but it does not provide a final resolution.

The Homestead Called Damascus is divided into four parts, three of which have titles. The untitled Part I introduces the two Damascen brothers, focusing primarily on Sebastian and emphasizing his loneliness, memories of his dead parents, and uncertainty about the future direction of his life. Part II, entitled "The Autumn of Many Years," contrasts the sense of sterility and estrangement with a potentially regenerative act of self-sacrifice. Part III, "The Double Hellas," describes the brothers' varying responses to sexuality and women. The last part of the poem, "The Stigmata of Fact," presents the attempt to find personal fulfillment by accepting actuality.
Part I

The first part of *The Homestead Called Damascus* introduces the twin brothers, Thomas, the first-born, and Sebastian Damascen. They live in the family mansion,

A rambling house with Doric columns
On the upper Hudson in the Catskills,
Called Damascus. (p. 3)

Both brothers are very cultured and enjoy discussing intellectual matters. The unnamed friend of the brothers who narrates in first person some sections of the poem describes a typical visit to the mansion:

We sat up late that night drinking wine,
Playing chess, arguing- Plato and Leibnitz,
Einstein, Freud and Marx, and woke at noon. (p. 4)

When he first presents the brothers, Rexroth refers to the symbolic significance of their names. Thomas recalls that, after reading Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and while in school, he signed his name Tammuz. Rexroth alludes to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian when the brothers discuss shooting a bow and arrow. As the three friends hike in the nearby woods, a comment by Sebastian also hints of the theme of youthful martyrdom. Speaking of a meadow on the family land, Sebastian says, "'We'll have to die quick to be buried here.'"

The main subject of *The Homestead Called Damascus* is the quest for personal identity, and Part I shows that the brothers are still in the process of defining themselves. Rexroth was fifteen to twenty years of age when he wrote this poem, and the subject and the tone reflect that fact. The poet's indecision about his own identity makes difficult a consistent detachment from the dilemmas of the Damascen brothers. The poet shares with the twins not only a preoccupation with the self but an
inability to resolve conflicts occurring within the personality. Each brother seeks a clearer understanding of his sexual and vocational roles and his relationship to his parents and his society.

Part I focuses primarily upon Sebastian's sense of estrangement. Rexroth emphasizes Sebastian's loneliness, his troubled memories of his dead parents, his concern about the transience of life, and his ambivalent feelings about carnality.

Two aspects of Sebastian's loneliness are his inability to accept fully the leisure and high degree of culture associated with the family mansion and his belief that a better world exists in some distant realm. An early scene in the poem depicts the type of society to which the brothers belong and reveals Sebastian's estrangement from this way of life. The setting is a party given by a neighboring family in another mansion, across the Hudson from Damascus. Leslie, the hosts' daughter, illustrates the refinement of this upper class of society. At the party she plays on the clavichord Henry Lawes' musical setting for Edmund Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose." She appears "very precious and British" (p. 5), and Sebastian recalls watching her hunting with the family's falcons, "riding side saddle, dressed in velvet." The importance of taste to this family is evident, whether in the choice of paintings (including two by Francesco Guardi and Pietro Longhi, two Venetian painters of the Rococo period) or in Leslie's favorite color combination.

Sebastian's detachment during Leslie's performance shows his critical view of aspects of this society and his preoccupation with the transience of life. As Sebastian stands apart and watches Leslie play and sing in the candlelit drawing room, his feelings about this kind of
life merge in the figure of a moth that flies into the room and rests briefly on his hand. Sebastian associates several of the moth's characteristics with various qualities of this society. The moth's "pale sienna" body and green eyes remind him of Leslie's pale hair and "bronze green velvet" dress; the Debussy played by a trio after Leslie's song is "music for a moth"; and the description of the moth titivating while its antennae are "thrown over its wings like plumed eyebrows" suggests this group's fond regard for itself. Like the moth and Waller's rose, this world's beauty is delicate, ephemeral, and reminds Sebastian of mortality. In a later passage in Part I, Rexroth returns to the image of the rose as a reminder of death:

The rose astonished Sebastian and
He was astonished that some day he
Would be irretrievably quite dead. (p. 7)

Finally, the moth's departure by "rushing through/ The candelabrum on the clavichord" (p. 6) implies that social conflagration possibly awaits this way of life in the imminent future. The association in this scene of Leslie and a moth's attraction for fire may reflect Sebastian's feeling that sexuality is in some way a threatening force.

Thomas shares his brother's dissatisfaction with the way of life symbolized by Damascus. One of his few appearances in Part I contrasts the highly cultured and refined activity occurring inside the mansion with a larger, more vital life outside. Thomas leaves the "calm and prim" library (p. 6) to go outside and watch a flock of sheep pass nearby over a frozen marsh guided by "wading shepherds, tall and bent." The rhythm of this twelve-line section is uncharacteristically regular and based firmly upon a line of iambic tetrameter. The monosyllabic
rhymes ending alternate lines add to the impression of vigor and order. The departure from the highly flexible free verse of the rest of the poem makes these shepherds appear like stately, venerable figures, almost larger than life participants in a mysterious but deeply impressive ritual closely in tune with the movements of nature. Life in the mansion shrinks sharply in scale when Thomas returns to a library in which "Botticelli ladies slim/ And hyperthyroid, grace the walls" (p. 7). The use of a run-on line for the first time in the stanza and the grotesque application of the word "hyperthyroid" to the etherealized realm of a painting by Botticelli deflate the image of the brothers' cultured society. Life is bypassing the sterile, moribund existence inside the mansion.

Sebastian carries his loneliness with him beyond the boundaries of the homestead. A change in setting does not reduce his frustration but intensifies his conviction that a more satisfying and adventurous world must exist somewhere beyond the limits of his present situation. In the fourth section of Part I, Sebastian walks at night alone beside the sea. Readiness for adventure marks the description as he paces "Barefoot, with wet open lips, his nostrils/ Flaring to the beating air" (p. 6). He imagines that this spot is potentially a springboard to a world of excitement and dangerous exploration:

from such a shingle over
Such water went the perilous bridge
To the shining city, went the knight.

This passage alludes to medieval tales of knights errant, adventures

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involving the Chapel Perilous which occur in certain Grail romances.\textsuperscript{15}

For all the initial excitement, the conclusion of this section is anticlimactic as Sebastian leaves the beach and returns to his present unsatisfying existence, taking a train to the "city of steel and concrete towers." The narrator adds that Sebastian will face similar moments of unfulfilled promise, that he will know "many days of walks in/ Little parks of dead leaves and sparrows," and, like his namesake, "the martyrdom of arrows." The beginning of this scene shows how strongly Sebastian desires heroic adventure, yet he resumes at the conclusion his old life.

Another aspect of the poet's youth presented in the poem is an uncertain image of his parents. Sebastian has contradictory feelings towards his dead mother and father. The memory of his mother's warmth comforts him, but the thought of her sexual intimacy with his father is difficult to face. Sebastian, in Part I, relives in a dream the peaceful, calm, domestic world of his mother, feels her fingers running through his hair, and gladdens at the thought of her imminent return. But the realization that her loss is permanent enters the dream, and the harsh knowledge "that things/ Had not been this way for many years" (p. 8) turns Sebastian's waking world into a "worn out cruelty."

In the section immediately following, Sebastian feels a less idyllic nostalgia for a lost world identified with that of his parents.

\textsuperscript{15}Jessie L. Weston devotes a chapter to the adventures of the Chapel Perilous in \textit{From Ritual to Romance} (New York: Peter Smith, 1941), pp. 165-77.
The core of this reverie is the image of a man and a woman walking down a garden path, never to return. Early in Part II, this image reappears:

He and she, matching stride for stride, pace
The garden walks. It was very
Pleasant where they went. (p. 15)

The passages involving this image contain several sexual references. In the first presentation, the path "ends at a statue/ Of Priapus" (p. 8) before changing suddenly into a place rich in gold, lying buried and forgotten beneath the "ooze of the sea floor." What is buried seems to be Sebastian's awareness of his parents' sexuality. Perhaps he witnessed as a child their copulation, what Freud terms the "primal scene," and he may view their intimacy with distaste and resentment because of the idealized image he retains of the mother. Identifying this region with lost Atlantis reinforces the nostalgic element. Sebastian expresses the danger he feels about delving into this area in an account of a diver who went mad and said he had seen Atlantis, the "rooms/ Of the courtesans bright with electric/ Fish and octopus" (p. 9). In spite of the danger, the reward for rediscovering Atlantis is high because the gold of this once rich and splendid place still remains.

Part of the elaboration of the image of the man and the woman walking down a garden path in Part II also carries sexual connotations. The couple matches stride for stride as they walk in the garden, and "It was very/ Pleasant where they went" (p. 15). Further description presents a very vigorous and masculine image of the father and a view of the mother possibly in a state of sexual ecstasy: "He chews his sun/ Baked mustache. Her eyes are almost closed." There seems to be a close
link in this passage between eroticism and death, as the parents walk
down a path apparently leading away from life. What Sebastian resents
is their commitment to each other, especially as their bond is fulfilled
sexually. The opening part of this section presents someone who is com­
pletely alone: "Nobody knows him, nobody cares." Others observe the
single set of footprints he leaves on his journey into the desert. In
contrast, the couple go to a "very/ Pleasant" place, united step for
step. Part of Sebastian's jealousy seems to be an anxiety about follow­
ing in his father's footsteps, "'still/ Black in the early morning
hoarfrost.'" Admitting his own sexual needs would mean for Sebastian
acknowledging similar drives in his father, and recognizing such a bond
would call for a forgiving of the father which Sebastian apparently
does not want to make. He also seems to feel that the acceptance of
erotic life is a concession to mortality, a commitment to the flesh
that passes as quickly as the dew or the "'early morning hoarfrost.'"

Another passage shows that sexuality has unpleasant connota­
tions for Sebastian. Sitting one winter evening in the warm, comfort­
able mansion, Sebastian realizes that the varied and enriching activities
at Damascus cannot obscure his knowledge of transience, his awareness
"Of all the things that had been/ Fossilized safely so long ago" (p. 7).
Trying to find an alternative, he thinks,

    Somewhere there was still an old dry
    world
    Of trouble and amazement filled with
    Things of stone and meditation. Then,
    Too, there was a humid garden where
    In the lewd green dark a lewd white
    Animal minced kneelessly away. (p. 8)

This passage shows that Sebastian finds sex obscene, a violation of a
youthfully rigorous sense of decency, and that he contrasts sexual indulgence to the life of the spirit. Perhaps he feels that part of his martyrdom involves withstanding the temptations of sexual desires, seduction from his high spiritual and intellectual calling.

Sexual thoughts also bother Thomas in his spiritual ascent. Late in Part I, Thomas climbs alone toward the top of what is apparently a church tower. He moves upward "through the rafters,/ Past the sleeping bells and bats and owls" (p. 9), entering a region in which ordinary standards of good and evil no longer apply: "Here the devil came to play cribbage/ With the sexton." Thomas's passage is hindered by carnal desires which take the form of hideous and menacing creatures lurking in the "surrounding darkness." Joining "horned and hairy shadows" is the same animal that disgusted Sebastian, "the other with his mincing/ Fellowship." As he climbs, Thomas remembers hearing panthers mating "once in the underbrush." What frightens Thomas about carnality is the lack of rational control, the fear of being manipulated by the involuntary processes of the body:

Alone
In this prehistoric night, each naked
Marionette is dismayed at his
Own conduct and flees, leaving a spoor
Of scratches on the snow. (p. 9)

The battle between the flesh and the spirit divides the personalities of both Damascen brothers. Their youth intensifies the struggle because both their physical desires and their idealism are at maximum strength. In the first section of the poem, Rexroth presents this irony by contrasting the questions of innocence with the acceptance of
experience. The older angels do not try to explain their unique existence but modestly go about their heavenly concerns:

busy, orderly,  
Content to ignore the coal pockets  
In the galaxy, dark nebulae,  
And black broken windows into space. (p. 3)

Acceptance is not characteristic of the young:

Youthful minds may fret infinity,  
Moistly dishevelled, poking in odd  
Corners for unsampled vocations  
Of the spirit, while the flesh is strong.

These lines describe accurately much of the thought and activity of the twin brothers. This passage may also reflect the poet's awareness of the "dishevelled" quality of his own poem and attempt to excuse the disorder of the work by appealing to the unruly lives of the youthful protagonists. The conclusion of this opening section states that the passionate questioning of the young eventually will cease:

Experience sinks its roots in space -  
Euclidean, warped, or otherwise.  
The will constructs rhomboids, nonagons,  
And paragons in time to suit each taste.  
Or, if not the will, then circumstance.

The apparent assurance of the adult individual may conceal an avoidance of risk. However, neither brother is willing in the early parts of The Homestead Called Damascus to capitulate; the inner conflicts remain too fierce for this type of solution.

Another factor which spurs on Sebastian and Thomas is the feeling that their estrangement and internal disharmony betray their best selves. The last section of Part I presents this theme by introducing Modred, the nephew and traitor of King Arthur. Rexroth's description
associates Modred with another arch-betrayer, Judas Iscariot. The person who ruins King Arthur's glory walks away from Golgotha, "the place called the skull" (p. 10) and covertly watches "Hakeldama, the potter's field/ Full of dead strangers." Hakeldama is the Aramaic word for the "field of blood" mentioned in Matthew 27:8, bought with the thirty pieces of silver returned by Judas to the chief priests and used for burying strangers.16

Modred is an example of one of the poem's two basic archetypal figures: individuals who sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others and evil characters who betray especially good persons. In the first group are annually dying gods like Tammuz and Adonis, Christ, St. Sebastian and Baldur. The second group includes Modred, Judas Iscariot, and Loki. Each of the three betrayers directly caused the death of a hero or god—a dead eminently heinous.

On one level, the presence of these two groups of villains and victims represents existence as a struggle between two mighty opposing forces, whether they be called life and death, good and evil, or light and darkness. Modred, the most developed of the three betrayers in the poem, is associated with darkness. He is "the dark and crimson man" (p. 10), a person of iniquity and bloodshed. After his malicious act, he hides undercover and wherever he looks sees death.

Identifying these figures as forces of darkness seems appropriate because they actively combat figures of special goodness: Baldur,

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16 Two additional allusions to the crucifixion of Christ occur in the concluding section of Part I: references to Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb and to the crown of thorns.
Christ, and King Arthur. In addition, such vegetation gods as Tammuz and Adonis must triumph over the dark powers of the underworld that threaten to keep the world permanently barren. These three characters thus signify the forces of darkness in several senses: sterility, night, death, and evil.

More important than the representation of a cosmic dualism is the bearing these figures have on Rexroth's personal life. The two groups of antagonists indicate an inner struggle between selflessness and egotism. Rexroth apparently seeks to exorcise his dark side by a dramatic act which would radically alter his personality, as the experience on the road to Damascus transformed Saul, an accomplice in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58-60, 8:1), into Paul, the chief spokesman for Christianity. The Homestead Called Damascus shows Rexroth searching in several guises for a way out of futility and sterility into a life of healthy growth and fulfillment. The activities of the Damascan brothers early in the poem signify Rexroth's sense of being trapped like them in a waste land, immersed in the ultimately meaningless occurrences of a place of death. Modred, Iscariot, and Loki perhaps indicate Rexroth's fear of self-betrayal and need for renewal in almost all aspects: psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual. The presence of both villains and heroic victims in the poem may therefore represent Rexroth's realization that only self-sacrifice, as symbolized by Tammuz, Adonis, Christ, and Baldur, can redeem self-betrayal, that the cost of the birth of a new self is the painful dying of the old.
Part II: "The Autumn of Many Years"

While Sebastian remains frustrated throughout Part II, Thomas takes positive steps to overcome the sterility within his life. The brothers are diametrically opposed in this part of the poem. As Sebastian broods passively about his plight, Thomas actively combats an unproductive existence. Thomas's efforts culminate in an act of self-sacrifice that parallels the annual death of Tammuz, a Mesopotamian vegetation deity, and the crucifixion of Christ.

In the opening section of Part II, the brothers meet before separating. Having come to a crossroads, a "turning of the paths" (p. 10), Sebastian halts and watches Thomas descend

\[
\text{Slowly towards the empty city from which} \\
\text{Alternate noise and utter stillness} \\
\text{Came.}
\]

Although each brother is alone after this moment, there is a crucial difference. Thomas's solitariness is that of a hero singlemindedly pursuing a definite goal. Sebastian's isolation is that of a person always cut off from others, even in a crowd.

In Part II, Sebastian expresses a deepening fatalism as he remains lonely and sexually repressed. A major reason for Sebastian's estrangement is self-centeredness. A scene early in Part II reveals his absorption in his own loneliness. As if to emphasize his emotional isolation, Sebastian sits alone in a ruined summerhouse playing chess with himself and drinking "bitter tea,/ Cold and steeped too long" (p. 11). He imagines that he is cut off completely from all other persons:

\[
\text{Sebastian thought, "I have no relatives.} \\
\text{I am like the little figure of} \\
\text{Daruma secreted in the last}
\]
Encapsuled Japanese box. I am
All alone at Christmas time somewhere
Like Durban, Bergen, or Singapore." (p. 12)

Sebastian finally admits that this rumination, "'Like myself, ... is
getting nowhere'" and returns inside to pick up a "book he had turned
down."

Sebastian's loneliness also colors his view of existence. His
isolation makes him accentuate the pathos of the human condition:
each person is basically alone; the rare gestures of communication
always prove ineffectual as life quickly vanishes:

How short a time for a life to last.
So few years, so narrow a space, so
Slight a melody, a handful of
Notes. Most of it dreams and
dreamless sleep,
And solitary walks in empty
Parks and foggy streets. Or all alone,
In the midst of nightstruck, excited
Crowds. Once in a while one of them
Spoke, or a face smiled, but not.
often. (p. 16)

The deepening of Sebastian's unhappiness may account for a new
hopelessness about any future improvement. The title of Part II, "The
Autumn of Many Years," refers to one past experience which Sebastian
believes has fixed irrevocably the limits of his life. Thinking back
to this moment of great importance, Sebastian's dominant impression is
the particular quality of the light of an autumn day. Doubling back
upon his own life,

Sebastian at last came to
An afternoon, a parcel of hours
In the Autumn of many years. (p. 11)

Reliving this moment is melancholy because he feels that this distant
experience contained his entire lifetime, that nothing in the future can

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extend beyond the bounds of that instant. He is certain that this is

A time which he had always known,
A passing light in which he had
Always lived. A heart beat in the
clock.

Sebastian, in his fatalistic mood, stretches this event to cover his
lifetime. The atmosphere of that fall afternoon seems to spread across
his subsequent life, fixing possibility within "This bland forever,
known forever." Immobilized by such a belief, Sebastian can only pass
his days in a premature and permanent Autumn.

A passage in Part II involving the unsettling experience of an
unnamed narrator in a city park reinforces the theme of the limits
imposed upon each individual. The narrator sits in late summer and
ponders new perplexities in his life, especially the recurrent sensa-
tion of being visited by the "Lotophagi" (p. 13). These lotus-eaters
mentioned in the Odyssey haunt his dreams "with their silly hands/
. . . plucking" at his sleeve, their "gibbering laughter and blank
eyes," and their constant presence on the periphery of his conscious,
waking activity, hiding on the edges of vision "In dusty subways and
crowded streets" (p. 14). The ancient god Adonis disturbs another
recent dream. This once beautiful youth stands suddenly before the
narrator, "frenzied and bleeding," clutching in his hand the "plow/ That
broke the dream of Persephone."

Ruminating upon these ominous but enigmatic visions on a park
bench the day following the latest dream, the narrator's attention
shifts to the "scorched grass/ In the wilting park," and an awareness
of all the past geological epochs lying beneath his feet overwhelms him.
Pushing beyond the subsoil, his mind reaches

the glacial drift,
The Miocene jungles, the reptiles
Of the Jurassic, the cuttlefish
Of the Devonian, Cambrian
Worms, and the mysteries of the
gneiss. (p. 14)

Whatever occurred during each of these immense divisions of time is permanently lost, part of the histories of these epochs which are "folded, docketed/ In darkness." Descending to the earth's "hot/ Black core of iron," he climbs back up the "long geologic ladder," again past the "inscrutable archaic rocks" lying under the surface, and comes back to his present location with a deepened sense of the unfathomable mystery at the heart of earthly life.

This passage seems to reflect the difficulty of uncovering the meanings which lie at the heart of one's own life. Many of the earliest and most formative experiences are permanently hidden, buried in the unconscious mind. Yet the hot core still seethes: acknowledging the basic mystery does not remove the troubling desire to explain the uncertainties about oneself. This passage concludes with a vivid reminder of oblivion breaking the narrator's reverie and touching him directly: "And beside me,/ A mad old man, plucking at my sleeve." The last impression of this section is that knowing how much crucial information shall remain lost forever makes forgetfulness especially repulsive.

While Sebastian becomes more lonely and resigned to a futile existence, Thomas goes in search of the source of alienation. A comment by the poet as Sebastian plays chess with himself alludes to the brothers' contrasting roles: "The two knights moved/ Reciprocally. One side was
sure/ To lose" (p. 11). Thomas's search parallels the adventures of another type of knight: the seeker for the Holy Grail in the Arthurian tales, and the nature of this quest recalls T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, a poem which Rexroth states strongly influenced The Homestead Called Damascus. Part II presents Thomas's adventure in three different ways: a quest toward a city, a desert, and a mountaintop, each a solitary journey into a waste place. When Thomas departs at the beginning of Part II, he descends towards an "empty city" (p. 10), and he enters a completely barren land. Ahead of Thomas,

not a leaf
Or blade of grass appeared nor any
Warm or cold blooded moving thing.

The second representation of Thomas's journey is a lonely trek through foreign country towards a desert. Strangers discuss his progress:

"Here are his footprints,"
They say, "He went this way,
through the woods,
Over the rocks and towards the desert."
They say, "There was nobody with him." (p. 15)

Finally, at the end of Part II, the quest becomes an ascent into a bleak mountainous area. When he reaches the crest, Thomas suffers a figurative crucifixion:

This hour the sacramental
Man was broken on the height,
in dark
Opacity rent with caw and caw. (p. 17)

This laceration apparently signifies the pain and suffering

which must precede renewal. Rexroth's presentation of this part of the poem shows that the same process occurs on three levels: within the individual soul, for all physical life on earth, and in humanity's spiritual relationship with God. Just as the annual death of earthly vegetation in autumn and winter precedes the new growth of the spring, the old self must die before a new person can be born.

To convey the importance of sacrifice in life, Rexroth refers in the final section of Part II to the deaths of three symbolic figures: Tammuz, Baldur, and Christ. The annual death and resurrection of Tammuz represents the disappearance and renewal of vegetation on earth. Baldur, the Scandinavian god of special goodness, wisdom and beauty who is treacherously killed, has been compared to such vegetation gods as Tammuz, but he is more like Christ because his return to life is not yearly but must await the end of time.\(^{18}\) The allusion to the crucifixion of Christ is a reference to the apostle Thomas, "the one Called Didymus in the upper room" (p. 17).

In each of these deaths, the flesh is torn. Thomas's demand for proof of the resurrection made Jesus reveal his pierced hands, feet, and side. Baldur bled to death after the shaft of mistletoe pierced his body. Although the exact circumstances of Tammuz' death are unclear, the deaths of other forms of the same god make it probable that Tammuz' body was also in some way torn.\(^{19}\) The arrow mentioned in this section

\(^{18}\)Branston, pp. 123-29. Branston, in his discussion, compares Baldur to Tammuz, Adonis, and Christ.

\(^{19}\)Frazer, p. 347.
alludes to yet another example of this type of death: the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

Although the manner of dying is very painful, the spiritual gains can convert the means of death into a symbol of triumph. Christians now worship the figure of Christ on the cross, and in pictures of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, he has, at the moment of death, a look of bliss. In the version of the legend of St. Sebastian written by Gabriele d'Annunzio and set to music by Claude Debussy, as the body is carried away, the arrows disappear from the body and appear in the tree on which he died, suffused with a growing light.\textsuperscript{20}

In the final section of Part II of \textit{The Homestead Called Damascus}, Thomas shows that the only way to overcome the dark side of existence is to relinquish oneself totally to its power. In suffering the arrow to rend his flesh, the martyr paradoxically triumphs over the instruments of death. In Rexroth's passage, the moment of greatest blackness, the hour of "dark opacity" (p. 17), becomes filled with light as the sacrificial hero "breaks the gold arrow in the gold/ Light."

Through the story of the doubting apostle, Rexroth states that one must examine thoroughly the baneful qualities of life before one can act decisively. Because Thomas "Peers in the black wounds," he can hammer "the frame/ That squeezes the will." The "black wounds" can signify such elements of life as pain, death, nothingness, and evil, and scrutinizing these areas gives a definite shape to the will and forces the person to act. At the end of Part II, Thomas momentarily has

\textsuperscript{20}d'Annunzio, p. 84.
achieved this power, but Sebastian remains in a state of indecision and self-pity. The conclusion moves from Thomas, transfigured on the height, to Sebastian, sitting alone and drinking "cold astringent tea in the damp Summer house above the hazy river."

Part III: "The Double Hellas"

The solitary adventures of Sebastian and Thomas give way in Part III to attempts to get beyond the self and come in closer contact with external reality. The primary relationship presented in the third part is the brothers' responses to women. Although the female appears in both beneficent and a malevolent forms, the conclusion stresses her power to heal and nourish man.

The title of Part III is "The Double Hellas," and when Rexroth uses the word Hellas, he refers to the early stages of Greek civilization, not to modern Greece. The origin of this name in the fifth century B.C. and its reference to prehistoric times identify Hellas with Greek culture from the heroic to the classical age.21

"The Double Hellas" refers apparently to a dichotomy within Greek culture posed by Freidrich Nietzsche that is similar to the two

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21Hellas is an ancient name for Greece and specifically means the domain of the Hellenes, a northern tribe that invaded the Greek peninsula in the prehistoric period. C.F. Keary in The Dawn of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), notes that Hellas is a linguistic rather than a geographical or racial term (pp. 205-06). Gilbert Murray, in Four Stages of Greek Religion (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1912), points out that the term Hellas arose from the gradual realization by the Greeks of their separateness as a people (p. 60). Even though the historical existence of the original Hellenes is now in doubt, their importance to the later Greeks was in providing an "ideal and a standard of culture" (p. 59).
sides of the poet's personality. Nietzsche postulated a conflict in Greek art between Apollonian and Dionysian qualities, between rationality and ecstasy.\footnote{In The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the terms Apollonian (or Apollinian) and Dionysian in order to symbolize dual aspects of Greek culture. (The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 33.) Nietzsche associated with Apollonian art the qualities of restraint and proportion, calm, self-awareness, and a radiant, dreamlike serenity. Dionysian art reflects the opposing qualities of excess, ecstasy and cruelty, self-forgetfulness, and intoxication. The Apollonian artist is especially conscious of his own individuality, rising above the world of suffering in order to contemplate it with detachment. When the Dionysian artist creates, he loses his sense of himself as a distinct person and becomes one with all of nature. Nietzsche stresses the "necessary interdependence" (p. 45) of these opposing principles and feels that their reconciliation in Attic tragedy created the highest achievement of Greek culture.} If such a conflict has existed since the beginning of Western culture, the antagonism between the Damascan twins assumes more than a narrowly personal significance.

The Latin epigraph for Part III of The Homestead Called Damascus, *Claret enim claris quod clare concopulator*, can be translated, "It is indeed clear for the clear because it joins together clearly." The epigraph and the title of Part III together indicate that Rexroth seeks reconciliation of the two contrasting sides of his personality. There are at least three possible ways to join together the two aspects of his character: artistic achievement, religious vision, and sexual......
fulfillment, and the method set forth in "The Double Helias" is greater intimacy with women, culminating in sexual union.

A male's first and most important encounter with the opposite sex is his relationship with his mother. Although Sebastian's basic associations with his mother are positive, her memory interferes with the acceptance of his own sexuality. Because of his idealized image of his mother, Sebastian has not accepted his parents' intimacy.

When Sebastian thinks of his parents as a unit, his response is not always positive. He identifies them with the limitations of a childhood world that he fears he cannot escape. The world of his parents was orderly, domestic, and moderately prosperous, but its deliberate restriction of experience was stifling. Sebastian remembers certain details of that milieu:

A dry static tightness of pigment,  
Aloofness to more accessible  
Experience, the hand dry and white  
In bygone porcelain drawing rooms,  
Hot, dry, indoor wintry afternoons,  
Crisp crinolines and bright figures of  
Twisted glass. The children coming home  
Through the grey green fog that prowled between  
The grey stone and dark brick closed house fronts. (p. 18)

Sebastian places on his parents part of the blame for his own self-centered, excessively involuted life:

My parents had that life,  
And they in turn recognized themselves  
In Henry James and would in Proust  
If they had lived long enough, and now  
We seem to be unable to escape  
From our own ornate, wasted fictions.

Thomas's response to his family's background also influences his feelings about sex, but he criticizes the burdensome presence of the
past at the ancestral home rather than the narrowness of his parents' lives. Life at the homestead is for Thomas a stifling accumulation of death and debris:

Thomas said, "This land is too well manured. In fact it's nothing but dead flesh and rock. The parlor is choked with meaningless Bric a brac, the flotsam of India, The China trade, and whaling round the poles. And the bark cloth my great grandfather Wore the night he bedded the princess." (p. 24)

Thomas then associates a particular girl's sexual appeal with certain aspects of prehistorical times:

Thomas said, "She's nice. But the chirr of bracelets on her wrists, The scorching hallucination of Her thighs, her buttocks rolling like two Struggling slugs--these things are not for me. I hear them echoing in the tunneled Sepulcher, once more the underground Hocus pocus of torches and cavern trysts." (pp. 24-25)

Thomas feels that the further one goes into the past, the greater the degree of unrestrained emotion:

Under the church is a crypt. There are Bones there, but of a pterodactyl, Not a man, and beneath the black crypt A blacker catacomb, ceiling and walls Painted with women copulating With beasts and monsters. (p. 24)

The girl's strong sensuality threatens Thomas with the relinquishment of a self-control which he identifies with civilized life. Her physical allurements evoke orgiastic rites that Thomas would relegate to the distant past. Thomas, in rejecting the image of woman as being unbridled and drawn towards ecstatic abandon, also repudiates the animal side of his own nature. In this passage, Thomas gives to women the
attributes of various animals, but especially repulsive to him are the creatures found at the lowest level, the "beasts and monsters" copulating with the women. His final comment is foolishly complacent: "My arteries and veins are my own./ Pass me the paper" (p. 25).

Sebastian finds much more opportunity in his current social circle than in his parents' world, but the highly cultured level of society he now frequents does not satisfy his strong sexual desire. The type of woman Sebastian encounters in the world of leisure and refinement repulses him, and he eventually seeks fulfillment from a different kind of woman: unlearned, simple, socially inferior, but possessed of an ancient wisdom.

While at a garden party, Sebastian feels sexually repelled by his refined world, and Rexroth in the preceding section prepares this scene by conveying Sebastian's sexual frustration through images of garden flowers. Sebastian feels confined both inwardly and outwardly in an excessively dry environment:

There are canna's now on the guarded
Lawns, crimson and Chinese orange,
with wine
Brown leaves. The privet hedges
are black,
And grey with dust . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . The brain
Unrolls in its own vaults its own arid,
Endless frieze. Sebastian strolls along
The narrow privet lanes of the garden
Labyrinth. (p. 18)

As he walks, the canna flowers metamorphose into "Floral vulvas of orange and crimson" which "Squirm inside his head." Yet all he can do is "snap/ The brittle privet leaves" (p. 19).
The setting for the next section is a genteel garden party dominated by the endless talk of one woman who may be the hostess. Unrelieved sexual tension permeates the description of this scene. In such surroundings, castration seems the only completely satisfactory remedy:

The capon sits spatulate, Origen
Among the teacups, the lowering,
Not quite invisible genius of
The case at hand.

Masturbation does not provide a solution:

Manipulations,
Especially ante-Steinach and
Unsure, do not suffice to still the
Pauline,
Age-long battle. A puzzled fire
Still hovers. (p.19)

These lines reflect Paul's exhortations to other Christians to choose the life of the spirit rather than succumb to the delusive lures of the flesh (Romans 8; I Cor. 5-7).

While physical impotence is a central theme of this scene, this cultured segment of society is barren in all senses. The conversation is elaborately pointless and monopolized by the woman's building "bridges and arches to nowhere." The more animated she becomes, the more trapped one of her male listeners feels. While her hands are "never still, never/ Hurried" and continuously "build another bridge/ And send a covey of words out of it," his hands, "Like huge white grubs, hang dying/ To his wrists."

The natural description conveys directly the prevailing mood of suppressed sexuality: as the outdoor air "smoulders" and the "mellow mountains undulate/ Down to the river," within the garden, "dusty
hollyhocks/ Defend the wall" as this woman prates, and the "phallic vermillion flowers rot." The large number of images of impotence in one section of only thirty lines communicates the poet's theme in an unmistakable but also a heavy-handed fashion.

Disgusted by this inadequate world, Sebastian seeks satisfaction from Maxine, the black striptease dancer and a simple, unlearned type of girl. Sebastian's response to Maxine is twofold: he celebrates her uniqueness with simple lyricism, and he believes that she embodies two universal roles of the female: the Muse and the Goddess of Wisdom.

Maxine has a good effect on Sebastian because she leads him toward greater simplicity in his art and in his life. A lyric in praise of her reveals a new directness of expression:

Brown, brown, brown is the color of my True love's skin. Her lips are sweeter than The full blown rose. Her eyes are sad where Love has entered in. Graceful and wise Before my eyes she goes. Her learned Body and her childish ways possess All my mind and all my days. (p. 20)

This new strain shows the influence on the poet of popular songs and more primitive verse, such as the ballad and the Negro blues. One section includes two lines from a blues song:

"Come back, baby, I miss your little Brown body and your childish ways." (p. 20)

These sources help counteract the poet's tendency toward a highly allusive verse, at times too dense for complete comprehension.

Sebastian also identifies Maxine with semidivine figures of
ancient history who exemplify the inspirational role of women in art. In one example, a noblewoman playing chess in Uxmal, capital of the later Mayan empire, merges into the figure of Maxine performing her act (pp. 19-20). Although the particular embodiment of the Muse will pass quickly away, the art she helps create will last a little longer, living in memory until the last traces disappear:

... Maxine...
Uxmal, Konarak, or Ajanta.
His walls have fallen, his painted Beauties are yellow dust forever now. (p. 20)

Sebastian's life also gains in simplicity as a result of the special kind of wisdom such women bring, wisdom which is not based on the intellect but is an instinctive affirmation of the basic goodness of life. One important part of this affirmation is a celebration of nature. In the concluding section of Part III, woman appears as the goddess of both wisdom and plenty and reveals to Sebastian the nourishing and sustaining power of nature.

Several passages in Part III contrast the wisdom of the goddess with that of the philosophers. The first comparison occurs in a section describing some of the past incarnations of the all-wise, healing power of the female. The name of the first of these "avatars of the goddess" (p. 22) is Marichi. She appears

... cuddled in the shadow of the
Golden man headed bull at the gate
Of the Great King.

This reference apparently is to the Minoan civilization of the Bronze Age with its legendary association with the Minotaur. This avatar fore­shadows the life-giving role of Maxine, the black stripteaser, because
Marichi was, when originally noted, a twelve-year-old "street walker, just brought out." They share occupations of dubious respect, as if to show the unpredictability of the goddess and her disregard for outward show.

Marichi travels widely, visiting the great empires of the time and baffling the philosophers she meets. Chinese sages fear her, but their polite, even deferential behavior testifies to her power:

The Indians called her Marichi,
The Chinese were polite but afraid.
In less than a year, she spoke their language.
They sat before the mountain cottage
High above the great plain of China.
The philosophers, so polite, came
And offered their polite discourses.
She interpreted as best she could.

The force she symbolizes is present in all ages and periodically recognized by the philosophers. Many years later the Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus "knew she must have been and/ Reinvented her. He called her Theano."

The next section of the poem continues the contrast between the knowledge gained from studying philosophy and that represented by intimacy with a woman:

Sebastian is alone.
She is asleep in her scented bed,
The shades drawn, the room warm and dark, her
Body dark and coiled in heavy sleep.
Sebastian reads Socrates on love.
"Putte him bye--." The current flows the other
Way. (p. 23)

The reference to Socrates points to the difference between Platonic and erotic love. Sebastian's relationship with Maxine leads
him away from abstract speculation and into closer contact with the concrete world. Sebastian shows his awareness of this contrast when he thinks:

"Young and beautiful with
Old eyes and quick feet. Philosopher--
No hunk of this matter will receive
Any impression of the pure Idea."

Because of his close, presumably erotic relationship with Maxine, Sebastian sees nature with greater clarity and finds new value in it. One description of nature has the simplicity and directness of his earlier portrait of Maxine, and the influence of sexual love upon Sebastian's vision is explicit:

Now the new brick warehouse
shouldering
Strong by the shore of the lake
through soft
Smoke, rests in the sunset like
the vast
Cheek of a peasant resting on the vast
Chest of her lover. (p. 25)

The passage ends in a vision of the recurrent and always available splendor of the simplest earthly happenings, rendered in correspondingly simple, objective verse:

Pied cattle come
Home down hills of young grass
once more
In the beautiful hour. Once more
The bridges lift in the blue twilight.
White boats go out. I forgot this is
Undeniably reality.

The major presentation of the feminine principle occurs in the final section of Part III. Its positive tone throughout signifies the momentary decline of negative factors in Sebastian's life. This passage is Rexroth's "Hymn to Demeter," his moving celebration of the
bounty of earth and woman. Like Marichi--Theano, this goddess has had previous forms, and all the good qualities of her past incarnations combine to create the special brilliance of this present avatar. Although the symbolic significance of Marichi is vague, the attributes of this last manifestation are the agricultural riches of the earth. Holding a loaf of bread, her "Hair as blonde as mown rice" (p. 28), she gestures toward the lonely male characters of the poem and offers to share her food.

The style of the passage is impressive for its simplicity, concreteness, and freedom from the pretentious literary allusions which mark many other parts of the poem. The action also is simple—the mutual partaking of food and drink—and the mood is one of complete satisfaction. The poet recites types of food and drink associated with the bountiful goddess, seeking to excite the listener by the simple, common nature of the items themselves. The narrator acclaims:

The lucent wine, olive oil, honey,
Figs, dry cheese, and fish, and
pickled squid.

Milk of goat and cow and sheep, fruit and
Oil of the olive, honey and wheat,
White wool and dyes from the sea to dye
It, and fruit and juice of the grape.
(pp. 28-29)

Clarifying Rexroth's intentions in this passage is his comment about a similar aspect of the poetry of Walt Whitman. Unlike William Blake,

Whitman found his cosmogony under his heel, all about him in the most believable details of mundane existence. So his endless lists of the facts of life, which we expect to be tedious, are
Instead exhilarating.²³

Rexroth closes the last section of Part III with the male protagonist's acceptance of the gifts of the goddess:

So having broken bread beneath
The white pillars he rose and left
the hill
To walk the sea strand of sculpt
and colored stones and shells.

The breaking of bread emphasizes the theme of communion with another person, which is one of the needs of the Damascans, and contrasts with the image of breaking used at the end of Part II in a painful and sacrificial sense. In the first instance, the poet introduces the image of the arrow and of breaking associated with the martyrdom of St. Sebastian: "The arrow breaks./ . . . The arrow breaks the brittle flesh,/ Breaking upon it" (p. 17). Linked by similar imagery, the painful sacrifice of Part II moves to the joyful and replenishing communion which ends Part III.

Part IV: "The Stigmata of Fact"

The hopeful note at the end of Part III does not carry over into the final part of The Homestead Called Damascus as the poet reverts to the pessimism and dissatisfaction of earlier sections. Because neither Thomas's self-sacrifice nor Sebastian's communion with woman has provided a lasting solace, the brothers return in Part IV to their quest for identity. The immediate goal is resisting despair and finding a basis

---

for personal development. Although some positive values are found, these affirmations are more the first steps away from a deep pessimism than a conclusive resolution of the protagonists' dilemma.

The title of Part IV, "The Stigmata of Fact," refers to the poet's attempt to accept the actual conditions of human existence. In using the word "stigmata," Rexroth implies that facts wound human flesh, brand the body with shameful marks. The word "stigmata" also signifies the wounds of the crucified Christ. Persons who have experienced religious ecstasy have received similar wounds as an indication of having taken on the pain and sin of human life like Christ.24 Faced with the world of fact, the individual must transform painful and disgraceful wounds into signs of divine favor. At the end of The Homestead Called Damascus, Sebastian experiences a moment of illumination on a crowded street in the slums as he suddenly realizes that the immediate present, no matter how squalid or full of suffering, is the foundation of all knowledge (pp. 35-36). The only way to redeem the often painful nature of events is to submit to them as the only source of meaning and value.

Another way of stating this conflict in Part IV is the opposition between what might and what does happen, between the values created by imagination, speculation, and theory and the facts embedded in the world of experience. Rexroth seems to be trying to counteract a strong tendency to turn away from direct experience in order to dwell in a realm of timeless absolutes provided by art, religion, and philosophy. A

24"Stigmata," in The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1974), Micropaedia, IX:570. Since St. Francis of Assisi, "there have been more than 330 known stigmatized persons."
The major reason for this otherworldliness is that Rexroth has reached certain negative conclusions about life. One such conviction is that corruption is an inescapable fact of life, and his view of history emphasizes the decline and fall of previous societies. Coloring the poet's pessimism is the belief that his civilization is currently in a state of decay, and this evaluation of his own culture leads to an emphasis on similar periods in the past.

The primary comparison in Part IV of the time in which Rexroth wrote *The Homestead Called Damascus* is with late Minoan civilization. The setting for two sections is the area of the Aegean Sea during the late Bronze Age as the Minoan civilization on Crete yields its dominance to the rising Mycenaean civilization centered on mainland Greece. In Rexroth's version, the once proud Minoan cities on Crete have been reduced to tourist spots for the inhabitants of the mainland. The religious rites and social customs of the Minoans are no longer the signs of a healthy, cohesive culture but the exotic remnants of a dying civilization. Placed in this Aegean world of the Bronze Age, Sebastian hears from an old man an account of activities one might encounter on Crete. The old man portrays a society so full of sensational and weird customs that mainlanders flock to it on their vacations. The once symbolic religious performances of the Minoans titillate rather than awe the visitors:

"Some of the galleries
Are like an aquarium, full of
Fish and octopuses, mostly though
It's bulls and naked women wiggling
In the torch light. It's quite a
Sight. A lot of fellows and girls
Come here from Athens on their
honeymoons."

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They are always shocked at the way our
Women paint and our men use
perfume." (p. 32)

The guide's spiel deflates any desire by Sebastian to believe
that such past cultures were closer to the elemental mysteries of being.
Our wish to romanticize the past merely discloses the frustrations of
our own lives.

In a later section, Thomas steps directly from the world of
twentieth-century New York State into this same period of the last days
of Minoan civilization. Thomas now pays a price for his earlier rash
statement, "My arteries and veins are my own" (p. 25), as he is drawn
against his will and with considerable anguish to seek out the sensual
excess he earlier had spurned. The cause of the despair Thomas carries
with him into the ancient world is apparently failure to achieve spiri­
tual perfection:

Thomas drank all night and read
John of the Cross.
He was drunk and forsaken before
Dawn. At daylight he went out
through the
Lion Gate and bought a ticket for
Knossos, where the women paint
their breasts
And the men use perfume and
the girls
Mate with bulls. (pp. 34-35)

As Thomas learns that his desire for spiritual perfection cannot suppress
indefinitely the passionate side of his nature, he also discovers that
this is an anti-heroic and decadent period:

The crowd boiled around him,
Lonely as beasts in a slaughter house.
The period grew blackly backward
Across its sentence. Theseus died
At last in a vulgar brawl. The priests,
Stinking of perfume, got him
ready. (p. 35)

Rexroth's primary intention seems to be an indictment of his
contemporary society for its demoralizing effects upon the individual
as he projects into the distant past weaknesses and drawbacks of the
present. Thomas's disgust with his own society and with himself so
distorts his vision that he can only see past cultures in modern terms.

In another section of Part IV, a once dominant religion,
rather than a civilization, dies. Rexroth adapts a story recounted by
Plutarch in order to present a time of transition from one religious
belief to another. In order to illustrate the fact that deities can
perish, Plutarch tells in De Oraculorum Defectu the following story.
When a ship going to Italy drifted by an island off the coast of Greece,
a voice called out, "When you get to Palodes, announce that Great Pan
is dead." After this announcement, a "great cry of lamentation"\^25 arose
from many people on that island. Robert F. Palmer elaborates upon this
legend:

This event occurred supposedly in the first century A.D.,
during the reign of Tiberius, in a Roman world in which the
rationalistic and evolutionistic approach to religion had already
done much to bring death not only to Pan but to many of the other
greater and lesser gods of the Greek pantheon. Later, however,
Christian legend was to suggest that Pan had died on the very day
when Christ had mounted the cross.\^26

Rexroth alters this account by having the voice on the first

\^25Plutarch, De Oraculorum Defectu, trans. F.C. Babbitt (London,
1936), p. 402, quoted by Robert F. Palmer in his introduction to Walter

p. x.
island say, "'When you come to Crete, / Tell them there that the unknown 
god is dead'" (p. 30). The rest of the section shows that the "unknown 
god" is Tammuz. The voice arises from a "crowd of weeping women" and 
calls out, "'Tammuz! Tammuz!'" (p. 30) Female mourners were a central 
part of the worship of Tammuz, and their grief brought back to life the 
dead god. In Rexroth's version, a man named Thomas is on board and 
answers the cry. His response is supposedly only a joke, but his 
furtive actions later on Crete show that he is either the god or one of 
his manifestations. In the conclusion of this section, the god of 
fertility does indeed depart:

\[
\text{Tammuz} \\
\text{Parts the arras, smiles again,} \\
\text{farewell,} \\
\text{And goes across the drawbridge} \\
\text{through the} \\
\text{Orchards, past the jousting} \\
\text{and polo} \\
\text{Field, into the hazy hills dim with} \\
\text{Dust, his burnoose drawn} \\
\text{across his face. (p. 31)}
\]

Rexroth's primary aim seems to be to reflect his belief that con-
temporary society faces a similar time of transition. The Damascan 
brothers are caught in a period in which one world is dead and another 
is powerless to be born, and their divided personalities reflect this 
fact. A time when accepted beliefs and values break down can cause in 
the individual a sense of anxiety, dislocation, and isolation.

Various scenes in Part IV reflect responses by the Damascan 
brothers to this bleak situation. When the frustrations of the present 
overpower a person, two possible reactions are temporary surrender and 
withdrawal. In one section, Sebastian is completely exhausted by his

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unsuccessful efforts to solve his quandary. As at the very beginning of the poem (p. 6), Sebastian is alone by the sea. He had at the outset excitedly paced the beach, thinking of knights setting out over the "perilous bridge/ To the shining city" (p. 6). The interval since that moment, however, has emptied Sebastian of such enthusiasm. Despairing of finding the secret password (p. 27), like one of the Arthurian knights who failed to discover the Grail, "Sebastian had/ No question" (p. 34). As this section ends, he judges himself harshly for the failure of his quest:

Sebastian said, "Do I possess this?
Or do I repossess myself? Dead?
No, living with a limitless sterile
Kind of life" (p. 34)

Another response to a time of change and uncertainty is withdrawal, and Thomas takes in Part IV this course. Alone in the mountains, Thomas meditates on the meaning of history. All he finds are struggles for power and dominance, including the latest example of Western imperialism, "the long crash of emirate/ And corporation... the ships/ Of Royal Dutch Shell in the Malacca Straits" (p. 32). Rule is always uncertain, and history's capriciousness can cause such dramatic reversals as "the Caliph hiding/ In some foetid desert tent."

Distancing himself from such conflict, Thomas searches for some enduring values, seeks "the immortal/ Element in an otherwise all/ Dissolving corruption."

Yet Thomas realizes that the individual cannot avoid the influence of his time. The person cannot retreat into a self-sufficient existence purified of the surrounding corruption. Thomas reflects this
awareness when he states that "'There is no self subsistent/ Microcosm.'"
Without the support of some larger world, no one could survive.

Thomas, when last seen, is out under the stars on the western plains, quietly watching his campfire, far from any other person's company. His response to a passing train reveals how separated he is from society:

    Far off in the low mists and
    fireflies
    The lights along the railroad
    track change.
    Then the whistle comes as
    distant as
    A star and finally the distant
    Roar... (p. 36)

When the train does pass, Thomas watches as if through a microscope:

    All so
    Far away, not like a toy train
    but
    Like some bright micro organism,
    The night train to Omaha goes by.

The last lines of the poem imply that Thomas is turning his back on his past life:

    Thomas smokes and spits into the
    Fire. Bats cry, the creaking
    of the hundred,
    Tiny, closing doors of silence.

This last section recalls Huckleberry Finn's response to civilized life:

    But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the
    rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me,
    and I can't stand it. I been there before.27

A common response of Americans to a difficult situation has been to withdraw from society and head West into the wilderness. Thomas's retreat

may not be a sign of complete defeat but the only way to gain the detach-
ment needed for simplifying the issues which confuse him. However,
Thomas certainly has not yet mastered the problems of his life, and he
has drawn apart as a result from society.

In contrast to his brother, Sebastian responds to a similar
plight by confronting more directly his immediate situation, hoping to
discover how to accept the facts of existence. Sebastian's relationship
with Maxine has increased his knowledge of other persons, and his
visit to Maxine's sick mother provides a symbol of endurance and incor-
ruptibility. Rexroth threads throughout the poem a narrative involving
Sebastian and Maxine. Early in the poem, she performs while he watches
and waits to escort her after her act. When her performance ends, they
depart together in a taxi (p. 13). The reader does not learn for about
twenty pages their destination. Close to the end of the poem, Maxine
tells him, "My mother's sick. I've got to/ Go see her" (p. 33).

During this visit, Sebastian finds in a poor old black woman an
image of courage more powerful than anything contained in his large
learning or contacts with refined society. Looking like a "scrap of
lumber" in bed, Maxine's mother is "obviously dying and/ Going to be
very hard to kill" (p. 33). Sebastian has been bothered by the apparent
inconsequence of one person's actions when viewed against the broad
course of human existence and the far vaster period of the earth's dura-
tion, but he discovers now in the most meager surroundings that personal
integrity has its reward. Looking at the "old Negress," he realizes that

The most industrious worm
would never
Penetrate her, no corruption take

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Maxine's mother is an example of the acceptance which Sebastian is trying to gain. A large part of this acceptance is learning to live with those aspects of life which cannot be changed. To break out of his moody speculation and accomplish something, Sebastian must temper his idealism, bring his hopes more in line with the possibilities of reality. One of the inescapable facts of existence presented in Part IV is that being only one person limits one's choices. Even though life appears to consist of infinite promise, the activities of each individual are physiologically determined:

No matter where the spirit goes or
Goes out, the flesh will stay here,
mixed with
This place, so many molecules, so
Many hairs in the head and
mustache.
So many movements and no
more, out
Of what might seem a most
capacious
Infinitude. (p. 30)

Part of the warfare between the flesh and the spirit is that the demands of the body interrupt the flights of the spirit with vexing reminders that the total person is tied to a particular time and location.

The title of Part IV, "The Stigmata of Fact," may reflect this idea of the constraint of the individual by his hereditary and social determinants. Rexroth implies that everyone is bound in the flesh, limited by having a certain genetic heritage and no other. An awareness of these unalterable biological restrictions thus would be another instance of the wounding of the flesh by fact.

Her dead as none could take
her living. (p. 33)
In the introduction to his autobiography, Rexroth returns to the central fact that the moment of conception fixes the possibilities of every individual:

Each human being has at the final core of self a crystal from which the whole manifold of the personality develops, a secret molecular lattice which governs the unfolding of all the structures of the individuality, in time, in space, in memory, in action and contemplation. Asleep there were just these dreams and no others. Awake there were these actions only. Only these deeds came into being.

Every cell in the body is marked with the pattern of the genes that stripe the chromosomes of the original fertilized egg.28 Discussing this same actuality in "The Stigmata of Fact," Rexroth points out the folly of resisting this condition of life:

A piece of landscape
At Damascus. A smile in the Gorgon's face rooted in only one
Instant as no mountain can ever Be--gracious or anguished
acceptance--
But rooted and fixed and
no cavil. (p. 30)

In his final appearance in the poem, Sebastian's new willingness to accept actuality leads to a moment of illumination. As Sebastian walks with Maxine in the slums of an unnamed city, searching for a place to eat, preoccupation with intellectual dilemmas still fills his head. The common, even squalid nature of the surroundings crystallizes a growing conviction of Sebastian's:

Saturday night, rain falls in the slums.
Rain veils the tired hurrying faces,
Sordid and beautiful in the rain,
Sebastian walks, puzzled, in the rain.
This is the macrocosm, on these Materials it subsists. And the Microcosm - This is the very thing. (p. 35)

28Kenneth Rexroth, An Autobiographical Novel, p. [v].

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Sebastian realizes that he does not need to undergo the trial of death alone. The present is completely adequate because it contains all of being. Sebastian's reflection about the greater and the lesser worlds recalls his brother's earlier conclusion that neither the macrocosm nor the microcosm is "self subsistent" (p. 32). Sebastian states in a similar manner that the universe and the person do not have separate existences but are inextricably bound together. Sebastian has learned that no one can entirely remove himself from his surroundings, even for so laudable a goal as perfecting the self. Spiritual struggles are not limited to the hermetic inner recesses of the personality.

Referring to a nearby restaurant, Maxine says, "This is the place..., Let's eat here," as she

    turns against him, warm
    and firm, rain
    On her brown cheeks and
    odorous hair. (p. 35)

Because of his current thoughts, her words and presence carry for him additional meaning. Since the fullness of the immediate situation is indeed what Sebastian seeks, her statement is true in an ultimate sense for him. Her strong sensual appeal heightens the impact of her comment, implying that spirit and flesh are twin aspects of one fused reality.

Certain of Sebastian's previous experiences coalesce when he hears this casual remark. As the learning represented by his family's well furnished library congealed into one closed book, Sebastian previously despaired that "The way is closed" (p. 27). His search for ultimate answers to the dilemmas of existence apparently had reached a dead end. But a chance remark made later by Maxine suddenly offers him the
password thought to be lost forever.

Sebastian's last appearance in the poem also echoes the scene which ends Part I with a command to reflect upon that place "Where hinges fall" (p. 10). Sebastian believes, at the end of the entire poem, that he has at hand "The password at which all rusted/ Hinges fall" (p. 36). Sebastian assumed earlier that this place where the doors blocking insight fall must be a forbidding place set aside for death:

    a land of crusts and
    Rusted keys, the desert colored like
    A lumpy fog. (p. 10)

It is instead the immediate present, no matter how downfallen a place of waste and decay, even a slum on a rainy night. Sebastian's homecoming does not mean his life will stand still. The narration of Sebastian's adventures in The Homestead Called Damascus ends, not in a moment of stasis, but in a discovery radical enough to break through old patterns of response and free the future for the weaving of new ones.
CHAPTER II

A PROLEGOMENON TO A THEODICY (1925-1927)

Introduction

A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927) presents Rexroth's quest for a transcendent experience powerful enough to affirm the goodness of creation. A "prolegomenon" is a discussion introducing a longer work, and a "theodicy" is a justification of divine justice despite the apparent existence of suffering and evil in the world. The title of the poem thus indicates Rexroth's belief that vision precedes rather than follows a rational defense of God. The first three parts of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy express a general dissatisfaction with the corruption, tedium, and pain of life. This malaise constantly borders on despair and instigates the poet's search for vision. The initial revelation achieved in Part IV culminates in a hymn of praise to God in Part V. After this temporary illumination, Rexroth undergoes in Parts VI - VIII a dark night of suffering and despair, but in Part IX, he triumphs over doubt. Throughout Part X, Rexroth ascends steadily towards the final moment of supreme enlightenment.

Much of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy reflects Rexroth's stay for two months as a participating guest at the Holy Cross Monastery on the Hudson River in New York State. In his autobiography, he describes this visit, which coincided with the celebration of Easter, as "all one orderly rapture" (p. 334). The first part of my chapter explicates A
Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, and the second part discusses the method of literary Cubism used by Rexroth and its effect on the major aims of the poem.

Part One: An Explication of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy

Ia

The theme of Part Ia is the enervating effect of change. Although the exact nature of the action is obscure, several lines communicate the sense of movement, of passing from one location to another:

The tinsel white that ascends
The rocker
Aboard aboard
It rustles rustles
.................
Slowly it shifts....
.................
It goes around it lies off (p. 39)1

Change, at this point of the poem, is a debilitating, ominous force. The poet feels that change necessitates a decline in value, both a physical and a moral weakening. This section introduces the worm as a symbol of the slow but sure process of decay which undermines all effort. Loss of power pervades being and even corrupts the agents of decay. The poet seems demoralized by seeing all around him a place "Where the worm walks/ The fatigued worm."

The only hope expressed in this section is that the individual

1Kenneth Rexroth, A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, in The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 39. All quotations from A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy are from this edition, and page numbers in the text refer to it.
can resist the effects of change by finding or creating structures
durable enough to withstand the corrosive passage of time. Two lines
in this first section contrast the forces of enervation and permanence:

Should he acquiesce to forever flow
No one shall ever enervate this structure

The emphasis in Part Ia is on debilitation rather than creation
and endurance. The passage concludes with several ominous and pessi-
mistic images: thunder rapidly building, steel keys locking, and
blackness:

This is a squash
Thunder
More thunder
Still more
The little steel keys
Lock and revolve
And lock but
It is black scarred
Of what it was
When it stops transparent on the screen
Fish
Black

Ib

Sections Ib and Ie include parts of a conversation in which one
person pleads with another to overcome a deep dejection and dissatisfac-
tion with life. The speaker's insistence in Part Ib that there is
nothing to fear only strengthens the conviction that there is at the
center of existence a void:

Remember that I told you there is nothing to
Be afraid of
I said there is nothing
I said it is a ghost it is a
dream a
Joke an ontological neurosis
I told over and over
I said there is nothing
It is not an abyss
It is not even
a pit (p. 40)

This section implies that the feeling of the emptiness of life
derives in part from a continuous, inescapable sensation of pain:

Little planes of pain inserted in
the brain
Needles in the tongue

0 the pressure it presses o
to get away to get
Away where it doesn't press where
it isn't
Always pressing and pressing

When the speaker urges belief of any kind, his advice appears facile
and merely verbal, not grounded in firm conviction. The final exhorta-
tion in this passage ends with a question which reveals that the
advocate of faith is himself becoming more uncertain:

If it was as you think someone
would have
Told you o yes by now someone would
Don't you think someone would

Ic

Section Ic restates the theme of pain, but the use of Christian
imagery changes the emphasis: "The cope of flesh the amethyst morse of
pain" (p. 41). A cope is a long, open, hooded cloak, joined at the top
by a clasp or morse, and worn in ecclesiastical ceremonies. This line
implies, first of all, that the focus of physical existence is pain.
The image of the cope, however, introduces a more hopeful attitude
toward the painful aspects of human life. The pain of existence remains

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at the center of Christianity, but it is transfigured in the ceremony of the Eucharist. The donning of the cope by a Catholic priest is one method of consecrating human suffering. The Eucharistic ritual celebrates, rather than laments, the crucifixion of Christ.

The theme of transforming the maleficent aspects of life into forces for good appears earlier in "The Stigmata of Fact," Part IV of The Homestead Called Damascus, as Rexroth tries to accept and even affirm the unavoidable limitations of individuality. "The Stigmata of Fact" expresses the conviction that the restrictions and corruption of the body are the distinguishing marks of the human being:

The flesh will stay here,
mixed with
This place, So many molecules, so
Many hairs in the head and
mustache,
So many movements and no
more, out
Of what might seem a most
capacious
Infinitude. (p. 30)

Rexroth reaffirms in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy the fact that the perishable flesh is an insignia of humanity. After presenting the image of the flesh as a garment held together by pain, he states:

They erected a sign
They said this is a sign
This is our own heraldry
(p. 41)

One way to overcome an oppressive awareness of the essential role of pain in human activity is a sacramental view of reality, and the major aim of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy is an affirmation of being through a transcendental experience based upon the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. Rexroth identifies in section Ic the object of his quest in
the following line: "The unobtained ostensorium." The concluding lines of this section, however, indicate that the promise of Christianity is not yet fulfilled:

It goes down down without alteration
With a chipper Chirr Down

Id

Section Id applies the principle of enervation to mystical and spiritual experience. Just as the body must decline, moments of enlightenment will quickly fade. Although the visionary seeks "The note which could never be interrupted and would never stop" (p. 42), he knows that

The lucid crystal breaks always and recedes quanta
By quanta retreating Engine of revelation (pp. 41-42)

The inherent dynamism of life resists the desire for permanence. Several images in section Id reveal that the passage through space and time entails a loss of value. One line presents both space and time as a difficult terrain which cannot be crossed unscathed: "In Horseshoe Basin the snow bled as the horses crossed it." At the end of the section, the poet emphasizes his own aging and destruction in a vision which stresses the doom of temporal and spacial existence:

I walk in the sunset
I walk in the sunrise
In the meantime I have been up all night
I have seen at a speed of three hundred kilometers a second the great nebula
Rexroth explicitly states his theme: "It should be observed that this principle leads unavoidably to endless regress." And the last line of the section underscores this idea by referring first to hysteresis, the failure to return to an original value after the cause of change has been removed, and then concluding with a concrete image of the working of this principle: "the shattered stone."

Ie

The conversation begun in section Ib resumes in section Ie. While the issue remains one person's dissatisfaction with life, insatiable desire, rather than continual pain, is the chief source of depression. Unappeasable desire is as much an eroding force in human activity as temporal and spatial change:

I don't know what else to say but
I want something else
I want and want always wear
and wear
Always
Always (p. 43)

This hunger leads to an ever insistent demand for novelty:

You ask presents
Surprise packages
What have you brought
Have you brought anything
Will you ever bring anything

The subject and tone of this last section shift abruptly as a new, distant, authoritative voice interrupts the unfruitful conversation and exhorts the person who is unhappy with life to

Go into the sterile mountains
into the region
Of minute stone
The puma that circles the
pyramidal peaks
The eyes that dry revolve

The dissatisfaction this individual cannot master seems due in part to an unchallenging way of life. He cannot change the pattern of unrelieved despair and pain without a sharp break with the present and a willingness to take risks. The mountainous region apparently symbolizes a place set apart for simplification and renewal. Radical personal change requires a decisive, even if temporary, separation from one's previous existence. A thorough examination of one's life offers both the hope of new insights leading to transformation and the threat of increased disorientation. But the speaker who urges this departure emphasizes that such a trial will demand a modification of one's former life:

Can you ask and after returning
Is it the same sewing and humming
    a little
Tune a little tumrtumrtumrtumrtum

The type of withdrawal advocated in section Ie is similar to the solitary quest of Thomas Damascan in Part II of The Homestead Called Damascus, beginning with his separation from his brother (p. 10) and culminating in his symbolic sacrificial death "on the mountain crest" (p. 16). Another analogue is Christ's departure into the desert where he overcame Satan's temptations and clarified his life's mission (Matthew 4:1-11).

This parallels the apparent circumstances of Rexroth's life at the time he wrote A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. After living a few months in New York, Rexroth was baptized in the Catholic Church. As he says in An Autobiographical Novel, "The next day I left in a snowstorm
for Holy Cross Monastery on the Hudson across from Poughkeepsie.  

Staying as a guest at this monastery, Rexroth says:

... [I] took part in all the offices and other activities, served every morning at Mass, and otherwise comforted myself like a member of the community. Every day I painted, prayed, wrote, and walked through the snowbound forest... So began what is certainly the happiest period in my life.

After experiencing the "unfolding of the great two months' long liturgical drama of Lent, Holy Week, and Eastertide," Rexroth decided he had no vocation as a member of a religious order and returned to New York.

II

The opening lines of Part II are another illustration of the theme of "endless regress" prominent in the first part of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy:

We were interested in ways of being
We saw lives
We saw animals
We saw agile rodents (p. 43)

The last type of life mentioned, the gnawing mammal, reflects the emphasis in the poem on the enervating effect of the processes of life. The poet later seeks to ascend step by step toward a vision of God, but a preoccupation with the tendency of all energy to approach an inert

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3Ibid., pp. 333-34.

4Ibid., p. 334.
state blocks that progress. All the poet at the moment can see are "Scala rodent" (p. 44), the Latin equivalent for corroding ladders.

Several images in Part II maintain the general mood of discouragement by suggesting a loss of power or a lack of firmness: "The stricken plethora," "Elastic fatigue," "The white lax hill" (p. 44). After the initial four lines, each line in Part II consists of usually one image and appears at first disconnected from the other lines within the section. However, Rexroth uses parallel structure to focus the reader's attention upon certain lines: When these images are examined together, apparent relationships emerge. These lines include:

```
The line warps
The meridian of least resistance
  ascends the sky
The brain ferments
.............
The little block falls
.............
The heart inclines
.............
The fingers jerk
.............
The resin curls
.............
The grackle breaks
```

(pp. 44-45)

This group conveys a sense of life as a continuous process which eventually abrades all substances. Change is inevitable and always means a decline in value. Activity is feverish and quickly spoils: The line "The brain ferments" is followed by "The curdled brain" (p. 44). Included in the last lines of Part II is a descending progression from the fifth to the first. Rexroth seems unwilling to make the effort necessary for obtaining a religious vision. Perhaps it is wiser to yield, to submit passively to the destructive force that is existence. This
course could be at best a kind of martyrdom, and three lines near the end of Part II evoke this association:

The cleaved cough
...................
The closing ribs
...................
The diverse arrows (pp. 44-45)

Part II communicates concern about the effort needed to achieve vision, a wavering before the thought of the "Sweat" that is the price of being able to see with "The anagogic eye" (p. 45).

III

The tone of Part III continues to be discouraging. The opening line states, "This is the winter of the hardest year" (p. 45), and some images convey the oppressive weight of falling snow (ll. 3, 8, 11), stone obstacles (ll. 7, 19), and "Flayed jaws piled on the steps" (l. 22). Part III also mentions burdensome aspects of life which increase the poet's longing for transcendence. The speaker bemoans "So many minor electrocutions/ So many slaps of nausea" (pp. 45-46). These two elements are part of Rexroth's presentation of existence as an unending interplay of pairs of opposites that batter the helpless human in a wearying alternation of extremes:

Ineffably to know how it goes
swollen and then not swollen
Cold and then too warm
...................
The abrupt diastole
That leaves you wondering
Why it was ever despite their
assurances unlocked
(pp. 45-46)

The speaker at one point asks, "Do you take this forever
concentric bland freezing to touch" (p. 46), and this question recalls the most pessimistic point in Sebastian Damascen's presentation in The Homestead Called Damascus. As Sebastian reviews his past,

His own especial arc in time curved
And then went flat around him, moment
And century in which he lived life -
This bland forever, known forever. (p. 11)

Carrying over into A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy is the belief that one past moment can epitomize and permanently freeze the life of an individual.

The last four lines stress the despondent mood of this portion of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. The first of these final lines, "It is Winter" (p. 46), echoes the opening statement of Part III, "This is the winter of the hardest year" (p. 45). The passage ends with three lines, each of which consists of a single noun:

Reason
Winter
Ache (p. 46)

This conclusion indicates that Rexroth feels mental as well as physical or emotional pain and reflects his difficulties in establishing the foundation for a reasoned defense of the justice of God. The last word of Part III, "Ache," recalls the sufferings of the woman in the conversation included in sections Ib and Ie and also reflects how deeply the poet yearns to change his bleak outlook by achieving religious insight.

IV

Rexroth's somber mood lifts in Part IV as a new day dawns. Expanding light is the basic metaphor of Part IV and engenders two other
symbols of the beginning of the poet's progress: the rising sun opens
the flowers and ascends into the sky. One aspect of the theme of opening
presented in this passage is the sense of being freed from a
restricting darkness. As daylight releases the flowers tightly closed
around themselves throughout the night, the image of "unfolding leaves"
(p. 47) helps convey a corresponding relaxation within the poet. A
variant of the theme of opening is the idea of many separate strands
uniting to form an outlet, as streams and rivers come together and flow
into the sea. One line which presents this image is "The crackling
anastomosis" (p. 47), and sunrise provides a mouth for "The throat of
night" (p. 46).

Various lines in Part IV combine with the rising sun to empha-
size the theme of ascent. Images explicitly dealing with upward move-
ment include "The climbing wheel," "The climbing toe," "The climbing
humerus," and "The lengthy stair" (p. 47). Lines joining with "The
climbing humerus" to depict a body straining to reach higher are "The
bending femur" and "The involved tendon." Contributing further to the
theme of rising are the images of "The white plateau," "The twisted
peak," and three presentations of a wing: "The droning wing," "The
conic of the wing," and "The general conic of the wing" (pp. 47-48).

The final goal of this ascent is spiritual revelation. The con-
text is Christian, and the means is Christ's sacrifice on the cross as
symbolized in the sacrament of the Eucharist. A probable allusion to
the cross early in Part IV is "The revealed tree" (p. 47), and a
reference to the Eucharistic cup is "The wine crater." Several images
of breaking which occur in this passage allude to the laceration of
Christ's body on the cross, symbolized in the Eucharist by the breaking of bread. The appearance of light after many hours of darkness is painful at first, as the poet describes the dawn as "The fractured hour of light" (p. 46) and "The hour of fractured light" (p. 47). Two other images of breaking are "The cracking mirror" (p. 47) and "The crazed pane" (p. 48). These references to the death of Christ recall the culmination of the quest of Thomas Damascen at the end of Part II of The Homestead Called Damascus. After reaching the top of the mountain, Thomas, assuming the role of the "sacramental Man,"

was broken on the height,  
in dark  
Opacity rent with caw and caw.  
(p. 17)

At the time of the writing of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, Rexroth still desires to transcend the inadequacies of the present by an act of extreme self-sacrifice, and he feels that an adequate representation of his need is the figure of the god who dies so that others may live.

Several objects presented in Part IV function either as a source, a reflector, or a transmitter of light. These items are a lens, eye, pane, mirror, and lamp. The light of revelation initially cannot penetrate either the "opaque lens" or the "clouded pane," and the mirror distorts any illumination because it is "cracking" and "concave" (p. 47). But two objects remain steadfast throughout the movement characteristic of this passage. Both lamp and eye are "rigid." The lamp apparently is the chief source of revelation for the poet: Christ's sacrificial death celebrated in the Eucharist. Part II ended with a reference to the "anagogic eye" (p. 45), and the poet's persistent effort to see reality
in the fourth and ultimate mystical sense is rewarded at the close of Part IV with the "revelation of the lamp" and the "revelation of the mirror" (p. 48).

V

After the revelation which ends Part IV of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*, Part V begins:

*It is now a decline
A decline and an understanding*

(p. 48)

The intense effort to gain illumination slackens temporarily in the first half of Part V. The widely dispersed lines of Part V contrast with the continuous lineation of Part IV, and the images in the first half of Part V diverge rather than draw together in meaning. The poet seemingly pauses to assimilate his transcendent experience, but he momentarily cannot order the elements he perceives.

Interrupting the poet's confusion is an unequivocal voice calling the faithful to worship:

*Ye that by night stand in the house of the Lord
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary
And praise the Lord* (pp. 48-49)

The invocation identifies the Lord as He "that made Heaven and earth" and then invokes for the individual believer "Blessing out of Sion." Included in the last lines of Part V are the closing words of a final benediction in a Catholic service: "Sicut erat/ . . . In principio/ Et nunc/ . . . Et semper/ Et in saecula/ Saeculorum" (p. 49), which can be translated as "Just as it was in the beginning and is now and evermore
shall be and unto ages of ages."

The words of the invocation and benediction reflect the primary purpose of the poem as an introduction to a defense of God's unlimited power and goodness. Such belief is the source of the praise of God voiced in the last half of Part V. Rexroth seemingly desires to make such a response himself, but he must at this point first establish intellectual grounds for belief in divine justice. The conclusion of Part V also indicates why Rexroth diligently seeks acceptance of the truth of Christianity. Proper faith and praise reward the believer with blessing, peace, and beauty.

VI

The revelation achieved in Part IV and the religious certitude and thanksgiving expressed at the end of Part V wane. Rexroth begins in Part VI the struggle to regain such vision and faith. Before reaching anew these heights, however, he must resist temptations to forsake the quest for religious enlightenment and succumb to the life of tedium, frustration, and despair presented in the first three parts of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. From Part VI through Part VIII, doubt and fatigue contend with the desire to make permanent the vision and peace of Parts IV and V. The effort is rewarded as Rexroth begins in Part IX to triumph over uncertainty. In the last part of the poem, he experiences even more intense and overwhelming visions of the validity of the Christian faith.
In the four sections of Part VI, Rexroth's visionary ardor alternately languishes and flares anew. Several lines in Part VIa indicate the flagging of his efforts toward illumination:

Day of drain
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Strain strain the pinguid
night long and told
on sacrosanct
And told on drought (p. 49)

With the coming of another night, the color black reasserts itself and actively combats the holiness symbolized by Christ on the cross:

Hung white on that black
Agios
The crackling black

The conclusion of this first section of Part VI is hopeful, however, because Rexroth alludes to the action which led Isaiah to accept a divine calling:

\[ o \ theos \\
Qui labia Isaiae Prophetae \\
calculo mundasti ignito \\
[0 God, who cleansed \\
with a \\
burning small stone the lips \\
Of Isaiah, the Prophet] \\

When Isaiah expressed his unworthiness to speak for God in his verse, one of the seraphim purged his past sins by touching his lips with a live coal taken from the altar of heaven. Isaiah then offered himself to the service of God. By citing this verse (Isaiah 6:7), Rexroth apparently reflects a willingness to use his poetry to communicate religious illumination and justify God, but in selecting this particular passage he emphasizes the pain of being made anew by fire and reveals some
reluctance to assume such a poetic role.

VIb

In the second section of Part VI, Rexroth presents some of the imperfections of life through the imagery of three fruits: an apple, a pomegranate, and an apricot. The first two symbols derive from classical mythology:

Atalanta and the germ of gold
Persephone the germ of parchment
red the granular carbon
chromosomes (p. 50)

Atalanta challenged each of her suitors to a footrace, knowing her great speed always assured her an easy victory. When a slower but clever opponent dropped the golden apples of the Hesperides in her path, Atalanta paused three times to stoop and pick them up and barely lost the race. Rexroth seemingly alludes to this story as an example of the human propensity for being easily distracted from a goal by a less worthy but momentarily alluring object.

The second symbolic fruit comes from the legend of Persephone. After Hades abducted Persephone from her mother Demeter, Zeus ordered her release. Because Persephone ate one pomegranate seed offered by Hades on her departure, she had to return for four months of each year to the underworld. A brief indulgence of appetite cost Persephone the chance to live always in the sunlight above the surface of the earth.

Rexroth's use of the words "germ" and "chromosomes" in his description of these fruits implies that fickleness is inherent in human character. One minuscule part of the germ cell of each individual
contains a fatal, inescapable tendency to choose the lesser immediate satisfaction rather than the greater ultimate good. In the midst of his effort to retain vision, Rexroth apparently realizes how ingrained is the urge to forego any difficult task. These classical allusions are a restatement of the theme that all change entails a loss of value. The ceaseless mutation which is characteristic of life is not a sign of vitality but of inconstancy.

This section closes with two lines from "To Cynthia: On her Changing," by the seventeenth-century English poet, Sir Francis Kynaston:

Though the tree die and wither, whence
The apricots were got.

The speaker in Kynaston's poem reminds Cynthia that she, unlike her namesake, the moon, cannot renew the diminution of her beauty. Because time slyly will steal her loveliness, he advises Cynthia,

do not waste
That beauty which is thine,
Cherish those glories which thou hast,
Let not grief make thee pine.®

The final stanza illustrates that the inevitability of decay should not hinder the enjoyment of earthly pleasures, no matter how fleeting:

Think that the lily we behold,
Or July-flower may
Flourish, although the mother mould,
That bred them be away.
There is no cause, nor yet no sense,
That dainty fruits should not,
Though the tree die, and wither, whence
The apricots were got.®


6Ibid.
Placing the lines quoted by Rexroth within the context of Kynaston's entire poem gives some consolation for the wasting away of value by time. The speaker in "To Cynthia: On her Changing" accepts irreparable decline but states that the proper response to evanescent beauty is not remorse but appreciation. Although the complete poem celebrates what is valuable in life, Rexroth's selection of only the last two lines stresses the lasting corruption more than the momentary splendor. The preceding lines of Rexroth's poem add to the negative emphasis:

Is this the question
Is this the chute threat mountain
The crumbling femur (p. 50)

The now disintegrating thighbone recalls the "bending femur" (p. 47) that in Part IV helped the poet achieve vision. Rexroth implies that the most illuminating vision will fade as surely as bone decays, and this knowledge discourages subsequent attempts to regain enlightenment.

VIc

The passage quoted at the end of the following section, Part VIc, and taken from a section concerning the nature of angelic knowledge in the Summa Theologica by St. Thomas Aquinas, indicates that, regardless of Kynaston's wise counsel, the poet seeks an imperishable bliss:

But as to the knowledge of the Word and of the things beheld in the Word, he is never in this way in potentiality. He is always actually beholding the Word and the things seen in the Word. For the bliss of Angels consists in such vision and beatitude,

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and does not consist in habit
but in act, as the Philosopher
says. (p. 51)7

Rexroth would desire a similar "knowledge of the Word" because of his interest in theodicy. The Word usually signifies in theology the thought and will of God as manifested in creation. A theodicy is in one sense an elaboration of such a beatific vision, that is, a rational confirmation of the active presence of the divine wisdom in the world and in man and an explanation of the problem of evil.

VIId

The effort continues in Part VIId to strengthen the will to vision. Helping maintain the poet's resolve are several italicized words and phrases in Greek and Latin which occur throughout this section and are taken from a hymn in the liturgy of the Eastern Church called the Trisagion. Some of these words are apparently divine attributes, such as holy (Agios), strong (ischyros), and immortal (Athanatos). Supplementing the call for strength in the word ischyros is a possible allusion to Athanatus, who was, according to Pliny, a man of great stature and superhuman might. Another phrase, Lumen Christi, identifies Christ as the source of enlightenment. One line is a solemn Christian formula expressing the gratitude of a devoted follower: Deo gratias, or "Thanks be to God." Still another italicized phrase incites perseverance in holiness: Habemus ad Dominum, or "Let us hold to the Lord." And the last phrase is a petition for divine mercy and aid:

Eleison imas, or "Have mercy on me."

Part VIId seemingly concludes with another visionary experience:

The every presence whirl
The spinning eye
The deepest air
The shadow lain across the noonday air

Eleison imas
The single wing
And the feather forever floating
a thin spiral down
forever in the air of noon

It is difficult to decide whether these lines describe a pleasing or a discouraging vision. Although the wing and the floating feather could refer to the descent of the Holy Spirit, the passage includes certain ominous elements. The shadow, apparently cast by the feather, contrasts with the image of Christ as the light of revelation. This shadow also could symbolize the ennui which the poet is resisting at this point in the poem. In an adaptation of part of Lucretius' De rerum natura, Rexroth describes in detail this impediment to spiritual growth:

I write letters and don't send them;
Dream away my poverty;
Make dozens of incredibly Bad sketches; reread the great
Masterpieces; review my Greek and Chinese, and discover
My vocabulary is gone;

The Rule of St. Benedict
Is very explicit about
The sickness that destroyeth
In the noonday.8

The perpetual descent of the feather in the last line of Part VI recalls the theme earlier in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* of "endless regress" (p. 42) and contrasts with the general upward motion leading to revelation in Part IV (pp. 46-48).

**VIIa**

The effort reflected in Part VID, not to falter, but to remain steadfast in Christian belief, involves the intellect as well as the emotions. Rexroth's quest is for that "knowledge of the Word" of God mentioned in the passage from Aquinas quoted at the end of Part VIC (p. 51). This knowledge is for Rexroth both visionary and cognitive: apprehending the mind and will of God as manifested in creation means experiencing the bliss of vision and, at the same time, establishing the basis for a theodicy, or a reasoned defense of God's guidance of the universe. Part VII reflects the resistance of the divine wisdom to the human intelligence. The most perplexing factors are the apparent futility of applying normal logical procedures and the conflict between an urgent need to act and the difficulty of finding any signs of progress or avenues of development.

The impression given in all three sections of Part VII is the frustration of the poet's mind. The intellect, trying to pierce through phenomena to vision, is hampered by its own logic. The difficulty in maintaining the heights of spiritual illumination and peace reached in Parts IV and V causes considerable dissatisfaction. The occasional moments of consolation and renewed resolve expressed in Part VI are no longer acceptable. Nothing less than a lasting return to the state of
revelation seems the poet's due:

The casual reverberation is not
restitution
The doing must claim
A claimed doing (p. 52)

One result of the unexpected delay in recurrent moments of exaltation is
a confusion which is communicated by seemingly illogical lines or
phrases:

As the transit of residing
As the bifurcation that will
never equalize

Some lines explicitly render this state of confusion:

And as you spoke they spoke
The gongs of name
Confusing a difficulty
(a difficult memorandum: a difficulty)

Other statements in section VIIa seem nonsensical, as if the language
is breaking down under the excessive demands placed upon it by the
search for renewed enlightenment:

Audible folding that cannot watched
sheds dichotomies

And then to square the black square
and the placental necessity
in a stone acre

The tension within the poet emerges in a tendency toward violence that
is mirrored in several explosive images:

The upright eyes
The pole of light
Stave eyes
Stars burst
Jaws squirm beneath the
ingrained claw
Eyes break the capsules of
the strange arithmetics
in claps of light
Trapped and frustrated "In a paralyzed night," the poet even turns against the holiness that has been his principle access to vision, as he suddenly urges, "Stave sanctity."

VIIb, c

Sections b and c of Part VII illustrate the dynamics of reasoning. The effect of these sections is a picture of the mind actively engaged in conceptual thought prior to reaching any settled conclusions. The reason for not accepting any particular assertion is apparently a fear that assent might stop further progress. One sign of this mental restlessness is the violation of common logical procedures. The opening lines of section VIIb show that Rexroth's method will not be confined by the ordinary laws of identity and contradiction:

Evasion is not contradiction
Aside is not against
This is that method
This one is aside
This one is against (p. 52)

The usual standards of intellectual investigation are insufficient for the answers he seeks and the causes he plumbs:

It is not enough to go posting in causes
It is not accurate to ask
It is not the case
Is the cause (p. 53)

The unique nature of visionary experience interferes with the commonly accepted relationship between a set of circumstances and the apparent causes of these existing conditions:

The cause is the case
Not in this place
The simultaneous cause is not however the perfect simultaneous case
Not perfect in this place (p. 54)

All three sections of Part VII reflect the processes involved in making conceptual discriminations. Although these sections present both the basic mental activities of discovering likenesses and dissimilarities, the emphasis is decidedly upon differentiation. Rexroth refers in section VIIa to "the bifurcation that will never equalize," "mitosis," "dichotomies," and the process of squaring (p. 52). Two lines in section VIIb seemingly summarize the basic urge of the poet: "To encourage/ To evolve differences" (p. 53). Other statements in this section emphasize separation:

Now is the time and we go aside and they go away
The geminal eyes separate
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
In all cases the concomittant values will always separate in such a way that the postulates gone to their creating will remain forever separated (p. 53)

Rexroth apparently identifies finding equivalences with evasion:

Evasion is not contradiction
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Evasion is consistent in equals
Evasion is pleasant on occasion
. . . . . . . . . . . .
If there is not a necessity it does not mean that such a necessity is an impossible necessity. It means there are equals.
(pp. 52, 53)

The fear of evasion is part of Rexroth's concern about a lack of progress, the conviction that he is "Not growing/ Not doing" (p. 53). No one
course of action can guarantee greater coherence, intensity, or meaning:

It is not always possible to suppose configuration.

It is not even always possible to suppose intensification.

It is not possible to suppose signification.

(p. 54)

In order to get himself away from a dead center, Rexroth shies from similarities in his thinking because to do so tempts one to settle passively in the midst of specious similitudes. A constant alternation between extremes has the advantage that,

When there are polarities there is a pole, at least
There is a polarizing activity. (p. 53)

Going in circles is even preferable to accepting the likeness of various concepts because "When the activity is circular it means a center" (p. 54). The intellectual hunger at the center of the poet which demands action may not be a completely negative force:

When there are vortices it means at least an eye, it may mean a hand, it may mean germination.

There is, however, a particular type of circular movement that seems best suited for both activity and progress: "As a spiral."

Faced with an apparent stasis in his spiritual quest, Rexroth feels that he must take some mental action, even if it is misguided, to try to effect some solution. This pressure to do something, to avoid
sinking into torpor, seemingly is the impetus for the intellectual drive to multiply differences, to divide and subdivide in a constantly accelerating analysis. This drive also imparts the strong note of instability to this part of the poem. The impression arises that it is perhaps this mental agitation that is blocking renewed vision, that it is an intellectual craving which is "Eroding the essential plethora" (p. 52). Rexroth notes, at the end of Part VII, that a major difficulty in breaking down conceptually the quest for vision into its component parts is the poet's close involvement in a complex experience:

Perhaps if you were given one rubber neurone and then went far away it could be said: this is the case, likewise: this is the cause, as in the economy of a microcosmos there exist polar and antipolar determinants. (p. 54)

VIII

Part VIII helps clarify some of the main themes of the preceding part. The opening nine lines indicate Rexroth's desire to discover the general principles and concepts underlying events:

The grammar of cause
The cause of grammar
The being of grammar
The place of being
The magnificent being of division
The gradient of change
The invisible triangle of difference
Of division
The parsed challenge (p. 54)

These lines reflect several subjects of particular interest to Rexroth: the nature of causality; the origin and nature of language and its
dependence upon causal thought; the relation of language to being; the interest in ontology; the focus upon the dynamics of being, especially the important activity of division; and the concern with growth and measuring the rates of change in minute, even subliminal gradations.

The ninth line, "The parsed challenge," apparently states Rexroth's approach to the challenge of maintaining a religious vision capable of authenticating the nature of reality: despite the limitations of traditional logic and the uncertainty of progress, he shall remain committed to intellectual analysis, confronting any difficult issue by breaking it down into its component parts in order to explain the relationship of each part.

Part VIII emphasizes the difficulty of carrying through this challenge. Being able to see through phenomena to the basic structure of reality is as hard as "Hunting badgers by owl-light" or "Hunting owls by flint light" (p. 55). Numerous factors threaten the poet's vigilance. Complicating the search for universal principles is "The periodic variation which descends like a curtain of cold fire from the aurora borealis" (p. 55). Several lines emphasize coldness and reversal of direction, as if to indicate weakening of ardor and a confused blunting of the visionary impetus:

The cold tangle of bowels
slides on itself

The curtain of glow bends
on itself

This last line from Part VIII also implies that the most intense moments of illumination face an inevitable diminishment; the blooms of vision fade quickly when caught up in the vast areas of space and the copious

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effluvia of time:

Those worlds that bloom against
the blessing retina,
etiolate across unnumbered
distances and disgulphing
years

The conclusion of Part VIII reaffirms the value of close intellectual discrimination and links this mental discipline to the artist's effort to forge a lasting faith. In the manner of a Biblical exegesis, Rexroth states:

And "Faith sits triumphant on a
car of gold
Of Tubal's making, where blew
sapphires shine"
Of Tubal's, that is, the discipline
Of severed choice from
satellite to sepulcher
As: "the choice of death rather
than dishonorable wealth
reveals character, the choice
of a nectarine rather than a
turnip does not."

IXa

The first line of Part IX introduces an important symbol of the conclusion of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, "The bell" (p. 55). This bell seemingly announces that the moment is approaching when the poet will either succeed or fail in obtaining enlightenment. The ringing of the bell heralds the judgment of spiritual progress, but the poet initially encounters torments rather than bliss. It is unclear at first whether the bell is identified with or opposed to these sufferings. As the afflictions continue, so does the "enduring bell" (p. 56), and the sound of the bell merges, at the end of section IXa, with the cry of
agony from the poet's mouth. There is, however, stronger evidence that
the bell is a symbol of divine aid, helping the poet resist temptations
and persist in his quest for a vision of God. The second line of Part
IXa states that the bell "Too softly and too slowly tolled" (p. 55),
implying that this sound is not yet strong enough to prevail against
the demonic onslaught. An earlier mention of a bell occurs in Part VIA,
just before a reference to the calling of Isaiah to devote his poetic
gifts to God (p. 49). A sounding bell therefore is in close proximity
with a direct encounter with God. The strongest evidence that the bell
is a positive symbol occurs in Part Xb. At this point of the poem, the
poet's trial is over, and he moves steadily toward an ever increasing
illumination. As part of the preparation for the final, most intense
visionary experience in Part Xc, the bell appears twice (p. 59).

Before light dawns for the poet, however, he must undergo a
dark night of the soul. Plagues first attack him, in a series of seven
waves: snow, ice, fire, blood, adders, thick smoke, and stench (pp.
55-56). Other horrors accompany the pestilential waves:

And unnumbered beasts swam
in the sea
Some feather footed
Some devoid of any feet
And all with fiery eyes
And phosphorescent breath (p. 56)

These afflictions bring to mind the plagues that struck Egypt while the
Israelites were in bondage (Exodus 7-12). Such natural disasters were
a sign of divine judgment and supremacy over the works of man. As
terrible as these visions are to the poet, one consolation is that
through similar visitations Israel became free. Another source is the
plagues that form part of the vision of St. John the Divine in Revelation (8:7-11:19; 15:1-16:11), a primary source for some of the imagery in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*.

The dominant images for the moment are of hesitancy, confusion, darkness, and aversion:

The wiry cranes that stagger
in the air
The hooded eyes struggling in
the confused littoral
The smoky cloak

Those who watch the hole of
waving dark

Unplumbed and unforgotten
caves

A gruesome vision of death confronts the poet:

The gull matted on the sand
Worms spilling out of the beak

The dead bird recalls the theme of inescapable corruption as the basic law of all life, the image of a wing and ascending flight in the first attainment of revelation in Part IV (pp. 47-48), and the contrasting symbol of a feather "forever floating a thin spiral down forever" (p. 51) as the poet's enlightenment recedes. The picture of the dead gull indicates that the poet's visionary hopes are plummeted disastrously and are now only a broken, tangled mass. The frequent use of a bird to symbolize the Holy Spirit adds the possible meaning that the poet is lost in darkness without hope of divine aid.

Section a concludes with

A cry sent up in expectation
A mouth filling the sky
Shaping the words of the victor
The bell

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A voice
Blessed are the dead who die
The generations of generations

Although these last lines are ambiguous, they apparently are a cry of agony, a dismayed acknowledgement that victory belongs to the powers of darkness. The next to last line is part of a verse in Revelation, but what is omitted is significant. After a heavenly condemnation of those who deny Christ and worship the beast, St. John the Divine hears a voice commanding him to write

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.
Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them. (Rev. 14:13)

By quoting only part of this verse, Rexroth indicates that despair still wrestles with faith. The statement of the next to last line of Part IXa, removed from its Biblical context, is a grim beatitude which implies a near triumph within Rexroth of death over the promise of eternal life.

The last line of Part IXa, "The generations of generations," echoes part of the Latin phrase, *Et in saecula saeculorum*, which concludes the statement of faith in the eternal nature of God, quoted at the end of Part V: "Who was in the beginning, is now, and evermore shall be, even unto the ends of the earth," or, in Latin,

Sicut erat
. . . . . . In principio
. . . . . . . . . .
Et nunc
. . . . . . Et semper
. . . . . . . . . .
Et in saecula
Saeeculorum (p. 49)

One interpretation of the last two lines of Part Xa, "Blessed are the dead who die/ The generations of generations," is that they are a
parody of a Christian benediction, a refusal to praise "The Lord that made Heaven and earth" (p. 49). Shaken by an assault of repulsive visions, Rexroth seemingly sees existence, not as the garment of a continuous divine presence, but as an ever growing mound of death, the final resting place and summation of all "The generations of generations."

A possible hopeful interpretation of these last two lines, however, is that Rexroth refers to a penitential dying to the self, necessary that a new person may emerge. Such a figurative death occurs in The Homestead Called Damascus when Thomas Damascan culminates his solitary quest with a symbolic crucifixion on a barren mountaintop (p. 17). The death of the self is a temporary and painful extinction of the worshipper's personality in homage to the sovereignty of God. In order to approach the deity, the seeker for religious vision must yield totally and remove all barriers between himself and God, including consciousness of himself as a distinct individual. Knowledge of the omitted portion of the verse from Revelation also supports an optimistic reading. The promise of rest from labor, the reward for martyrs in the service of God, and the belief in the efficacy of works, a theme emphasized in the first section of Part X (p. 58), would especially appeal to Rexroth at this moment of trial.

IXb

Rexroth opens section b with a scene of great devastation:

They were in an unstable condition
Floating about in a putrid fog
Throughout the tangled forest
Between the charred trunks
Over the yellow marshes (p. 56)

This infernal setting seemingly occurs immediately after the lifting of the scourges appearing in section IXa. The description reflects the confusion, revulsion, and exhaustion the poet feels in a time of darkness and estrangement from God. A possible contribution to the fog and thick forest could be the intellectual entanglements reflected in Parts VII and VIII. These quandries may have deadened rather than fed the spiritual impulse. A statement made elsewhere by Rexroth about the visionary experience supports this interpretation: "the abandonment of the rational intellect is the first portal of illumination, the first veil of Isis."  

Rexroth next depicts in section IXb those persons caught in this waste place. Parallel structure increases the power of the passage: each line begins with the pronoun Some and describes a group of victims. These lines recall a similar portion of section a which presented

Those who walk
Those who are constrained
Those who watch the hole of wavering dark (p. 56)

The next line, "There is no order in expectation," prepares for the "cry sent up in expectation" at the end of section IXa. The position of each of the groups detailed in section b reflects its expectation of immediate, additional calamity, and perhaps death, as the hour of God's judgment has come (Rev. 14:7). The last two lines of section a,

"Blessed are the dead who die/ The generations of generations" (p. 56), may indicate that sudden death has fixed the people in the following section, as an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius arrested the inhabitants of Pompeii, but the continuation beyond this section of the poet's religious experience argues for a temporary rather than a permanent condition.

The varied positions of the groups in section b show indeed that "There is no order in expectation." Typical stances are aversion:

Some squirmed after the manner of lizards
......
Some lay with their knees partly drawn up
......
Some held their heads bent down, (pp. 56-57)

complete vulnerability:

Some were upright with their arms held up
......
Some lay stretched at full length, (pp. 56-57)

obeisance:

Some were stooping
......
Some were kneeling, (p. 57)

panic:

Some kicked out with arms and legs,

and a blind groping for any solution:

Some felt about in the dark.

While most await their fate lying down or cringing, a few respond less ignobly. There are those who seek the comfort of the equally unfortunate:
"Some embraced"; others try to maintain calm: "Some stood and inhaled deep breaths"; and one group attempts to act in a normal fashion: "Some walked."

The last two reactions stand apart from the others. The next to last description presents a gesture of dignity in the face of catastrophe: "Some arose." Within the context of Rexroth's quest for visionary illumination, the final response is doubtlessly the proper manner of outlasting the night and the best hope of greeting the dawn: "Some gazed, sitting still."

IXc

The direction of the poet's fortunes reverses in section c. An "Imperceptible light," a faint spark within the soul ("Scintilla animae"), announces the alteration from negative to positive. The change is minute but of great significance. Rexroth uses the image of the shifting of a tremendous weight to convey that the momentum toward darkness and despair has turned around and now lends massive support to his quest for illumination:

Slowly the immense creaking screw
Turns

None of the previous hindrances can prevail against the growing light: "Nor the canker . . ./ Nor the entangled bone . . ./ Nor the salt of the sea . . ./ Nor the broken glass."

The new outlook begins while the poet sleeps, doubtlessly exhausted by the trials of the two preceding sections, and the catalyst for change seems to be a vision of the crucified Christ as a defense
against evil:

Behold the man swung in the way
. . . . . . . . . . . . .
And the shield hung from the lintel
Swayed in the wing

This vision of Christ then takes the form of a lion, a traditional image of the majesty of Christ: "And the secret appearance of the twilight lion." The following line recalls the cowering group in section b, "The hands clutching the knees" (p. 58), and implies that the source of the fear evident in so many of the responses listed in section b was, not a demonic force, but the coming of Christ in power and glory. Supporting this interpretation is a sudden image of "The bloody ankles" of Christ on the cross. The coming of the lion, "Which might devour/Which might trample," is no longer frightening because the poet knows that Christ, who is the lion, is tame and "shall dissolve in the hands" of the worshipper. This line apparently refers to the ceremony of the Eucharist which becomes the central symbol of the poem's conclusion in Part Xc. According to Christian belief, the bread and the wine become the actual body of Christ, and the elements of the Eucharist are "the instruments" of salvation placed in the hands of the celebrant.

The ensuing lines reinforce the theme of the resurrection of Christ by alluding, first of all, to the women who come at dawn to the tomb of Christ, find the stone rolled away from the entrance, the body missing, and hear angels proclaim that he is risen, and, secondly,

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One example of a lion symbolizing the majesty of Christ occurs in a vision in Revelation 5:5: "And one of the elders saith . . ., behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David."
alluding to the subsequent appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene, who, having mistaken him for the gardener, inquires where he has taken the body (John 20:15). The next line, "He sees him alive," could refer to another of Christ's appearances, either to one of the disciples or to the poet himself. As the section concludes, the poet views with fatigue but also a new detachment the struggle to overcome discouragement and acquire vision: "The tired men converse watching the wrestlers under the arc-light." The wrestlers may foreshadow the struggle in Part Xb which signals final victory: "The angel Gabriel seized the evil spirit and tied it up in the desert of upper Egypt" (p. 59).

A quiet statement ends Part IX: "You stand in the house at night." Two passages in Part X show that this image is the reassuring sight which greets the delayed return home of a formerly lost traveller, and the following analysis of the last part of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy will include a discussion of these passages.

Xa-c

A major theme of Part X is the descent of the Holy Spirit, coming with light to aid and welcome the arrival of once lost travellers. Several aspects of section Xa deal with the culmination of a quest, with the rescue of an objective from the "well of lost destinations" (p. 58), and the dominant note is now achievement rather than retrogression. One verse states the Aristotelian doctrine that initiating motion toward a goal assures the possibility of its attainment:

Now it would be useless for a thing
to be moved unless it were able to reach the end of that movement, hence that which has a natural aptitude for being

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moved towards a certain end
must needs be able to reach
that end.

Another passage indicates a more objective outlook by the poet, with
less interest in inner conflicts and focus instead on identifying and
then dealing with specific problems outside the self:

A traveller who has lost his
way should not ask, where
am I? What he really wants
to know is, where are the
other places? He has his own
body, but he has lost them.

Replacing the despair felt at the beginning of the poem over
the inevitable decline in value and vigor accompanying any change is
a more charitable view that good works have a reward:

And he considered that they who
had fallen asleep with godliness
had great grace laid up for them,
for their works follow them.

Adding to the optimism of this part of the poem is Rexroth's emphasis
on the grace bestowed by God for man's regeneration. One image of this
divine assistance is a figure descending to bring aid to the lost. An
example of this type of image occurs at the beginning of section a:

Down the unending staircase
goes the mother who shall
not die till she finds her
daughter

A similar figure appears in the opening lines of section c, and the
description implies that this is the Holy Spirit:

He descends five hundred steps
They hear his breathing secretly
The murmur of the midnight air
The unendurable fragrance
O woe unto him
The breath of God (p. 59)
Accompanying the brightening of the poet's outlook is a shift from intellectual to spiritual values. Rexroth apparently feels that the mental labor reflected in Parts VII and VIII is insufficient in itself for the attainment of vision. Only when grace intervenes and transmutes the labors of the human mind does vision emerge. The last line of section a states that the insights of a life in direct contact with the divine are superior to the highest accomplishments of man apart from the Christian god:

An Aristotle was but the rubbish of an Adam and Athens but the rudiments of Paradise. (p. 58)

The reference in section b to Gabriel as both man and angel implies that man, with divine help, can acquire near godlike powers:

Behold the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, flying swiftly touched me at the time of evening sacrifice (p. 59)

Section b continues to stress that the poet's achievement of vision is dependent on a force greater than the intellect. Rexroth describes the present wave of rapture as "A movement athwart the gradients of thought" (p. 59), and the following lines attempt to communicate the special nature of this movement:

The larvae of the brain A song in the peace of sleep The larval brain

The first line, "The larvae of the brain," implies that the initial products of the mind change radically and unpredictably, and the song which arises from the depths of sleep recalls the onset of illumination in the "slumber" (p. 57) which followed the dark night within the poet's
soul. After receiving this musical gift, the efforts of "The larval brain" themselves undergo the miraculous metamorphosis which crystallizes in vision.

Section c reiterates the theme of the sudden appearance of light to nightbound pilgrims:

The embowelled wanderers
The spark
Light by night to travellers
Remembering happiness
Separating night from night

The dark night resounds with welcome sounds and blossoms with light:

Hearest thou what curious things all the caves of night answer
The bright leaves reflect the severe light

The human mind without divine aid cannot obtain full vision, but the gift of grace does not rule out the necessity for any further human effort. Unexpected and unmerited help quickens Rexroth's own ardor.
The light shining down from heaven clarifies, refines, and strengthens his forward movement:

The cloud of sparks
The manifold bars of gold
The broom of light
The sweeping glow
The burnished ladders of the intellect
The silver spiral of the will
Tense in the telic light

Earlier statements foreshadow the type of progress made by Rexroth. When the poet desperately seeks at the end of Part VII an avenue of growth, he presents the spiral as one possible kind of ascent (p. 54). At the beginning of Part X, Rexroth's own effort is called "The winding labor"
(p. 58). The question which has tormented Rexroth from the first of the poem, "Is the labor lost" (p. 59)? is answered firmly by the image of "The silver spiral of the will," gathering power as it stands "Tense in the telic light," ready to pierce through to a supreme revelation embodied in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Xd

The main symbol of Part Xd is the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. The suffering and death of Christ enabled man to triumph over the liabilities of his existence: sin, evil, and death. Rexroth presents the paradoxical nature of this victory through the image of light miraculously springing out of a profound darkness, leaping from the instruments of the Eucharist:

- The ciborium of the abyss
- The bread of light
- The chalice of the byss
- The wine of flaming light (p. 60)

Light is prevalent throughout this concluding section. The first two lines consist of the single word "Light," and two Latin phrases refer to Christ as the "light of light and fountain of light": "Lux lucis/ . . . Et fons luminis." These phrases recall an earlier reference which pinpoints the source: Lumen Christi, "the light of Christ" (p. 51). Rexroth, in his use of the communion vessels, does not deny the existence of the abyss. The vain attempt in Part Id (p. 40) to argue another person out of despair over the meaninglessness of life showed the futility of trying to ignore the dark regions of being. By incorporating the shadowy, unknown depths within the sacrament itself,
Rexroth implies that acceptance, rather than evasion, of the abyss is the correct path to revelation.

Rexroth alludes in this final passage to the graduated nature of his often difficult ascent toward illumination. As part of the reward of the poet's labor, a "reverberant scalar song lifts up." The word scalar apparently means graduated and recalls the step-by-step progress up the "burnished ladders of the intellect" (p. 60). When the poet first began this climb, he saw the way as a "Scala rodent" (p. 44), a ladder hopelessly and continuously eroding before him. Rexroth seemingly emphasizes the gradations characteristic of an approach to God in order to stress that a person cannot leap immediately to vision, no matter how intense the desire, but must work long and patiently to acquire a gradually increasing illumination.

Another somewhat puzzling line also alludes to the theme of progress by precisely measured amounts: "The metric finger aeon by aeon" (p. 60). The finger may be that of God reaching out to impart life in man as depicted in The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo. This painting captures the moment just prior to the passage of the soul--the divine spark--into Adam, and a similar process initiated Rexroth's movement toward full vision. The first sign of the passing of the poet's dark night was an "Imperceptible light," a spark in the soul: "Scintilla animae" (p. 57). Rexroth's quest has been for a vision which would place him in direct contact with the divine, and this verse may indicate that coming into touch with the source of spiritual reality is a measured process. The line also expresses the paradox of drawing near in closely observable steps to an eternal, unlimited holiness. Rexroth can feel
therefore that as God approaches, He moves across immeasurable amounts of time. The way to God that the poet sees as a precisely graduated path is simultaneously coming into contact with the creative force of the universe, which moves toward the poet from all of time, "aeon by aeon."

Such an all-encompassing process obviously gathers a great deal of force, and, although the poet can visualize each step of his previous effort, attaining the height of enlightenment is an immensely overpowering moment transcending exact articulation. Rexroth uses symbols of fertility to convey the sense of creativity he feels at the heart of this experience. In keeping with the central role of the Eucharist in this passage, Rexroth alludes to an aspect of the death of Christ: "The water flowing from the right side." In the account of the crucifixion in the Gospel of St. John, when a soldier pierces Christ's side with a spear, blood and water pour out (John 19:34). By mentioning only the water, Rexroth stresses the regenerative nature of the death on the cross. A second image of fertility refers to the wine used in the Eucharist: "The regnant fruitful vine."^13

^11 Another vision of God which includes flowing water occurs in Revelation 22:1: "And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb."

^12 Referring to the necessity for individual baptism in John 3:5, Jesus says, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

^13 Jesus uses the image of the vine in addressing his disciples just before the crucifixion: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).
As the poet's diligent labor reaches the crest of the visionary experience, all restraint falls away as enlightenment bursts forth:

The exploding rock
The exploding-mountain cry

When the poet's upward motion meets the descent of the divine, rapture erupts in a glowing shower of "sapphire snow." Language is now inadequate to communicate transcendence. Rexroth's first resort is the Greek phrase "Tris agios," meaning "thrice holy" and the basis of the short hymn in the liturgy of the Eastern Church cited in Part VIId (p. 51).

One characteristic of several theophanies in the Bible is this threefold repetition of the word holy. Rexroth's indebtedness elsewhere in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy to Revelation makes it a likely source. When St. John the Divine approaches the throne of God, he sees four beasts who circle the throne and sing "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). The cherubim and seraphim who stand before the throne of God in the vision of II Enoch also sing this hymn (II Enoch 21:1). One reason Rexroth selects this phrase is that it is the traditional response of those creatures who are continuously in the closest contact with God, living in unending beatitude.

Another example of the occurrence of this refrain in a Biblical vision helps amplify Rexroth's intentions. As Isaiah draws near to God, he hears the seraphim sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). This passage is important to Rexroth because it immediately precedes the presentation of Isaiah's talents as a poet to the service of God (Isaiah 6:5-8).
Rexroth quotes in Part VIa (p. 49) part of the account of the touching of Isaiah's lips by a burning coal, an act which cleanses past sins and seals his new vocation. Rexroth stresses throughout his career that the vatic role is the poet's highest calling.\textsuperscript{14}

The second part of the praise of God sung by the seraphim in the vision of Isaiah reflects the theme of the justification of God's creation, the conviction that "the whole earth is full of his glory." The vision which concludes Rexroth's poem is the prolegomenon to the theodicy: illumination precedes, rather than follows, a reasoned defense of divine justice. But enlightenment defies, first, reason, then language itself. When the sanctioned epithet \textit{Tris agios} fails to embody the full glory of divine vision, Rexroth ends his poem with a series of sounds not found in any language:

\textit{Hryca hryca nazaza}.

Part Two: An Analysis of the Methods and Aims of A \textit{Prolegomenon to a Theodicy}

Literary Cubism attracted Kenneth Rexroth while he was quite young. He was in his early twenties when he wrote \textit{A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy} [1925-1927], the one longer poem constructed according to the creative principles of Cubism. He says, "When I was a young lad I

thought that literary Cubism was the future of American poetry."  
Rexroth had such high hopes because he felt that this poetic method was both revolutionary and visionary. Rexroth's early acquaintance in Chicago with persons actively involved in radical politics strengthened his belief that he was a member of a "special elite whose mission it was to change the world," and an important weapon in this mission was art. Abstract painting and literary Cubism were as much signs of belonging to an enlightened minority in the midst of a benighted majority as was the most uncompromising interpretation of Marxism. At this time, while still in his teens, Rexroth viewed himself as "one of Plato's Guardians."  

Literary Cubism was revolutionary because it attacked one of the basic supports of the social order: the logical structure of language. In discussing the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Rexroth lists the dominant failings of Western culture faced by Williams at the beginning of his career: "A dying social order, a dead language, a value system emptied of meaning." Rexroth believes that these weaknesses are interrelated and that the structure of language reflects and perpetuates the basic illness of the modern world: human self-alienation.

Social and economic factors are vitally important for Rexroth's

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16 Kenneth Rexroth, An Autobiographical Novel, p. 149.
17 Ibid., p. 150.
understanding of art, and a major influence on his interpretation of modern literature is the thought of Karl Marx. Rexroth believes that comprehension of the art of the capitalist era is impossible without a grasp of the "alienation that is characteristic of it and is shared by all its major writers." Modern industrial civilization is unique in having its major artists deny all of its values. Rexroth's list of these artists includes:

Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoievsky, Melville, Mark Twain—all are self-alienated outcasts. His only exception is Walt Whitman.

The basic cause of alienation is the reduction of all values to commodity relationships. One theme of the writings of Marx is that new economic forces have dealt a decisive, irreversible blow to social cohesion. A passage of The Communist Manifesto, attacking bourgeois society of the late 1840's, is an especially trenchant portrayal of this social trauma:

The bourgeoisie, whenever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." . . . In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

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Rexroth traces this alienation to the present, claiming that the cause of the sickness of contemporary America is a system of values whose pinnacle is the "reduction of all things and all men to commodities."\(^\text{22}\) A primary cause of alienation was the increasingly abstract nature of human relationships which accompanied the onset of commercial, industrial society in America and Europe. As human beings become more remote from their work, they also grow more detached from each other. Other people become "more like things than persons,"\(^\text{23}\) and the individual eventually becomes separated from himself. The steps of the entire process are, first, "alienation from comradeship in the struggle with nature, then alienation from each other, finally self-alienation."\(^\text{24}\) The intellectuals were the first to realize that they had lost the power of determining their own lives and, more importantly, any "personal, determinative role in society."\(^\text{25}\) By articulating this new situation, the intellectuals gradually spread throughout society an awareness of alienation.

The major artists of the period roughly from the French Revolution to the present reacted against the secularization of their society and the accompanying growing disregard for aesthetic and especially spiritual values. Because the apologists for this increasingly worldly


\(^{24}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{25}\text{Rexroth, "Who Is Alienated from What?" p. 130.}\)
society based their defense largely on rationalistic and pragmatic
grounds, the artists in secession from the dominant culture eventually
reacted against the sufficiency of the principle of reason itself.
Rexroth feels that the Romantic Movement is an early manifestation of
this tendency. He explains the rise of Romanticism as part of a turning
away from the "neat, domesticated universe" created by the Age of En­
lightenment and a search "in older times, and remote places, and in the
lower classes" for the values missing in the rationalistic culture of
the eighteenth century. The origin of the Romantic Movement was the
realization by the most sensitive individuals that their society
suffered from "spiritual malnutrition."26

Rexroth states furthermore that one consistent trait of Roman­
ticism was anti-rationalism.27 Not only were the leaders of romantic
secession offended by rationalistic defenses of the secular society,
but they felt that the positivist approach discounted and even denied
existence to crucial areas of their experience. Rexroth cites John
Newman as an example of such an approach. The most important value
for Newman was the "direct experience of Christ," and if this experience
could not satisfy reason, then "so much the worse for reason."28 Newman
would repudiate reason rather than forego an essential element of his
spiritual make-up.

28Ibid., p. 261.
Newman's criticism of the disruptive effect of reason in spiritual matters is part of a larger attack on the prevailing values of industrial civilization. Whether the critic is Newman, Nietzsche, or William Morris, the indictment is the same: "'There is no room for a whole person in the nineteenth century synthesis.'" Rexroth adds that because there is even less room in the "twentieth-century synthesis, they are all still relevant."29

Rationalistic philosophy reduces human beings to mechanisms and cannot provide satisfactory explanations for the inner, spiritual life, for those moments which are the "fundamental experiences of life."30 Rexroth is especially aware of the limitations of rationalism because he has had from earliest childhood formative experiences difficult to reconcile with prevailing materialistic philosophies. He explains that he was unable to fit his most important experiences, primarily moments of vision, into the framework of scientific materialism. This frustration initiated his interest in a "philosophy which put the foundations of reality beyond time and space."31 Such a quest welcomes challenges and alternatives to accepted rational structures, including the ordered use of language for communication. Rexroth's poetry occasionally departs from conventional rational discourse, and underlying these efforts is the hope that the radical use of language can

29Ibid., p. 260.
incorporate those determinative areas of experience that otherwise would be denied expression.

Rexroth's introduction to an anthology that he edited in 1949 gives a definitive statement of the spiritual crisis of the modern age. He states that the then current belief in the impersonality of art is one sign of a worldwide sickness. What splits the modern personality is

this rigorous rationalism, this suppression of all acknowledgement of personality, feeling, intuition, the denial of communication and the existence of emotion . . ., the attempt to divorce the brain from the rest of the nervous system.32

The poetry of Charles Baudelaire expressed definitively the beginning of a period which was antagonistic to the complete personality because he was very susceptible to the destructive currents set in motion as materialistic values began engulfing all others. Rexroth feels that Baudelaire's poetry marks a major turning point in Western culture because his rejection of the dominant values of the newly emerging society prefigured the alienation of the artist in modern civilization. Baudelaire was constantly aware not only of a loss of moral standards in his society but of his own estrangement from it. In "Masterpieces of Symbolism and the Modern School," an introduction to a selection of modern literature that includes poems by Baudelaire; Kenneth Douglas and John Hollander identify as a new element in nineteenth-century art the awareness by many artists that a chasm exists between themselves and the "middle class, or bourgeoisie, or

Philistines."³³ Adding to the artists' alienation is the realization that society has assigned them no role. These artists face a hopeless dilemma: "reigning values are fraudulent or trivial, while their own meet with nothing but incomprehension."³⁴ Rexroth believes that intense alienation from everyday life so affected Baudelaire's perception that he adopted the conviction that normal life can only be accepted if it is a "message in code, a system of symbols for something else." Since the surface of ordinary life must contain a hidden meaning, the role of the poet becomes the decoding of the "incomprehensible obvious."³⁵

Because of the profound change in the artist's relation to society, the poet becomes a prophet, alchemist, and seer. These roles reflect three responses to the appearance of modern society. The prophet denounces the specific abuses that he sees immediately before him. The alchemist seeks to convert the base matter of everyday experience into something of higher quality. Rexroth notes that Baudelaire "claimed the power of transubstantiation--'Paris, you gave me mud, and I turned it to gold and gave it back to you.'"³⁶ The seer penetrates beyond the unacceptable surface of events to unveil the real world which lies behind the "world experienced by sense and reason."³⁷

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³⁴Ibid.
³⁵Ibid., p. 241.
³⁶Ibid., p. 242.
The poetry of Arthur Rimbaud is the most dramatic example of the poet as a discoverer of hidden knowledge. Rexroth states that Rimbaud, taking seriously the most extreme claims for poetry, believed that the poet was an "all-powerful shaman and seer, capable of altering the very nature of reality." After witnessing the fall of the Commune, an insurrection against the French government during March, 1871, Rimbaud transferred his revolutionary hopes from social change to poetry. His ambition was to make poetry a "sufficient vehicle for a total overturn of the human consciousness and a transvaluation of reality." Rimbaud's radical goals called for a correspondingly fundamental metamorphosis in poetic communication. Rimbaud's transformations of the structure of language are important in understanding Rexroth's poetry because this method of creation basically is the same as that of literary Cubism. Rexroth makes an even bolder claim that Rimbaud developed, refined and pushed to its final forms the basic technique of all verse that has been written since in the idiom of international modernism - the radical dissociation, analysis, and recombination of all the material elements of poetry.

Such poetry uses extreme methods in seeking the creation of a new reality. The first effect of this creative method is the disintegration of the "logical pattern of Western European thought and language" as the basic syntactical structure - "subject, verb, object, and their modifiers" - breaks down. Secondly, and more importantly, this technique fragments


39Ibid.

40Ibid., p. 272.
the "psychological, descriptive, [and] dramatic" elements of the poem and then recombines them in "forms that establish the conviction of a new and different order of reality." Such an approach violently demolishes the subject and the basic situation of the poetry. Ordinary patterns of response based on past experience are of no use to the reader in determining "who the actors in the poem are, or where they are, or what is happening to them."^41

Rexroth's analysis of the modern history of Western culture helps explain the need for such a revolutionary assault on the validity of logical and causal processes. He feels that the most important European artists and thinkers of the nineteenth century realized that the "diabolical principle of lifeless rationalism [was] reducing reality to empty quantity"^42 and that quantitative rationalism cannot cope with the most crucial experiences and relationships of persons. Only such extreme measures as those exemplified in Rimbaud's poetry could communicate effectively the urgent need for alternatives to an ultimately dehumanizing, materialistic conception of the nature of reality.

Rexroth's discussion of three of the forerunners of the revolution of the modern sensibility, Blake, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, shows that the dominant view of reality especially threatened the individual's capacity for achieving spiritual insight. Rexroth claims that all three of these poets thought of the artist as a prophet, a seer, in Baudelaire's

^41Ibid.


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phrase, "the visionary eye of the body politic." This emphasis directly links the revolution of the sensibility to a spiritual crisis characteristic of the entire modern era and reveals as well how central visionary experience is to Rexroth's view of poetry.

The artistic expression of the deep-seated change in the modern sensibility demanded a new idiom. The desire to alter the individual's basic presuppositions explains the difficult style of much of modern poetry. The later poetry of Mallarmé departed from the conventional communicative devices used by Baudelaire in presenting the spiritual crisis of modern alienated man. Mallarmé's radical alterations of syntax heralded the realization that the "logical structure of the Indo-European languages" no longer could express so all-encompassing a change in the human sensibility.

In discussing certain contributors to the literary magazine Pagany who wrote in a manner like that of literary Cubism, Rexroth articulates the revolutionary aim of attacks on the logical structure of Western language. These writers felt that the arts could be the means for a radical transformation of the sensibility itself. More specifically, they believed that

the word or the pictorial image could be used to subvert the dead syntax by which human self-alienation had been grafted into the very structure of the brain and nervous system.45

44Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. xii.
These artists hoped that the "Revolution of the Word" would set free a completely new meaning of life for modern man and revitalize language by sweeping away "dead shells from which meaning had been exhausted or had turned malignant."46

In explaining the failure of this ideal, Rexroth indicates one reason for the change after A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy in the method of poetic construction of his longer poems. Halfway through the life of the magazine, the "economic and social collapse of the dominant society began to make itself felt." Artists throughout the world reacted to the forces of disintegration by turning their attack upon those "specific social evils from which they had thought they had escaped by concentrating on the underlying, fundamental Lie."47 (The "fundamental Lie" is the Social Lie, or the masking of the exploitative basis of modern commercial civilization which fosters human self-alienation.)

Rexroth believes that the method of poetic composition introduced by Rimbaud culminates in the Cubist poetry of Pierre Reverdy, who is the major modern influence on Rexroth's own poetry.48 Rexroth's analysis of the poetry created according to the principles of Cubism emphasizes its transcendental nature. Reverdy's technique in his poetry is that of Rimbaud--"the conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity"49--and his goal is to

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 186.
48 Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. xiii.
49 Ibid., p. vi.
force the reader beyond the limits of ordinary experience:

When the ordinary materials of poetry are broken up, recombined in structures radically different from those we assume to be the result of causal, or of what we have come to accept as logical sequence, and then an abnormally focused attention is invited to their apprehension, they are given an intense significance, closed within the structure of the work of art, and are not negotiable in ordinary contexts of occasion. So isolated and illuminated, they seem to assume an unanalyzable transcendental claim.\textsuperscript{50}

Reading this type of poetry seemingly approximates a visionary experience. Rexroth discusses in several interviews, some of his literary criticism, and his autobiographical writing the relationship between poetry and mysticism. In an interview with Cyrena N. Pondrom, he states that the most refined art "may communicate the mystical experience. Poetry may be the expression of the direct apprehension of reality."\textsuperscript{51} Two aspects of such refined poetry are directness and intensity. These qualities help focus the reader's attention upon the material of the poem in an especially sharp fashion, thereby making of the work of art an object of contemplation. This view implies that poetry can function in a manner similar to religion, that a reader should approach a mystical poem with the attitudes and expectations usually felt toward an object of religious devotion.

These two types of experience diverge from the same "creative matrix,"\textsuperscript{52} and they share certain nervous responses. In his introduction

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., pp. vii-viii
\item \textsuperscript{52} Rexroth, \textit{Pierre Reverdy}, p. x.
\end{itemize}
to the poems of Pierre Reverdy, Rexroth lists the most common of these physical sensations:

Vertigo, rapture, transport, crystalline and plangent sounds, shattered and refracted light, indefinite depths, weightlessness, piercing odors and tastes, and synthesizing these sensations and affects, an all-consuming clarity.53

In his discussion of the poetry of Rimbaud, Rexroth calls these sensations the "phenomena of dissolution of the personality"54 which accompany trance states. In listing some more specific examples of these phenomena in Rimbaud's poems, Rexroth makes clear that the underlying motive is the discovery of a hidden reality:

Cyclones, explosions, blue lights, shattering crystals, colored snow, whirling sparks, shipwrecks, whirlpools, the looming of an alternative reality behind the fiction of the real, the sense of the estrangement of the self.55

Rexroth states, however, that in spite of definite similarities, a distinction does exist between the aesthetic and the mystic experience in terms of necessity and specificity. The first difference is that illumination is not the unavoidable result of reading a visionary poem. Vision compels the person undergoing a religious experience, but if we encounter a poem written about such an occurrence, "We can take it or leave it alone, and any ultimates we find in it we must first bring to it ourselves."56

The second distinction is that, while any aesthetic experience,

53 Ibid., p. viii.
55 Ibid., p. 274.
56 Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. x.
even a visionary poem, has a definite, specific nature, a mystical experience is not restricted in any way. Rexroth's constant emphasis on particularity as a foremost attribute of poetry supports this key difference between these two types of experience. While a complete absence of qualification distinguishes the mystical state, the poetic experience is at the opposite pole in its exactitude of detail.

This view of poetry obviously leaves much to the individual reader or listener. Rexroth states, in fact, that a "work of art is, in a sense, a function of the perceiver's attention." He feels that the most ambitious and refined poetry can so elevate the reader's attention that a state of bliss results. One could claim, however, that under the proper conditions anything could initiate the same intense response, and it seems that Rexroth would concur. In discussing the surviving fragments of the poetry of Sappho, he states that "If attention is focused sharply on anything whatever from which we expect aesthetic satisfaction, a process takes place similar to the raptures of nature mysticism." The object of such intense concentration hypnotizes the perceiver and, "like a crystal ball," assumes an unlimited significance. In discussing how a poem can affect a reader's attention, Rexroth claims that any work of art can be defined primarily in terms of its function as an "efficient vehicle for focusing attention."

59 Ibid.
this definition is accepted, the conclusion follows that for an invalid or a prisoner, spots on the wall or designs on the ceiling can become a work of art. Rexroth believes that some of the art of Constantin Brancusi, for example, his abstract sculptures of fish, represents "attention focused at its most intense." Rexroth adds, however, that if the mind is sufficiently refined "any old fish or any old rock, for that matter, will do--it doesn't have to be Brancusi's fish."61

Since the reader is not compelled to respond so acutely to a visionary poem, one supposes that the poet would try to facilitate the achievement of a trance state. Rexroth notes that in recreating the original aesthetic situation, the poet may try one of three approaches: placing the reader in a situation which corresponds to his own, or into one that would create the poem, or into one which the poet wants "deliberately to manipulate and produce."62 The poet also can use the peculiar physical sensations which are characteristic of both the aesthetic and mystic experience, what Rexroth calls the "epiphenomena"63 that attend the commencement of rapture. Rexroth remarks that these nervous responses can be "induced or transmitted in the person undergoing the poetic experience, whether poet or reader."64 Visionary writers whose work features these epiphenomena include Sappho, Henry Vaughan, Jacob Boehme, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and St. Hildegard

61Ibid.
63Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. ix.
64Ibid., p. viii.
of Bingen.\textsuperscript{65} Rexroth mentions his own use of these devices to affect the attention of the reader or listener. In her interview, Cyrena N. Pondrom observes that in Rexroth's poem, "Time Is the Mercy of Eternity," the word "crystal" or one of its derivatives appears five times in the final twenty lines. Responding to that observation, Rexroth says that he consciously includes in various poems "things concerning light and rays of light, images from projective geometry, terms like harmonic pencil, things like this: ice, crystals, rays."\textsuperscript{66}

Rexroth includes some of these physical responses in \textit{A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy}. The first experience of illumination in the poem occurs in Parts IV and V, and several images in Part IV communicate the feeling of vertigo or a disordered state in which many objects appear to be moving or whirling around:

\begin{quote}
  The turquoise turning  
  in the lunar sky  
  . . . . . . . . .  
  The moving cubicle  
  The shifting floor (p. 47)
\end{quote}

Rexroth varies a phrase in Part IV which conveys the sensation of broken and refracted light: "The fractured hour of light" (p. 46) and "The hour of fractured light" (p. 47). This moment of partial enlightenment continues in Part V. One line evokes two of the senses in an especially intense fashion: "Velvet Peppermint" (p. 49), and the next image of "Spinning silver" repeats the sensation of vertigo and shattered light.

Another example of Rexroth's use of these "epiphenomena" to...

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{65}Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. viii; "Rimbaud: Poems," p. 274.  
\end{flushright}
induce in the reader intense emotion is a series of images in Part VIId which communicates a feeling of vertigo and indefinite depth:

\[
\text{The every presence} \\
\text{whirl} \\
\text{The spinning eye} \\
\text{The deepest air} \\
\ldots 
\text{And the feather forever floating} \\
\quad \text{a thin spiral down} \\
\quad \text{forever in the air of} \\
\quad \text{noon (p. 51)}
\]

The last three sections of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* include several of these physical responses. There are piercing odors, "The unendurable fragrance/ . . . The breath of God," and piercing sounds, "The ululating she-goat" (p. 59). The final vision of the poem contains some of the specific phenomena enumerated by Rexroth in his analysis of the poetry of Rimbaud: explosions: "The exploding rock/ The exploding mountain cry" (p. 60); colored snow and blue lights: "The sapphire snow" (p. 60), "The blue gleams stir" (p. 59); and whirling sparks: "The cloud of sparks" (p. 59).\(^{67}\) Rexroth also emphasizes at the end of the poem a sense of moving, ascending, brilliant light:

\[
\text{The broom of light} \\
\text{The sweeping glow} \\
\text{The burnished ladders of the intellect} \\
\text{The silver spiral of the will} \\
\text{Tense in the telic light} \\
\text{(p. 60)}
\]

Rexroth states in his autobiography that a kind of Platonism underlay his artistic and intellectual interests at the time of the

\(^{67}\)Rexroth, "Rimbaud: Poems," p. 274.
composition of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. He apparently means the belief that sensory objects, or their representation in art, are an imperfect intimation of ultimate reality. True existence lies beyond the realm of the senses, but the only approach to this true world is through sensory phenomena. At the end of his autobiography, Rexroth questions whether or not he still believes that the "world experienced by sense and reason in which I seem to live is only the surface of a world incomparably vaster and utterly different in kind in which life is really lived?" Although his answer is a qualified perhaps, such a belief does seem evident in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. Rexroth's statements about the nature of reality stress that sensory objects are the only avenue to the world of ultimate reality. One reaches true existence, not by transcending sensory phenomena, but by engaging them more intensely, penetrating them more deeply. Rexroth emphasizes this idea in the introduction to his Collected Longer Poems: "The real objects are their own transcendental meaning. . . . The holy is in the heap of dust--it is the heap of dust." In writing of William Carlos Williams, Rexroth reaffirms his conviction: "the transcendent and the immanent are not somewhere else. They are the thing itself. . . . The Sacrament is the bread and wine."

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68Rexroth, An Autobiographical Novel, p. 150.
69Ibid., p. 339.
71Rexroth, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century, p. 78.
A statement by Rexroth summarizing the aim of the poetry of Pierre Reverdy applies as well to the ultimate goal of his own Cubist poetry, and especially to A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy: "if poetic vision is refined until it is sufficiently piercing and sufficiently tensile, it cuts through the reality it has reorganized to an existential transcendence." In such Cubist poetry as A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, the poet seeks to make the reader concentrate as intensely as possible upon the objects of the poem. One method of Cubist poetry for increasing the perceiver's attention is to create a series of detached images, each stripped of its usual associations and combined with other concrete images in unexpected relationships. This procedure blocks habituated responses and deprives the reader of any familiar contexts which could distract from the intense presence of the objects themselves. The desire of the Cubist poet is not escape from, but transformation of, the things of this world, in hopes of penetrating to an absolute, eternal realm. Since this region is not the same as ordinary reality, part of the technique of reaching this vaster, more fundamental world is freeing the reader from common assumptions about reality. As Anna Balakian says about the poetry of the French surrealist, Louis Aragon, "events are liberated from their tape measure of time." Cubist poetry also overturns accepted notions of space, logic, and causality. This process increases the creative, in contrast to the passive, absorbent, role of the reader. A chief characteristic of states of rapture

72Rexroth, Pierre Reverdy, p. xi.
74Ibid., p. 93.
is an estrangement between the self and experience, a dissolution of
the personality.\textsuperscript{75} Since the aim of \textit{A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy}
apparently is the communication of such a state of ecstasy, the removal
of common objects from customary associations can help precipitate such
an experience in the reader. Another catalyst is the attempt to evoke
through the choice of imagery and language the peculiar range of nervous
responses which accompany intense aesthetic or mystic experience,
including vertigo, piercing odors and tastes, refracted light, and
indefinite depths.

Rexroth has praised highly Anna Balakian's analysis of the poetry
of Pierre Reverdy, calling it the "best . . . most sympathetic study . . .
in English"\textsuperscript{76} of this French poet, and several of her remarks about
Reverdy help elucidate Rexroth's aims in \textit{A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy}.
She stresses the importance to Reverdy's art of the conviction that
earthly life borders constantly on the eternal.\textsuperscript{77} The poem impinges
upon this infinite realm by presenting earthly objects in such unusual
arrangements that they appear to hover on the edge of a realm vaster,
more absolute, and more wonderful than accepted reality. The startling
quality of the poem constantly pushes the reader toward the frontiers of
finite understanding.\textsuperscript{77} Balakian notes Reverdy's insistence that poetry
must always deal with concrete, objective material because "it is this


\textsuperscript{76}Kenneth Rexroth, "Poets in Revolt," \textit{New York Times Book Review},
vol. LXV, no. 17 (April 24, 1960), 44.

\textsuperscript{77}Balakian, \textit{Surrealism}, p. 112.
contact with the tangible that gives promise of illuminations." In *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*, Rexroth likewise advances to vision by a series of images that can be precisely realized by the mind and, in most cases, grasped by the senses.

Rexroth's explanation of the methods and aims of poems created according to the principles of literary Cubism in one sense precludes criticism of a work like *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*. After the poet breaks up the basic elements of such a poem, he recombines them according to principles other than those of accepted causal or logical sequence. Rexroth explicitly states that the elements of a Cubist poem "are not negotiable in ordinary contexts of occasion." Yet a critic of a poem like *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* seemingly must proceed on the basis of that ordinary logical and causal sequence which the poem purposely violates, unless he wishes himself to write a Cubist poem. Rexroth's occasional attempts to explain in any exact fashion the Cubist method of poetic construction do not shed much light. He claims that the "restructuring of experience" by the Cubist poet is "purposive, not dreamlike," but his explanation of the underlying principles again removes the poem from any common ground of criticism: A poet like Pierre Reverdy restructures the essential material of his poetry "into an invisible or subliminal discourse which owes its cogency to its own strict, complex and secret logic." Such logic seems

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78 Ibid., p. 108.
80 Ibid., p. vii.
destined by definition to reside permanently below the threshold of consciousness. In an interview with Cyrena N. Pondrom, Rexroth implies that Cubist poets followed Cubist painters in using mathematical principles as a basis for their compositions, but this information remains too general to be helpful.

The critic apparently must use, to a large degree, accepted logical procedures and ordinary associations if his response is to be anything other than a self-induced mystical experience. Although a judgment of the moments of transcendence which are the climaxes of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* (Parts IV-V, IX-X) may rest on the reader's ability to approach, even in an attenuated form, or at least sympathize with, visionary experience, basic comprehension demands a context for these transcendent heights. Yet this demand is another violation of Rexroth's strict definition of Cubist poetry. Some of the information which aids an understanding of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* challenges Rexroth's assertion that a Cubist poem is a completely self-contained experience. Knowledge of Rexroth's stay at Holy Cross Monastery during the period of the composition of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* supports the view that the theme of the poem is the search for a divine vision within the context of Christianity. An awareness that the "dark night of the soul" is a traditional phase of such a quest plays an important role in interpreting the progression of the poem,

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81Pondrom, pp. 166-67.

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especially as reflected in Part IX. Knowledge of information which lies outside the poem also aids the interpretation of individual lines. A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy includes allusions to Shakespeare: "This is the winter of the hardest year" (p. 45); to the liturgy of the Christian Church: the last half of Part V (pp. 48-49) and the Trisagion, a hymn in the service of the Eastern Church (pp. 51, 60); to classical mythology: Atalanta and the golden apples and Persephone and the pomegranate (p. 50); to other poems: "To Cynthia: On her Changing," by Sir Francis Kynaston (p. 50); a direct quote from St. Thomas Aquinas (p. 51); and several Biblical allusions, including one quotation, "Blessed are the dead who die" (p. 56), whose full context (Rev. 14:13) considerably alters the meaning.

A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy is too long a work for the exclusive use of the methods of literary Cubism. This technique is effective in isolated sections of the poem, but it is excessive to demand throughout a longer poem the reader's highest concentration upon images whose significance is not readily grasped and supposedly lies outside the ordinary criteria of understanding. Those passages which seem most successful include the first experience of illumination in Part IV (pp. 46-48), the three sections which depict the onset and eventual lifting of the dark night of the soul, Part IXa-c (pp. 55-58), and the climactic last section of the poem that communicates the final state of revelation, Part Xd (p. 60). This list shows that Rexroth's method works best when presenting moments of extreme emotion. This type of subject matter warrants the acute concentration that the technique of literary Cubism entails. Other parts of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy are successful.
because the reader happens upon a rare passage that is readily comprehensible and does not cause the strain of gazing too long at a troublesome crystal ball. One example is the conversation in Part Ib and Ie in which one person tries to talk another out of a despondency about life. The prose passages in Part Xa also place the reader on familiar ground for a length of time, but a flat tone lessens the impact of this section.

Rexroth seemingly is aware that one could apply to *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* the criticism he makes of the work of Gertrude Stein, that her writing produces "interesting reading for a while, but it is, by and large, a failure, because it lacks significant contrast to engage the attention for long." The conversation in Part I and the prose passages in Part Xa seem to be attempts to provide such "significant contrast." Apparently serving the same purpose are the highly abstract concepts that are worried over in Parts VII and VIII (pp. 52-55). This portion of the poem differs sharply from the others, but the reader receives no relief because it is the most opaque, frustrating part of the entire work.

The basic problem of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* is length. When a technique based upon a series of detached images, stripped from ordinary contexts and associations, and meant to be recombined into novel structures extends throughout a poem of over twenty pages, the poet places an excessive demand on the reader's attention. There are too many images in a longer poem for this method to be effective. Rexroth's

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most detailed analysis of the methods and aims of literary Cubism is in his introduction to selected poems by Pierre Reverdy. Yet of the twenty-eight poems of Reverdy translated by Rexroth, all are short and only three are as long as three pages. Within the restricted compass of a short poem, the Cubist technique is more effective because the poet dissociates and recombines a small number of elements. A relatively few images can create a self-sufficient work of art that invites the intense contemplation of an object of religious worship.

The question of length also affects the transcendental claim that, according to Rexroth, a Cubist poem assumes. Only a few parts of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy actually support that claim: Parts IV - V and IX - X. The other portions of Rexroth's poem lead up to these two visionary experiences, but they do not deal explicitly with moments of enlightenment or call for rapture on the part of the reader. Rexroth's explanation seemingly applies only to that Cubist poetry which is visionary. Not all poetry using this technique, nor all of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, absolutely demands a transcendental response. While the technique of literary Cubism is successful for the peak experiences of despair and illumination in Parts IV - V and IX - X, and occasionally impressive, as in the depiction of differing responses to the momentary loss of vision in Part IXb and in the presentation of the climax of revelation in the final section of the poem in Part Xd, the confusion and irritation caused by much of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy makes this method on the whole an ambitious failure.

A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy emphasizes one aspect of Rexroth's personality to the near exclusion of all others. The desire for
transcendent vision remains constant throughout his career, but in all of the other longer poems, this is only one of many facets of Rexroth. In *The Homestead Called Damascus*, Rexroth revealed two sides of his personality: while one aspect stressed self-denial and withdrawal, the other emphasized indulgence of appetite and involvement. The origin of the religious experience presented in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*, Rexroth's stay for two months at Holy Cross Monastery culminating in the celebration of Easter, reflects the sacrificial part of his personality, the martyr rather than the sensualist, and recalls the separation from society of Thomas Damascen which concludes *The Homestead Called Damascus*. As that poem ends, Thomas sits alone by a campfire out West and notes how a passing train looks "All so/ Far away" (p. 36).

The religious quest of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* is a direct outgrowth of one of the major motivations of *The Homestead Called Damascus*. The title of the first poem, with its allusion to the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus, indicates the importance of a direct encounter with God, but that desire is frustrated throughout *The Homestead Called Damascus*. The reference to Paul does imply that Rexroth seeks a similar complete reorientation of his outlook on life through one overpowering transcendent experience, and this motive carries over to the second longer poem. One view of the relationship between these two poems is that Rexroth wishes to overcome the conflicts and frustrations presented in *The Homestead Called Damascus* by the dramatic assault on vision of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*.

*The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1940-1944), the longer poem which follows *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*, shows, however, that even a
successful quest for transcendence cannot dispel the frustrations and doubts within the poet. When The Phoenix and the Tortoise opens, the intense illumination of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy has faded and the dilemmas of daily living have returned. The arduous achievement of religious insight is, unfortunately, no panacea for the problems of modern life.

The attitude toward vision of The Phoenix and the Tortoise also differs from that of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. Vision is no longer an exclusive pursuit but arises out of everyday experience. Moments of special insight evolve naturally from the ordinary pattern of the poet's life. One reason for the changed approach to vision is Rexroth's greater involvement in the world. The Phoenix and the Tortoise shows an interest in history, current public activities, and other people, especially the poet's wife, that A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy lacks. Another difference between these two poems is a growing tendency toward presenting visionary moments in natural rather than overtly Christian symbols.

A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy has a more restricted focus than any other longer poem written by Rexroth. While all the other poems touch a wide range of topics, A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy pursues single-mindedly the quest for transcendence. The main goal of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy is a vision substantiating the basic goodness of existence. Having achieved this validating experience, Rexroth in subsequent longer poems turns to more specific issues and seeks to establish the basis for a comprehensive view of life. Before commencing such a large project, Rexroth undergoes the religious experience recorded in A
Prolegomenon to a Theodicy which is for the poet an irrevocable confirmation of spiritual reality. After this affirmation, Rexroth no longer suffers the intense despair and ennui evident at times in The Homestead Called Damascus and the early parts of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. The success of the quest for transcendence in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy frees Rexroth from the paralysis of religious doubt and enables him to move forward in the attempt to establish a world view founded on the belief that being is sacred.
CHAPTER III

THE PHOENIX AND THE TORTOISE (1940-1944)

Introduction

The main subject of Kenneth Rexroth's third longer poem, The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1940-1944), is the establishment of a basis for a system of values. The setting is a beach on the California coast where the poet and his wife are camping in the "dry Spring" (p. 63) of 1942, and the action covers the time from sunset on Maundy Thursday to the dawn of Good Friday. In Part I, Rexroth walks by the beach, eats supper and watches with his wife the rising of the Easter moon, and falls asleep late at night by the campfire. Parts II and III present Rexroth's meditations as he lies awake during most of the night. The Phoenix and the Tortoise occurs in the midst of World War II, a war that confirms Rexroth's belief that the individual faces a "collapsing system of cultural values," a breakdown which creates a major obstacle for anyone concerned with developing an integrated personality. Rexroth

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cannot find in his nightly meditations any hope in the face of the relentless wasting away of the human being by natural process and a social situation so catastrophic that the end of history seems imminent.

In Part IV, as Good Friday dawns, Rexroth awakes and discovers a solution. Salvation is possible if the person assumes unlimited responsibility for realizing the total value of each moment. As the sun rises, Rexroth feels infinity focusing upon him and realizes that he in turn should order the infinite potential of the continuous present. Exalted by this insight, Rexroth concludes the poem with a celebration of his wife as she comes up the beach to him, lit by the sun that illuminates the earth and reverses the freezing effect of thousands of years.

In a pendant to The Phoenix and the Tortoise, a shorter poem entitled "Past and Future Turn About,\(^4\) Rexroth returns in autumn to this beach and reviews the conclusion of the longer poem. Less than one year later, Rexroth discovers that all hope is gone and time has triumphed momentarily again. The reason for his embittered reversal seemingly is the overemphasis in The Phoenix and the Tortoise on the individual as the sole source of value. Amidst the deep pessimism of "Past and Future Turn About," however, are glimpses of a more broadly based world view that includes other persons and the hope for a community of love to

\(^4\)Kenneth Rexroth, "Past and Future Turn About," in The Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 168-72. In the original edition published in 1944, this poem is number XXXVII, pp. 81-85, and it is listed in the table of contents by the first line, "Autumn has returned and we return." Rexroth adds in The Collected Shorter Poems the title, "Past and Future Turn About," and all page references are to this later edition.
bolster the individual's search for value. The extensive development of this approach in the next longer poem, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, shows that the reaction in "Past and Future Turn About" is a helpful corrective to the idea of universal responsibility, first presented in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and the seed of Rexroth's mature philosophy.

**Part I**

Early in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth gives one reason for the choice of the title. He refers to "this poem/ Of the phoenix and the tortoise -/ Of what survives and what perishes" (p. 64). The creatures in the titles of the two related poems by Rexroth, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, are the four chief legendary animals of China. They are the highest representatives of the four classes of nonhuman living beings in ancient Chinese thought. In *Science and Civilisation* by Joseph Needham, these creatures are discussed in a passage from the *Ta Tai Li Chi* (Record of Rites of the Elder Tai), written in the second century B.C.:

> The essence (or most representative example) of hairy animals is the unicorn, that of feathered ones is the phoenix; . . . that of the carapace-animals is the tortoise, and that of the scaly ones is the dragon. That of the naked ones is the Sage. . . .

> These four (numinous) animals are the aids of the spirit of the Sage. Thereby the sage can be the master of heaven and earth, the master of the mountains and rivers, [and] the master of the gods and spirits.5

According to Chinese legend, the tortoise is exceptionally long-lived,

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and the phoenix appears only rarely. In this passage from *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, therefore, the tortoise symbolizes permanence while the phoenix represents transience.

The most important significance of the title seemingly is the search for lasting values in a world of mutability. Throughout *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth searches the past for the "continuity/... of history" (p. 64), for whatever persists throughout human history, surviving the destruction of time. As Rexroth stands on the California beach, only the destructive power of existence is apparent. Because of a storm out in the ocean, throughout the previous night, "Vast rollers exploded/ Offshore" (p. 63). Many dead sea creatures now lie on the beach while

"everywhere, swarming like ants,
Innumerable hermit crabs,
Hungry and efficient as maggots"

complete the process of disintegration.

Rexroth feels threatened by the sea, the symbol of the processes of nature, because he sees it as a powerful force that creates momentary forms of life before quickly dissolving them back into the elements. Rexroth's description of the ocean conveys his aversion; after the storm, the sea subsides "To a massive, uneasy torpor" (p. 63), and he walks beside the "viscid, menacing/ Water" (p. 64). The ocean is an unstable force, fluctuating between periods of extreme violence and inactivity, and ineluctably drawing toward itself all life.

The processes of nature are also wearily repetitious, an unending cycle of uplift and erosion. Rexroth notes that "This is not the first time this shingle/ Has been here" (p. 63). The stones lying on the seashore have been washed from the Franciscan series, an older rock formation of the California Coast Ranges that once formed ancient beaches before being built up into the coastal mountains. The Franciscan group, or series, is an important symbol for Rexroth. This rock formation is unique because an absence of fossils makes dating difficult. Due to this lack of evidence, whatever occurred during this epoch remains a mystery,

Thousands and thousands of years,
of bays,
Tidemarshes, estuaries, beaches,
Where time flowed eventless as silt.

The Franciscan series seemingly symbolizes for Rexroth the obliterating force of time and recalls the "inscrutable" mystery found by Sebastian Damascus as he sat on a park bench at the end of summer (p. 14). The happenings of centuries have left no trace, and it is as if a void hangs in the cliffs above the poet's camp, an apparent sign of the indifference of nature that is difficult to reconcile with a belief in divine creation.

Although uplifting of the earth's surface is part of the work of nature, Rexroth stresses the process of erosion. Not even the fossilized forms of nature are free from destruction. In the aftermath of the storm offshore, on the beach

Are fossil sand dollars the sea
Has washed from stone, as it
has washed
These, newly dead, from life.
(p. 64)

The geographical disintegration reflects current social conditions. Much of the poet's misery at the opening of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is due to his standing

on the crumbling
Edge of a ruined polity
That washes away in an ocean
Whose shores are all washing
away into death.

The aim of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is the discovery of a source of life in the midst of a world of death. Concrete evidence of the pervasiveness of death is the body of a drowned Japanese sailor "bumping/ In a snarl of kelp in a tidepool," rapidly dissolving into the life of the ocean. Rexroth's gaze fastens upon the "open hard eyes" of the dead sailor which watch him, "Like small indestructible animals." These eyes are symbolic of one of the major subjects of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, the doom that awaits all living creatures. Rexroth's primary effort throughout the poem is to find a value to counter the doom which is an integral part of organic process. The doom first embodied in the eyes of the drowned sailor appears later when Fomalhaut, the brightest star in the constellation Piscis Austrinus, watches with a "cold, single eye" (p. 79) the conflict between the two guiding principles of the poet's life.

Other symbols of doom are various insects whose individual members subjugate themselves completely to the group. A lack of feeling ensures the efficient functioning of these insects, and Rexroth pictures

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them as indestructible scavengers that are always patiently awaiting the
death of other creatures. The first example of such insects is the group
of hermit crabs at the beginning of the poem, swarming over the dead
creatures on the beach. Rexroth later sees the present catastrophic
conditions in the world as the

Dawn of the literate insect,
Dispassionate, efficient, formic.
(p. 80)

Another example is the ant, a creature whose "perfect statistical/
Intelligence" (p. 80) makes it a fitting symbol for the type of human
that seemingly dominates the world.

Finding himself in a ruinous situation, a "node/ In a context of
disasters" (p. 71), Rexroth examines the past for some enduring value.
His study of the past is not just an escape from an unbearable
present, for he relates the question of the meaning of history to the
main subject of all of his longer poems: the quest for an integrated
personality. Rexroth not only seeks in both history and personality
values that will outlast the waste of time, but he feels that there is
a direct relationship between personal immortality and historical con-
tinuity:

The problem of personality
Is the problem of the value
Of the world as a totality,
The problem of immortality
As a basic category -
That passed away, so will
this. (p. 70)

The last line is the refrain of *Deor*, an Old English poem about the
transience of all earthly happenings. Although the participants of
history pass quickly out of existence, Rexroth hopes that a study of
history will prove valuable because, behind the short-lived activities on the surface of life,

    The patterns abide and reassert
    Themselves.

Because of this faith, Rexroth turns from the horrors of the immediate present, "Seeking the continuity,/ The germ plasm, of history" (p. 64). Thomas Damascen articulated this quest in Rexroth's first longer poem, The Homestead Called Damascus, when he withdrew from the city to contemplate the "pale blue snow peaks" and the immortal Element in an otherwise all Dissolving corruption, the germ plasm Of history. (p. 32)

These similar passages in poems separated by two decades reveal that one of the unifying themes of Rexroth's longer poems is the search for universal values. Although The Homestead Called Damascus ended before Thomas Damascen discovered any incorruptible values, Rexroth does carry through this effort in The Phoenix and the Tortoise.

Alternation between contrasting positions is characteristic of Rexroth's nature, and this restlessness is evident in The Phoenix and the Tortoise. The use of dialogue to approach a subject seemingly would be most congenial and fruitful to such a personality, but Rexroth raises doubts in The Phoenix and the Tortoise about the process of dialectical reasoning itself. The only solution in the poem which overcomes these reservations is the reconciliation of opposites in a vision that transcends antinomies. One example of such a vision is Rexroth's sudden comprehension at the end of Part I of the view of the universe held by
the German mystic Jakob Boehme. After considerable doubt and despair, Rexroth himself discovers a similar vision at the end of the poem.

Rexroth presents several conflicting views in Part I of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. While one of his main goals in the poem is the search for imperishable values in history, Rexroth at times questions whether human history has any positive value. When his wife interrupts his meditations by riding up to their camp,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>hungry, shouting</th>
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<td>For supper, on a red stallion,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breasts quivering in their silk blouse, (p. 66)</td>
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her purely sensual appeal seems for the moment completely adequate and a mockery of any attempts to find further meaning in life. Rexroth muses that history may not hold profound lessons but be merely the record of a morbid condition,

| A perversion of the blood's chemistry, |
| The after effects of a six thousand Years dead solar cyclone. |

Although one possible explanation for Rexroth's wavering attitude toward plumbing history for general truths is that the predominance of death and destruction in the world of 1942 makes difficult any hopeful position, a more probable reason for his initial uncertainty is the coexistence in his personality of extreme pessimism and extreme optimism. The same poem can range from near nihilism to unqualified affirmation. The mystical quest presented in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* is well suited to these two currents in Rexroth's persona because the path to illumination leads traditionally through the dark night of despair and revulsion.
Rexroth recognizes early in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* the importance of dialectic to his view of the world. He notes that the "ancient Chinese/ Built up their whole cosmology" out of the interaction of complementary opposites: "sterile and swarming,/ Steam and spume, inhale and exhale" (p. 66). The interchange between Yin, the passive, female cosmic element, and Yang, the active, male cosmic element, provides the ceaseless dynamism of all life:

Rest that dissipates into motion,
And motion that freezes into rest.

Rexroth attempts to discover the basic forces that are the poles of the dialectical process of human existence. He first states that "Value and fact are polar aspects/ Of organic process" (p. 66). In moral terms, the lack of value is the condition of sin, and virtue conversely is the process of moving from negative fact to positive value. Rexroth's inability to accept permanently any one abstract summation of life can be seen in his final comment about this particular scheme: "How comfortable, and how verbal" (p. 67).

Rexroth then proposes other pairs of forces as the fundamental poles of human life: want and fear, fear and danger, danger and desire, jealousy and fear of pain (pp. 68-69). Rexroth also presents two contrasting ways of viewing the person. One can define the individual either as a victim of doom or an agent of responsibility. According to the first interpretation, organic process inevitably conquers the individual, overwhelming him with the "constant pressure/ For the lesser, immediate good" (p. 69) until the accumulated consequences of a lifetime's actions destroy the person. The alternative is for the person to
take on responsibility through self-sacrifice, overcoming doom by assuming the role of "priest and victim." Rexroth cannot accept any of these formulations because of a distrust of dialectical reasoning. If being does consist of opposing forces, the rational investigation of existence by means of polarities is self-defeating and always ultimately unsatisfactory. Rexroth cites one example from theology of the insufficiency of this type of reasoning. If God is defined as positive in all senses, the rest of creation must then assume a corresponding absolutely negative position. As God becomes all-powerful and transcendent, logic reduces man to a state of utter contingency and powerlessness. One result of the use of positive and negative concepts is that the poles
Of being short circuit in reason.
The definition dissolves itself.
Anode and cathode deliquesce
By virtue of inherent structure.
(pp. 67-68)

The "rigid/ Vectors of the fallible mind" (p. 68) subvert even the most thoroughly constructed philosophical and theological systems. Because traditional logical methods are not flexible enough to cover the full range of human life, there is "Always the struggle to break out/ Of the argument that proves itself." A similar distrust of reason occurs in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy. The highly abstract reasoning of Parts VII and VIII of that poem does not advance but retards the progress toward illumination.

The most important experiences of life defy the limits imposed upon existence by logical processes. It is even possible that
irrationality is at the heart of being, that the discoveries of twentieth-century physics confirm that "The atoms of Lucretius still, / Falling, inexplicably swerve" (p. 71). Rexroth turns from the examination of being as a rigidly polarized field to explore the frontier, that area where different qualities merge into one another. Rexroth feels that the most crucial events take place where reason ceases to function, where "all boundaries fuse" (p. 68). Since The Phoenix and the Tortoise searches the past in order to gauge the historical and personal future, the poet should forge into this future because it is the realm of revelation and prophecy:

In this wilderness as men say
Are the trees of the Sun and the Moon
That spake to King Alexander
And told him of his death. (p. 70)

This belief explains Rexroth's later statement that John of Patmos, author of The Revelation of St. John the Divine, is the true philosopher of history (p. 78).

As an example of a fabulous story which contains a prophecy of the future, Rexroth presents part of a translation from The Mabinogion, a collection of eleven medieval Welsh tales. His selection is from the tale entitled "Branwen Daughter of Llŷr" and deals with the fate of Bran the Blessed and his followers.\(^7\) Just before Bran died from wounds suffered in a mighty and disastrous battle which killed all but seven of his men, he spoke of the fate of these men and his own miraculous head.

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The excerpt in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* narrates the fulfillment of all of Bran's prophecies. The severed head of the dead Bran carried by his followers brought them happiness and obliterated all the sorrow in the world as long as one of the three doors of their castle overlooking the sea remained closed. But after eighty pleasant, carefree years, one survivor deliberately opened the door which looked toward Cornwall, "To see if Bran had spoken the truth" (p. 71). Once that door opened, all their past sorrow returned,

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all the evils they had suffered,
And all the companions they had lost,
And all the old misery, and the death
Of their good lord, all as though once again,
It was happening there, in that same spot.
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Rexroth cites this passage because it is a good example of the persistence and value of the fabulous in the creative works of man and it deals with the partly nonrational gift of prophecy. The theme of the pain of remembrance and the undesired return to a dreadful reality probably also appeals to Rexroth in his situation. He doubtless would like to avert his gaze from the events of World War II and the preceding years, but because of the goal of his poem, he must open that door and relive his own previous evils, lost companions, and "all the old misery" whose webs first spread in the opening line of the poem (p. 63).

Rexroth had doubted earlier in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* whether one could bridge the gap between the ideal and the real, the distance between his highly generalized, abstract speculations and the concrete events of particular lives (p. 65). One way of overcoming the sense of personal insignificance is projecting individual lives against
the heroic background of myth and legend, revealing through art how, for example, a story like that of Bran can relate to a person caught in World War II.

Religion also can deepen the meaning of separate lives. Rexroth notes that "In the last Passover of the just," he and his wife "too prepare symbolic supper" (p. 65). Knowledge of several religious traditions enlarges the dimension of this scene. The couple's supper by the campfire recalls two symbolic meals: Passover and Holy Communion. Passover commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from bondage to Egypt, when God passed over the Israelite houses while killing the first-born of the Egyptians. Rexroth also alludes to the Jewish legend of the Just, the Lamed Waw, or the thirty-six righteous men whose existence in each generation insures the continued survival of the world. The bleakness of the situation Rexroth faces apparently explains his implication that this is the year of the last Passover, that the evils of the world will soon annihilate the Lamed Waw and bring an end to history.

Rexroth and his wife reenact a second and more important "symbolic supper," the meal shared by Christ in the Upper Room with his disciples. This religious reference is especially appropriate, for the setting of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is the evening before Easter, that Holy Thursday which celebrates Christ's Last Supper and his washing of the disciples' feet. The anniversary of the poet's marriage also makes this occasion special, and Rexroth's description of their marriage

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as the "white gift of sacramental flesh" (p. 66) could apply as well to the crucifixion of Christ, especially in the sense that the bread of the Eucharist symbolizes the body of Christ.

Moments transfigured by religious faith, however, exist precariously in a world at war. Rexroth cannot forget that the "moonlight of the Resurrection/ . . . Glitters on the wings of the bombers" (p. 72). The moonlight becomes an important symbol later in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, representing the power of religious faith to carry a person through a dark night of despair and provide illumination and grace. Rexroth identifies this moonlight with Amida, the Japanese name for Amitābha, the Buddha of infinite light who is the assurance of salvation for his believer. Rexroth also mentions at the end of Part I another Japanese deity, Kwannon, who is identified with Amida as a god of mercy and compassion. These qualities will be important when Rexroth struggles with his will to discover some value that can resist the destructive forces of his time. As Rexroth prepares for bed, at the conclusion of Part I, the moonlight "Illuminates the darkened cities" (p. 72) and acts as a force against the sun that at that moment dissolves "The motion of Egyptian chisels/ . . . in the desert noon," the fleeting passage of time which consumes all artists and ultimately destroys their art.

Light is an important part of the vision at the end of Part I. While Rexroth lies sleepily on the beach, suddenly

A log falls in the fire. The wind Funnels the sparks out in the moonlight Like a glowing tree dragged through dark. (p. 72)
Because of this occurrence, Rexroth sees

in sudden total vision
The substance of entranc'd
Boehme's awe:
The illimitable hour glass
Of the universe eternally
Turning, and the gold sands falling
From God, and the silver sands rising
From God, the double splendors of joy
That fuse and divide again
In the narrow passage of the
Cross.

Rexroth refers apparently to one or more of a series of religious experiences of Jakob Boehme in Görlitz, Germany, which was the basis of all his subsequent speculation about the nature of God and the universe. Boehme's most intense ecstatic experience occurred in 1600, when he was twenty-five. Rufus Jones notes that after the reflection of sunlight on a pewter dish precipitated a trance, Boehme felt "admitted into the innermost ground and centre of the universe."9

When Boehme went out into the fields at Görlitz, Jones adds,

it seemed to him that he could see into the very heart and secret of Nature, and that he could behold the innermost properties of things.10

Although an exact correlation between Rexroth's vision on the beach and specific aspects of Boehme's thought is difficult, a brief discussion of some of Boehme's views can clarify the meaning of the turning hourglass seen by Rexroth. One characteristic of Boehme's view of the universe is a polarization of reality. He affirms the dialectical

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10Ibid.
principle of existence in his statement that "In Yes and No all things consist." In his study of Boehme's teachings, Hans L. Martensen says, "Boehme is never weary of enforcing the necessity of contrasts in order to have life and manifestation." Such a contrast is necessary even within God. Martensen states that in Boehme's thought, a division occurring within the divine will produces "two centres in God, the Nature-Will and the Spirit-Will." Another way to understand this split is to designate the former as Self-Will and the latter as Universal Will.

The object of all organic process is the subordination of the Nature-Will to the Spirit-Will, and Boehme explains this process by means of the seven natural properties or fundamental forces of being. Contraction and expansion are the first two natural properties, and the state of ceaseless conflict between these antagonistic forces creates the third basic force, rotation. Martensen notes that the "restlessness and anguish" of this third property produce an insolvable contradiction in Nature.

In order to still this conflict, the Spirit must conquer and liberate Nature. Martensen states that

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 46.

14 Ibid., p. 47.
Freedom, the Spirit, lets its light stream into the darkness and confusion of Nature, and a tremor, terror, and shock passes through the whole of Nature.\textsuperscript{15}

This action seemingly corresponds to the "narrow passage" of the hourglass in Rexroth's vision. The fourth natural property is the lightning created by the initial contact of Nature and Spirit, that light which "breaks forth as, at once, a joyous and appalling surprise."\textsuperscript{16} An additional comment by Martensen supports Rexroth's vision of the Cross at the center of this process. Martensen says that two theosophical maxims apply to this portion of Boehme's cosmology. The first maxim is \textit{Per ignem ad lucem}, "Through the fire to the light," and the second, "since the Lightning, as the fourth Natural Property, has for its theosophical-symbolic designation a Cross," is \textit{Per crucem ad lucem}, "Through the cross to the light."\textsuperscript{17}

Once the gentle light of the Spirit subdues the dark, unruly Nature, the dark triad of the first three natural properties is transfigured into three bright forces: wisdom, harmonious sound, and the gathering of all of the six preceding properties into what Boehme terms the essential or the Kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{18} Although the human mind, conditioned by its temporal existence, must use analysis to distinguish the various elements in the manifestation of God, Boehme stresses that this process in actuality takes place simultaneously and throughout eternity. Martensen states that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 48.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., pp. 49-50.
\end{itemize}
If we were permitted to gaze directly into these regions, we should behold nothing but the seventh natural property, or The Glory of God. All the rest lies in concealment.\footnote{Ibid., p. 51.}

What seems especially important for Rexroth in this view of creation is the Christian context and the reconciliation of opposites. At the heart of Boehme's revelation is the paradox that the "narrow passage of the Cross" is a source of joy. Rexroth emphasizes that paradox in the passage which follows the vision on the beach. After stating that peace can provide the "conservation of value" (p. 72) that is the goal of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, Rexroth quotes the account of the appearance of Jesus after the Resurrection to the disheartened disciples, hiding on the evening of Easter day (John 20: 19-20):

> Came Jesus and stood in the midst, and Saith unto them, "Peace be unto you." And when he had so said, he shewed Unto them his hands and his side. (p. 73)

Christ's gesture is paradoxically comforting to the disciples because only the marks of the crucifixion can confirm the reality of the resurrection and restore the faith of the followers of Christ.

This insight into the source of Boehme's awe prepares for the vision which culminates The Phoenix and the Tortoise. Rexroth must first pass through a considerable period of doubt before finding a source of value in a world of death. It is as if Rexroth presents in miniature the final solution of the poem through the brief image at the end of Part I of the Cross of joy at the heart of the turning universe. After

\footnote{Ibid., p. 51.}
a lifetime of meditation, Rexroth concludes that illumination precedes knowledge, and the structure of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* seemingly reflects this belief. The sudden illumination in Part I caused by the windblown sparks of a campfire precedes the troubled, tortured analysis of Parts II and III that eventually results in the intellectual confirmation of the truth of the original vision. Rexroth finally succeeds at the end of the poem in turning the crucifixion of the individual—impaled on the spot where past and future come together—into a source of joy and peace.

But at the end of Part I, the fire dies down, the moment of enlightenment passes, and Rexroth again becomes sleepy. The movement of the last lines of the first part leads away from the height of visionary insight and prepares the reader for the passing of a slow night of trial and uncertainty in Parts II and III.

The ending of Part I stresses the interplay of complementary forces. As the fire again dies down, Rexroth turns from vision "into shadow" (p. 73), passes from full awareness into sleep. A reciprocal process balances the return to darkness of the fire and the poet:

As moonlight
Flows on the tides, innumerable
Dark worlds flow into splendor.

These lines imply that sleep will liberate the wondrous contents of the unconscious mind, but Rexroth's preoccupations will deny him the consolations of this brilliant realm. Too troubled to sleep easily, he will

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spend almost all of the night meditating, while his wife dreams beside him (p. 85).

The last two lines of Part I, which reflect this uneasiness, are an alteration of a Japanese poem by Minamoto No Kanemasa that Rexroth translates in *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*:

Guardian of the gate
Of Suma, how many nights
Have you awakened
At the crying of the shore birds
Of the Isle of Awaji?21

Awaji is an island at the eastern end of the Inland Sea, and Suma is a town on the coast across from Awaji, about sixty miles from Kyoto, the capital at the time of Kanemasa, who flourished during the early part of the twelfth century. In the notes to his translations from the Japanese, Rexroth comments that this, his favorite Japanese poem, implies a parallel with the "guardians of the gates of life, weary with the cries of souls migrating from life to life."22

Although Rexroth omits the place names in the version in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, the primary effect seemingly remains the same as the original, the evocation of the immense unhappiness that is ever present in the world. An echo of this poem by the seventeenth-century novelist, Ihara Saikaku, makes explicit its meaning: "Hearing the cries of the shorebirds of the Isle of Awaji, I know the sadness of the worlds."23 Rexroth suggests the significance of the final two lines of

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22Ibid., p. 124.

23Ibid.
Part I in the passage immediately preceding the sudden insight into the meaning of Jakob Boehme. The description of the shorebirds, the distant men, and the waves emphasizes large numbers, and there is a close association between the "faint,/ Myriad crying of the seabirds" and the unbelievably

Distant voices of the multitudes
Of men mewing in the thoroughfares
Of dreams. (p. 72)

The conclusion of Part I thus prepares for the poet's realization when the night ends that he is not alone in his sorrow (p. 85). In expressing the grief and pain he feels when observing the events of his time, Rexroth fulfills one function of the poet: spokesman for his fellow sufferers. When Rexroth later raises in The Heart's Garden The Garden's Heart [1967] the question, "Who hears/ The worlds cry out in pain?" (p. 297) one answer is the responsible artist.

Part II

There is at this point, however, only an intimation of shared suffering. A difficult night must pass before Rexroth can articulate this theme. His dominant emotion at the opening of Part II is separation from all others. Not only does he feel distant from the inhabitants of the "vindictive/ Foolish city" (p. 73) to the north, but he and his wife, in their sleeping bags, float "isolate/ From each other and the turning earth" (p. 74). They are "Two Ptahs, two Muhammad's coffins" (p. 73). The most common representation of Ptah, the Egyptian god of creation, is that of a man "swathed like a mummy," and according to

legend, the coffin of Muhammad hangs suspended between earth and heaven.

Helplessness and irresolution of a sort do mark the nighttime meditations of Rexroth during Parts II and III. Although his opposition to all institutions, especially the state, remains certain, he cannot determine what the individual can do in the face of the crushing power of the organization. Early in Part II, Rexroth indicts both history and the state:

The State is the organization
Of the evil instincts of mankind.
History is the penalty
We pay for original sin. (p. 74)

Parts II and III elaborate this judgment. The basic theme is that history and the state are not the source of, but a conspiracy against, true value. Current wartime conditions are paradoxically the sign of a healthy state because

War is the State. All personal
Anti-institutional values
Must be burnt out of each
generation.

Since personal and institutional values are by definition completely opposed, Rexroth's absolute condemnation of the state inevitably follows.

Rexroth apparently defines history as that continuous record of past events which survives the general ruin of time. History in this sense is simply what is remembered from the passage of events, without any consideration of meaning or value. One basis of Rexroth's definition of history is a low estimate of human motivation:

history is the description
Of those forms of man's activity
Where value survives at the
lowest
Rexroth elaborates this view when he says that Machiavelli assumed that the historical process occurs

at the lowest moral level necessary to ensure continuity. When the State or the individual actor falls below that level, it goes out of existence. When it rises above it, history gains an unexpected bonus.\(^\text{25}\)

When Rexroth speaks unfavorably of history in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, he means the cumulative effect of the succession of events. He does not deny that estimable actions can occur, but he contends not only that history does not progress, but that the course of human affairs is tragic.

From the Christian viewpoint, the tragedy of history results from original sin, the "price we pay for man's/First disobedience" (p. 78). Rexroth clarifies his definition of original sin by a comparison with the Socratic fallacy:

the tendency of man to choose a trivial, immediate good over a great final good is indisputable. What future ages were to call original sin is the only provable theological dogma. Socrates was wrong. Man does not follow his reason if only he understands it.... Man unquestionably does not... infallibly choose the greater over the lesser good. There are plenty of people who choose positive evil.\(^\text{26}\)

The irrationality of circumstance combined with the inherent folly of man continuously undermines works of lasting value. All great histories illustrate the tragic nature of history. The subject of *The*
Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon is the "subject of all tragedy: the defeat of the ideal by the real, of being by existence." Although the persistence of individual and social existence depends upon order, the enduring force in time is that "vital disorder . . . from which organization emerges into temporary significance and into which it washes away."

The study of history in The Phoenix and the Tortoise is an integral part of the theme of personal identity throughout the longer poems because what is true of history must apply to each individual: "All values wear out at last or at once in the attrition of the passage of the world of facts." The Phoenix and the Tortoise is Rexroth's attempt to find some value which can resist the ruin of time. One possible alternative to the waste of value in history is to accept the futility of achievement and renounce all effort except the enjoyment of the senses. The two portraits of a girl treading grapes (p. 67) and a Syrian barmaid (p. 75) seemingly exemplify such sensual abandon.

Although Rexroth offers the life of sensory indulgence as one way to avoid the vexing passage of events, he cannot reside for long in this choice. He desires something more substantial than the affirmation of the flesh. Those areas presented in Part II which might contain lasting values are religion, fame, and philosophy.

Rexroth contrasts the joy accompanying the chanting of the Latin Mass with the suffering and duplicity characteristic of public life (p. 76). The guns in Boston apparently refer to the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in Boston on August 29, 1927. This event is for Rexroth a crucial turning point in modern history. Rexroth believes that the "first twenty-five years of the century were the years of revolutionary hope," but when the death sentence against Sacco and Vanzetti was carried out despite intense, worldwide protest, the "generation of revolutionary hope was over." The conclusion of Rexroth's account of his early life shows the decisiveness of this incident. The execution occurred during the third week of Rexroth's stay with his wife in San Francisco. The final paragraph of An Autobiographical Novel states that, with this event,

A great cleaver cut through all the intellectual life of America. The world in which Andrée and I had grown up came forever to an end. One book of my life was closed and it was time to begin another.

The hope early in the century for a creative liberation in the lives of all men withered before the increasing horrors of the years leading to World War II, including the show trials conducted in Moscow by Joseph Stalin, the many deaths in the Chinese and Spanish Civil Wars, and the unprincipled German-Soviet Treaty of Nonaggression signed in

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31 Ibid., pp. 96-97.

August, 1939, by von Ribbentrop and Stalin, enabling the German invasion of Poland which began World War II. Such events would increase significantly the burden of the sins of the world assumed by Christ in his crucifixion and celebrated in the sequence of the Catholic Mass mentioned in this passage. The phrase, "Victimae paschali" (p. 76), refers to the Paschal Lamb, the symbolic role of Christ as God's sacrifice for the redemption of humanity. This phrase also recalls Rexroth's description of his evening meal as a "symbolic supper" (p. 65) like Passover or Holy Communion.

Fame is another possible triumph over the waste of value in the world. Just before Rexroth falls asleep briefly at the end of Part II, a series of images from past history and "ineradicable bits of tune" flow through his mind, examples of "what is half remembered/ In the hypnogogy of time" (p. 78). Rexroth recalls moments in the lives of four men who suffered public misfortune: Nicias, an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War; Cardinal Wolsey, chief adviser of Henry VIII; Thomas More, successor to Wolsey; and Peter Abélard, French philosopher, theologian, and poet of the Middle Ages.

The life of each of these men was tragic. Nicias led an Athenian force against Syracuse, Sicily, but when his siege of that city failed, the Syracusans slaughtered the Athenians and captured and executed Nicias. His death was tragic because he opposed war with Sparta, negotiating personally a peace treaty that subsequently was foiled; he argued against the expedition to Syracuse but then accepted, against his will, a generalship; and he asked to be relieved of command on Sicily because of illness but persisted after reinforcements arrived.

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Despite severe pain, Nicias showed great bravery in a cause he had resisted strenuously and accepted reluctantly.

Henry VIII of England amidst great pageantry met Francis I of France at the Field of Cloth of Gold in June, 1520. This meeting testified to the power of Thomas Wolsey, chief adviser to Henry VIII and a Cardinal in the Catholic Church. Yet this assembly, for all its splendor, accomplished nothing politically. Within one month, Henry connived with the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire against his rival, Francis I, and in a few years, England was at war with France. Cardinal Wolsey's decline from power was swift and total. When Wolsey failed to persuade the Pope to annul the marriage of Henry with Catherine of Aragon, the king turned against his former adviser and stripped him of all power and offices. Wolsey soon died in disgrace.

Thomas More also suffered greatly when he fell from favor with Henry VIII. Appointed Lord Chancellor in place of Wolsey, More opposed the king's divorce and resigned. Later accused of treason because of a refusal to take an Oath of Supremacy to the king, More approached his trial and beheading with unshakable courage and faith. More is Rexroth's outstanding example of the "delusion of participation," the acceptance of a position of authority by a philosopher or intellectual, under the mistaken belief that "'If I don't,/ Somebody else will. Think of the good/ I can do with my authority'" (p. 82).

Peter Abelard's tragedy is primarily that of his love for Heloise which lead to his castration, the loss of a powerful place in the Church

hierarchy, the dissolution of their marriage, and the forced separation of the lovers. The lines quoted by Rexroth in this passage are a translation of a Latin poem written by Abélard for an evening worship service. Rexroth believes that the Biblical characters in all of Abélard's poetry disguise the "apparent faces of Abelard and Héloïse stricken with their great heartbreak," and this selection, David's lament for Jonathan, his close friend and the eldest son of the former king, Saul (II Sam. 1:17-27), actually expresses the sorrow and desolation of Abélard for the disastrous outcome of his love for Héloïse.

Although the lives of these men ended tragically, the continued memory of their deeds seems to be a kind of victory over the waste of natural process, but Rexroth shows in the conclusion of Part II that fame is untrustworthy. As Rexroth lies awake, he watches the constellations of Aquarius and Capricorn rise, two signs of the zodiac closely related with the date of his birth. Rexroth feels that these signs symbolize the dual nature of his personality:

Noah and Pan in deadly conflict,
Watched by Fomalhaut's
cold, single eye. (p. 79)

Noah is associated with a common representation of Aquarius as a man emptying two jugs of water because Aquarius rose in the ancient Middle East during the time of rain and floods. The symbol of Capricorn is a goat with the tail of a fish, an image derived from the legend of Pan, who jumped into the water to avoid a monster just as he was

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changing into the shape of an animal. While that part of the god above
the water took the shape of a goat, the portion below water assumed the
form of a fish. Noah and the goatlike Pan apparently represent the
prophetic and renunciatory in contrast with the bestial and indulgent
sides of Rexroth. That aspect of his personality that judges an evil
society and warns of imminent catastrophe ("the turn/ Of the apocalyptic
future") struggles with the lustful, carefree part of his character that
is unconcerned about society or its direction. Noah and Pan also sym-
bolize the dichotomy within Rexroth of Apollonian and Dionysian aspects.
The legendary musical contest between Pan and Apollo can signify the
opposition between Rexroth's interest in history and his hedonistic
desire to turn his back on all culture.

Joining Aquarius and Capricorn in the late night sky is
Fomalhaut, a bright star in the constellation Piscis Australis, whose
"cold, single eye" watches the "deadly conflict" of Noah and Pan.
Fomalhaut seemingly symbolizes the certain doom which patiently abides
the conflict within Rexroth's personality. This doom first gazed at
Rexroth through the "open hard eyes/ Like small indestructible animals"
of the drowned Japanese sailor (p. 64), and doom is always present in
the poem. Even when Good Friday Morning dawns,

    doom
    Watches with its inorganic eyes,
The bright, blind regiments, hidden
By the sun-flushed sky, the
remote
Indestructible animals. (p. 88)

Rexroth then notes that these same stars shone while Boethius,
imprisoned in the Tower of Pavia, awaited the death sentence from
Theodoric, Gothic King of Italy, in 524. The reference to Boethius introduces the third possible way to overcome the ruin of history, philosophical meditation. Rexroth quotes three passages from Chaucer's prose translation of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written while he was in prison. These lines occur in a speech by Philosophy to Boethius demonstrating the vanity of the desire for fame. In the preceding section, Philosophy emphasizes that an individual's renown has no value when compared with the earth, the extent of the heavens, and finally the "endles spaces of eternyte." Philosophy also mentions that the memory of many great men is quickly forgotten and those records that are made cannot long survive the passage of time.

In the section which Rexroth quotes, Philosophy repeats these lessons by telling Boethius that whoever imagines that fame is the highest good should contrast the broad expanse of the heavens with the narrow site of the earth. He then shall be ashamed of the desire to increase the fame of a name that cannot even encompass the comparatively small area of the earth. In order to stress the evanescense of fame, Philosophy first recalls the names of three former Roman statesmen, then remarks that all but a few letters of their names have vanished. Darker still are those whose memory has not survived. They lie silently, utterly unknown, victims of the second death which obliterates all acclaim.

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36 Ibid., p. 340.
Fearing that he too may face imminent death, Rexroth hopes that a wider view of his predicament may engender philosophic calm and let him lie still through the rest of the night.

Part III

But Rexroth soon awakes and immediately sees a reminder of the continuing struggle between light and dark, peace and war, salvation and destruction:

The night patrol planes return
Opaque against the transparent moon. (p. 79)

His meditations repeat the same bleak themes of Part II. The poet does not look forward to the future because the goal of history is the achievement
Of the completely atomic
Individual and the pure Commodity relationship.
(pp. 80-81)

The condition for the salvation of the individual, however, is autonomy, the power of self-determination. Rexroth gives two examples of autonomous personalities, Hippias and Socrates (pp. 82-83), and his portrait of Hippias shows that unbounded creativity characterizes the autonomous individual. Yet for all his talents, Hippias was ignored because the only interests of the Greeks were matters of state: "their own history/ And the ruins they had made elsewhere" (p. 83).

The fate of Socrates reveals that the aims of the creative person and those of the state are irreconcilable. The high place given to dynamic growth by the liberated individual clashes inevitably with the static demand of the community for law and order. Socrates saw civic
life "as subject to continuous criticism and revaluation in terms of
the ever-expanding freedom of morally autonomous but co-operating
persons." While he thought that the aim of the community should be
an "organically growing depth, breadth, intensity of experience," the
Greek city state sought instead to minimize the "inrush of disturbing
experience of novel scope and intensity." Because Socrates refused
compromise, he became, like Boethius and Thomas More, a martyr to the
state.

Evaluating the past in terms of a six-thousand-year-long "struggle/ For autonomy" (p. 82), Rexroth can only see intellectuals losing
themselves in the state out of fear of the masses and individuals
equally lost in the opposed pursuit of perfection through otherworldli-
ness and self-effacement. Rexroth's example of the latter tendency is
Sufism, an ascetic, mystical movement within Islamic religion. In his
yearning for union of the soul with the divine, the Sufi sets out on a
path whose final goal is self-annihilation, the "complete extinction
of the personality." Both the cowering intellectuals and the Sufi
poets in the deserts of the Middle East reflect the relinquishment of
personal autonomy in hopes of attaining the "inaccessible": absolute
political or mystical unity.

The outcome of future conflict between the state and the

37Kenneth Rexroth, "Plato, The Trial and Death of Socrates," in
Classics Revisited, p. 72.

38Ibid.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia, 9:945.
individual seems equally hopeless:

Atomization versus
Autonomy - the odds are with
The side with the most
matériel. (p. 83)

Such discouraging conclusions make Rexroth wonder if it had been better
to have slept and dreamed throughout the night like his wife. He then
reintroduces the moon as a major symbol of the poem, noting that he
has been awake

while the moon crossed,
Dragging at the tangled ways
Of the sea and the tangled,
blood filled
Veins of sleepers. I am not
alone,
Caught in the turning of the
seasons. (p. 85)

The moon assumes in this passage some negative connotations. The
moon's "Dragging" at the sleepers implies that the individual is
not free but constantly at the mercy of natural, as well as historical,
forces. The "turning of the seasons" carries forward all persons,
whether they are ready or not, and the description of the "veins of
the sleepers" indicates that another great uncontrollable force is the
passions of men. The unruly forces in nature and human emotions illus-
trate the "vital disorder"\textsuperscript{40} that combats and eventually conquers the
ordered meditations of men like Rexroth. The description of the effects
of the moon and seasonal change on the sea and sleepers, especially such
words as "Dragging," "tangled," and "Caught," foreshadows the appear-
ance offshore of the fishing nets that ominously concludes Part III.


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Rexroth's realization that others participate in his fate, however, is one positive aspect of this section. Rexroth was aware earlier in the night that "multitudes/ Of men" (p. 72) shared in dream his troubles, pain, and sorrow. The sound of the shore birds at the end of Part I (p. 73) symbolized the "crying of all the worlds" (p. 292) which keeps from sleep the guardians of life (p. 300). By recalling that he is not alone, Rexroth overcomes the sense of floating in the night, completely isolated from any other person, that he expressed at the beginning of Part II (pp. 73-74).

An even more striking event of positive value suddenly occurs as dawn nears:

As the long beams of the setting moon
Move against the breaking day,
The suspended light pulsates
Like floating snow. (p. 85)

The mazes besetting the meditations of Rexroth and the dreams of the sleepers vanish in such light. Quandaries about value quickly dissipate before the "solid, irrefragible glories of sensually verifiable objectivity." Rexroth often uses light to symbolize moments of special insight. Light is integral to the presentation of the Eucharist in the final section of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (p. 60), the cosmological vision at the heart of Jakob Boehme's writings (p. 72), and the culminating passage of The Phoenix and the Tortoise (pp. 90-91).

These examples also reveal a trend toward decreasing the

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dependence on allusions and outside references in the most important visionary scenes of the longer poems. While the effect of the conclusion of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy depends on a knowledge of Christian ritual and symbolism and Rexroth's vision beside the flaring campfire early in The Phoenix and the Tortoise assumes some understanding of a seventeenth-century German mystic, the passages closing Parts III and IV of The Phoenix and the Tortoise seemingly describe only the direct experience of the poet. The absence of literary references in these last two instances is, however, only apparent. The last section of Part III contains translations or adaptations of five Japanese poems, making up approximately half of the final twenty-eight lines, and the description of the white egret at the end of Part IV (p. 90) is a translation of another poem from the Japanese. The visionary experiences in the last two examples are more self-contained, though, because knowledge of literary sources is not a necessary part of the reader's response.

The intense beauty of the pulsating moonlight answers the question posed by the poet at the beginning of the passage. The coming of dawn has rewarded his nightlong vigil. No matter how entangled Rexroth may become in the "web/ Of accident" (p. 85), some part of his mind more fundamental than memory will retain this sight.

The modulation of this section changes with a break in the

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42 These poems are numbered VII, XIII, XLIII, LXII, and LXVII in Kenneth Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, pp. 9, 15, 45, 64, 69.
43 Poem LXXXVI in Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, p. 88.
versification ten lines from the end of Part III. The statement that moments of supreme beauty have permanent value immediately precedes an expression of the transitoriness of all life. This contrast illustrates a basic opposition in Rexroth's poetry between a continual quest for transcendence and an abiding awareness of transience.

Like the moonlight, the significance of the dawn varies within the poem. At the close of Part III, daybreak ominously reveals, first, the stakes of the fishing nets, then, "beyond them the dark animal/ Shadow of a camouflaged cruiser" (p. 86). Rexroth attempts to increase the feeling of impending menace by emphasizing the slow but inexorable emergence of these stakes: *pedetemtim* is a Latin word which repeats the meaning of "One by one" (p. 85), and the nets range "far out into the shallows" (p. 86). The final note of Part III, the appearance of the cruiser, completes the transition from illumination to world war.

The conclusion of Part III repeats several motifs in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, including the place of religious values in a world of death and destruction. Rexroth most often symbolizes the tension between these forces by juxtaposing the moonlight and forces of war. Wartime conditions paradoxically increase the desire for religious transcendence at the same time that they render precarious its achievement.

At the end of Part I, the glitter of the moonlight on the "wings of the bombers" (p. 72) disturbs the peace the moon offers to the individual worshipper, whether through the Resurrection of Christ or the salvation of Amida. In the opening lines of Part II, the moonlight is a force which opposes two representatives of the state. It slips behind the "drowsy sentries" and subverts the work of the bureaucrats in their
offices (p. 73). The initial passage of Part III closely reflects the conclusion of Part I. Just as bombers flew out over the ocean earlier in the night, other planes now return, impervious to the calming light of the Easter moon. And as the moon sets at the conclusion of Part III, another dark military object emerges: the "Shadow of a camouflaged cruiser" (p. 86) lying just offshore.

Another repeated theme of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is the conflict within Rexroth's personality of spirituality and carnality. The appearance of Aquarius and Capricorn at the end of Part II brings to mind this inner division: "Noah and Pan in deadly conflict" (p. 79). The end of Part I also presents these two sides of the poet's personality. Four lines express the theme of transitoriness:

The flowers whirl away in the
wind like snow.
The thing that falls away
is myself

The motion of Egyptian chisels
Dissolves slowly in the
desert noon. (p. 72)

In the following passage, Rexroth counterposes a vision of creation without decay, of a universe "eternally/ Turning" (p. 72), in which nothing is lost. Another subject of this section, the existence of innumerable people crying out in pain, would elicit different responses from the two sides of Rexroth's character. The great sorrow of the world that the spiritual man could never forget would only encourage the sensual man to seize the day more tightly.

Another motif of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is the omnipresence of doom, coldly watching the individual entangled in circumstance. This
doom seems primarily to be personal fate, the inevitable total extinc-
tion of the physical being that gives added impetus to and, in a sense,
mocks the internal rivalries which mark the effort to develop an inte-
grated personality. Impassivity and indestructibleness characterize
the symbols of doom in The Phoenix and the Tortoise. Both the drowned
Japanese sailor (p. 64) and Fomalhaut (p. 86) gaze coldly at Rexroth,
and two passages compare doom to "indestructible animals" (pp. 64, 88),
perhaps intending to evoke such scavengers as hermit crabs, maggots
(p. 63), and ants (p. 80).

The close association of doom with elements of the war shows,
however, that catastrophe awaits modern history as well as each indi-
vidual. It is, therefore, ironic that both the prophet and the sen-
sualist face doom. World War II is only the latest sign of a growing
public violence and disintegration leading toward cataclysm, and the
certain decay of the flesh casts a shadow on even the most incandescent
physical pleasure. Mortality ultimately triumphs over the ecstasies of
both saint and lover, and the apocalypse shall consume history as
totally as time ravages the flesh.

Although the repetition of motifs makes The Phoenix and the
Tortoise a more controlled and ordered work than the first two longer
poems, there is also in this third poem a feeling of redundancy, primar-
ily due to the similarities that occur in the conclusions of Parts I-III.
Especially noticeable is the lack of progression in the abstract argu-
ment of Part III. The only new element in the criticism of history and
the state seemingly is the phrase, "Atomization versus/Autonomy"
(p. 83). Another device unifying The Phoenix and the Tortoise is

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Rexroth's falling asleep at the end of each of the first three parts, but the meditations of Part III argue that he awoke once too often.

Part IV

Rexroth's despondency reaches its lowest point in the hours just before morning, but dawn brings at last new hope. Having briefly fallen asleep after the conclusion of Part III, Rexroth resists waking and facing again his desperate situation. In describing his effort to remain forgetful of the worldwide crisis, Rexroth includes two Biblical allusions that foreshadow the successful culmination of The Phoenix and the Tortoise. Rexroth clings in sleep to oblivion,

As Jacob struggled in a dream,  
And woke touched and with another name,  
And on the thin brainpan of sleep  
The mill of Gaza grinds.  
(p. 86)

Rexroth refers to Jacob's wrestling with the angel of God (Gen. 32:24-32) and John Milton's interpretation in Samson Agonistes of the imprisonment of Samson by the Philistines (Judges 16:21-31). At low points in their lives and after considerable resistance, both Jacob and Samson accept the divine purpose of existence and experience a complete reversal of fortune.

Jacob fights with the angel the night before he meets his brother Esau for the first time since Esau vowed to kill Jacob for stealing his birthright and his father's blessing (Gen. 27). Although Jacob supplicates his brother with a large tribute, he is so afraid that
he divides his company in hope that at least one group might escape
Esau's wrath. While alone that night, Jacob wrestles until daybreak
with a man who demands Jacob's blessing, then changes the name Jacob
to Israel, signifying special favor with God. On the following morning,
Esau forgives Jacob, and the brothers are reconciled.

In *Samson Agonistes*, a play whose title indicates another
wrestling with divine purpose, Milton transforms the straightforward
Biblical narrative of Samson's revenge into a struggle to overcome
despair and alienation from God. Samson's hopelessness is so intense
at one point that he longs only for a quick death:

> My race of glory run,
> and race of shame,
> And I shall shortly be with
> them that rest. (11. 597-98)\(^44\)

The chorus articulates the incomprehensibility of God's ways:

> in fine,
> Just or unjust, alike seem
> miserable,
> For oft alike both come to
> evil end. (11. 702-04)\(^45\)

Rexroth, in his dejection, echoes these lines:

> beyond the reach
> Of my drowsy integrity,
> The race of glory and the race
> Of shame, just or unjust, alike
> Miserable, both come to
> evil end. (p. 86)

Because procreation seemingly is the sole value that does not

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362.

\(^45\)Ibid., p. 364.
diminish in history, marriage becomes the only sacrament justified by experience. The fate of three modern poets illustrates how time inevitably impairs the artist. Physical deterioration destroys at an early age D. H. Lawrence, celebrator of the flesh, forced to leave the sunlight and enter the "sightless realm where darkness is married to dark." While another English poet loses the confidence, candor, and total emotional freedom of Catullus and submits to psychoanalysis, T. S. Eliot, an "aging précieux" like Paul Valery (pp. 68-69),

Drinks cognac, dreams of rutting children
In the Mississippi Valley,
Watches the Will destroy the logic
Of Christopher Wren and Richelieu.
(p. 87)

Schweitzer's playing Bach on the organ in the African jungle indicates that Western culture has come to an impasse.

When Rexroth's survey of recent history reaches this nadir, daylight finally comes and lifts the darkness. Although the problem of value remains, Rexroth faces it with a new serenity and distance:

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in the isolating morning
The problem hangs suspended,
lucid
In a crystal cabinet of air
And angels where only bird
song wakes. (p. 87)

In other poems, the resolution of especially vexing problems or
troubles also occurs, not in the discovery of a solution but in a
gradually evolving state of calm and detachment. Near the end of The
Dragon and the Unicorn, the world still heads toward destruction, but
when Rexroth finally exhausts his theories, philosophy, and "Capacity
for tragedy," unlimited peace and glory overflow in another moonlit
night (p. 265). In "The Signature of All Things" [1949], Rexroth
meditates once more on the thought of Jakob Boehme. As a long July
day passes,

The evil of the world sinks.
My own sin and trouble fall
away
Like Christian's bundle, and I
watch
My forty summers fall like
falling
Leaves and falling water held
Eternally in summer air.49

And in "Time Is the Mercy of Eternity" [1956], Rexroth, camping alone
in a mountain canyon, is most explicit about this recurring moment of
clarity and peace:

Suspended
In absolutely transparent
Air and water and time, I
Take on a kind of translucent
Being.

49Kenneth Rexroth, "The Signature of All Things," in The
Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth, p. 177.
The good and evil of Rexroth's personal history depart first, accompanied by the "other personal facts,/ And sensations, and desires."

Finally all that remains is the "vast crystal" of knowledge which in turn encompasses the "Limitless crystal of air/ And rock and water."

These two crystals are

perfectly
Silent. There is nothing to
Say about them. Nothing
at all.50

The first instance of this situation in The Phoenix and the Tortoise differs, however, because the problem crystallizes but does not disperse. Rexroth soon offers a definite solution to the dilemma of the individual in a world of constantly diminishing values. The inability to reside in a state of suspension perhaps explains Rexroth's reversal of position and renewed pessimism in the pendant to The Phoenix and the Tortoise, "Past and Future Turn About."

Even though the "problem hangs suspended," speculations about value continue. Placing several definitions of value within quotation marks implies, however, increasing disenchantment with a rationalistic approach. Rexroth states that two of the foundations of logical thought, the "assumption of order,/ [and] the principle of parsimony" (pp. 87-88), are as much beyond human understanding as the mysteries supporting religious truth.

Rexroth returns to the meaning of the central experience of Christianity, the crucifixion of Christ. The progression from Maundy

Thursday to Good Friday Morning represents a movement from communion to agony to responsibility (p. 88). The sequence applies as well to the poet since his anguished night followed communion with his wife, as symbolized by supper on Thursday evening (pp. 65-66), and the poem now moves to a statement of individual responsibility.

Criticism of the basis of logic is a necessary step for Rexroth because the climax of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is not a rational deduction but an act of devotion. The individual must assume universal responsibility, what Rexroth calls most often "unlimited liability."\(^{51}\) The person in this act identifies himself with the creative artist, Christ, and the fundamental principle of the universe.

This response corresponds, first of all, with Rexroth's idea of the artist. The person who defies doom is

He who discriminates structure
In contingency, he who assumes All the responsibility Of ordered, focused, potential - Sustained by all the universe, Focusing the universe in act. (p. 89)

The ideal artist, similarly, reveals the "macrocosm in the microcosm, the moral universe in the physical act, the depths of psychological insight in the trivia of happenstance."\(^{52}\) Rexroth feels that D. H. Lawrence, at the height of his career, superbly possessed this gift of


continually presenting the whole in the particular, and his means was
an "intense realization of total reality, and . . . the assumption of
total responsibility for the reality and for the realization." The
state of total realization is like an electric field, with the positive
and negative aspects of Lawrence's personality functioning "at maximum
charge, and all the universe streaming between them glowing and trans-
formed." \(^5^4\)

The individual who assumes universal responsibility also ful-
fills the Christian injunction to live a Christ-like life, because
Christ in the crucifixion took on "unlimited liability" for the sins
of humanity. The cross is a fitting symbol for this response, and
Rexroth emphasizes this symbol in the following passage, an account by
Edward Whymper of his party's descent after climbing Mt. Matterhorn for
the first time in July, 1865. While descending, a rope broke, killing
four of the group of seven. The three remaining climbers, anguished
and downcast, suddenly saw in the sky three crosses of light. \(^5^5\) The
timing and impact of this vision on Mt. Matterhorn reflects the unex-
pected emergence of hope in Rexroth's own discouraging situation in The
Phoenix and the Tortoise.

The cross also symbolizes the assumption of unlimited liability


\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 193.

\(^{55}\) Edward Whymper, Scrambles Amongst the Alps, revised and edited
tration by Whymper of this phenomenon faces p. 325.
because the person places himself at that "narrow passage of the Cross" (p. 72) which is central to Jakob Boehme's vision of the universe. Accepting universal responsibility means living continuously in the present, dwelling at that point where quality, the "determinable future," declines into quantity, the "Irreparable past" (p. 90).

The individual thus identifies himself with the basic process of the universe: the continuous creation and destruction that is the present. Because potential future value unceasingly falls away into a past of dead fact, the person must take responsibility for all the value in his experience that he misses, as well as that which he recognizes:

- this lost
  And that conserved - the
  appalling
  Decision of the verb "to be."
(p. 91)

This process also focuses the macrocosm in the microcosm. Like the infinite particles of sand that converge at the center of Boehme's "illimitable hour glass/ Of the universe" (p. 72), endless forces are concentrated within the completely responsible person:

The immense stellar phenomenon
Of dawn focuses in the egret
And flows out, and focuses in me
And flows infinitely away
To touch the last galactic
dust. (p. 90)

The unfolding sunlight that ends the poem contrasts with the images of clinging fast to darkness, imprisonment, and struggle at the beginning of Part IV. The final illumination brings together again the poet and his wife, after a night of isolation "From each other and the

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turning earth" (p. 74). This light transfigures organic process and triumphs over time as it "glorifies the sea" and melts the "glaciers/
of ten thousand thousand years" (p. 91). The peace and salvation promised by Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light (pp. 72-73), are fully lit at last for the poet.

In the preface to the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, Rexroth states that he might well dedicate this longer poem to Albert Schweitzer,

a man who found that door which is straight, and smaller than a needle's eye, but through which the universalization of the human soul, the creation of the true person, comes freely, as a guest.56

The strongest influence on the statement of universal responsibility in The Phoenix and the Tortoise seemingly is Schweitzer's philosophy of reverence for life. The basis of Schweitzer's world view, like Rexroth's position, is a nonrational, activist, absolute ethic.

In his comments on Job, Rexroth says that acceptance of the justice of God is not a rational decision but an act of religious devotion, culminating in taking upon oneself unlimited liability.57 When Job demands an explanation for the evils of the world, for the "destruction and waste of good in time"58 which is the most salient fact of existence, God rebukes and confronts him with the mighty works of creation. This display of power brings Job into communion with God.

In a moment of illumination, Job no longer requires justification, and his last words are a prayer that expresses the "breakdown of logic and evaluation." Rexroth's statement in the poem that assuming total responsibility is the "only blood defiance of doom" (p. 89) indicates that this is not a reasoned but an almost desperate response.

Schweitzer similarly claims that there is no logical basis for an ethical affirmation of life and the world. The "complicated operations of thought" cannot achieve an ethical world view; reverence for life is a mystical act, not a "proved necessity of thought." Much of Rexroth's presentation in The Phoenix and the Tortoise of universal responsibility stresses activism. He reduces abstract speculation about "Value, causality, being" to the "purest/Act," an acceptance of complete responsibility that at the same time focuses the "universe in act" (p. 89). Rexroth repeats in a later passage the emphasis on action. He bases his view of reality on the individual's responsibility to "Discriminate," to evaluate actuality (p. 90). The falling away of potential value into the irrevocable past is the context from which "The person emerges as complete/Responsible act" (p. 91).

Schweitzer claims that although mysticism is the only valid approach to an affirmative world view, the mysticism of the past sought "absorption into the Absolute" at the cost of an "activist ethic."

59 Ibid., p. 28.


One of his major aims is the establishment of an approach to being founded on ethical mysticism. His criticism of former mysticism is also part of an effort to redirect the study of ethics from abstract speculation to particular experiences in the lives of specific persons. Acceptance of his philosophy should not be a "purely intellectual act" but directly affect all that comes within the scope of an individual life. Rexroth similarly states that the province of universal responsibility is the "self evaluated/Actual" (p. 90).

Rexroth asserts that the individual must assume an unlimited liability, and Schweitzer likewise states that his ethic is absolute. Schweitzer defines ethics as "responsibility without limit towards all that lives," and reverence for life imposes a responsibility "so unlimited as to be terrifying."

Although Rexroth's debt to Schweitzer's philosophy of reverence for life is large, the desperation and defiance of The Phoenix and the Tortoise do not characterize the writings of Schweitzer. Even though Schweitzer states that resignation is a necessary stage toward affirmation of the world, that inner freedom from worldly fortune must precede reverence for life, the tone of his philosophical meditations remains uniformly positive and often radiant. Unshakable hope for mankind is the

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62 Ibid., p. 242.
63 Ibid., pp. 241-43.
64 Ibid., p. 248.
65 Ibid., p. 258.
66 Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought, pp. 267-68.
foundation of his thought. When he wrote *Civilization and Ethics* in 1923, he felt that religious and social organizations still could make spiritual progress. His study of modern culture ends on a confident note. In the last chapter of *Civilization and Ethics*, entitled "The Civilizing Power of the Ethic of Reverence for Life," he states that the power of his philosophy can make the "civilized state an actuality,"67 and his consolation in a difficult time is the conviction that "we are paving the way . . . for a civilized mankind which is to come."68

Rexroth, however, cannot be as sanguine in the midst of a second world war, where "Jews are smashed/ Like heroic vermin in the Polish winter" (p. 91). The ethical mysticism of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* emerges from a bleak landscape of dead corpses, sleepless nights, and thoroughgoing contempt for contemporary civilization. Not even the presentation of the ideal of responsibility is encouraging. This act, which is the only conservation of value, is not only "self-determining" (p. 89) but self-sacrificing. It demands the "absolute price" by placing entirely upon the individual the great burden of unlimited liability. Accepting this task requires an "appalling" (p. 91) but, for Rexroth, an inescapable decision. Schweitzer felt that the power of his ethic could spread beyond the individual and generate immediate responses within the community and the state. Because Rexroth lacks this trust, he accepts all of the responsibility for the ethical quality of his world. Speaking of the injustice and self-deception


68 Ibid., p. 285.
dominating the scene at the time of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, he says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{This is my fault, the horrible term} \\
\text{Of weakness, evasion, indulgence,} \\
\text{The total of my petty fault -} \\
\text{No other man's. (p. 91)}
\end{align*}
\]

The conclusion of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* is triumphant, nevertheless, as the joy of discovering a way to conserve value after a long period of fruitless searching surpasses the burden this viewpoint places on the individual. Although the world basks at the end of the poem in the sunlight of a new Spring, in a sequel to this longer poem entitled "Past and Future Turn About," Rexroth returns during Autumn with a changed, colder outlook.

"Past and Future Turn About"

"Past and Future Turn About" repeats the setting of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, but the mood throughout is one of futility. Rexroth achieves in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* a victory over time by transforming the dilemma of the individual caught at the intersection of past and future into the "condition of salvation" (p. 91). In "Past and Future Turn About," however, time resumes its tyranny over man. Three different factors revive Rexroth's pessimism: the oblivion that awaits all human activity, the evil of this particular moment, and the illusion of continuity within the self.

Rexroth opens "Past and Future Turn About" by emphasizing the inescapable fact that every human action ends. Although at the climax of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth assumes responsibility for the entire content of his experience, he now admits that the domain of the
individual is limited:

The gratuitous discipline
of finality
Falls on our lives and shapes
our ends.
Ourselves as objectives, our
objects,
Pass from our hands to the
hands of time.69

Relinquishing power to the passage of time makes man vulnerable to neglect. The seals play in the surf, unaware that the same kelp entangled in the Spring a dead Japanese sailor. Mankind's memory is equally narrow, as the unexplained "dark fish shaped patches/ Of rock"70 testify. The only constant apparently is the senseless course of nature. Obeying blind instinct, "Hundreds of jellyfish" die on the sand as the extravagant process of life continues.

The impact of individual action seems infinitesimal when viewed as part of any extensive stretch of time. Our understanding of the past is little better than our insight into the future. Vast tracts of time lie unknown, buried "Deep in the blind earth," and a hidden but inevitable final cataclysm will obliterate those scraps of knowledge which we do possess. Rexroth's cynicism about human conduct even touches the lines of Simonides commemorating the Spartan rear guard that held the pass at Thermopylae against the invading Persians in 480 B.C.:

"'Stranger, when you come to Lakadaimon, tell them that we lie here,

70Ibid.
obedient to their will." The modern version in "Past and Future Turn About" denies the enduring value of heroic sacrifice:

Who remembers
The squad that died stopping the tanks
At the bridgehead? The company
Was bombed out an hour later.
Simonides is soon forgotten.72

The especially dark nature of the present as well as the general neglect of history discourages Rexroth. The presence of the armed sentry at the opening of the poem shows that while the splendid illumination of The Phoenix and the Tortoise has faded, the world of death remains. The enormity of the contemporary situation mocks the hope implied in the title of Rexroth's recently finished long poem:

Carapace or transfiguration -
History will doubtless permit us
Neither.73

Tricked by the subtle power of evil, Rexroth has overestimated the strength of the individual will. These calamitous times have goaded Rexroth into a direct assault on evil which can bring only "greater evil or despair." Chastened by the extent of evil in the world, Rexroth now feels that his assumption of unlimited liability was a presumptuous imitation of Christ:

The Cross cannot be climbed upon.
It cannot be seized like a weapon


73 Ibid., p. 169.
Against the injustice of the world.

The Cross descends into the world
Like a sword, but the hilt thereof
Is in the heavens.74

Along with the changed attitude toward sacrifice goes a new view of the individual. In Rexroth's analysis of personality in "Past and Future Turn About," purposive activity becomes a farce, and man is indistinguishable from any other animal. The assumption of infinite responsibility for finding value in contingency, as presented in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, seemingly depends on an act of will, but in "Past and Future Turn About," Rexroth discredits human will. Direct engagement of all of the evil in the world is futile and impious. Rexroth quotes Christ's submission to the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42) as an example of the proper attitude toward earthly injustice.

Another aspect of Rexroth's criticism of the will involves the value of the "self determining person" (p. 89) praised at the end of The Phoenix and the Tortoise. Rexroth states in "Past and Future Turn About" that the will achieves autonomy solely at the cost of ethical integrity. Because of the might of the world, self-determination can exist safely only as the "inane autonomy/ Of the morally neuter event."75

Rexroth ridicules realization of any potential, let alone the "operation/ Of infinite, ordered potential" (p. 90) that is the goal in

74_74Ibid., pp. 169, 170._

75_75Ibid., p. 170._

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The Phoenix and the Tortoise. The brain does not learn from its repeated failures to achieve value, but the combined pressure of the "unfound/Future" and the "lost/Past" whips it into further fruitless effort. This dismal view reduces the individual to a self-deluded central nervous system and a "cobwebbed body," each feeding on the other as they press together like mating mantids, and leaves no room for the person, the "entelechy" that realizes the potential of the universe in the vision culminating The Phoenix and the Tortoise. If an individual wishes to fulfill the true purpose of the human species, he might as well give full vent to his brutish instincts and "wear the head/Of the wolf, in Sherwood Forest."*76

The final imagery of "Past and Future Turn About" reflects that which concludes The Phoenix and the Tortoise, but with a crucial change in meaning. Both the poet and his wife at the end of The Phoenix and the Tortoise have been swimming in the sea, and one of the last images is her body, "Sparkling with water" (p. 91), as she runs to embrace him. However, in "Past and Future Turn About," the sea plays an ominous role in the rejection of an essential element of the doctrine of universal responsibility: the persistence of the self in time. Rexroth contradicts the first lines of "Past and Future Turn About": neither person returns in Autumn with the same self present in Spring. The denial of continuity within the self also negates the basis for an enduring relationship with another person. The belief that two people can return "Each to each, one/To another, each to the other" is just

*76 Ibid., p. 171.
a "Sweet lovely hallucination."

Two confusing, awkwardly phrased lines ask whether the individual self deliberately destroys any hope for lasting duration of character:

The hole itself cuts in its self
And watches as it fills
with blood?

The following lines clearly state that the flow of time and circumstance, with a force as compulsory as digestion, irrevocably sunders the closest couple:

The waves of the sea fall through
Our each others indomitable
As peristalsis.

The dominant image of the last three stanzas is the falling leaves of Autumn. The first stanza repeats the theme that natural process is the only constant in life, but replacing the waste and cruelty of the doomed jellyfish, "struggling/ Against the drive of the rising tide,"77 presented earlier in the poem, is a picture of the recurring forms of nature containing some beauty and consolation:

Autumn comes
And the death of flowers, but
The flowered colored waves of
The sea will last forever
Like the pattern on the dress
Of a beautiful woman.78

Although the last two stanzas also use the imagery of falling leaves, they contrast sharply with this brief lyrical interlude. In the

77Ibid., p. 168.
78Ibid., p. 172.
next to last stanza, time has vanquished Rexroth and his wife. He has not constructed a shield strong enough to protect them from external influences. Rexroth's sacrifice is not transfiguring, but demeaning, like the easy capture, impalement, and display of an insect by some immensely overpowering, callous creature. Rexroth again mentions the leaves, falling in the "gardens/ Of a million ruins," perhaps a reference to the far-reaching destruction of World War II and further evidence of the sovereign force of time which reduces all accomplishment to decay and oblivion.

This stanza contrasts with the conclusion of The Phoenix and the Tortoise. While at the end of the longer poem, the rising sun melts the "glaciers/ Of ten thousand thousand years" (p. 91), nature, in "Past and Future Turn About," advances, rather than undoes, the work of centuries, and unlike the slow process of melting glaciers, these leaves "Fall easily" as they cover the efforts of man.

The last stanza of "Past and Future Turn About" also echoes the ending of The Phoenix and the Tortoise. Both poems conclude with an image of a natural process occurring "deep/ In the mountains" above the beach. The Phoenix and the Tortoise ends on a note of hope and regeneration symbolized by the sun melting the "snow of Winter and the glaciers" (p. 91), but in the last lines of "Past and Future Turn About," the wind blocks with frightening ease the flow of the healing waters:

And deep
In the mountains the wind has stopped
The current of a stream with only
A windrow of the terribly
Red dogwood leaves.
This final stanza is a translation of a Japanese poem written in the tenth century by Harumichi No Tsuraki, but Rexroth has changed the red maple leaves of the original to dogwood. This change may allude ironically to the crucifixion of Christ, an event associated by legend with the dogwood tree and a painful reminder to the disillusioned poet of the ineffectiveness of his own sacrifice.

The quest of The Phoenix and the Tortoise apparently is successful. Rexroth has combined a source of lasting value in a world of mutability with the means for achieving true integration of the personality. But in the sequel, "Past and Future Turn About," Rexroth violently turns against his own solution. The intensity of the reversal seems due to the absolute and undeveloped nature of Rexroth's thought in The Phoenix and the Tortoise.

Rexroth places such a tremendous burden on the individual that failure seems inevitable, and the ethic of unlimited responsibility, after raising the highest hopes, can only appear as a cruel "hallucination." Although Rexroth warns in the introductions to the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise and to the Collected Longer Poems that the self does not assume unlimited liability "by an act of will," and he follows Schweitzer in repeating the Biblical injunction that "He

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79 Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, pp. 85, 131.
who would save his life must lose it" (Matt. 10:39), the first presentation of this doctrine in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* does not make it clear that this response is not one of "sheer assertion." Rexroth's statements in this poem that the individual must be self-determining, self-evaluating, wholly responsible for distinguishing the enduring patterns behind the flux of immediate experience and that the only valid realization of value occurs in act (pp. 89-91) imply a considerable degree of volition.

Disenchantment with human desire seemingly is part of the sudden reversal in viewpoint because much of the attack in "Past and Future Turn About" criticizes the capabilities of the will. Rather than stressing the person's need to give to others, which is integral to Schweitzer's reverence for life, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* emphasizes that the entire burden of evaluation rests on the single individual. As if to counter the overemphasis on the self in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and "Past and Future Turn About," Rexroth, in his next longer poem, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, broadens his philosophy by including other persons and introducing the ideal of a "Community of lovers" (p. 173). The change in emphasis shows that the eight years separating the publication of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* [1944] and *The Dragon and the Unicorn* [1952] benefited Rexroth in establishing more securely his basic approach to life.

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Amidst the pervasive gloom of "Past and Future Turn About," two glimpses of future hope for the beleaguered self appear: signs of a wider context which can aid the individual in the struggle to secure moral values. Even though the will is doomed to fail, forgiveness and grace are still possible, because Rexroth implies the possibility of a love which transcends man's limited existence, the "love that suffers ignorance/And time's irresponsibility." A later passage states that personal autonomy paradoxically grows out of commitment to something outside the self, especially a religious principle that can free the individual from the certain failure avowed elsewhere in the poem:

Conversion, penitence, and grace -
Autonomy is a by product
Of identification.

The turnabout in "Past and Future Turn About" appears in retrospect, therefore, as in part a natural reaction against an extremely idealistic belief and also a kind of birth pang accompanying an idea which is not clearly stated in The Phoenix and the Tortoise and needs the development evident in the more broadly based and systematic worldview set forth in The Dragon and the Unicorn. One evidence of this greater maturity is the assured tone of The Dragon and the Unicorn which contrasts sharply with the anguish of The Phoenix and the Tortoise and the bitterness of "Past and Future Turn About." The climax of The Phoenix and the Tortoise undeniably reflects a powerful moment of

86 Ibid., p. 170.
illumination that survives the asperity of "Past and Future Turn About" and kindles the system of values presented in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.

The dramatic reversal of opinion in "Past and Future Turn About" also illustrates Rexroth's dialectical approach to experience. In the introduction to his *Collected Longer Poems*, Rexroth notes that passages in his poetry expounding a specific world view always are "contradicted by the spokesman for the other member of the polarity." In this particular instance, Rexroth follows an affirmation of life and the limitless potential of the individual in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* with unrelieved pessimism and a denial of the continuous existence, let alone the growth, of the self in "Past and Future Turn About." This change recalls the conflicts of the Damascen brothers in *The Homestead Called Damascus* and Rexroth's inability to rest content in the illumination achieved in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*. The tension between antagonistic parts of Rexroth's personality provides much of the drive in his poetry and the impetus for continued exploration of the basic issues of life in subsequent longer poems.

The style of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* reflects the intention. Rexroth notes that each of his long poems is a "philosophical revery," and this type of poem requires more than other poetry a greater use of abstract terminology. Rexroth's basic aim therefore partially explains the flat, prosaic tone of parts of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. The

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following longer poem, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, also contains long passages of abstract speculation which apparently would be more fitting as prose than poetry. This characteristic is not, however, as prominent in the first two longer poems. *The Homestead Called Damascus* is more a collection of the highly imagistic and sensual verse of a youthful poet than a systematic analysis of clearly articulated philosophical questions. *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* does raise abstract considerations, especially in sections VII and VIII, but the cubist style makes this discussion quite unlike that in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*.

Interest in philosophical issues, however, does not excuse all of the stylistic faults in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. Vivienne Koch, in her review of the original edition, pinpoints two weaknesses of the longer poem. There are too many quotations "from the classics" and "meditation which is sometimes mulled over to the point of rumination."\(^{89}\) She correctly specifies Part III as an especially conspicuous example of these defects. The main difficulty with Part III is that the argument of the poem does not advance, but the entire poem depends too heavily on literary allusions. Rexroth's attempt to expand as widely as possible the scope of his poem through these numerous references, along with the direct quotations mentioned by Koch, results in a highly elliptical style which confuses more than it enlightens the reader.

In one stanza in Part III (p. 84), for example, Rexroth alludes to three classical myths: Atalanta and the golden apples of the Hesperides, Persephone and the pomegranate eaten as she left Hades, both

also mentioned in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* (p. 50), and the judgment of Paris. Other allusions in this same stanza include Duns Scotus’ doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, freeing Mary from original sin; what Rexroth elsewhere calls the embarrassing "paean to the Eternal Feminine" concluding Goethe’s *Faust*; two earlier references in Part III to the "pure form/ Of the cutting edge of power" (p. 81); the "immortal buttocks/ Of little Murphy" (p. 81), a reference to a painting entitled *La Petite Morphi* by François Boucher of Louise O’Murphy, a lower-class Irish girl who became the mistress of Louis XV; and a poem by Catullus about the betrayals of his mistress Lesbia, probably the pseudonym for Claudia, the "most depraved member" of the patrician Claudian clan.

These items supposedly illustrate the two "swords of history" (p. 84), and precise identification of these swords is the first difficulty with this passage. Rexroth apparently wishes to explain the destructive forces of history in terms of two basic human motives, each of which is associated with a female archetype. The reversed spelling of the words *Eva* and *Ave* represents the complementary nature of these two historical forces. *Eva* comes from *Heva*, the word for Eve in the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, and *Ave* stands for *Ave Maria*, a

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92 Kenneth Rexroth, "Catullus," in *The Elastic Retort*, p. 28. The poem mentioned in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* is number fifty-eight in the codex manuscripts of Catullus’ poems.
salutation to the Virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic Church. While Eve symbolizes jealousy, especially intolerance of another's good fortune which eventually destroys the welfare of all, the Virgin Mary symbolizes a quest for an inhuman, absolute perfection that ends in self-destruction. Rexroth thus applies to history the contrasting stereotypes of the whore and the virgin, of the first woman who caused all subsequent sin and the pure mother of God who escaped the taint of any sin.

Understanding the stanza depends on the reader's ability to find the threads uniting the list of apparently highly eclectic personal associations, not on a clear statement of theme by the poet. Poor arrangement of the illustrations for the two opposing historical forces complicates this search for meaning. After introducing the examples of the second sword with the word "conversely" in the ninth line of the stanza, Rexroth confuses the reader with the phrase, "as contradictory" in the sixteenth line. It is unclear whether Murphy illustrates one principle of history in contrast to Lesbia or, as appears more likely, together they contrast with the preceding illustrations of the second sword. Both represent female covetousness, although Murphy seems a simpleminded pawn of more powerful women, Lesbia a victim of her own lustfulness. Once Murphy became the principal mistress of the king, a noblewoman named Madame d'Estrées used the young girl to supplant her rival, Madame de Pompadour, but when the plan backfired, the king ousted Madame d'Estrées and after arranging a marriage for little Murphy also removed her permanently from court.93 Lesbia moved in the

93 Mitford, pp. 189-90; Smythe, pp. 271-72.
opposite direction from Murphy, as rapaciousness drove the descendant of one of the most renowned Roman families to debauchery with ruffians in alleys and repeated betrayals of others, including the poet who deeply loved her. Confronted with a list of allusions illustrating a specific thesis, the reader may willingly suspend disbelief, trust that Rexroth has connected the disparate items, and puzzle out each link. Repeated instances of this technique, however, increase the irritated feeling that Rexroth relies heavily in The Phoenix and the Tortoise on inaccessible personal associations and does not assume enough responsibility for forming coherent passages of verse.

Rexroth's overly elliptical writing does the most harm to The Phoenix and the Tortoise when he presents the doctrine of unlimited responsibility. The climax of the poem and the solution of his dilemma should be unmistakably clear. The second statement of this belief (pp. 90-91) is especially confusing largely because Rexroth uses many appositives to define in one passage several seemingly different themes: the basic reality of the human condition, the realization of unlimited potential, the waste of value (or the change of quality into quantity), the ceaseless passage of time, the completely responsible person in action, and the consequences of failed responsibility. If these concepts are identical, Rexroth does not make sufficiently clear that fact. The torrent of supposedly equivalent terms reflects emotional rather than rational certainty. The passages describing the sunlight striking the white egret, Rexroth, and his wife (pp. 90-91) communicate concretely and therefore more effectively that infinity converges upon and illuminates the poet.
Because a clear statement of Rexroth's philosophy occurs in the preface to the original collection of poems entitled *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, several critics, including Vivienne Koch, mistakenly have discovered that same belief in the longer poem also entitled *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. Rexroth says in this introduction that the primary theme of the shorter poems in the volume is the discovery of a basis for the recreation of a system of values in sacramental marriage. The process as I see it goes something like this: from abandon to erotic mysticism, from erotic mysticism to the ethical mysticism of sacramental marriage, thence to the realization of the ethical mysticism of universal responsibility - from the Dual to the Other.

He then adds that the longer poem is an "attempt to portray the whole process in historical, personal and physical terms." Several of the shorter poems in the original edition which do reflect the complete process may confuse these critics. "When We with Sappho" and "Floating" illustrate proceeding from "abandon to erotic mysticism," and "Incarnation" probably indicates most clearly the meaning of erotic mysticism itself. "Lute Music" and "Habeas Corpus" continue the progression from "erotic mysticism to the ethical mysticism

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96 Ibid.

97 Rexroth, "When We with Sappho," in The Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 139-42.


of sacramental marriage," and "Theory of Numbers" completes the process to the "ethical mysticism of universal responsibility--from the Dual to the Other."

Morgan Gibson in his biographical survey of Rexroth's complete career recognizes that the conclusion of the longer poem does not celebrate "Erotic and matrimonial mysticism," but he finds a communion with other persons in the climactic passages that overlooks the major focus on the individual and the bitter reaction that emphasis engenders in the sequel, "Past and Future Turn About." Although this interpretation agrees with Rexroth's philosophy as stated in the preface to the original edition, it disregards the highly self-centered nature of the passages in The Phoenix and the Tortoise. The main consideration is the possibility and the guilt of the self. Rexroth only mentions other people in order to underline personal culpability, and he seeks first salvation, beauty, peace, and immortality (p. 91) for himself.

Rexroth exorcises the imbalance toward self in "Past and Future Turn About," a poem that Gibson slights in his book, calling it a quiet celebration of the completion of the longer poem, while admitting that in it Rexroth doubts his own theories and the value of sacrifice. Gibson ends his brief mention of the pendant by emphasizing the only

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., p. 66.
hopeful aspect of the poem, the statement that the beauty of the
colored waves and the flowered pattern on the dress of a lovely woman
are equally eternal. Although these lines do acknowledge the endless
duration of organic process, Gibson omits the final two stanzas which
present man as the mortal victim of the eternal cycles of nature.

The Phoenix and the Tortoise and "Past and Future Turn About"
do not support Gibson's claim that Rexroth in them attains a "trans­
cendent community of love." The introduction and some of the shorter
poems in the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise show that
other people are a part of Rexroth's complete world view, but he does
not embody this wider perspective in a longer poem until The Dragon
and the Unicorn.

106 Ibid., p. 57.
CHAPTER IV

THE DRAGON AND THE UNICORN (1944-1950)

Introduction

The action of Kenneth Rexroth's fourth longer poem, The Dragon and the Unicorn [1944-1950], primarily covers a trip taken by the poet from California across the United States to Europe and then back, lasting from the beginning of Spring until the onset of winter in 1949. The last portion of The Dragon and the Unicorn includes several of Rexroth's experiences after his return to California and concludes as the summer of 1950 ends. The poem is in five parts. Part I (pp. 95-122) covers Rexroth's train ride across the United States, boat trip to Liverpool, and experiences in Wales and England. Part II (pp. 122-154) presents Rexroth's trip through southwestern France toward Italy, and Part III (pp. 154-226), the longest section of the poem by far, deals with the poet's travels in Italy. Part IV (pp. 226-248), which treats the return trip through Switzerland and France, ends with Rexroth's departure from Europe by ship at Bordeaux, France. Part V (pp. 249-280) follows Rexroth across the United States back home to California, arriving near Christmas, 1949, and the final sections of The Dragon and the Unicorn present isolated activities ending with the summer of the following year.

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1Kenneth Rexroth, The Dragon and the Unicorn, in The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1968). All quotations from The Dragon and the Unicorn are from this edition, and page numbers in the text refer to it.
Throughout The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth alternates concrete descriptions of his travels with passages of abstract speculation. This division reflects the "interior and exterior adventures" of the poet mentioned in Rexroth's introduction to his collected longer poems. Rexroth also states in this introduction that "Partly, each of the separate long poems is a philosophical revery," and The Dragon and the Unicorn continues the concern with philosophical issues evident in The Phoenix and the Tortoise.

The basic impulse behind the abstract speculation in The Dragon and the Unicorn is the quest for a new system of values. At the climax of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, because he could find no hope in current Western society, Rexroth in an act of self-sacrifice assumed total responsibility for realizing the content of each moment. The reaction against this assumption of unlimited liability in "Past and Future Turn About" shows that a new ethic needs a broader base than the isolated, vulnerable individual. In the preface to the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, Rexroth outlines a system of values which does extend beyond the self. He states that the "ethical mysticism of sacramental marriage" can lead to "universal responsibility," that one can proceed "from the Dual to the Other." Several of the shorter poems in the original edition reflect various aspects of this.

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process, but Rexroth sets forth the full implications of his new value system in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.

In Part I, Rexroth establishes the grounds for a method of evaluating experience which is mystical rather than rational. He challenges the validity of modern science by refusing to restrict knowledge to the verifiable properties of natural phenomena or the limits of time and space. Experience instead has unlimited and inexhaustible meaning, and the first step toward realizing this meaning is to regard all objects as perspectives on other persons. This viewpoint initiates the movement in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* away from the self and toward a community of love. The conclusion of Part I states that true value transcends the restrictions of the analytical intellect and then identifies this "ultimate/ Mode of free evaluation" (p. 121) with love.

In Part II, Rexroth contrasts discursive with direct knowledge, which arises from the duality established with another person in love and sacramentalized in marriage. Direct knowledge transcends the isolation of the self and overcomes the world of consequence and possibility which limits the analytical reason.

Part III elaborates the process by which direct knowledge of the beloved, best revealed within the sacrament of marriage, leads to an increasingly direct knowledge of others. This is the progression from the Dual to the Other mentioned in the preface to the original edition of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. Part III also defines God in personal rather than dogmatic terms, postulates the Community of Love as the "only absolute" (p. 215), and contrasts communities with collectivities. The climax of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* occurs in Part III when Rexroth
and his new wife celebrate their honeymoon at the temple of Poseidon in Paestum, Italy.

Part IV continues the opposition between the two classes of communities and collectivities and culminates with a vision of Christ on the Cross.

Part V shows the relationship of the key topics of The Dragon and the Unicorn to contemplation. The source of direct knowledge of the beloved and other persons, God, art, and love is the act of contemplation, and the infinite possibilities of the universe arise from the single contemplator. The conclusion of The Dragon and the Unicorn thus returns to the individual, transfigured by a new awareness of other persons and enlightened by the truth that love and contemplation are two aspects of one ultimate reality: "What is taken in/ In contemplation is poured out/ In love" (p. 157). A comment made elsewhere by Rexroth summarizes the theory of value presented in The Dragon and the Unicorn:

all the ultimate terms of meaning are one meaning, and that meaning is vision, and that vision is love.\(^4\)

There are several contrasts between the two divisions of The Dragon and the Unicorn. The highly particularized descriptions of Rexroth's travels provide a needed balance to the numerous passages of abstract speculation. The two types of verse also manifest the antithetical aspects of the poet's personality evident in varying degrees in all of the longer poems. The presentation of Rexroth's itinerary reveals

qualities such as sensuality, skepticism, and action, while the speculative sections express spirituality, idealism, and contemplation.

The two creatures in the title of the poem, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, reflect the poet's continuing dialectical approach to life. The title refers to the two remaining members of the group of Chinese creatures including the phoenix and the tortoise which represent the four classes of nonhuman living creatures. According to *Ta Tai Li Chi*, "'The essence (or most representative example) of hairy animals is the unicorn . . . and that of the scaly ones is the dragon.'" The poem does not give an unequivocal symbolic significance to these animals, apparently so that they may represent as many different pairs of opposites as possible, but a major polarity in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* is the contrast, within the poet, between the active, natural man and the contemplative, spiritual man. The Chinese dragon is a highly active creature that personifies the immense powers of nature, capable of both benefiting and threatening humanity. The Chinese identify the dragon with the element of water, and as long as the regularity of nature continues, this element is life-giving and fecundating. But if natural harmony is disturbed, the wrath of the dragon can cause great destruction. Similarly, Rexroth appears in his travels as a man of strong appetite and volatile emotion. The dragon is ubiquitous, and there are

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celestial, spiritual, earthly, and subterranean varieties.  

In contrast to the powerful, omnipresent dragon, the Chinese unicorn is a delicate, amiable, and reclusive animal. It shows itself only "'when perfect rulers appear'"  and tranquillity and peace prevail. In China, the unicorn "gradually turned into a kind of protector of saints and sages. It never walks on verdant grass or eats living vegetation." Some of the symbolic meanings of the unicorn in Western thought support Rexroth's use of this creature to signify contemplative or spiritual practices. The healing properties of the unicorn's horn mentioned in Greek literature could reflect the power of contemplation to calm and restore the troubled man of the world, and supporting this interpretation is the traditional association of the unicorn with Christ. 

Like the phoenix, the unicorn is rarely seen and tenuously tied to the material world. The overlapping of the symbolic significance of the phoenix and the unicorn reflects a common theme of The Phoenix and the Tortoise and The Dragon and the Unicorn. Rexroth states that a major topic of The Phoenix and the Tortoise is "what survives and what perishes" (p. 64), and he repeats the same concern in The Dragon and the Unicorn:


Society is
Immoral and immortal.
The fragments that survive can
Always laugh at the dead. But
A young man has only one
Chance and brief time to seize it.
Shang bronzes. What
endures, what
Perishes. (p. 250)

The relationship between the two divisions in The Dragon and the
Unicorn raises other questions. The many critical, even cynical comments
made by Rexroth while traveling apparently contradict the idealistic
type of value which unfolds throughout the poem. Rexroth at times
seems to be a difficult person to get along with, let alone found a
community of love. However, Rexroth's particular outlook reconciles the
apparent discrepancy between theory and practice. Because he begins by
totally rejecting modern society, Rexroth can thoroughly denounce the
contemporary scene and still keep inviolate his idealism by focusing it
exclusively on an alternative society, a community of the elect existing
in, but apart from, a diabolical world. He emphasizes that genuine
loving relations must presently exist in small groups, resisting the
entire pressure of modern civilization (p. 191). Rexroth may have un-
expected affinities with that Calvinism which he condemns absolutely
throughout The Dragon and the Unicorn. Rexroth therefore seems open to
the charge that his theory conveniently justifies practices which are in
fact misanthropic, but supporting the integrity of the poem are several
examples of friendship between Rexroth and individuals or groups. The
quest for community which is one of the major themes of the poem is thus
a genuine desire, not an evasion, and the conflict between Rexroth's
ideals and the conditions of the modern world gives dramatic tension to
this long work.
Another issue is whether Rexroth's observation of immediate experience deepens in insight as *The Dragon and the Unicorn* progresses. Rexroth states that direct knowledge of the beloved leads to an increasingly direct knowledge of others (pp. 158, 264). The presentation of Rexroth's adventures, however, does not grow more acute but remains relatively uniform. Rexroth perhaps felt that an attempt to show a progressively increasing awareness of immediate experience as his journey continues would sacrifice too many valuable observations early in the poem. Another consideration is the probability that Rexroth's direct experience in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* in many cases received considerable revision after he returned to California. Although the poem presents travels in 1949, it was not published until 1952.  

A more accurate judgment of Rexroth's growth in perception, therefore, is a comparison of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* in its entirety with preceding poems to see if the hope expressed in the introduction to the original edition of the poem is justified that "age has brought increasing richness, depth, complexity and irony."  

Although Rexroth's immediate experience does not intensify in meaning, the tone and content does change in Parts IV and V. Once he turns north and begins the return trip, an elegiac note emerges. As Rexroth travels across the United States in Part V, interest in Western history fades and preoccupation with his own past grows. In the

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sections following the return to California, the inward quality deepens further. One influence is the changed environment, as mountain wilderness areas of the western United States replace the churches, museums, and restaurants of Europe.

The difference in tone reflects in part the changing year. At the end of Part III, Rexroth juxtaposes the departure from Italy with the fallen leaves of "deep Autumn" (p. 226), and throughout Part IV, the emotions of Rexroth and his wife as they prepare to leave France echo the diminishing light and warmth of the year. As Rexroth travels across the United States during the onset of winter, he repeatedly recalls youthful experiences in the same regions. This change in tone is ironic because entering the American West represents for Rexroth abandoning illusion and cultural sickness and making a clean, fresh beginning (p. 255), a response reminiscent of Thomas Damascen leaving the overly civilized East for the vacant Western plains at the close of Rexroth's first longer poem, *The Homestead Called Damascus* (p. 36).

The parallelism between mood and season is less exact, however, in the rest of the poem, primarily because of a rapid and sometimes vague passage of time. The recurrence of a more outwardly oriented, optimistic outlook at the end of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* does not correspond to the year but represents another shift in the dialectical nature of the poet.

Part I

In "Past and Future Turn About," the pendant to *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth concluded that fighting an unjust society with its
own weapons leads to self-destruction and even "'greater evil or despair.'"\textsuperscript{12} In \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn}, Rexroth chooses withdrawal from the dominant society rather than direct resistance or reform from within. In order to convey an essentially religious challenge to modern society, Rexroth adopts the viewpoint occurring within Judaism and Christianity of eschatology, which deals with the "last things" taking place at the end of the world, including the cataclysmic end of history, the Day of Judgment, the Second Coming of the Messiah, and the beginning of the Millennium.

Rexroth feels that the situation following World War II gives new meaning to this religious notion. The development of atomic and nuclear warfare makes possible the annihilation of mankind and indicates the breakdown of civilization. However, the imminent end of history has for Rexroth symbolic more than literal significance. He states that even if humanity avoids catastrophe and survives for a million years, apocalypse has arrived nevertheless in the sense that "we are at this moment living morally in the Last Days."\textsuperscript{13} An inward, spiritual change must precede any fundamental alteration of society, and Rexroth attempts in \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} to establish theoretical foundations for the creation of a new sensibility and new interpersonal relationships. Those who acquire this sensibility will make up a community of love, a saving remnant possessing that Kingdom of Heaven whose


existence "not of this world" (John 18:36) confounded Pilate, "Caesar's friend" (John 19:12).

Rexroth wishes to sever himself completely from the standards of a world that he considers, not dying, but already dead. He says that in this world, "any truly religious . . . action, must be utterly drastic," and once Apocalypse comes, "all excess baggage should be thrown away."¹⁴ In order to express how the eschatological standpoint radically alters a person's response to life, Rexroth borrows a statement from alchemy: "All things are made new by fire" (p. 95). The adage applies to both the inner and outer worlds because the essence of alchemy is the "interaction, and in most cases . . . the transcendental identity, of the macrocosm and the microcosm."¹⁵ The search for the philosopher's stone parallels Rexroth's quest for a value that can transform personality and illuminate exterior reality.

The alchemical saying also illustrates the equivalence of several important values in The Dragon and the Unicorn. The meaning of the renewing fire could include the eschatological viewpoint ("Life lived in the eye of Apocalypse"),¹⁶ the rites of passage or the turning points of an individual's life, righteous anger, action, creativity, sex, love, and contemplation. The most important rite of passage for Rexroth while


writing The Dragon and the Unicorn would be his recent marriage, the
honeymoon being celebrated during part of his European travels. Several
of the images in the lines following the statement from alchemy are
sexual, including "The plow in the furrow" (p. 95), and an aggressively
erotic element is part of Rexroth's conception of the act of writing
poetry.

Rexroth presents two different views of artistic activity. One
states that intense creativity and masculinity, two qualities closely
associated by him, arouse so much jealousy that they must be destroyed,
either by the gods or vindictive women (p. 96). He also defines artist-
ic effort as a means for simultaneously destroying the oppressive past
and forcibly engendering new value. One passage at the beginning of
Part I presents creativity as a very complex event analogous to matricide,
incest, crucifixion, and baptism. Rexroth compares artistic creation to
the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes, if that action symbolizes sexual
intercourse as well, coupled with the rape of his virgin sister, Electra
(pp. 96-97). A comment by Rexroth about the early poetry of Dylan
Thomas helps elucidate this passage. Rexroth identifies the clamor
accompanying the initial impact of Thomas' verse as the "most primitive
and terrible cry in the world, the cry of parturition, the dual cry of
mother and child," because most of these first poems concern the "agony
and horror of being born and childbirth." For Thomas, the "crucifixion
and the virgin birth are one simultaneous process, archetypes of the act,
or rather catastrophe, of the creative consciousness."\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\)Kenneth Rexroth, "Introduction," in The New British Poets: An
According to this view, the masculine and feminine aspects of 
the poet's personality must be intimately entwined, the pen is both 
sword and penis, and the poem is born in blood. Thus the fire that 
renews all things signifies for the artist the painful "horror of crea-
tive birth." The comparison of creativity to alchemy is appropriate 
because one interpretation of the alchemist's goal is the integration 
or marriage of the male and female qualities within the individual.

Rexroth's description of artistic process also resembles 
alchemy by equating the macrocosm with the microcosm, for the artist 
internalizes the creative activity of the universe, the "fiery/ Mixture 
of being and not being" (p. 97). The incorporation of the cosmic drama 
by the poet apparently is that "supernatural identification of the self 
with the tragic unity of creative process" which Rexroth claims in the 
introduction to his collected longer poems to be the "only valid 
conservation of value." This identification may be supernatural in the 
sense that God identified with humanity through the incarnation of his 
son. Christ may be another analogue of the artist because the cruci-
fixion of creative accomplishment redeems mankind.

The multiple meanings of the symbol of fire in The Dragon and 
the Unicorn make ambiguous its relationship to the contrast between 
action and contemplation. Fire could be a part of the physical world 
by representing savage indignation confronting a corrupt civilization,
the cleansing power of action for its own sake, or the sex act (p. 159).

Fire could represent as well qualities arising when one withdraws from
the active world, including the fires of meditation and creativity
refining the gross matter of immediate experience. Love and apocalyptic
vision could exist in both worlds, if each is considered to be a
spiritual state with physical manifestations.

Even though fire clearly signifies the dragon, the symbolic sig-
nificance of the two animals in the title also is ambivalent. From the
viewpoint of Chinese mythology, the dragon represents action and
passion, while the unicorn denotes passivity and calm. But Rexroth at
one point in Part I identifies the unicorn with earth and matter, the
dragon with air and form (p. 104). Following this approach, the unicorn
would symbolize the earthly adventures of the poet, and the dragon
would stand for his abstract speculations. When the fervor and appetite
characteristic of Rexroth's travels seem at variance with the delicate,
ephemeral nature of the unicorn and more in keeping with the fiery,
frightening character commonly associated with the dragon (p. 99), one
possible consolation for this dilemma is Rexroth's remark at the end of
Part II that

All things have an apparent
Meaning and an opposite
Hidden meaning brought forth
by fire.
The phoenix and the tortoise,
The dragon and the unicorn. (p. 154)

One theme of Rexroth's poetry is the dynamic quality of experience, and
he apparently feels that the basic polarities of life, like the cycles
of Yin and Yang in Chinese speculation (p. 66), ceaselessly inter-
penetrate.
Some of the oppositions in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* fortunately are clear-cut. Rexroth contrasts geographical areas and concepts and viewpoints that are occasionally embodied in a person or group. After the beauty of the land and the people in North Wales and Shropshire, the ugliness and sickness of London is even more manifest.

Abundant natural life characterizes Wales. Wild flowers, "Too many to name" (p. 103), cover the fields and fill the hedges, the land is "loud with birds" (p. 107) both day and night, and "plump farm women with baskets" (p. 105) crowd the busses. Caught up in the "tremendous exaltation/ Of North Wales glowing with Spring" (p. 103), Rexroth decides that "Even the sheep look clean and/ Intelligent" (p. 105). Everything about Wales delights Rexroth: the language, the place names, the "dark blue-eyed people/ With their musical voices" (p. 103), and the strange smell that distinguishes this country (pp. 100, 105, 107). These unique qualities show that the Welsh are in fact a different race, still isolated from the corrupting values of modern society. A scene in an inn near the English border dramatizes the difference between the conquering Anglo-Saxons and the defeated Britons. Rexroth is mildly uncomfortable sitting in the restaurant with the English guests, "decent people, but/ Too much like drawings in *Punch*" (p. 106), but entering the pub, he discovers a room "full of/ Peasants singing and drinking beer" (p. 107). This last experience with these friendly Welsh peasants convinces him that he never will find "better people/ Or a more beautiful country."

While North Wales is exalted, Shropshire is "entranced" (p. 108). The people remind Rexroth of those in the American West: "Friendly and
open, bright and clear" (p. 110), and a counterpart to the Welsh peasants in the pub is a young veterinarian who gives Rexroth a ride as he takes a farewell drive throughout Shropshire. The veterinarian is the first example in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* of the contrast between culture and civilization. Rexroth believes that the farther an individual exists from modern commercialized culture, the greater the chance of acquiring civilized virtues. This conviction helps explain Rexroth's sympathy for the downtrodden, including several prostitutes from Liverpool to San Francisco. Rexroth's portrait of the veterinarian also reflects a preference for the values of the heart rather than the head. The young man's obvious love for the countryside easily compensates for his incomprehension of A. E. Housman's "On Wenlock Edge," and his remarkable degree of civilization ironically will be a liability in the competitive atmosphere of the American university he will soon join.

One sign of the disintegration of modern society is the cancerous growth of the megalopolis while smaller communities slowly die. The healthy environment of Shropshire is an exception to this trend because Rexroth gloomily concludes that "England is gone and London,/ Sicker than New York, takes its place" (p. 117). One symptom of the unwholesomeness in London is the sexual maladjustment which pervades Rexroth's stay. The rhesus monkey masturbating at Kew Gardens prepares for the "Tense tiger-eyed wômen" (p. 118) whose scatological games illustrate the general immaturity and malice of London intellectual circles.

Rexroth and Nini, a French prostitute from Romilly Street, agree that the English embrace the extremes of conduct from bestiality and perversity to sanctity (p. 120), but forced exile in London apparently has affected
Nini too, for as Rexroth leaves, she weeps violently because of the ill will in the world (p. 121).

Touring the countryside reveals other flaws in the English character. Although the exteriors of the cathedrals at Liverpool (p. 101), Wells (p. 113), and Salisbury (p. 116) impress Rexroth, the "combination/ Of Protestant destruction/ And British worship of the dead" (p. 113) grows increasingly repulsive. Rexroth seemingly associates the Church of England with the oppressive effects of British imperialism. He mentions a window created for the cathedral in Liverpool which celebrates the soldier Charles Gordon "bringing opium/ And Christ" (p. 101) to enlighten the Chinese, and he compares the decay of the British Empire with that of the Roman (p. 100). Rexroth dislikes all church hierarchies, but he especially opposes the negative spirit and life denial that he finds at the heart of Protestantism. His loathing for the Church of England foreshadows another contrast in The Dragon and the Unicorn which emerges once Rexroth reaches the continent: the irreconcilable conflict between northern and southern Europe, between the North and Baltic Seas and the Mediterranean.

Rexroth's criticism of the English for worshipping a vanished grandeur is ironic because he gives several instances in Part I of a marked decline in the quality of modern life that largely results from the triumph of the business ethic over sensual pleasures. Passing through Chicago, Rexroth notes that fine restaurants of his youth now cater to tourists and

On the sight of several
Splendid historical brothels
Stands the production plant of
Time-Luce Incorporated. (p. 97)
Rexroth also is nostalgic for medieval England because contemplation still formed an integral part of life and had not become an anachronism surviving precariously within the frenetic pace of industrial life, like the church of St. Mary Radcliffe, incongruously quiet in the midst of "vast and busy" Bristol (p. 112). In order to represent the loss of both physical and spiritual potency in modern England, Rexroth borrows two symbols from Arthurian literature used by T. S. Eliot, the waste land and the Fisher King (p. 113). The lack of vigor has reached such a point that a retired army officer, a relic of the colonial era, is the "last total male in London" (p. 119).

As he travels, therefore, Rexroth, like the English, occasionally romanticizes the past, and in his reflections in Part I, he rejects certain notions of progress, especially belief in the intellectual superiority of modern science. A major villain of The Dragon and the Unicorn is the logical positivist, who most clearly expresses the sole claim to truth of a philosophy that Rexroth finds shockingly materialistic and a dangerous threat to spiritual values. Because the positivist asserts that all knowledge must be supported by observation and experiment, metaphysical statements are unverifiable and therefore meaningless speculation. One of the primary aims of The Dragon and the Unicorn is the creation of a theory of knowledge which can admit visionary experiences that occur beyond the narrow limits of the scientific method.

Early in Part I, Rexroth criticizes a view of human development like that formulated by the father of positivism, Auguste Comte, who believed that mankind has passed through three intellectual stages. The
first, the theological, explained experience in terms of spirits and
gods, and the metaphysical stage that followed postulated abstractions
such as final causes and essences as interpretations of existence.
Positivism inaugurates the last "positive" stage, which restricts knowl-
edge to the verifiable properties of natural phenomena that form the
basis for scientific laws. The repudiation of the basic concerns of
metaphysics that Comte regards as a sign of mankind's increased maturity
represents for Rexroth a reversion to barbarism and a denial of the
most important issues for the human being. The quotation in Part I
which criticizes the immaturity of imagination, fantasy, and myth (pp.
98-99) is to Rexroth a shallow, primitive viewpoint disguised as a mani-
festo of modern enlightenment. Such hubris produces the advanced state
of modern warfare, making imminent the twilight of the apocalypse rather
than the dawn of a new, rational age for humanity.

Illustrating the serious threat of the presuppositions of modern
science is the Karen who interrupts Rexroth's contemplation at Stonehenge
(pp. 116-17), an event which recalls the spiritual temptation of George
Fox during his travels in England in 1648. Rexroth quotes from Fox's
account in his journal of a religious experience that occurred in
Nottinghamshire, in the Vale of Belvoir, or Beavor. A cloud materialized
and, in the spirit of modern logical positivism, declared that the source
of creation is nature rather than God (pp. 114-15).20 Rexroth's agree-
ment with Fox that a living God does exist reflects the essentially

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20George Fox, The Journal of George Fox, ed. John L. Nickalls
religious nature of his criticism of modern culture and opposes the tendency in modern science to support quantified, dehumanizing values.

Two additional limits on personal experience are "serial time/And atomic space" (p. 121). Rexroth claims that these concepts are merely convenient methods for measurement (pp. 97-98), but man's most important knowledge comes in moments of illumination that transcend all mathematical conditions (p. 121).

Although Rexroth sees no significant intellectual or moral development in the human race, he does believe that growth can occur within particular disciplines and the individual sensibility. Rexroth quotes a statement that progress in science consists of the acquisition of "'new and/ Better information'' (p. 99). This process sometimes necessitates discarding the "'false and inadequate'' information of the past. However, any philosophy like positivism that scorns the past deprives itself of much insight. The type of progress favored by Rexroth is like that claimed for philosophy in the statement he quotes, the "'Deepening and enriching . . . of principles/ Already known''" (p. 99). In the introduction to Classics Revisited, Rexroth applies the same principle to mythology. The archetypes of myth gain greater symbolic relevance as time passes because they comprehend "ever wider, more profound, more intense means."

Art, on the other hand, does not improve in this manner because the material of art, the major crises within the life of man and the basic pattern of his relationship to


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other persons and the environment, has not changed. Literary creations like The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Iliad have as much insight into the human condition at the beginning of civilization as the most contemporary works.

While art does not progress, it is a chief means for the development of the individual sensibility, which is again a "Deepening and enriching" process like that of philosophy. Several times in Part I, Rexroth emphasizes the unlimited nature of this growth. In order to express this belief, he uses the scientific definition of light as the

aptitude of
A point to generate a
Sphere of graded intensity
Indefinitely large. (p. 104)

This definition is convenient because light repeatedly symbolizes illumination in Rexroth's poetry. Part of the quest of The Dragon and the Unicorn is to discover the source of this ever widening light. Other metaphors for the potentially limitless character of individual experience include an unending series of Chinese boxes and the tubes of an endless telescope (p. 105). These comparisons convey the sense of surprise and revelation which results from meditation upon the events of one's life.

The conviction that experience is inexhaustible explains Rexroth's denial of concepts which place limits on time and space. A fruitful way to grasp the immense possibilities of occurrence is to view everything as an aspect of a person:

Every item of this cosmos
Of possibilities is the
Mode by which I apprehend
A person. (p. 109)
The central significance of the person is a first principle for Rexroth in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, partly because this viewpoint leads away from the preoccupation with self which disturbs the search for value in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and its pendant, "Past and Future Turn About." In the following parts of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, Rexroth elaborates the importance of other persons in his philosophy of life.

Toward the end of Part I, Rexroth identifies love as the source of the light which can give unlimited illumination to experience. His definition of love as the "ultimate Mode of free evaluation" (p. 121) is therefore one answer to the question that opens *The Dragon and the Unicorn*:

"And what is love?"

    said Pilate,

    And washed his hands. (p. 95)

These lines allude to the narratives by Matthew and John of the crucifixion of Christ. According to John, after Christ states that his kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36), a baffled Pilate asks if Christ therefore claims to be a king. Christ answers cryptically that he came into the world "That I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37). Pilate then replies "What is truth" (John 18:38). Rexroth adds a detail from Matthew's account. When Pilate realized he could only appease the multitude by letting Christ rather than Barabbas be crucified, he washed his hands in water before the crowd and said, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Matthew 27:24).

Rexroth changes the word *truth* in John to *love* because a major
theme of The Dragon and the Unicorn is the attempt to define love. In fact, Rexroth says in an interview that the answer to the question, "What is love?" is the "subject of . . . my whole work." Pilate is a major character in The Dragon and the Unicorn, and each part refers at least once to him. The household of the English poet and critic Derek Savage that Rexroth visits in Somerset seemingly represents the triumph of love over the ways of the world (p. 114), but Rexroth feels that this early in his travels he as yet cannot articulate a full "answer to Pilate's question" (p. 115).

In general, Pilate stands for those forces in the world that destroy love. The state most powerfully embodies these forces, and Pilate was Caesar's representative in Palestine (John 19:12). Rexroth apparently interprets Pilate's statement, "What is truth?" as an expression of relativism and a denial of absolute values. Pilate heard the clamor of the multitude rather than the voice of Christ because he did not believe in the existence of truth. This viewpoint equates Pilate with the logical positivists and belief in the limited nature of human knowledge. Supporting this conclusion is the interjection of George Fox's temptation in the Vale of Beavor immediately before the reference to Derek Savage and "Pilate's question" (p. 115). Rexroth's experience with the Karen at Stonehenge (pp. 116-17) directly compares Fox's trial with the challenge presented by the positivist theory of knowledge. The contrast between Christ and Pilate, between the principle

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and the crucifier of love, is therefore another major polarity within

The Dragon and the Unicorn.

Rexroth concludes Part I with another gibe at English conserva­tism. A London newspaper editorial superciliously chides the Italians for following American advice and replacing coal with electrical power. This comment aligns England and France, two countries from the North which Rexroth opposes, against the Italians, home of the saner Medi­terranean culture, and it provides further illustration of the symbolism of the title, the dragon representing air and hydroelectricity, the unicorn earth and coal. But regardless of one's preference for a fuel supply, the contrasting areas of human endeavor symbolized in Rexroth's poem by the dragon and the unicorn are both strong sources of power.

Part II

Part II of The Dragon and the Unicorn presents Rexroth's experiences in France. After a short stay in Paris, he is joined by his new wife, and they travel by vélos throughout eastern and southern France on the way to Italy. In August, 1949, at the age of forty-three, during the "middle age of Summer" (p. 127), Rexroth leaves Paris and at last reaches the South. Much of Part II attempts to define the virtues which make southern Europe vastly more civilized than northern Europe. The contrast between the two areas is moral rather than merely a matter of taste. Northern Europe represents the triumph of the business ethic based on repression, while the South stands for a relaxed way of life centered on sensual satisfaction. The conflict is moral because the former viewpoint is more likely to deny basic human needs, sacrifice

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individuals for abstract values, and inhibit the growth of love relationships.

The most striking immediate indication of entering the South is greatly increased sensual pleasure. Clean air and warmth replace the "smoke/ And lifeless London sunlight" (p. 118). The fog and mist prevalent throughout Rexroth's stay in Britain symbolize a lack of vision in the people. The destruction of the Catholic churches by the Protestant reformers and the degree of absorption in the past reveal moral, spiritual, and aesthetic faults. One image of this aspect of England occurs near Winchester. As the sun struggles to break through the fog, Rexroth sees

Two aged men in an ancient Churchyard cleaning the gravestones Under a calling cuckoo. (p. 117)

Reaching the South means for Rexroth entering the valley of the Loire. He emphasizes how in this region "Light and shadow both lie long/ On the haystacks and poplars" (p. 127), and he rapturously itemizes the first of many splendid meals in southern France and Italy (p. 128). Elucidating the importance of the emphasis on cuisine in The Dragon and the Unicorn is a later poem by Rexroth entitled "Observations in a Cornish Teashop":

How can they write or paint In a country where it Would be nicer to be Fed intravenously?23


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Rexroth also feels a much closer contact with the past through the life of southern Europe. The industrialized, Protestant North has more nearly severed all ties with ancient, especially pagan, Europe. While the English churches always remind Rexroth of the destruction of the "artistic heritage of the Middle Ages"\(^{24}\) by the Protestant revolt during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the churches and cathedrals of southern France constantly recreate the often glorious past.

Signs of an easy coexistence between the flesh and the spirit especially attract Rexroth, for a chief sickness of the contemporary world is a lack of integration, the "splitting of the modern personality" into such equally unsatisfactory extremes as "puritanism and libertinism."\(^{25}\) Rexroth also believes that the way to spiritual enlightenment leads through the full use rather than the denial or curbing of the senses. According to the statement introducing the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, "erotic mysticism" is the first step toward the "ethical mysticism of universal responsibility." This desire for total integration of all aspects of human life explains Rexroth's comment that the secular lyrics of the medieval collection entitled Carmina Burana are "at least as mystical" (p. 132) as the poems of Hafiz. He apparently means that earthly passion is not only one expression of divine love but the primary means for its realization.

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While traveling in this region, Rexroth recalls two Latin poets who easily combined fondness for worldly beauty with sincere religious piety. One is Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers in the late sixth century, whom Rexroth pictures as

that mild
And felicitous heart writing
Odes for gifts of plover's eggs
And violets, compliments
On new dresses of lady saints. (p. 133)

Yet this sophisticated, even frivolous priest wrote one of the finest, most exalted Christian hymns, a poem on the Cross entitled *Vexilla regis.* Rexroth gives part of the translation by John Mason Neale:

The royal banners forward go,
The Cross shines forth with mystic glow, (p. 133)

and its inclusion in the Catholic liturgy shows how the distant past can remain continually alive.

The other poet is Ausonius, author of *Cento Nuptialis,* an account of a wedding feast that ends with a description of consummation so explicit that the Oxford scholar, Hugh G. Evelyn White, shocked by the "crude and brutal coarseness of [the] closing episode,"[^26] left part of the last section of his translation in the original Latin.[^27] The canonization of Ausonius amuses Rexroth and signifies a truly ecumenical spirit.

Rexroth finds signs within the Catholicism in this area of an


erotic, near pagan element that occasionally flared into open conflict with the upholders of the established religion. Rexroth associates the convent of St. Radegunde near Poitiers with an attempted revival of pagan religion like that of the Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate. Radegunde, the "saintly pagan queen" (p. 132), was the orphaned daughter of a Thuringian king, captured as a child by Chlotar I, king of Merovingia, and later forced to marry him. After Radegunde steadfastly refused to put aside her extreme asceticism, Chlotar reluctantly ended their marriage and helped found for her the convent at Poitiers.

Despite severe personal discipline, Radegunde allowed a degree of license within the convent that led to accusations of profligacy and, soon after her death, to armed conflict between loyal and rebellious nuns. Use of ample gardens and baths, sumptuous feasts, entertainment of male guests, gambling, and the reading and writing of secular literature were regular features of life in Radegunde's convent. During this time, Venantius Fortunatus was protector and adviser of the convent, and this charming, sophisticated man, whose luxurious tastes were indulged and even pampered by Radegunde and especially her abbess Agnes, doubtlessly encouraged the free atmosphere which Rexroth advocates in religious life. Although the conflicts within Radegunde's convent apparently never led to the deliberate break from the Catholic Church that Rexroth implies, they certainly caused much trouble for the authorities and precipitated charges of sexual laxity.

The reaction of organized Christianity to the growth of the

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Albigenses, a heretical sect in southern France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, did culminate in a long, bloody war. Rexroth again sympathizes with the heretics and apparently feels that the Church's violent reaction was directed primarily against a liberated sexual morality that formed a part of the Albigensian movement. Although the Albigenses were led by an elite called the Cathari, or the pure, the majority were not expected to achieve these high moral standards. It was the conduct of the believers rather than that of their apparently ascetic leaders which led to accusations of licentious behavior.

Pope Innocent III resisted this heretical movement and eventually declared a crusade against the Albigenses, which began in 1209 and became a war of conquest by the nobles of northern France. Rexroth singles out the leader of the crusade, Simon de Montfort, as an especially vicious man whose ruthless extermination of the Albigenses and their joy of living embodies the spirit of Pilate, the arch-murderer of love. Memory of this crusade gradually spoils the beauty of the cathedral of Sainte Cécile in Albi. Even though this church is the "finest integral work/ Of art ever produced north/ Of the Alps" (p. 141), because of its association with de Montfort and the Pope, it becomes the symbol

Of the repression of all
That I love in France. The struggle
Of the vine, the olive, and the
Orange against coal, iron,
and wool,
The lure of the narrow seas,
The soot of Flanders and the Rhine,
Against the clean blue
classic sea.

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In Toulouse, Rexroth laments de Montfort's defeat of Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse (p. 143), and the cities of Narbonne and Béziers again recall de Montfort and his wholesale butchery (p. 147).

Rexroth finds other signs of a pagan strain in the life of this region in southern France. The exterior of the church of St. Front reminds him of the "white breasts" of an eastern Mediterranean fertility goddess, Diana of Ephesus, "recumbent/ On the fertile flesh of the Midi" (p. 135). A favorite city of Rexroth's is Nîmes, still representing the best of Roman civilization. Rexroth exults that there still is one place untouched
   By the Normans or the English,
   No sign of Gothic mentalism.
   (p. 148)

Although Nîmes once was Calvinist, Rexroth is pleased to say that "Now it seems hardly Christian."

The oldest evidence of ancient life is caves once inhabited by Cro-Magnon man. The cave paintings disappoint Rexroth, but the beauty of the area and his image of idyllic Cro-Magnon life, with the "bison/
   Grazing in the meadows, smoke/ Rising from the caves and huts" (p. 136), convinces him that the present inhabitants are "surely less civilized" (p. 135).

Rexroth believes that the height of French culture also occurred in the past, during the reign of Louis XV, and a major indication of this most civilized period is an enjoyment of sensual pleasure well exemplified in the conduct of the monarch himself. During this time, painters like Boucher and Fragonard celebrated physical beauty, as in the portraits of Madame de Pompadour, and accompanying the sensuousness was
a respect for intellectual accomplishment which produced the highest form of culture, the "thought of the thinking flesh" (p. 127). A monument near the Loire River to Etienne-François, duc de Choiseul, also reminds Rexroth of this time. In recreating Choiseul's exile from court, Rexroth stresses the leisureliness and sensuality that he associates with this age (p. 130). Because these qualities are suppressed or perverted by modern commercialized society, he feels that a way of life devoted to productivity and consumption cannot be truly civilized.

One reason Rexroth emphasizes fleshly pleasures is the importance of erotic love to his theory of value. The introduction to the original edition of The Phoenix and the Tortoise outlines the evolution of this theory, and sensual abandon is the first step away from the demoralization of living in a "collapsing system of cultural values." Such abandon can lead to erotic mysticism and then through "sacramental marriage" to an ethic of "universal responsibility." Toward the end of Part II of The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth presents another schematization of his philosophy in terms of various types of love. Friendship (philia) leads to a sense of communion (agape) and then to physical love (eros). This process continues on a higher level as eros grows into caritas, a deep affection which Rexroth calls "The supernatural eros" (p. 153) and the

foundation
Of a transformed philia.
Thus the process is a cyclic
Ascent of realms of value.

Erotic love therefore forms an integral part of this indefinitely expanding realization of value.
Although the upper reaches of this system reflect the idealistic nature of much of Rexroth's speculation in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, an incident in Part II involving the poet's past experience shows a more realistic view of human love. Soon after arriving in Paris, Rexroth receives a copy of *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, a collection of poems written mostly in the 1920's but first published in 1949. The Cubist style used by Rexroth in these early poems and later abandoned may partly explain the impact on him of this volume, for after "All that old agony and/ Wonder" (p. 122) strike him in the face, he goes to a quiet terrace and stares at the book "in amazement," wondering

Was it all true once? Just like
It says? I cannot find
the past.
It is only anecdotes
For company and the parching
Of a few more hidden nerves
Each year. (p. 123)

The inability to recognize his own past is ironic because it occurs just before he sets out on an extended trip whose primary purpose is to "absorb The Past" (p. 150) of Western civilization. As Rexroth ponders this event that evening, the past does return, and part of his rediscovery recognizes that the reality of human affairs does not live up to the high ideals of theories of life such as his own. Rexroth's recollection is sudden, overpowering, and seemingly total, for all at once,

the past
Returns, the youth, the agony,

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And the vertigo and the love
That always failed or broke or
turned
Away.  (pp. 123-24)

The apparent inevitability of "fugitive/ Loyalty and passing faith" (p. 124), however, does not invalidate the high place given to love in a philosophy of life, because the most fleeting occurrence of communion between two persons transcends the wasting effect of passing time and is, in one sense, immortal. As Rexroth and a French girl watch the celebrations of the French Independence Day, even though he knows that "our few days fall away/ From us like falling stars," he still proclaims that the

   glory of rockets,
Showered on sky and river,
On our nightbound eyes and
lips,
Will always last. That is what
"Always" means, and all it
means.

This moment of insight and the preceding awareness of youthful desire and disappointment while sitting in a Parisian slum are two examples of direct knowledge, a concept introduced in Part II by Rexroth that contrasts with the ordinary understanding acquired cumulatively by the analytical mind. Direct knowledge is a type of visionary experience which gives total realization of a particular object, person, or situation, and such knowledge lies beyond any qualification, including the limited concepts of time and space criticized earlier in The Dragon and the Unicorn. Rexroth believes that this mode of realization through discipline and practice can become a person's habitual response to experience rather than an exceptional state, like the ever widening ray of
light presented in Part I as a metaphor of the growing personality (p. 104). Love for another person is the means to direct knowledge, and as direct knowledge of the loved one increases, it gradually includes other types of experience as well. A duality provides first a way for self-transcendence and then a focus for the clearest apprehension of all being. Rexroth hopes that his relationship with his new wife, who joins him for their honeymoon as he leaves Paris and heads south, will provide such a focus. This belief that the "unique is universalized/ In the dual" (p. 144) explains Rexroth's remark at the end of Part II that "Love, like all the sacraments, is a/ Miniature of being itself" (p. 154). The microcosm of the married couple is potentially a mirror of the universe. Direct knowledge of another in marriage ideally clarifies not only the "apparent/ Meaning" of events but the "opposite/ Hidden meaning brought forth by fire" (p. 154).

Part III

The presence of Rexroth's new wife is strongly evident for the first time in Part III, as the celebration of their honeymoon reaches its high point in Italy. Through his love for her, Rexroth gains greater knowledge of others and, in a vision occurring at the temple of Poseidon in Paestum, Italy, direct insight into the ultimate nature of reality. This experience, which is the climax of the entire poem, reveals that there is an order and design to the world, that love is the guiding force of the universe, and that human love is a direct manifestation of divinity.

This idealistic view of existence contrasts with the severe
social criticism of the United States and Italy presented throughout Part III. The coexistence of idealism and denunciation again reflects the dialectical nature of Rexroth's personality. Rexroth's complete disapproval of contemporary society and his failure to find any signs of improvement are largely responsible in Part III for the deepening mood of pessimism and the increasingly strong desire to retreat from the frustrations and conflicts of the present into a life of quiet, removed contemplation. This mood arises as Rexroth and his wife prepare to leave Italy and begin their return trip through Europe and back to America. The travel in Italy which begins happily during the early summer of 1949 ends somberly amidst the innumerable fallen leaves of "Deep Autumn" (p. 226).

A fable about two Jews who are persecuted by the Romans reflects the two aspects of Rexroth's character presented in Part III. According to this legend, after openly opposing the Romans, Simon ben Johai and his son Eleazar hide for fourteen years in a cave. When they finally leave, Eleazar's eyes burn the "mundane works of men with/ Transcendental wrath" (p. 164). Opposing the son's wrath are several acts affirming life, including the "word/ Of the father" that restores the works destroyed by Eleazar. The more important symbol of affirmation is "two sprays/ Of myrtle" identified with the feminine principle in life, the "Hidden bride in heaven" (p. 165) who accompanies and softens the male rigors of God. In Kabbalistic speculation, the female emanation of God is the "goddess Shekinah" (p. 162), and the smell of her perfume changes the son's thoughts from wrathful accusations to marriage festivals. After Simon ben Johai praises the earth as God's creation, the two men
go to Rome as healers rather than destroyers. Similarly, the influence of Rexroth's wife leads to praise for divine creation and a theory of love which offers some hope in a world whose "mundane works" are castigated by the poet's wrath. The social criticism prevalent in Part III is another instance of the fiery judgment mentioned at the beginning of The Dragon and the Unicorn (p. 95). Just as the eyes of Eleazar ben Johai must burn the works of men before his father can reveal them to be the wondrous creations of God, Rexroth perhaps feels that the inhumanity and hopelessness of modern life must be exposed before a new, healthy society can emerge.

The criticism of the United States and Italy reflects the different levels of prosperity in the two postwar countries. While Rexroth concentrates on the sexual problems of the affluent in America, he emphasizes the struggle of the Italian workers to obtain basic necessities and some share in their government. Rexroth's picture of Italy includes an extreme contrast between the workers and the bureaucrats, the rich and the poor. At a dock strike in Genova supported by the Communist Party, the workers dress in rags while the party leaders wear double-breasted suits. The confusion and ignorance of this strike characterize all the protest movements presented in Part III. The description of Genova also contrasts the rich and the poor, as Rexroth sees the local offices of Amadeo Peter Giannini, the son of an Italian immigrant and founder of the Bank of America, one of the largest in the United States. Modifying a line from Thomas Campion's poem, "When Thou Must Home to Shades of Underground," Rexroth creates an epitaph for the recently deceased banker, "Nonentity's new arrived guest" (p. 158).
Although Rexroth sees at Florence many people sleeping outside, the worst situation by far in Italy is in Naples. He lists several of the appalling conditions there, including the constantly drugged babies of the beggars and the high incidence of tuberculosis (p. 192), and he indicts the Catholic Church for benefiting from the misery of the poor (p. 193). No hope for a solution exists because the modern "Evil Twins" (p. 204), the Catholic Church and the state, support the existing situation, and the leaders of the opposition are myopic and ineffectual. The "leading/ Anarchist theoretician" (p. 193) of Naples and "two/ Young anarchist leaders" (p. 216) in Venice excitedly seek information about the latest American fads and celebrities but have no conception of the actual plight of the Italian workers. Ignazio Silone, a novelist who helped found the Italian Communist Party, delivers a long, rhetorical speech which avoids any concrete problems to an audience including only one impatient worker (pp. 217-18). Only in Milan is there any sign of persons dedicated to improving the social conditions, but their work cannot affect the "tidal wave" (p. 224) of problems inundating Italy.

Part III presents a romanticized image of the poor but happy workers who repeatedly show great affection for Rexroth and his wife, especially when it becomes known that they are neither rich nor English but American (pp. 157, 161, 205-06). A train going from Paestum to Naples overflows with girls working for pennies who nevertheless "laugh and sing" (p. 204) like angelic peasants. Rexroth essentially views Italy as a beautiful land of beautiful people whose immense potential is being entirely wasted (pp. 173, 218).
Approximately halfway through Part III, Rexroth begins a detailed analysis of American life (pp. 193 ff.), and he states that the seemingly unlike societies of the United States and Italy are actually two sides of the same coin: both are cultures of death. While conditions in Naples literally kill many persons, the life-denying quality of American life is less apparent. Rexroth concentrates on sexual relationships in the United States because of their central place in his view of life. Since he believes that the sexual fulfillment of a man and a woman in marriage is the avenue to eternal values, any perversion of this potential means of transcendence is an attack on being itself.

In America the prostitution of sex is a part of the overall aim of the capitalist state to turn all human dealings into "quantitative, commodity/Relationships" (p. 209). This treatment of people as things is for Rexroth equivalent to murder because it gives no allowance to the uniqueness of the person. Sex in America has become linked with the accumulation of commodities, a process that destroys true love. The attempt to confuse sex with the productive process makes the advertising man a "professional/ Murderer of young lovers" (p. 195), and when problems occur, professionals step in to direct sex back into "socially useful forms" (p. 197). Rexroth feels that American culture has converted all the rites of passage into medical problems:

In America today
All basic experience is
Looked on as a morbid condition,
An actual serious sickness.
There are doctors specializing
In each of them - being born,
Childhood, puberty, fucking,
Parenthood, vocation, growing
Old, and dying. (p. 198)
His primary objection to this situation is the same as his censure of modern science: the most important human experiences cannot be uniformly measured and dispassionately managed. The crucial occurrences of life should be sacraments,

Moments when life necessarily
Transcends any quantitative
Experience altogether, (pp. 198-99)

rather than dilemmas, events better entrusted to priests than to "medical specialists" (p. 199).

Rexroth simplifies his view of modern life to a conflict between two conceptions of man: the human being as an item for manipulation and as a person capable of loving others. The community of lovers stands against the collectivity, the two most important being the "State/ and the Capitalist System" (p. 207). While the state merely sees the individual as an abstract entity, capitalism reduces him to an article of merchandise.

The effect of depersonalization on sex in America especially alarms Rexroth because of the vital importance of sexuality in his quest for transcendence. He states in Part II that sexual union with the beloved provides the most direct knowledge of another person that is possible (p. 147), and he implies in Part III that sexual climax can overcome in a brief moment of insight all the contradictions of life:

The fire of the sexual act,
The wedding of light and
darkness,
Boehme's scream and flame,
the pregnant
Echo of the sound of eternity. (p. 159)

The reference to Jakob Boehme recalls Rexroth's vision by the campfire

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in The Phoenix and the Tortoise (p. 72). In this earlier passage, Rexroth apparently means that such visionary experience lies "at the center of the X which marks the spot where all contradictions and contraries cross." In The Phoenix and the Tortoise, he identifies this spot with the individual facing the continuously vanishing present and with Christ on the cross. The element of self-sacrifice is less dominant in The Dragon and the Unicorn, however, for waiting "At the end/ Of the Way of the Cross" now is a "dense/ Cypress wood, full of lovers" (p. 172). Love, defined by Rexroth as existing "beyond cause/ And effect, or time and space" (p. 212) and especially as known sexually in marriage, transcends the "insoluble problems" (p. 172) created by the intellect of man and opens the way to mystic vision.

The supreme moment of insight in The Dragon and the Unicorn occurs on an excursion to the temple of Poseidon built in the fifth century B.C. by Greek colonists on the eastern coast of Italy at Paestum. The time spent at Paestum represents for Rexroth and his wife the "apex of the trip,/ And the zenith of our years" (p. 200). One of the most striking aspects of this visit is the harmonious proportion of the temple of Poseidon, a work which has achieved a rare triumph over time:

no time at all has touched  
The deep constant melodies  
Of space as the columns swing  
To the moving eye. (p. 202)

This temple represents mankind's highest achievement and symbolizes the divine concord that is at the heart of creation. At this temple Rexroth unequivocally affirms the goodness of earthly existence:

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The world is made of number
And moved in order by love.

Certain mathematical facts give this order more than a symbolic existence. Various illustrations in Rexroth's description of his stay at Paestum allude to a particular mathematical proportion found extensively in nature and art. The basis of this proportion is a series of numbers called Fibonacci's sequence, discovered by an Italian mathematician at the beginning of the thirteenth century. After the second number in this sequence, each number is the sum of the two preceding numbers (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, ...). A later discovery was that the ratio between succeeding numbers is .618034 to 1, which is the golden mean used especially by the Greeks in their art and architecture. Pythagoras and Euclid discuss a rectangle based on this proportion that is known as the golden section, and the front of the Parthenon and the shapes of vases illustrate its use by the Greeks. Jakob Bernoulli, a seventeenth-century Swiss mathematician, discovered that a series of such rectangles could produce a curve which he termed the logarithmic spiral, and once its existence was noted, nature provided an astonishingly high number of objects which conform precisely to this spiral, including sea shells like the chambered nautilus, snail shells, ocean waves, pine cones, sunflowers, animal horns, the growth rate of bacteria, comet tails, and spiral galaxies. The golden proportion also occurs in music, for the major sixth chord, said to be most pleasing of all, vibrates at a ratio only infinitesimally away from an exact .618034 to 1, and thirteen keys, five black and eight white, represent on a piano
the eight notes of an octave. A treatise entitled *Divine Proportion* by Lucas Pacioli, a Renaissance Italian mathematician mentioned twice in Part III by Rexroth (pp. 193, 223), brought to the attention of painters such as daVinci the existence of this golden proportion, and a group of modern painters including the Frenchman Georges Seurat called itself the Golden Section. Rexroth notes in his autobiography that the mathematics of the golden section strongly influenced his own early painting; he discusses in an interview with Cyrena N. Pondrom the influence of this aesthetic on his poetry, especially the period of his Cubist works; and when he presents the central part of his experience at Paestum (pp. 201-04) as a separate work in the *Collected Shorter Poems*, he entitles it "Golden Section."

After Rexroth mentions arriving at Paestum (p. 200), he interposes seven stanzas which contain some of the allusions to these mathematical proportions before continuing his account of the visit to the temple. He quotes Aristotle's speculation about the origin of the shapes of the Greek vases (p. 201), and he mentions several groups of

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five: vowels, planetary spheres, musical chords, and colors (p. 200).
The number five is associated with this particular proportion, especially through the five-pointed star, each line of which divides two others in the golden ratio of 0.618034 to 1, and the symbol of the mystically oriented ancient Pythagorean communities of southern Italy.\(^3^6\) Rexroth's description of the temple of Poseidon includes an "empty snail shell," high praise for the front, doubtlessly based like that of the Parthenon on the golden section, and a reference to the ubiquitous presence in nature of Bernoulli's logarithmic spiral:

This is the order of the spheres,
The curve of the unwinding fern,
And the purple shell in the sea;
These are the spaces of the notes
Of every kind of music. (p. 202)

The effect moves Rexroth so much that he identifies it with the harmony of the universe, whether found in heaven, earth, sea, or the mind of man.

The seven stanzas preceding Rexroth's account of his visit to the temple (pp. 200-01) also announce that he has reached the end of his quest and traced the "Eternal Value to the End and pattern of all things" (p. 172). The belief expressed by this passage seemingly is the same as the revelation which came to George Fox in the Vale of Beavor:

"There is a living/ God who made all things" (p. 115), and every object that exists testifies to God's creation. The answer to Pilate's skeptical question, "'And what is truth?'" (p. 200), is being itself. The basic elements of life are signs of God's harmonious design and

instruments of man's creativity. Rexroth includes several items with which man creates: vowels, chords, colors, and numbers, and together they imply a fundamental order in existence. The cosmos is a unity, and all of its parts are interdependent. That even the smallest and most elusive entities in both the physical and spiritual realms, from "Every mote in the sunlight" to the "spirit who/ Troubles the waters" (p. 201), have names indicates the care and omniscience of the creator. The conviction that the hand of God has touched each thing and engraved upon it "its unique character" bestows a sacramental quality on all life and instills confidence that a person can discover the right response to any situation.

Because God's plan unifies the entire universe, human conduct mirrors divine activity. As the Smaragdine or Emerald Tablet, supposedly written by Hermes Trismegistus, states:

"That which is above is
Reflected in that which is below."

The finest expressions of this cosmic harmony, such as the temple of Poseidon and the shapes of the classic Greek vase, reflect both the most abstruse thoughts of the "Pure Mind" in heaven above and the concrete facts of human sensuality below. There is no conflict between mind and matter, for the "obscene gestures of the flesh" cause the Japanese sun goddess to reveal the "first and oldest mystery," numerical order.

This correspondence of the microcosm and the macrocosm is an essential part of Rexroth's philosophy. His experience at Paestum illustrates the idea that the "relationship of two specific human individuals is not only reflected in the organization of the cosmos but each,
macrocosm and microcosm, affects the other."37 Because of the emphasis on sexuality, he introduces in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* the notion borrowed from Kabbalism that similar activity occurs on a heavenly level. According to Kabbalistic speculation, in the beginning there was an ultimately unknowable Godhead, and in order to become "active and creative, God emanated ten sephiroth or intelligences." The most important of these is the last emanation, the "goddess Shekinah" (p. 162), the female element of God. This emanation also is identified with Malkuth, the "Queen and sacred/Whore" (p. 200), the "physical manifestation of Deity in the universe . . . a Divine Woman, the Bride of God."38 The most important illustration of the dictum expressed on the Smaragdine Tablet is sexual. Rexroth apparently seeks to revive the ancient Jewish belief that the sexual union of a man and a woman parallels the simultaneous union of a divine couple. Sex was the supreme sacrament because it provided the chief means for achieving "mystical/Fulfillment, the actual/Worship of the gods" (p. 162). Although Rexroth notes that the procreation of offspring was the primary consideration in ancient Judaism, he seems more concerned in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* with the sexual aspect apart from begetting children.

When Rexroth and his wife finally are alone at Paestum, they eat within the temple and go at sunset

Into the naos, open to the Sky and make love, where the sea god


38Kenneth Rexroth, "The Holy Kabbalah," in *Assays*, p. 44.
And the sea goddess, wet with sperm,
Coupled in the incense filled dark,
was still. (p. 203)

The stanzas preceding this act celebrate the creative process in the universe, and the supreme manifestation of creativity is sexual love. Rexroth believes that the "sexual act is the foundation of all existence"\(^{39}\) and the "most perfect mystic trance,"\(^ {40}\) and the allusion to the union of Venus and Poseidon in the description of making love at Paestum with his wife represents the central idea presented in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, that "it is in the consummation of marriage that immanence and transcendence become one."\(^ {41}\) According to his interpretation of *The Song of Songs*, an important element in many ancient Near Eastern religions was an hierosgamos, a ritual enactment of the marriage of Heaven and Earth, performed first by a priest and priestess and then by each couple. The societies in which the hierosgamos was part of the religion were agricultural, and the sexual intercourse of humans representing the god and goddess was a form of sympathetic magic meant to insure abundant harvests. This ritual revitalized both the land and the community and, occurring as it did at the New Year, played a part in the continuation of the cosmos. Because each couple repeated the activity of the deities, the ritual also symbolized the deification of man when the human sexual consummation recapitulated the sacred marriage above.

Rexroth obviously seeks to incorporate in his own life a similar

\(^{39}\)Kenneth Rexroth, "Gnosticism," in *Assays*, p. 139.

\(^{40}\)Kenneth Rexroth, "The Holy Kabbalah," in *Assays*, p. 44.

type of worship as a key means to enlightenment and a form of redemption, but he and his wife obviously cannot join a modern community of Baal worshippers, and much of the ancient fertility rite now can have only symbolic meaning. This fact adds some pathos to his comment after leaving Paestum that "Only in a secret place/ May human love perfect itself" (p. 204). His experience at the temple, however, always can remain as a time of great spiritual insight, the celebration of the beginning of their marriage, and the source of constant renewal.

Rexroth commits himself to moments of transcendence as embodied in religious sacraments because life otherwise is nothing more than the "frustrations and tedium and ultimate meaninglessness of 'materialistic existence.'" Belief in the equivalence of the macrocosm and microcosm gives significance to human affairs at the same time that it confers coherence on the universe. Man's stature increases because the "'divine drama is in you.'"

Despite the double nature of this idea, Rexroth's ultimate concern is mankind rather than the nature of the universe. The vision of an ordered, harmonious cosmos presented in Part III primarily symbolizes the successful, even though fleeting, achievement of personal integration. The description of God's creation reflects a profoundly moving experience of grace, the outward visible sign of an inner spiritual reality. Rexroth indicates this emphasis when he states that the

Shekinah
And Jehovah are only
An enlarged mirror image
Of the terrestrial embrace.
The sephiroth of the Kabbalah
Are the chakras of the
Tantra. (p. 170)

The sephiroth are the ten emanations from the Godhead which allow God to become physically manifested throughout the universe. There is a progressive lessening of divine purity the further removed each emanation is from the Godhead. Tantrism, a form of Hinduism and Buddhism, uses the concept of the chakra, or circle, in explaining the method of achieving spiritual enlightenment through a series of yogic exercises. The seven major chakras are the most important psychic centers in the body. A serpent goddess called Kundalint lies coiled within the lowest chakra located at the base of the spine, and the individual seeks first to rouse the Kundalint from its normal torpid state and then to raise this serpent through each chakra until it reaches the highest center situated at the crown of the head. Each stage of the ascent sheds on the practitioner greater illumination, and the last step provides total spiritual fulfillment and a vision of God in his purest splendor.44

Rexroth's statement means that Tantrism reverses the process of creation by emanationism outlined in the Jewish Kabbala, and because of Rexroth's greater concern with humanity than the cosmos, he apparently feels that this emanationist theory of the origin of the universe is an unconscious, symbolic reflection of the true reality: the potentially ever-increasing capacity within every individual for transcendence. He

says in his autobiography that he maintains a particular religious practice because it "insures the accessibility of bliss of vision of total knowledge of significance." Personal vision is the ultimate source, rather than the product, of our cosmogony and religious beliefs. Speculative systems like Kabbalism, Gnosticism, and alchemy do not teach anything about our solar system because what their authors present as a picture of the universe actually is a "picture of their own minds," and their mythologies symbolically portray the "forces which operate in the structuring and evolution of the human personality." Therefore the stay at Paestum, like similar mystical moments occurring in the preceding longer poems, is a critical step in the development of Rexroth's personality. Rexroth's final comment reveals the power of this experience, for the return trip to America can only be an anticlimax, a journey back to "life/ Always pivoted on this place" (p. 202).

After the extreme heights of Paestum, the return of Rexroth and his wife through northern Italy toward France must be a decline, and a change of season marks the passing of a major moment in the poet's life:

The sun enters the second
Moon of Autumn. The dove turns
To a hawk. Dew becomes
hoarfrost. (p. 205)

The unhappiness and frustration existing in a troubled society reasserts itself, and as Part III closes, a new note of fatigue and withdrawal from the busy world appears. Since the elements and "all their mixtures" quickly decay, the wise man withdraws from action and, seeking to attune

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himself to the rhythms of nature, follows the admonition: "Be still and let the years revolve" (p. 211). The pessimism of "Past and Future Turn About," the pendant to The Phoenix and the Tortoise, returns as Rexroth repeats the image of the world sinking "in a marsh of blood" (p. 208). The recurrence of a seemingly hopeless situation which occurred less than ten years earlier saddens Rexroth because it supports the conclusion that life is an endless cycle in which the appearance of novelty is a delusion. If this notion is true, the high point for the world has passed, and a period of darkness must take place until the circle completes another revolution. In presenting this idea, Rexroth contrasts two types of sexual union and at the same time alludes to the passing of his own culminating experience at Paestum:

As the world is transfigured
By the Divine Couple at
Its apogee, so in the
Depth of its declension it is
Returned and redeemed by the
Coupling of the warrior and
The whore, the beggar and the queen. (p. 215)

In order to find creative renewal in a deteriorating time, the highest level of society must embrace the lowest.

As Part III ends, Rexroth for the first time seriously qualifies the extreme idealism of the speculative passages in The Dragon and the Unicorn. He admits the possibility of evil people who are opposed to the community of love (pp. 215, 217), that most "Of our encounters with our/ Neighbors" (p. 222) are impersonal, and that even with the best intentions, a diminishing awareness of love and an impoverishment of reality can occur within the community (pp. 215-16) and each individual's life (p. 218). A disastrous party attended by the American consuls in
Italy and dominated by one nearly hysterical woman with "Nerve wracked, empty eyes" (p. 214) is concrete evidence supporting these more realistic additions to Rexroth's theory. Even an almost unlimited opportunity to view in Venice paintings by Tintoretto, an artist especially exciting to Rexroth, proves rather quickly exhausting (p. 220). Only the impact of daVinci's Last Supper (p. 225) and the knowledge acquired later that Rexroth's and his wife's daughter has been conceived (p. 226) alleviate the pervasive melancholy of leaving Italy. Some of the colors in Rexroth's last impression of the country are brilliant, but it is the dying splendor of "Deep Autumn" (p. 226).

Part IV

The weather which greets Rexroth and his wife in France is much colder than that in Italy, but his political and social analysis of the two countries is very similar. Their first impression in Paris, the struggles of a cabdriver with the lights of his old car, symbolizes the "pathos and anguish/ And heroism of the French/ Working class" (p. 229), and most of Rexroth's observations during his brief stay illustrate the sufferings and betrayals of the lower classes. Because Rexroth sees no more chance of improvement in France than in Italy, the problem remains of what an individual can do in such a deteriorating situation. Two alternatives presented in Part IV are contemplation which transcends and judges history and the community of love which functions as far as possible outside the dominant society.

Rexroth criticizes the inequality still existing in France by recalling past revolutionaries whose dreams remain unfulfilled. An
extreme example is Édouard-Marie Vaillant, who justified his attempt to destroy the entire Chamber of Deputies by indicting indiscriminately all bourgeois society (p. 230). Listening during a benefit show in Paris to names of revolutionary martyrs, Rexroth weeps when a list of Americans who died for liberty suddenly is included (pp. 231-32). His tribute to Paris celebrates the virtuous poor (p. 242) and mentions the grave of Maglorire Bégue, Robespierre's secretary in the French Revolution (p. 243). Just before leaving France, Rexroth contrasts Bordeaux, a city which he associates with the moralism and guilt of English Protestantism, with the revolutionary ideals of the French Revolution, specifically those of the three radical extremists, Jean-Paul Marat, Jacques-René Hébert, and Jacques Roux (p. 247).

Rexroth apparently believes that the poor and the workers are inherently more moral than the upper classes. Although the workers and minorities fought the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Bordeaux, the merchants acquiesced easily in the mass murders because "Business was better Than usual" (p. 247). Rexroth makes it rather difficult to qualify as impoverished by excluding any Frenchman with an income of more than sixty dollars a month (p. 230), but the presence of a temperament antithetical to the business ethic presumably is as unmistakable a sign of grace as poverty. By including in Part IV a French translation of one of the Beatitudes:

Bienheureux sont les débonnaires
Car ils hériteront la terre, (p. 242)

Rexroth gives religious sanction to the relaxed, easygoing spirit associated with the Mediterranean way of life and praised often in The
Dragon and the Unicorn as a mark of genuinely civilized living.

In order to relate this view of social oppression with poetry, Rexroth identifies himself with criminals and the poor (p. 232), which recalls the championing in Part III of the madman, beggar, and whore (p. 215). Rexroth then insists that American poetry should give up the sterile interest in correct form, and, once again following Whitman's example, speak for the values of the "working class" (p. 235). Rexroth also implies that the social evils in America are responsible for the high incidence of suicide among twentieth-century poets in the United States (pp. 235-36). The specific indictment of the dominant, commercially oriented culture in the United States and a detailed account of the particular suicides occur in "Thou Shalt Not Kill," a poem commemorating the death of Dylan Thomas and originally published in 1955.

Rexroth presents in Part IV two concepts which contrast with the frustrating daily world, the notion of great cosmic cycles and an apocalyptic end of time. One great circle, the zodiac, appears close to another, the ecliptic, which is the apparent annual path of the sun among the stars, or, from another viewpoint, the projection on the celestial sphere of the earth's solar orbit. The orbits of the moon and all of the principal planets except Pluto lie completely within the zodiac, and the constellations of the zodiac appear on and extend slightly beyond the ecliptic. The uncertain meaning of some of the terminology confuses this passage early in Part IV (p. 227), but Rexroth's purpose apparently is to designate a spiritual element in the universe that transcends the ultimately trivial events on the earth. At the intersection of the sun and the ecliptic, seemingly defined by Rexroth as the projection on the
celestial sphere of the earth's solar orbit, is the "World Soul" (p. 227),
the intelligence or spiritual principle attributed to the world by
Platonic cosmogony. Rexroth next pictures the zodiac as a waterwheel
gathering the illumination "generated/ By contemplation" and pouring
this light into the sun and moon. Thus without contemplation the solar
system would stop. Because Rexroth identifies love and contemplation
(p. 157), this vision is the same as that at Paestum:

The world is made of number
And moved in order by love.
(p. 202)

Projected against the slow movement and vast expanse of the zodiac
and the World Soul, the passage of the world is as brief and startling
as a "white pony which flashes/ Past a gap in a hedge" (p. 227). This
image implies that a detached view reveals the ephemeral and relatively
insignificant character of human endeavor. Rexroth's comparison of the
movement of the World Soul to the "waste of mountains/ In the midst of
falling water" recalls a passage toward the end of Part III advocating
quiet contemplation of nature because of the impermanence of all earthly
things (p. 211). Rexroth's juxtaposition of the cosmos and the earth
reflects the growing mood of withdrawal and passivity, especially
noticeable after the vision at Paestum, and parallels the year's decline
from summer toward winter. Subjects such as the movement of the zodiac
and the World Soul bring to mind some of the ideas presented in Yeats's
poetry. One similarity is the theme occurring in Parts III and IV of
*The Dragon and the Unicorn* that the world periodically descends into a
time of chaos and trouble. Yeats's attempt in *A Vision* to relate
historical movements to different types of personality suggests that
Rexroth's new interest in large; seemingly impersonal cycles primarily indicates his desire to replace an intense immersion in the world with detachment from contemporary affairs, or in Yeatsian terms, pass from an antithetical to a primary phase.

As much as these cosmic activities give a wider perspective to current events, an even greater distancing effect is the reference in Part IV to the end of time, to the Great Year which ends all cycles, large and small. Yeats's scheme repeats the notion found often in occult thought that the succession of different dominant civilizations, which changes every two thousand years, finally ends after 26,000 years. Rexroth predicts that this event will occur in the year 6666. On this date, Rome, symbol of the secular state and the source of Pilate's power, will no longer be necessary and "fall into ruins" (p. 228), and Rexroth concludes the prophecy with another version of the hierosgamos or sacred marriage:

The celestial 1 will raise up
The terrestrial 2 into the Bliss of sexual union.

Rexroth's interest in the end of time and history partly indicates his fatigue after seeing the manifest wrongs of postwar Europe without any prospects of fundamental remedy and the world controlled by the United States and Russia, two collectivities that he compares later in Part IV to equally deadly devouring beasts (pp. 235-36). This prophetic passage also reflects an alternative response to the contemporary situation. Because modern industrialized society is morally bankrupt and has reached a dead end, the apocalypse is already present. It is fruitless and dangerous to confront directly the system and naive to try
to change it gradually from within, but an individual can live as if the final judgment is now taking place. One example of such a life "lived in the eye of Apocalypse" is that given by the "French radical youth" for outwaiting the mutual destruction of the Communist and Capitalist systems:

Keep uncompromised;
Stay poor; try to keep out from
Under the boot; love one another;
Reject all illusions; wait. (p. 168)

Aside from the need for self-preservation, this alternative to a crumbling culture is a counsel of detachment and passivity like that of the contemplation of nature. Therefore the two methods presented in Part IV of resisting the dominant modern values lead toward an alternative community, exemplified by a group of Parisians who give Rexroth and his wife a farewell party, and toward the wilderness, the scene of much of Part V in The Dragon and the Unicorn.

The party given by a friend of Rexroth's named Leontine contrasts with the gatherings of the intelligentsia in London (pp. 118-19) and the party of American consuls and their wives in Italy (pp. 212-14). Despite their poverty and in some cases serious illness, Leontine and her friends are truly civilized. She serves a "wonderful dinner" (p. 236), and the company responds quickly and warmly to the American guests. The response of an old Breton shepherd at the party illustrates the supreme importance of a community of love. After discovering Rexroth's knowledge of outdoor life, he is suddenly infatuated with the American West and the

chance of being a shepherd there. But this idea quickly passes when Léontine tells the shepherd that the hectic pace of American life, "la Vitesse américaine" (p. 238), and separation from his friends would kill him. While he is one of the poorest citizens in France, he nevertheless enjoys the good life, "la bonne vie," apparently meaning the fellowship of close friends and the beauty and pleasure of living in Montparnasse. Other aspects of the party show the unknown, wasted creativity of the lower classes: the inventiveness of the man who washes cars at a garage (p. 239), the grace and literary sophistication of Léontine, worthy of the finest artistic celebration (p. 240), and the dignity of the Italian whose epilepsy destroyed his career as a sculptor (p. 241). Léontine's party ends, in fact, when the sculptor has a fit. The precarious existence of this fine, generous group of people embitters Rexroth and shows the difficult struggle of the community against collective society. Rexroth contrasts these two classes throughout Part IV, and the uncertainty of the outcome adds to the melancholy departure from Paris, as coldness, ever present "fine rain" (p. 244), and fading light signal the coming of Winter. His last thought of France is Eugène Delacroix' painting, Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi, and the many revolutions for greater equality which always have been betrayed in France (p. 248).

The sight of the moon setting at midnight on the first night at sea partially offsets the gloom. After leaving Europe behind, a fresh beginning in the United States may be possible. The description of the ship's wake, "Seething with stars and nebulae/ Of living phosphorescence" (p. 248), is a reminder of the immense vitality of life. The reference
to phosphorescence in this image implies that many experiences have happened during Rexroth's travels in Europe whose significance originally was unrecognized but will continue to enlighten his life as he reflects at home on this trip. The word "Seething" stands in sharp contrast to the sad mood accompanying the departure and signifies an intense dynamism within life which may temporarily be dormant but always is ready to brim forth and revitalize an individual's existence. Describing the patterns of light in the water as "stars and nebulae" contrasts with the passage at the beginning of Part IV in which the solar system dwarfs the earth (p. 227). Instead of looking to the heavens for escape from petty earthly activities, Rexroth sees that the ocean contains the unlimited space and countless life of the macrocosm. The occurrence of this image of the moonlit wake at the end of Part IV foreshadows another unexpected discovery at the end of The Dragon and the Unicorn of the unquenchable energy which shines throughout being (p. 280).

The three stanzas concluding Part IV are not effective. Because the relationship among these stanzas and their connection with the departure from France is difficult to discern, they seem to be added rather hastily to the main narrative in order to give weight to the conclusion of Part IV. This is especially true of the allusions to the "blood of Rahab" and to Jakob Boehme's "flagrat" (p. 248). Rahab could be the name of either a primordial dragon conquered by Yahweh (Psalm 89: 10; Isaiah 51:9-10) or the harlot whose clan was spared the destruction of Jericho because she hid the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:1-21), and Boehme's symbolism always is troublesome. These final stanzas apparently restate some of the major themes in The Dragon and the Unicorn, primarily

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the belief that love is the meaning of life and that the "denial,/
Betrayal, or debauching" (p. 219) of love is evil. These passages also
reintroduce the symbol of the cross which is very important to Rexroth,
appearing in The Homestead Called Damascus when Sebastian is "broken on
the height" (p. 17); at the end of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (p. 60);
and by the campfire on the beach (pp. 72-73) and at the conclusion of
The Phoenix and the Tortoise (pp. 89-91).

In the last section of Part IV in The Dragon and the Unicorn,
the image of the cross expresses the polarities and paradoxes of existence.
Just as Christ's death brought eternal life, symbolized by the identifi-
cation in Rexroth's vision of the cross with the tree of life growing in
Paradise (Gen. 2:9), human suffering paradoxically leads to exaltation.
Through the crucifixion, Christ achieved victory over the secular power
represented by Pilate. On an historical level, Christianity subdued
Rome with the conversion of Constantine, and several passages in the
Old Testament allude to Yahweh's defeat of Rahab, the primordial dragon,
in order to express God's superiority over any temporal power. Breaking
Rahab "in pieces, as one that is slain" (Psalm 89:10), establishes the
incomparable might of the Lord (cf. Isaiah 51:9), and the major proof
of God's dominance over the Egyptian Pharaoh, the parting and reclosing
of the Red Sea, occasionally is associated with Rahab, the great dragon
(Isaiah 30:1-7; Ezek. 29:2-3). These passages could comfort Rexroth in
his despair at the end of the European travels over the heartless power
of the modern collective state.

The reference to Rahab the dragon would be appropriate because of
the title of Rexroth's poem, and the slaying of a dragon symbolizes in
alchemy the reduction of metals to nonmetallic state or the conversion of imperfect matter into spirit. This type of rebirth also is described as a death and resurrection. Another symbol of this step in alchemy is a tree growing out of the earth bearing spiritual fruit which can become wine.

At this point in his travels, Rexroth may feel purged by the suffering and injustice he has seen and ready to receive a new spirit. At the beginning of The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth associates the dragon with the renewing fire (p. 95), and he may desire at the end of Part IV to mortify the worldly, active, prideful side of his personality. Supporting this conclusion are the views that the name Rahab derives from words meaning "to be proud, arrogant" or "to rage, be agitated."

Rexroth may intend for Rahab to signify the harlot of Jericho who befriended the Israelites, for some interpreters claim that Matthew, in his genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5), refers to this woman in the Old Testament. Other legends identify her as one of the four most beautiful women in the world and the ancestress of several prophets. Ascribing the name Rahab to this woman is in keeping with the high esteem given to prostitutes in The Dragon and the Unicorn and Rexroth's assertion that


49 Taylor, pp. 148, 152-53, 150.


the favored individuals in these declining times must associate intimately with outcasts like whores (p. 215). Christ's familiarity with socially undesirable individuals like Mary Magdalene was one way that he confounded the authorities in Palestine.

Boehme's cross first appears in a vision on the beach in The Phoenix and the Tortoise (p. 72). Boehme's theory of how God manifests himself in nature illustrates his dialectical view of reality. God is divided into nature and spirit, and reality seeks to harmonize these originally hostile qualities. Seven natural properties make up all of creation, and their interaction shows how nature becomes subordinated to spirit. The seven properties consist of a dark triad, characterized by hunger and restlessness, and a bright triad which is peaceful and free. The three bright properties arise when the seventh property, a lightning flash, transfigures the dark triad, liberating nature. The "illimitable hour glass/ Of the universe eternally/ Turning" (p. 72) seen in The Phoenix and the Tortoise seemingly represents this process, with the terrifying yet joyful flash of lightning occurring at the center of the hourglass:

the double splendors of joy
That fuse and divide again
In the narrow passage of the Cross.

In his translation of The Signature of All Things and other works by Boehme, Clifford Bax coins the word flagrat for this great flash of fire at the heart of being. Bax defines the flagrat as the "dividing

boundmark" between life and death and the "bursting forth of the ardent desire in nature." In The Signature of All Things, Boehme represents this moment when all of the properties in existence come together by the following symbol: $\Phi$. The lower half of the circle stands for the divisive aspects of creation, the "kingdom of darkness dwelling in itself," and the top represents the peaceful, calming qualities of being. The cross above the circle is the "kingdom of glory, which proceeds forth in the flagrat of joy." Earlier in The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth describes this flash of illumination, concluding with a phrase borrowed from Bax's translation:

The fire of the sexual act,
The wedding of light and darkness,
Boehme's scream and flame,
the pregnant
Echo of the sound of eternity.
(p. 159)

Such moments are immensely important to Rexroth because they show that on the highest level of awareness, all life is sacred. Much of Rexroth's poetry testifies to those occasions when transcendence "suffused and glorified human life." The lines discussing "Boehme's flagrat" also express Rexroth's conviction that visionary experiences unveil the truest meanings of existence rather than exceptional states of consciousness. Without these glimpses of reality, daily life would be a dreary succession


54 Ibid., p. 184.

of ultimately pointless acts.

The last line of Part IV, "Love who moves the sun and the other stars" (p. 248), restates the theme presented during two of the high points of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, both in Part III. The first statement occurs in a song by a woman praising the

"love which moves
All being, penetrates the
Universe, and shines back, in

Some things more, in others, less," (p. 164)

and the second expresses the realization at Paestum that the "world is made of number/ And moved in order by love" (p. 202). These passages agree that love is the supreme value of life and the ordering principle throughout the universe, from the "moral law within the starry heavens without."56

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**Part V**

Part V opens with Rexroth's trip alone by train across the United States from New York to his home in San Francisco. The rest of Part V presents various experiences he has after returning, including camping out in several remote areas in California. In Part V, Rexroth moves from the industrialized, crowded East to the undomesticated, open West; from civilization to the wilderness; from engagement in contemporary affairs and social commitment to withdrawal into himself and past memories; from action and passion to contemplation and calm. A passage early in

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the last part of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* articulates these contrasts in terms of Hindu mythology:

Being alternates with non-being,
For millions of years Shiva sleeps,
For millions of years he dances.
The world flows from the void, the void
Drinks up the world. (pp. 249-50)

Rexroth leaves the bright and busy world for a period of quiet recollection and regeneration. The symbol of the void implies a retreat into a kind of darkness in order to empty the self and germinate new life. As Rexroth travels across America in the first portion of Part V, the western civilization he leaves behind appears to be more and more illusory, while the meditations on nature in the second portion of Part V which culminate in a series of visionary experiences seem closest to reality. Rexroth's description of the countryside once he reaches the West differs from that preceding it, especially in Europe. Perhaps because of the largely uninhabited land and the younger civilization in America, most of his observation consists of objective accounts of natural phenomena: weather, flora, fauna, and terrain. This new orientation, however, seemingly coincides with Rexroth's desire to concentrate on purely natural rather than cultural details.

The "grey haze" (p. 249) of New York in the first stanza parallels the "faint green haze" (p. 95) of Spring at the opening of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, but replacing the optimism and possibility noted at the beginning of Rexroth's trip is the desire to forget as quickly as possible the skyscrapers and housing projects depressingly like war torn Berlin. The description implies that once having departed, Rexroth
permanently closes his mind to New York as he hears, like the pigeons circling above the slums, the call of home.

The light of the factories in Toledo and Gary and the street signs of Elkhart seem hellish in the late night and early dawn (p. 249), and Chicago again evokes childhood memories. Although in one sense society remains the same, "Immoral and immortal" (p. 250), the decline of Chicago represents a general loss of quality and vitality throughout the country. The "entranced sadistic face" (p. 251) of a stripper and the deceit and ironic good education of the call girls illustrate the perversion of sexuality which Rexroth pinpoints in Part III of The Dragon and the Unicorn as a chief symptom of cultural sickness in America.

Accompanying and reinforcing the triumph of the work ethic over sensual enjoyment is a religion emphasizing man's inadequacy and guilt rather than celebrating the crises of human life as sacraments in aesthetically pleasing rituals. The two areas of Rexroth's travels best typifying this "spiritual masochism" (p. 226) are Switzerland, associated with the Protestant theologian Karl Barth (pp. 226-27), and Kansas. The faces of most of the people and even some of the animals in Kansas express the anxiety and self-denial that for Rexroth characterizes liberal Protestantism. He traces this religious response from Augustine to Luther, Kierkegaard, Barth (p. 253) and modern existentialism (p. 175). Because this viewpoint stresses man's total insignificance and need to accept God through a blind "leap in the dark" (p. 253), it isolates the individual in the manner of capitalism, as delineated by Marx in The Communist Manifesto (pp. 189-90). Rexroth prefers Catholicism because there is less emphasis on the sole believer alone with his God and it
more closely fulfills the primary function of religion, celebration by
the community of the mystery and joy of life. Rexroth's indictments of
this type of religion usually go hand in hand with those of industrial
capitalism, and not long after leaving Kansas, a dust storm in Iowa
that coats and obscures all the life it touches becomes his symbol
for the "decline and fall of the/ Capitalist system" (p. 254).

As Rexroth approaches the West at Dodge City, his critical mood
changes with the air blowing from the Transcontinental Divide, and in
southern Colorado two elements appear that will be prominent in the rest
of Part V: thick snowfall and moonlight (p. 254). Rexroth underlines
the contrast between life in the East and the West by quoting from The
Oregon Trail by Francis Parkman, a wealthy Bostonian describing his first
excursion to the far West during 1844-46, just after he had graduated
from Harvard and before beginning his major work, France and England in
North America.57 This long history depicts for Rexroth the struggle
between the Protestant work ethic, represented by the English, and the
life of leisure and sensual indulgence of the French explorers, or the
"triumph of anal/ Over oral sexuality" (p. 255).

When dawn rises and the storm clouds scatter over northeastern
New Mexico, Rexroth realizes that at last

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I am} \\
\text{Back home. This is my country.} \\
\text{All that back there is illusion.} \\
\text{(p. 255)}
\end{align*}
\]

His rejection of civilization, the "great abyss/ Of pain and commodities,"

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57 Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and
for the clear skies and uncomplicated attitudes of the West is not simply escapism, for the many past associations awakened on this trip show that Rexroth has worked and lived extensively throughout this area (pp. 255, 256, 258) and can validly claim it as his home. A preoccupation with decline, however, mutes the sense of homecoming. As the end of the year approaches, Rexroth notes similar deterioration in himself, the United States, the white race, and modern civilization. Now in his mid-forties, Rexroth recalls from his more active past working on ranches (p. 255), riding the range country (p. 258), and "fine nights of drunken/ Argument twenty years gone" (p. 256). He believes somewhat surprisingly that the United States "reached its finest/ Expression" (p. 259) at the height of the Mormon settlement in Salt Lake City. A calm, peaceful city most impresses Rexroth at this point in his journey, in contrast to the excitement and bustle earlier of a city like Toulouse (pp. 142-43).

Rexroth has indicated previously that almost all white Americans have succumbed to the insane pursuit of commodities to such a degree that they are incapable of participating in a community of love (p. 242) but instead create unlivable places like Kansas City (p. 253). After seeing how commercialization has ruined Taos, New Mexico, Rexroth damns the entire white race. Natural cataclysms mark the end of white dominance and indicate either the start of a historical cycle of chaos or the oncoming Apocalypse:

Vulvas of flame open in the sun.  
The glaciers grow, the cyclones  
move south,  
A black Thales falls into a  
well.  (p. 256)

The last item reflects the loss of man's rational control over nature.
as Thales, called the founder of Western philosophy, falls victim to his own theory that water, the basic element of the universe, is the origin and final destination of all things. These lines also may mean that prodigious natural occurrences are causes rather than omens of great changes in human affairs. A preceding passage states this deterministic view:

Comet tails and sunspots suffice To account for all history.

Such deep pessimism characterizes one aspect of Rexroth, for it emerges periodically in his poetry, the opposite pole to his idealism. In The Phoenix and the Tortoise, a poem largely devoted to meditations on the meaning of history, Rexroth thinks that all efforts to understand human culture may be foolish because

possibly history Is only an irritability, A perversion of the blood's chemistry, The after effects of a six thousand Years dead solar cyclone. (p. 66)

If man's entire history is not an aberration, his efforts from the dawn of the Industrial Age to the present Atomic Age have been catastrophic. Rexroth merely sketches his indictment of modern science in Part V (p. 257), but he apparently opposes the restriction of experience to purely quantitative relationships (cf. pp. 198-99). The catastrophe repeatedly referred to as the final fruit of science presumably is the potentially widespread use of the atomic bomb, the true sacrament of the United States and the "Apotheosis of quantity" (p. 199). The pioneers of modern science mentioned in Part V (p. 257) were guilty
of what is for Rexroth a grievous sin: a fragmentation of being which ultimately leads to the pervasive self-alienation of contemporary life.

A comment in an article about Samuel Beckett explains the reference to Descartes:

although /Descartes/ separated spirit and matter and considered man an angel riding a bicycle, mortality caught up with him and the spirit betrayed him - the angel wore out the bicycle and the bicycle abraded the angel.⁵⁸

Newton's law of gravitation, by explaining all causes of motion by material agencies, sharply reduced the role of divinity in creation. This tendency also was present in the rigid demarcation of mind and matter in Descartes' philosophy and was further extended when Pierre-Simon Laplace, developing an idea of Kant, applied Newton's law of gravitation to the entire solar system.⁵⁹ The exclusion of the divinity by science contributed to the spiritual crisis of the modern world and clarifies Rexroth's accusation of science for believing in "Being as self subsistent" (p. 199). The inflexible mechanical laws and rejection of outside intervention by science mirrors the isolation of the individual by capitalism and Protestantism. All three aspects of life share an atomistic philosophy and are totally inimical to Rexroth's belief in the community of love, the inexhaustible content of every instant, and the inexplicably arising moments of inexpressible vision.

The most poignant reminder of Rexroth's youth is a visit to a


little cottage in the Santa Monica Mountains where he and his first wife stayed after marrying, leaving Chicago, and coming to live permanently in California in 1927. When Rexroth first met Andrée Dutcher, their association was immediate and so complete that they were constantly together for eight years. In his autobiography, Rexroth says that their relationship was an example of the "kind of total identification with another in which two personalities multiply each other like squared numbers." The happiness he recalls when he and Andrée were living in this cottage was so deep and untroubled that the period seemingly stands as the high point of his life in a manner comparable to the culmination in Salt Lake City of American culture. The old couple sitting inside the cottage, the "grey-haired childhood friend" (p. 261), and the long waves "wrinkling" Malibu Bay impress on the reader the poet's aging in a heavy, self-pitying fashion. Once Rexroth arrives home in San Francisco, this mood fortunately changes, and his immersion in nature during the rest of The Dragon and the Unicorn provides increased detachment and a wider perspective for his self-examination. This last section of the poem also indicates that Rexroth loses himself in nature, empties himself in order to enter the next phase of life with new energy and a fresh outlook.

An experience on Christmas Eve in Golden Gate Park marks an important turning point in The Dragon and the Unicorn from involvement in the problems of the world and past memories to detachment and self-forgetfulness. Foreshadowing this scene is the weather occurring once

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60 Kenneth Rexroth, An Autobiographical Novel, p. 358.
Rexroth passes Dodge City. Throughout the West, the dominant impression is steady, thick snow storms with occasional clearing. The elements at times blend into one amorphous mass. While crossing Colorado,

Steam from the curving train,
Clouds, snow, snow-covered mountains,
Emerge and merge. (p. 258)

This sense of the separate aspects of nature combining appears in the description of the park on Christmas Eve. Two lines use a succession of ɾ, w, and k sounds to communicate an almost palpable obscurity: "The Winter twilight thickens./ The park grows dusky" (p. 262). As light fails, "sky and trees mingle/ In receding planes of vagueness." In this cold, supersaturated air, snow suddenly materializes, but it does not seem to fall from the sky but to directly "crystallize/ Out of the air."

All is completely still except for two barely perceptible sounds: the wind in the rushes at the lake's edge and the snow as it falls through these gently swaying plants. After quietly listening and watching the snow, Rexroth walks away beside the water until a "huge white swan" (p. 263) explodes from the rushes very close to him, alights farther out on the lake's surface, and glides slowly out of sight as night finally descends.

Comments by Rexroth about the unusual aesthetic of the Japanese No theatre help elucidate this passage. Unlike the movement of a Western play as outlined in Aristotle's Poetics toward climax and denouement, No creates an atmosphere of unresolved tensions or longings or irresolutions, and this dramatic situation is resolved by an esthetic realization which evolves from the dramatic situation as its
own archetype.  

This resolution takes the form of a dance compared by Rexroth to a crystal of sugar dropping into a supersaturated solution—the dissolved sugar crystallizes around the introduced crystal until the solution is no longer saturated.

To illustrate this process Rexroth discusses a Nō play entitled Nishikigi, in which a dead hero and heroine are bound by their passion to undergo perpetually the most important moment of their lives until the prayer of a wandering priest who meets them by chance frees them from this hell. Once they are liberated from this endless re-enactment of dead fate and consequence, . . ., realization of the meaning of being itself pervades and saturates the minds of the audience, and precipitates a crystal called release.

Within the immediate context of The Dragon and the Unicorn, the experience in Golden Gate Park seemingly serves the same purpose for Rexroth and hopefully for the reader too. The original description of the unusually dusky park and the merging sky and trees apparently symbolizes Rexroth's thickening gloom resulting from the misery of the contemporary world and the vanished splendor of his past, especially the loss of his first wife Andrée the apparent victim of a brain disease to whom he felt so perfectly suited. From this literally supersaturated atmosphere suddenly appears "Unendurably beautiful" snow. It is as if

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all the grief, longing, and sense of loss accumulated by Rexroth during the entire poem builds to an unbearable degree but, instead of culminating in a dramatic act, unexpectedly and rather miraculously resolves itself in the "esthetic realization" of the snow and swan occurring in the aptly named Golden Gate Park. As Rexroth says about No drama, the final outcome is not "resolved climax but realized significance," and to know all is to forgive all. Conveying this sense of remission is Rexroth's description of the path he takes after observing the snowfall: it is "Pure white with the new snow" (p. 263).

Rexroth's emphasis of the two words "falling" and "floating" by placing them at the beginning of three lines (p. 263) conveys the sense that this experience has removed the heavy weight of his worry and placed him in an entranced, blissful state. His hushed response reveals the awe this sight engenders in him, and the correspondence of his gentle breathing with the "breathless lake" recalls a similar response to the divine beauty of creation in Wordsworth's sonnet, "It Is a Beauteous Evening," and implies the merging of Rexroth's identity into that of the external world, signifying the oneness of all being. Within the context of the entire poem, it is as if Rexroth's sense of self becomes so overwhelming that it overflows mercifully into the immense, always present emptiness surrounding life. This transition seemingly is one of the "great organic/ Cycles of the universe" (p. 96). Like the moon's waning and waxing, one of the "laws of the rhythm/ Of being" (p. 271) is the alternation between being and non-being. The way in which "the

unmoving/ Water is drinking the snow" (p. 263) symbolizes how, in Rexroth's life, the "void/ Drinks up the world" (p. 250) of troubles crystallized in the "cold, white" (p. 262) snowflakes.

The movement of the swan apparently symbolizes Rexroth's release from the world, especially his own "dead fate and consequence." He foreshadows the swan's appearance and associates the bird with the image of his longings and irresolutions by describing the snowflakes as "cold, white, downy/ Feathers" (p. 262). Startled by Rexroth, the swan "breaks out of the tangle," the "thicket of Winter/ Cattails" (p. 263) corresponding to the world of possibility and consequence which has grown increasingly perplexing for Rexroth. At last unbound, the swan "floats suspended on gloom," as if the void has absorbed, reduced, and soon will carry away the entire world of troubles. This passage also implies that the swan embodies that part of Rexroth still tied to the desires and frustrations of his earlier life, and when the swan fades into the dark, appearing only as a "white blur/ Like a face lost in the night," Rexroth at last obtains release from the dead past.

The presentation of this experience suggests a new beginning as well as the end of an old life. The falling snow and the swaying rushes are creating a "frail wavering" web, a new pattern of extreme delicacy and uncertainty requiring the utmost stillness. The movement of the snow and the description of the "weaving blades" of the rushes is an early form of the "weaving girl" (p. 302), a major symbol in Rexroth's last longer poem, The Heart's Garden The Garden's Heart. After a period of strenuous adventure, Odysseus, the "wanderer/ Of many devices,"
always returns to Penelope:

The final woman who weaves,
And unweaves, and weaves
again. (p. 303)

On Christmas Eve in Golden Gate Park, Rexroth hears the "weaving blades" of her shuttle preparing another new design.

The swan also points to the theme of renewal because it is the form assumed by Zeus when he rapes Leda. Part of Rexroth's description hints at this sexual assault, for the swan "plunges away" from the bank by "thundering and stamping his wings" (p. 263). Yeats uses the rape of Leda in "Leda and the Swan" as a metaphor for the beginning of Greek civilization and the start of a new historical cycle, and in the introduction to his Collected Shorter Poems, Rexroth applies this same myth to the major determining points of an individual's life. Leda represents the women in his life who form one pole of his character and contribute additional contrasting qualities to the dialectic within his personality:

From Leda's eggs sprang not only Castor and Pollux, divine and human, but Helen and Clytemnestra, innocence and power.

Rexroth includes this scene at Golden Gate Park as a separate poem in his Collected Shorter Poems, and its title, "Leda Hidden," indicates the allusion to the Greek myth and shows that although the poet is aware that his life has reached a turning point, the exact direction remains obscure. While the seed germinates, he rests at the end of this experience in the calm void where

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There is nothing but night,
And the snow and the odor
Of the frosty water. (p. 263)

In the last portion of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, Rexroth spends most of his time in nature, camping often with his wife in remote regions such as Sequoia National Park. This concluding sequence continues the movement away from worldly affairs and human culture evident soon after Rexroth returns to the United States and reflects the ascending role in the poem of the withdrawn, uncommitted part of Rexroth's personality. Illustrating this tendency are the final scene in *The Homestead Called Damascus* with Thomas Damascan camping alone on the Great Plains (p. 36) and all of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*.

While the last half of Part V in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* presents the passive rather than the active side of Rexroth, there is a further polarity contained within this final section. Rexroth's excursions into nature include moments of quiet meditation, apparent attempts to empty the mind and yield totally to the void for the purpose of purification and self-renewal, and a very close, active interest in the many forms of life in the wilderness that affirms the harmony of the universe. These two qualities are actually the interior and exterior signs of the same reality, for the clearest manifestation of achieved spiritual peace is reverence for life.

Certain Oriental religious ideas help clarify both aspects of the final portion of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, especially the Buddhist doctrines of the void and the Bodhisattva. By emptying the mind, the individual can approach the "unconditioned Void"67 at the center of being.

This void or sunyata is completely unqualified, existing beyond being and not being, illusion and reality, existence and essence. By becoming aware of this void within himself, the individual comes in contact with the ultimate source of all things. After a prolonged immersion in contemporary problems and the meaning of Western culture, Rexroth seeks to attain the undifferentiated unity beneath the apparent world of multiplicity.

A problem arises because the Buddhist doctrine of the void implies a final deliverance from the cycle of life and death and a liberation from the illusory world of phenomena. Since the final aim of Buddhism is Nirvana, some interpreters claim that its philosophy is nihilistic, a "profound rejection of the world," seeking release from the painful wheel of life by extinguishing the self. If this charge is true, there is no room in this world view for Rexroth's intense interest in nature exemplified in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn, and the person, the cornerstone of his philosophy, is a delusion.

The development within Buddhism of the concept of the Bodhisattva, the enlightened being who refrains from entering Nirvana until he can bring salvation to all beings, offsets the rigor and anti-humanistic bias of the doctrine of the void by teaching a compassion for all sentient beings. Occasionally Rexroth's poetry indicates a vacuity at the center of existence which reveals all ordinary experience to be a cruel hallucination. At one point in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth, as if in a moment of preternatural insight, is sure that the

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sun and the moon are absolutely vacant, while he is

alone in the great
Void, where they journey, empty
Through the darkness and the
light. (p. 279)

Another example of this bleak vision occurs in "Aix en Provence: Spring," when Rexroth stands in a Spring night that

Stretches on forever, that had
No beginning, and that will
Never end, and it doesn't mean
Anything. It isn't an image of
Something. It isn't a symbol of
Something else.69

However, this is not the dominant effect of references to the void in the concluding sections of Part V. The primary purpose of emptying the mind is to achieve calm rapture, and those passages in Part V which apparently indicate this emptiness seek to communicate a religious experience rather than a metaphysical position. Because of the ultimate nature of this experience, this discovery of a kind of primordial unity underlying reality cannot be qualified. As Rexroth says, it is a "state of not-being and not not-being."70 According to Rexroth's treatment in his poetry, this state does not annihilate or render illusory sensory phenomena but creates a new, crystalline awareness, a "sense of translucent knowledge"71 about oneself and nature. It is obviously difficult to discuss a concept as general and negative as emptiness in a medium as concrete and specific as poetry. Painters like

71Ibid., p. 156.
those of the Sung dynasty, however, can convey more easily this idea, Rexroth feels, by including in their landscapes scenes of vast areas dissolving in misty moonlight and stretching infinitely away. In one passage in Part V which reflects such an approach, Rexroth ascends a mountain and notices how, from the road,

fall
Away folded shadows of
Mountains, range on moony range. (p. 273)

The accompanying description of the valley below as a "great sea" dotted with the lights of the town and the "white and indistinct" peaks above merging into one "Undulant horizon" adds to the effect of the poet gently sinking into the "indeterminate profundity" of the void.

Rexroth more often presents this state of emptying the mind as the shedding of unimportant worldly qualities, often accompanied by a gradually enveloping crystal. As he lies by a remote mountain stream, in "The Signature of All Things," Rexroth recalls his past until first the "evil of the world," then his own "sin and trouble" fall away. In "Time Is the Mercy of Eternity," Rexroth uses several devices to communicate these mystical ideas and states of being. As in The Dragon and the Unicorn, he describes how falling away from his spot high in the remote mountains, "stretches/ Shimmering space, then fold on/ Dimmer fold of wooded hills," and at night, the "spring moon/ Swims in immeasurable/

72Kenneth Rexroth, "Sung Culture," in Assays, pp. 5-12.
73Ibid., p. 9.
Clear deeps of palpable light."75 After camping alone for several weeks in this area, Rexroth sees with visionary clarity the ultimate reality of the nature surrounding him and, in a manner reminiscent of "The Signature of All Things," his true self:

Suspended
In absolutely transparent
Air and water and time, I
Take on a kind of crystalline
Being . . . .

... The good
And evil of my history
Go by. I can see them and
Weigh them. They go first, with all
The other personal facts,
And sensations, and desires.
At last there is nothing left
But knowledge, itself a vast
Crystal encompasing the
Limitless crystal of air
And rock and water. And the
Two crystals are perfectly
Silent. There is nothing to
Say about them. Nothing at all.76

This passage is quoted in full because in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn Rexroth conveys the same mystical view of existence. Emptying the self leads to Nirvana, a transcendental awareness of one's identity with the environment, and a boundless compassion for all the life teeming around one. The landscape in the last part of The Dragon and the Unicorn, like that in Izaak Walton's The Compleat Angler, is "so clean and bright because it is bathed in a light that comes from a lucid heart."77

76Ibid., p. 251.
This identification is so profound that Rexroth asserts at the end of the poem that the individual is the totality, not only the natural world but all of being, including the supernatural realm: "You are Shiva, but you dream" (p. 279). This statement reflects another Buddhist doctrine called "Mind Only," the idealist view that, not only external, but ultimate reality is consciousness. The doctrine of "Mind Only," in a sense, merely goes one step beyond that of the void. Once the meditator finds within himself the emptiness underlying all reality, he discovers as well the plenitude of all creation.

In Golden Gate Park on Christmas Eve, the water drinks the snow as the void absorbs the world (p. 263). Rexroth's involvement in temporal concerns seemingly reaches a high point, until like the swan he breaks loose and begins to withdraw from the world. In the following scene on New Year's Eve, clarity replaces the obscurity and thickly falling snow of Christmas Eve, and as Rexroth empties himself of worldly cares, limitless peace fills the universe. This scene contains two kinds of illumination often associated by Rexroth with visionary experience: moonlight, whose "Immaculate" quality cleanses Rexroth of his problems, and phosphorescence, like that of the marine organisms stirred by the wake of the ship leaving France (p. 248). As if to indicate Rexroth's personal rapture, the phosphorescence is directly connected to him.


Like the crowns of saints, a "glory" (p. 264) shines around the head of Rexroth's shadow, apparently the same mountain phenomenon that Wordsworth associated especially with shepherds of the Lake District and interpreted as a sign of the inherent nobility of man and the holiness present throughout creation. His mind emptied of theory, philosophy, and any "Capacity for tragedy" (p. 265), Rexroth leaves the world to its own destruction and opens himself to total bliss: "The peace is illimitable/ The clear glory is without end" (p. 265).

A more somber aspect of Rexroth's return to nature involves the annual run of Pacific salmon up Tomales Bay, just north of San Francisco. The awareness that after ascending the river to their parent stream and spawning, these salmon soon will die, their flesh "Battered away by their great/ Lust" (p. 266), causes Rexroth to review again his own life. His career and the salmon run lead to the same conclusion: the gains hardly seem worth the pain and loss, the "deaths and dead ends." When Rexroth comes down to the water later, the mating salmon still agitate the surface of the stream, and as he kneels and touches the water, he sees on the edges "Frail blades of ice" and thinks of the stream flowing away in the night to the sea.

The spawning apparently reminds Rexroth that destruction is as much a part of the rhythm of nature as creation, and the similarity between the waste in his life and the death of thousands of salmon in

order to produce one causes him momentarily to doubt the value of such a world. This analogy, however, violates Rexroth's principles because it judges human life by quantitative standards and confuses physical and moral evil. In Part III, Rexroth points out that the physical evils of "Pain, waste and loss are inherent/ In the world of contingency" (p. 219) and should not be confused with moral evil, which is any violation of love.

Despite this distinction, the fact of personal extinction periodically looms large, as when Rexroth contemplates the salmon. The problem of the waste of value in a world of fact occurs throughout Rexroth's poetry, and this dilemma usually resolves itself, as in the conclusion of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, a poem which especially deals with this issue, in a transcendent vision glorifying being. Rexroth's return at night to the stream seemingly alludes to such an affirmation. The entire episode contains several polarities: male and female; aggression and receptivity; birth and death; the descent of the water to the bay and the ascent of the salmon; but the final lines tracing the path of the stream "from the sky to the sea" imply that the widest perspective places these conflicting activities in an ultimate unity of being in which the individual life, despite pain, disappointment, and certain death, is a valuable integral part. When included in Rexroth's Collected Shorter Poems, the title of this passage is "Time Spirals," and the choice of the word "spiral" rather than "cycle" may indicate that


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as the major patterns of a person's life repeat themselves, they also move closer toward transcendence. Certainly, Rexroth elsewhere in Part V of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* explicitly celebrates the recurrent cycles of nature when he and his wife "Once again" (p. 274) climb the same mountain trail to camp in the same location and hear and see the same animals, birds, and flowers. When the cry of the nighthawks reminds Rexroth of his "Entranced childhood" (p. 275) in Chicago, he concludes:

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It is
Wise to keep the pattern of
Life clear and simple and filled
With beautiful and real
things. (p. 275)
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Rexroth gives this advice because he believes that following such a pattern of life insures continued access to the transcendent experience.

Near the end of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, Rexroth makes an ascent, like that of the Pacific salmon, culminating in transcendence. He is skiing and camping on the eastern border of Sequoia National Park near Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the United States outside of Alaska. The vegetation Rexroth finds at these heights seemingly corresponds to the rarefied atmosphere of the higher levels of contemplation: very little grows and part of the area is as "barren/ As the moon" (p. 277), but those few creatures which do thrive in such thin air have the most intense odors and colors. Rexroth emphasizes the color of the polemonium, a blue so remarkable that he wrote an entire poem entitled "Blues"82 about this flower, in which he notes that the polemonium has a heavy, beautiful perfume, like the phlox growing in the same area

mentioned in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (p. 276). The intense colors and fragrance of the flowers and the campfire indicate the extreme pleasure of contemplation which removes one from worldly cares. An "unearthly perfume" also distinguishes a Bodhisattva, a person who experiences Nirvana and, although he returns to existence to save others, realizes that peace exists beyond the sensory world, that there is neither "peace nor illusion, saved nor savior." Rexroth may point to this sense of rising above ephemeral phenomena and reaching the ultimate void when he mentions breaking the ice and drinking the "black tasteless water" (p. 277), a description similar to one in the passage about the dying salmon (p. 266). By climbing to the "final ridge" (p. 276), Rexroth apparently has transcended all earthly passions. He reads "Buddha's farewell to his harem," part of the Great Renunciation of beauty and all transient pleasures by the Buddha as he begins to free himself from the world. Rexroth is far above the lightning storm in the lower mountains, and this transcendence of fire recalls the Buddha's use of that element in *The Fire Sermon* as a symbol of earthly passion and physical sensation which must be extinguished before final bliss is possible.


In the next scene, renunciation of the "world of purpose" (p. 277) has more positive effects and marks the beginning of Rexroth's movement back toward activity and engagement in life. The passage also emphasizes emptying the mind as the source of one's potentiality and a prelude to future creativity. The parallel grammatical structure of the opening lines, a series of short, simple declarative sentences, indicates the integrated character of this experience whose essence is Rexroth's motionless, completely receptive immersion in the continuous activity of nature:

I sit
In my ten foot square hut.
The birds sing. The bees hum.
The leaves sway. The water
Murmurs over the rocks.
The canyon shuts me in.
If I moved, Bashō's frog
Would splash in the pool.
(pp. 277-78)

Rexroth alludes to a haiku by the Japanese poet Bashō:

An old pond -
The sound
Of a diving frog.86

In the notes to his collection of Japanese translations, Rexroth says that this poem "describes a monk's retreat in the forest, so still that the only sound is the splash of a frog as the visitor approaches."87 The passage in The Dragon and the Unicorn means therefore that within his hut Rexroth too experiences the profound stillness of visionary

87Ibid., p. 135.
rapture. Just as the falling maple leaf heralds the end of Summer, the fire which now has no meaning other than itself indicates Rexroth's return after the loss of youthful aspirations to the basic elements of life. He is attuned with nature, "My breath moves quietly./ The stars move overhead," and reduced to the core of his being: "Only a small red glow/ Is left in the ashes." The final two lines symbolize the completely discarded past and the unlimited possibilities for new growth: "On the table lies a cast/ Snakeskin and an uncut stone."

Earlier in The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth refers twice to the "uncut stone." At the beginning of Part III, he states that the instruments of contemplation are the details of life and "Poetry like the unclouded/ Crystal and the uncut block" (p. 156). Rexroth means that if one concentrates intensely on poetry, this "object of contemplation, like a crystal ball, acquires a significance with unlimited ramifications." In the introduction to the experience at Paestum in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth identifies the goal of his quest as, among other things, the "Taoist uncut block" (p. 200). In the Tao Te Ching, Laotzu says that the perfected sage returns to the state of the uncarved block, that is, to the original undifferentiated state, the void reached by emptying the mind which is the source of all potentiality. The title of this stanza when included in the Collected


Shorter Poems, "Empty Mirror,"\textsuperscript{90} seemingly alludes to this state of clear consciousness "on which no impression has been 'notched."
\textsuperscript{91}

Rexroth learns that since the individual contains within himself the void which is the ultimate source, he is therefore the origin of all things. After attempting in \textit{The Phoenix and the Tortoise} to focus all value within the individual, Rexroth moved away from the self in the opening parts of \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} by emphasizing how an understanding of the beloved leads to comprehension of other persons. He also states that love, direct knowledge, the community of love, and contemplation signify the same ultimate value. The stress in Part V on the last item, contemplation, brings Rexroth back to the single self as the source of all value, but it is the individual transformed by love and immersed in contemplation:

\begin{quote}
At the center of every Universe, which flows from him And back to him again is a Contemplator; there are millions Of universes, each with its Contemplator, in a grain of sand. (p. 276)
\end{quote}

The last scene of \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} illustrates the reciprocal, limitless nature of this interaction between the contemplator and the universe. As Rexroth walks by an old orchard, in the "dark of the moon" (p. 279), he first shines his light on two raccoons eating sour pears, "Juice and saliva drooling/ From their mouths. . . ./ Their eyes deep sponges of light" (p. 280). In contrast to this unpleasant


\textsuperscript{91}Waley, p. 55.
sight, he then sees in the gravel road "tiny points of cold/ Blue light, like the sparkle of/ Iron snow," each one emitted by a small spider whose eyes shine at Rexroth with his "reflected light/ Across immeasurable distance." Rexroth apparently associates the raccoon with disagreeable qualities, for in "A Bestiary," written for his young daughter and published in 1955, the raccoon seems to represent the hypocritical moralist whose fastidious and suspicious nature keeps him from enjoying any pleasure. If you give sugar to a raccoon, because he cleans everything before eating, he will wash away the sugar and then weep. Rexroth draws the moral that

Some of life's sweetest pleasures
Can be enjoyed only if
You don't mind a little dirt.
Here a false face won't help you.92

In the final passage of The Dragon and the Unicorn, the raccoons greedily devour the bitter pears and apparently resent Rexroth's intrusion. Their eyes are "deep sponges," soaking up rather than reflecting his light. Throughout Rexroth's poetry light symbolizes the existence of transcendent values, enlightenment, and the infinite possibility for forming loving relationships with other persons. Thus the raccoons could symbolize those individuals who do not respond to love but jealously cling to their own possessions, retreat further "Towards the isolation of/ The ego, not being" (p. 217), and are therefore evil.

The "cold/ Blue" light, like "Iron snow," at first seems rather forbidding, but Rexroth apparently intends to identify this light as phosphorescence, which resembles a psychic phenomenon occurring in particular visionary states and has for him a special symbolic significance. In discussing the poetry of Rimbaud, Rexroth points out that the physical responses commonly accompanying naturally occurring or artificially induced trance states include "blue lights. . . , colored snow, /and/ whirling sparks." Rexroth presents the mystical vision which concludes A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy in a series of items dominated by overwhelming light, and the final image is "The sapphire snow" (p. 60). In an interview Rexroth says that he deliberately includes in his poems images associated with this type of visionary experience, "things concerning light and rays of light, . . . ice, crystals, rays," in order to recreate a similar situation in the reader. The group of images at the end of The Dragon and the Unicorn describing the spiders' light seemingly represents such an attempt to heighten the reader's chance of feeling rapture analogous to the poet's.

Phosphorescence, also called cold light, is the emission of light from a substance exposed to radiation which persists after the source of radiation is removed, involves the transformation of invisible forms of energy into visible light, and occurs in a large number of living creatures. Phosphorescent light apparently is for Rexroth a visual sign


of the spiritual force immanent throughout being and the primary link between all living matter, from the most minute to the most immense forms. Witnessing a solar eclipse provided Rexroth with a basic symbol for life. At the moment of total eclipse, he saw a "great cold amoeba/ Of crystal light"; this

   silent protoplasm
   Of light stood still in the black
   sky,
   In its bowels, ringed with ruby
   Fire, its stone-black nucleus.

He refers in the same series of short poems, "The Lights in the Sky Are Stars," to the great nebula in Andromeda, a spiral galaxy closely resembling our own, as a "phosphorescent amoeba," and he applies the same phrase in a poem significantly entitled "The Family," written while in Australia, to the Magellanic Clouds, our nearest galaxies. In this poem, Rexroth stresses the sense of being in the midst of eternally expanding life. As he stands at night by a dark pool on an Australian plain, "overhead and before and below me,/ Doubled in the unmoving water,/ The million stars come on," and the final image presents the endless mass of living beings, from the infinitely large to the infinitely small, as Rexroth sees "Two phosphorescent amoebas overhead,/ And two in the bottomless water," and he responds to the mystery of his kinship with all life with joy and wonder.


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The "cold/ Blue" light at the end of The Dragon and the Unicorn shows that these objects too are alive, and Rexroth's relationship with these tiny spiders expands to cover all life, traveling instantaneously across the "immeasurable distance" from microcosm to macrocosm. Once before, in this same wilderness area, while gazing at a small mountain brook, Rexroth suddenly realized that the greenish color of the water was due to millions of minute organisms. Like the later encounter with the spiders, this experience overwhelmed Rexroth with a transcendent awareness of the unity and scope of life, a feeling like

Peering into an inkspot,
And finding yourself staring
Out into the Milky Way.98

The final passage in The Dragon and the Unicorn, therefore, is primarily an affirmation of life, and if a person makes the effort, "Kneel [s] to see," the glory of life, like these spiders, will manifest itself "Under each/ Pebble and oak leaf." To support his claim elsewhere that William Carlos Williams is a visionary poet, Rexroth refers to several lines in a poem entitled "The Kingdom of God" by Francis Thompson that articulate part of the meaning of his encounter with the spiders:

Turn but a stone, and start
a wing!
'Tis ye,' tis your estranged
faces,
That miss the many-splendoured
thing.99

98Kenneth Rexroth, "Time Is the Mercy of Eternity," in The
Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth, p. 250.

99Francis Thompson, "The Kingdom of God," in The Poems of Francis

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The reflection of Rexroth's light by the spiders also illustrates how life flows from the individual into the universe (p. 279) and, most miraculously, returns, after covering infinite space, filled with the "inexhaustible content/ Of experience" (p. 146) and testifying to the

"love which moves
All being, penetrates the
Universe, and shines back, in
Some things more, in others,
less." (p. 164)

Love can appear and be reflected in all creatures. What Rexroth says about the offensive rhesus monkeys in Kew Gardens, London, that

Even these inconsequential Creatures carry the Buddha Mirror in their hearts, (p. 118)

applies as well to these spiders and raccoons. To deny love to any being is to denigrate the self, for the other is the mirror of the contemplative (p. 262) and, in Rexroth's view, both are "Emanations of each other" (p. 270).

The last scene also presents a different response to nature by Rexroth. The passive, self-emptying state revealed when he sits in his ten foot hut and gazes at the fire with snakeskin and stone on the table (pp. 277-78) is replaced now by an active interchange symbolized by the two reflecting lights. The titles of these two sections when included in Rexroth's *Collected Shorter Poems* indicate this progression, for the title of the experience in the hut is "Empty Mirror" and that of the encounter along the gravel road is "Doubled Mirrors."100

An even more important meaning of this final scene is that Rexroth's response is the outward sign of an inner spiritual state, the reverence for life which results from the vision of peace as the ultimate ground of being. This identity with and compassion for other creatures also implies a reawakened sense of social responsibility in Rexroth, perhaps the end of his temporary withdrawal from active life for meditation. The general tenor of the entire poem indicates that these contrasting responses are two fundamental aspects of Rexroth's character:

Act and power, the twin lovers;
Each reflects the other like
The two chambers of the heart. (p. 274)

The realization of the basic unity of these two forces, the stillness of contemplation and the responsibility of action, is perhaps true enlightenment. This last passage also recalls the sense of unseen forces working out Rexroth's future as the snow falls in Golden Gate Park (pp. 262-63). The last part of the poem shows Rexroth's withdrawal from action to await the gestation of the next stage in his life, and in the last scene he seems aware that despite the "immeasurable distance" from the irreducible core of his being which determines destiny, his actions will reflect this tiny flame, the unfathomable source of all power at the heart of the individual.

Two major weaknesses of The Dragon and the Unicorn, the rather prosaic quality of some of the verse and the excessive length, result from Rexroth's attempt to present in one poem a comprehensive philosophy of life. The verse in The Dragon and the Unicorn is unrhymed lines usually consisting of seven syllables, and W. T. Scott states that it is
"too loose, too easy"\textsuperscript{101} a medium to create a lasting work, while Dudley Fitts finds the "flat, uncadenced prose" eventually "tiresome."\textsuperscript{102} Scott notes, however, that the "overdoses of flat prosiness" are due to Rexroth's desire to communicate his ideas as directly as possible, and Fitts admits that some passages are excellent poetry and, more importantly, that Rexroth doubtlessly deliberately chose this form. As the reviewer in the London \textit{Times Literary Supplement} says, the informal tone and colloquial idiom probably are essential to keep the reader's attention throughout a poem of this length.\textsuperscript{103} Richard Eberhart agrees that the choice of verse, short unrhymed syllabic lines, enables Rexroth to "sustain his matter indefinitely," but he believes that the form is not a necessary evil but a highly flexible medium, "Hard as prose and lithe as lyric."\textsuperscript{104} Morgan Gibson also praises the range of the poem, extending from lyricism to satire, from philosophical speculation to visionary illumination.\textsuperscript{105}

The tone of \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} varies, and the passages


of abstract thought are the only sections which become wearisome because of the repetitious flat style. This element of the poem especially needs editing, for the continuously changing scene helps maintain interest in the narrative of Rexroth's travels. Rexroth apparently is determined to express every facet of his philosophy and, as he says about the poetry of D. H. Lawrence, the high importance of what Rexroth has to say sometimes makes it difficult "to keep from being long-winded."\textsuperscript{106}

Rexroth seeks to denounce thoroughly and present a point by point alternative to the values of the dominant, predatory society, and his success in articulating such a position shows one way in which \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} has advanced beyond the viewpoint of \textit{The Phoenix and the Tortoise}. Both poems start with the rejection of society, but \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} is much more positive, seeking the shared joys of a community rather than a desperate act of self-sacrifice and emphasizing a strong sense of pleasure instead of martyrdom. The speculative passages predominate in \textit{The Phoenix and the Tortoise} because very little action occurs during the entire poem, and the meaning of many of them is quite difficult to determine because the strands of several ideas are often tightly knitted together in one stanza. Rather than depending heavily on association and juxtaposition, Rexroth in \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} states his thoughts in a clear, succinct, easily comprehensible manner.

These qualities indicate a more integrated personality, greater

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assurance and less worry and anguish than in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*,
a better balance between interest in the world and the self, and a sense
of optimum creativity. Several critics praise the vitality and richness
of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* despite disapproving of Rexroth's philo-
sophical viewpoint or metrical skill. Rexroth's abstract speculations
especially rankle the reviewer for the *London Times Literary Supplement*,
who describes them as the "crude ravings" of an amateur philosopher
unfortunately lacking a good university background, but he commends
nevertheless the poem's wide range of knowledge and interests, "robust
taste, and passages of acute observation." W. T. Scott criticizes
the prosaic, careless writing in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, but a large
amount of "bright observation and a cranky hard-headedness of intel-
ligence" convey the enjoyable presence of a uniquely self-sufficient
personality. Richard Eberhart notes that Rexroth's absolutism "in feeling
and idea" raises the "problem of belief," but Eberhart avoids this
difficulty by advising the reader simply to reject any unacceptable notions
and enjoy the "wealth of logically organized particulars," presented with
"freshness of insight and always some new excitement."109

The primary strength of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* is this plenty,
seemingly the product of Rexroth's most fruitful period. The ease and
clarity of the writing contrasts favorably with the struggle and obscurity

107"Poetic Impressions," *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 Feb. 1953,
p. 107.


109Richard Eberhart, p. 25.
of The Phoenix and the Tortoise, and the contrasts between the basic polarities of Rexroth's character, between theory and practice, ideal and real, contemplation and action, reflect the full responsiveness of the poet and provide maximum tension and impetus to the poem. Fifteen years separate the publication of The Dragon and the Unicorn /T952/ and the next longer poem, The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart /T967/, and during this interval the vigor of maturity gives way to the repose of old age.
CHAPTER V

THE HEART'S GARDEN, THE GARDEN'S HEART (1967)

Introduction

The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart (1967), Kenneth Rexroth's fifth longer poem, reflects a mood of withdrawal for personal reexamination and contemplation like that of Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn. The detachment at the end of The Dragon and the Unicorn, however, is only an interval of rest and renewal between periods of strenuous activity and involvement in the world, while Rexroth throughout The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart shows little interest in contemporary problems or further elaboration of his world view. The settings of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart reflect Rexroth's disengagement from much of life and the basically religious orientation of the poem. The first ten sections which form the main body of the work occur in and around the Zen Buddhist temple of Daikotu-ji in Kyoto, Japan, and the two addenda also take place in religious communities set aside for meditation: the location of "A Song at the Winepresses" is Mount Calvary Monastery near Santa Barbara, California, and that of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" is the chapel of the Cowley Fathers Order in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Rexroth also expresses an apparently new attitude in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart towards those visionary moments which have formed the core of the preceding longer poems, stating that "visions are/ The measure of the defect/ Of vision" (p. 285), "The desire for vision is/
The sin of gluttony" (p. 295), and "Ecstasy is luxury" (p. 300).\(^1\) The reduced range of Rexroth's interests and his critical remarks about vision could be a sign of a general lessening of vitality and a growing preoccupation with death. In the early parts of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, Rexroth expresses a poignant awareness of the comparatively few years remaining in his lifetime (pp. 284-85), a desire to return to an ominous "dark woman" who is the "gate/ To the root of heaven and earth" (p. 283), and a rather exhausted belief that all extremely emotional experiences, including love, "Activate nerves otherwise/ Never used and so are hard/ To recall" (p. 285).

A more charitable view of the poem's smaller scope and weaker dramatic impact is that Rexroth in his last longer poem seeks to concentrate exclusively on the fundamental qualities of existence. From this point of view, the adverse comments about vision actually signify a quest for a constant state of illumination rather than for suddenly overwhelming ecstasies. The poem's title could signify the desire to dwell on the ultimate source of objective reality and the longing for uninterrupted bliss. The same serenity lies at the center of each individual and at the foundation of being. Since the major aim of the longer poems is the creation of a philosophy of life and an integrated personality, *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* fittingly concludes the series because Rexroth discovers that the right manner of living is a continuous illumination of ultimate reality.

A closer examination of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* shows that Rexroth does have opposing points of view and that a dialectical approach to experience remains a part of his poetic technique.

The Damascan brothers are "still, really, arguing with each other, to the last page," but the restricted range of subject matter and a pervasive lassitude considerably lessen the vigor and impact of their debate in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* when compared with the more dynamic previous works. Rather than contrasting the active and passive sides of his character, Rexroth presents differing approaches to contemplation. The "dialogue concerning the nature of reality" in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* primarily involves two interpretations of existence both of which lead to an annihilation of the personality. One attitude reflects a disenchantment with the dialectical nature of phenomena, a weary longing for escape from the "twin seas of/ Being and not-being" (p. 288) by achieving an unconditional state of bliss. In Buddhist terms, Rexroth seeks release from Karma, the endless cycle of births and deaths, and absorption into Nirvana.

The other approach views the immediate world of the senses as itself ultimate reality and a potential source of continuous enlightenment rather than an unending, eventually tedious alternation from positive to negative, action to rest, being to becoming. The most explicit statement of this view occurs in Part VI when Rexroth says that the person who lives

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without grasping experiences the "immediate as the/ Ultimate" (pp. 294-95) and sees any object so clearly that "only its essence remains,/ Only its ultimate being" (p. 294). Although these two attitudes have a fundamentally different interpretation of the immediate world, both result in a kind of selflessness. One of the ironies of the complete poems is, therefore, that the final achievement of a fully integrated personality is the extinction of the self.

A fruitful way to examine The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart is to view it in terms of Rexroth's understanding of Japanese No drama, an aesthetic approach that seemingly also influences the experience in Golden Gate Park on Christmas Eve in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn (pp. 262-63). This viewpoint helps explain the comparative lack of dramatic conflict, identify some of the major symbols, and clarify Rexroth's intentions in the conclusion of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. Rexroth feels that No drama does not conform to the precepts set forth in Aristotle's Poetics but instead

creates an atmosphere . . . of unresolved tensions or longings or irresolutions, and this dramatic situation is resolved by an esthetic realization which evolves from the dramatic situation as its own archetype.

Rexroth compares the songs and the dance culminating a No play to a crystal of sugar dropping into a supersaturated solution--the dissolved sugar crystallizes around the introduced crystal until the solution is no longer saturated. What eventuates is not resolved climax but realized significance.4

In his discussion of Nō drama and in *The Heart's Garden*, Rexroth alludes to a Nō play entitled *Nishikigi* by Kanze Zeami, in which the souls of two dead lovers endlessly reenact the failure to consummate their romance until, as a result of the prayers of a wandering priest, they are

unbound, and reciprocally, realization of the meaning of being itself pervades and saturates the minds of the audience, and precipitates a crystal called release.5

Tensions and irresolutions occur in the first nine parts of *The Heart's Garden*, as Rexroth wavers between the desire for escape from the unending dichotomies of human existence and the inclination to embrace the ceaseless flow of phenomena as ultimate reality, between a weary longing for absolute bliss and a reluctance to forego entirely the pleasures and memories of the sensory world. Rexroth creates a girl working in the weavers' quarter of Kyoto just outside Daikotu-ji and her boyfriend, who lives in the same section and plays pachinko, a Japanese form of pinball, at night, to represent the lovers in *Nishikigi*. The sounds of her loom and the pachinko balls falling through the machine also signify the ceaseless generation of new life and the continuity of organic process with its innumerable strands both creating and fixing human destiny.

At the end of Part X, Rexroth imagines the consummation of the love between the weaving girl and her boyfriend occurring on the seventh day of the seventh month, the date of the Tanabata Festival in Japan, when

Altair, a bright star in the constellation Aquila, crosses the Milky Way once a year and joins Vega, a star in the constellation Lyra. This event which culminates The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart represents the release from the dead past symbolized by the dance at the end of Nishikigi and, through the imagery of the looms and pachinko balls, signals a return to the source of life and the creation of a new pattern for the future. As the lovers dance and the looms spin, the last clouds scatter and the full moon shines forth clearly. The conjunction of this symbol of visionary transcendence and final release from "this floating life" (p. 294) of dreams with the weaving of a new design is an attempt to crystallize the "supersaturated" atmosphere of the poem and a last affirmation of perhaps the central theme of the longer poems: "our experience of reality begins and ends in illumination."6

Part I

In Part I of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, Rexroth presents the setting and introduces several major images and themes. The stage of growth of the plants described in the first four lines shows that the time is late spring, and the types of musical instruments mentioned in the next three lines indicate that the country is Japan. The identification of aspects of nature with particular instruments implies that nature has a voice which speaks to the poet, and Part II confirms this suggestion when Rexroth tries to decipher the "language" (p. 284) of the waterfall.

Although nature always has spoken to Rexroth, the accent now is Japanese. Two of these instruments, the drums and the flute, are vital parts of the No drama, and a No play entitled Nishikigi alluded to later in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart (pp. 286, 296) reinforces the theme of souls striving desperately for release from passionate attachment to this world and entrance into the everlasting peace of Nirvana. In his introduction to a translation of several No plays, Arthur Waley notes that the sound of the flute occurs during a performance only at specific intervals, primarily the beginning and the end. This characteristic of No may have influenced The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart because Rexroth refers to these musical sounds in the opening lines and then in the climactic last section (p. 302).

Gathering wild plants for food while listening to the innermost recesses of his mind portrays Rexroth as an independent personality far removed from worldly affairs seeking the ultimate meanings of his own life. The music he listens to is enigmatic. The fact that it lies "Deep in his mind" and is "Lost far off in space and time" (p. 283) implies that it exists beneath the conscious mind and has associations with the origins of Rexroth's life. It may symbolize a perfect harmony like that of a child in the womb that quickly disappears as conscious awareness develops but persists as a dim memory of a vanished paradise.

The music Rexroth seeks also seems related to the "dark woman," the subject of seven lines in Part I translated from Chapter VI of the Tao Te Ching, an ancient Chinese document written according to legend by

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Lao Tzu. This dark woman reflects the myth of the earth mother, the ancient goddess from whom all things come and eventually return. As the lines from the *Tao Te Ching* state, she is the "inexhaustible" source of everything, but only if drawn out gently "like floss." This manner of approaching the dark woman illustrates the Taoist belief that one must yield to nature in order to obtain her secrets. Joseph Needham emphasizes this interpretation of the passage from the *Tao Te Ching* in *Science and Civilisation in China*. He claims that these lines reveal the "profound Taoist insight" that a state of "receptive passivity" is necessary for accurate scientific observation of phenomena, harmonious social relationships, and inner peace of mind.⁸

Rexroth is equally enthusiastic about the *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Arthur Waley as "The Way and Its Power." Rexroth states that stillness and inaction are the way to the *Tao*, to the "core of the transcendent experience."⁹ This approach resembles the process presented in Part V of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* of emptying the mind and immersing oneself in the void, and Rexroth feels that the *Tao Te Ching* teaches that the "enduring and effective power of the individual . . . comes from the still void at the heart of the contemplative."¹⁰ Yielding to experience rather than dominating it also has metaphysical implications, and one theme of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* is that approaching reality without grasping provides an ultimate knowledge of being (pp. 294-95). This idea


¹⁰Ibid., p. 10

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grows out of the philosophy presented in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, especially the assertion that love and contemplation can result in direct knowledge of all life, if they rise above "consequence/ Ignorance, appetite, and grasping/ Of possibility" (p. 262).

The translation from the *Tao Te Ching* also includes the theme of a return to darkness or the womb which symbolizes both the sexual act and death. The description of the dark woman as the "gate/ To the root of heaven and earth" (p. 283) recalls the erotic mysticism that is the foundation of Rexroth's philosophy, the view that sexual intercourse between a man and a woman most directly reveals the mystery of life (pp. 159, 162-63). As Rexroth says in a series of short poems entitled "Inversely, as the Square of Their Distance Apart,"

> Invisible, solemn, and fragrant,  
> Your flesh opens to me  
> in secret.  
> We shall know no further enigma.  
> After all the years there is nothing  
> Stranger than this. 11

Rexroth may hold this mystical belief because he finds in the sex act the momentary fusion of the two great forces which make up all existence: active and passive, male and female, Yang and Yin.

The dark woman can signify the earth which is the source and final destination of all life, and Rexroth's acute awareness in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* of aging supports the possibility that these lines from the *Tao Te Ching* also allude to death. Rexroth uses later in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* two myths which represent the idea

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of death as a reunion of lovers. One example of this theme is the Japanese legend that the Cowherd, representing the star Altair in the constellation Aquila, crosses the Heavenly River, or the Milky Way, once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month and reunites with his lover, the Weaving Girl, representing the star Vega in the constellation Lyra (pp. 300, 302, 305). The second illustration of this reunion is the return of Odysseus to Penelope at the end of the Odyssey (p. 303).

Rexroth apparently borrows this theme from some of the last poems written by D. H. Lawrence. In "Song of Death," Lawrence states that when the individual dies, he at last "finds the darkness that enfolds him into utter peace," an image which combines sexual and maternal associations. The title of another late poem, "The End, The Beginning," implies that death is a return to the source. This work states that death does not oppose life but is an integral part of being. Life would be unbearable unless there were an "absolute, utter forgetting/ and a ceasing to know." Lawrence associates death with sexual union involving a dark goddess in "Bavarian Gentians." While Lawrence lies in a sanatorium in southern France, the blue Bavarian gentians in his room become dark, smoking torches leading to the underworld. Lawrence asks for one of these flowers to guide him to that region where Persephone returns to the "arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again/ ... with his passion of the utter dark," in the "sightless realm where darkness is married to dark."


As the poem ends, Lawrence sets forth to be a "wedding-guest/ At the marriage of the living dark."\textsuperscript{14} Rexroth praises these poems for reminding the twentieth century that death remains the "oldest and most powerful of the gods" and summarizes the most important themes of Lawrence's poetry:

\begin{quote}
Death is the absolute, unbreakable mystery. Communion and oblivion, sex and death, the mystery can be revealed--but it can be revealed only as totally inexplicable.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The woman in the \textit{Tao Te Ching} is dark because she is mysterious, even in those activities where she is most intimately known: sex and death.

Rexroth moves abruptly from this shadowy female principle with possible metaphysical significance to an unnamed but specific woman who affects him immediately when he painfully recalls a yellow and green outfit of hers. The persistent heartache associated with this memory contrasts with the enlightenment promised by the dark woman, and the juxtaposition of these two figures recalls the theme often found in \textit{Nō} drama of the conflict between the desire for salvation and an attachment to a particularly intense past experience which prevents complete release from the sensory world and its endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.\textsuperscript{16} The


\textsuperscript{16}Kenneth Rexroth, "\textit{Nō} Plays," in \textit{The Elastic Retort}, pp. 146-47. In the introduction to \textit{The \textit{Nō} Plays of Japan} (New York: Grove Press, 1957), Arthur Waley's reconstruction of \textit{The Duchess of Malfi} by John Webster as a \textit{Nō} play illustrates the difference in approach from Western drama (pp. 53-54). In the same work, Waley briefly discusses in "Note on Buddhism" (pp. 57-59) the Buddhist influence on \textit{Nō} drama. Several plays appearing in \textit{Twenty Plays of the \textit{Nō} Theatre}, ed. Donald Keene (New York; London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), illustrate the conflict between the possibility of salvation and an attachment to the sensory world: \textit{The Sought-for Grave} (pp. 35-50), \textit{Komachi and the Hundred Nights} (pp. 51-63), \textit{The Brocade Tree} (\textit{Nishikigi}, pp. 81-97), and \textit{The Deserted Crone} (pp. 115-28).
presence of this theme adds an element of dramatic conflict in a poem which otherwise lacks the sharp contrast found in the preceding works of passionate involvement in the world and critical detachment from society. A tendency to dwell on past sorrows and joys which occasionally disturbs the strong desire for unruffled calm adds some tension to *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*.

Throughout *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, Rexroth uses juxtaposition like that of the passage from the *Tao Te Ching* and the allusion to the heartbreaking end of a love affair. Rexroth notes that this device occurs in Japanese poetry through the use of a *joshi*, or introductory verse, whose relevance to the rest of the poem at times is not immediately evident.17 A poem by Kakinomoto No Hitomaro is an example:

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The pheasant of the mountain, 
Tiring to the feet, 
Spreads his tail feathers. 
Through the long, long night
I sleep alone.18
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Rexroth says that introductory phrases like the first three lines of Hitomaro's poem have only an "emotional or metaphoric relevance" and introduce into a poem of a few syllables an "element of dissociation"19 very similar to that found in the work of such modern French poets as Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Apollinaire.20 One development of this type of


18ibid., p. 18.

19ibid., p. xvii.

verse was Cubist poetry, and the use of juxtaposition in *The Heart's Garden*, *The Garden's Heart* recalls Rexroth's second longer poem, *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* (1925-1927). *The Heart's Garden*, *The Garden's Heart* is much more readily understandable, however, because the narrative remains clear throughout the work, dissociation is not the primary means of expression but an occasional device, and when Rexroth does use dissociation, he deals with units of language that are comprehensible in themselves rather than with fragments of a sentence like phrases, clauses, or single verbs and substantives. He apparently still believes, however, that the dissociation and recombination of the elements of a poem is a valuable device because such juxtaposition creates new meanings, and in certain cases, like the poem by Hitomaro, generates a "complex of meanings"21 whose range is infinite.22 Rexroth feels that the method of writing poetry called superposition by Ezra Pound derived from the qualities of Japanese poetry and No drama, and as a result Pound created a type of verse whose language became a "vast field of metaphors in which relations could be established at the option of the poet to produce genuinely novel meanings."23

One example of the use of superposition or sudden juxtaposition in *The Heart's Garden*, *The Garden's Heart* occurs at the end of Part I when the painful memory associated with a woman's green and yellow outfit is followed immediately by the description of two aspects of the natural

21Ibid., p. 152.


setting:

The evergreen pines grow more
Green as Spring draws to an end.

Yellow rice blades in blue
water. (p. 283)

Within the context of the rest of Part I, these lines have various possible meanings. Both details present an ironic contrast between the setting of new growth in late spring and the aging poet. The "evergreen pines" could represent the enduring nature of Rexroth's heartbreak which nevertheless becomes even more intense in a season traditionally associated with romance. The "evergreen pines" growing yet "more/ Green" also may be Rexroth's attempt to include in the beginning of his poem an example of the special Japanese sensibility which would especially appreciate such a subtle observation. In Rexroth's translation, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, the speaker of the first poem describes "The snow falling, pure white,/ High on the peak of Fuji," and Rexroth notes that this "contrast of white on white" typifies the "kind of perception prized in Japanese poetry."24

The rather abrupt last line echoes the initial observation of Part I and gives some unity to this first section of the poem. This simple description of the young rice repeats the yellow color of the outfit in the preceding lines and may indicate that even though Rexroth travels to a new country, his sorrow merely is transplanted and remains clearly evident just beneath the surface of his mind. The fact that the rice plants lie submerged in the water, on the other hand, may signify Rexroth's desire to forget his disappointment by immersing himself in the quite

24Kenneth Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, pp. 3, 121.
different Japanese culture. Because this last line shows that the
growing season now begins, the final note of Part I could be the hopeful
sign that Rexroth also seeks to develop himself further during his visit
in Japan. Another positive interpretation is that this line reflects
the lesson of the passage from the Tao Te Ching that the individual should
become at one with nature by yielding to her, and if Rexroth responds
with this complete trust of life, he will grow as surely as the rice seedlings in the flooded fields.

Part II

Part II continues the introduction to The Heart's Garden. The
Garden's Heart as Rexroth asks once again the major questions that have
inspired all of the longer poems: "'Who/ Am I? What can I do? What
can I/ Hope?"' (p. 284). Regret and uncertainty are the persistent
refrain throughout Rexroth's review of his past, as he laments the failure to acquire sufficient knowledge and the inability to foresee the
future through the "smoke and mist" of a rapidly dissolving, increasingly
insubstantial life. Rexroth compares his sitting beside a waterfall "In
the hills above Kyoto" to "Kant on Euler's bridges/ Of dilemma in
Koenigsberg," a reference to a mathematical problem invented by Leonhard
Euler, an eighteenth-century Swiss mathematician, involving the seven
bridges which connect two islands of the Pregel River with the mainland
in Koenigsberg, the former name of a city then in East Prussia. The
problem was whether someone could "leave home, take a walk, and return,
This type of question involves "unicursal curves," that is, figures which can be traced with one continuous stroke. In explaining why a solution of this particular situation was impossible, Euler constructed principles which would apply for any closed network.

Koenigsberg also was the birthplace and lifelong residence of Immanuel Kant, and his punctual daily walks that became part of that city's folklore perhaps brought him in the vicinity of the seven bridges. Rexroth's association of Kant with Euler's mathematical problem recalls that philosopher's concern with the nature and limits of human reason. The image in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart suggests the intellect's desire for absolute truth, for conclusive answers to all problems, and its tendency to transform concrete reality into abstract conceptions to be dealt with on a purely logical basis, as illustrated by Euler's creation of a mathematical problem based on a peculiar topographical feature of an East Prussian city. Rexroth implies that the intellect stubbornly believes that final answers to such ultimate questions as "'Who/ Am I? What can I do? What can I/ Hope?" exist in some realm of pure thought, that

Somewhere in some topology  
The knots untie themselves,  
The bridges are all connected.  
(p. 284)

The bridges of Koenigsberg that a person cannot cross in a mathematically perfect fashion apparently symbolize those major issues of philosophy,

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such as the existence of God, immortality, and freedom of the will, that Kant proved cannot be answered conclusively by the theoretical reason but nevertheless continually concern mankind.

Rexroth's reference to Pilate, the symbol in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* of the denial and betrayal of love, implies that love rectifies the limitations of reason. Rexroth expresses this idea in Part III of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, stating that the "insoluble problems" (p. 172) of philosophy, including the "Ego and the other, the/ Freedom of the will, evil, /and/ Identity" (pp. 172-73), are meaningless from the viewpoint of the "fulfillment/ Of love" (p. 173). Yet as Part II of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* continues, Rexroth suddenly depreciates both love and vision, stating that especially strong emotions, including "love, and ecstasy" (p. 285), fade quickly from memory because of their very intensity. This apparent repudiation of earlier basic beliefs includes the visionary experiences which have been the core of his preceding longer poems, for Rexroth states that "visions are/ The measure of the defect/ Of vision" (p. 285).

This turnabout, however, is only apparent. Rexroth still distrusts the analytical reason while upholding the value of insight and love, but he now rejects any exceptionally intense states because such feelings actually reveal the spiritual impoverishment of most of that person's life. The suddenly piercing memory in Part I of a woman's yellow and green outfit shows that Rexroth still can easily recall unusually powerful emotions. The rest of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, most explicitly in the second addendum, "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" (pp. 306-07), demonstrates that love and vision are as central as ever to
Rexroth's world view, but his perspective has changed. The climax of The Dragon and the Unicorn occurs at Paestum, Italy, when Rexroth and his recent bride make love within the temple of Poseidon (pp. 200-03), and this experience reveals that during those especially important events of life which are uniform throughout the human race, "immanence and transcendence become one." A major theme of The Dragon and the Unicorn is the necessity for celebrating the sacramental nature of these rites of passage in opposition to the powerful force of the modern world which seeks to quantify and equate all human experience. Although Rexroth's aim now apparently is a similarly uniform succession of events, his specific goal, the abiding realization that the immediate is always the ultimate, still defies the dominant secular society.

In the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems, Rexroth says that after achieving the mystical vision culminating A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927), he realized that rapturous moments paradoxically indicate the absence of genuine insight. His remark in the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems that after completing the second poem the "lesson has been learned, the ladder has been climbed, and so is kicked away" echoes a statement by Ludwig Wittgenstein at the end of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus that the reader who fully understands the propositions in his work will use them "as steps--to climb up beyond them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed it." The ending of The Phoenix and the Tortoise and the climactic passages of


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The Dragon and the Unicorn indicate, however, that this outlook occurs for the first time in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. The dialectical nature of Rexroth's personality, fluctuating from dark periods of despair to moments of brilliant illumination, is clearly evident throughout The Phoenix and the Tortoise and The Dragon and the Unicorn, and the alternation of moods is a chief source of their creative energy. Although distrust of sudden illumination does not appear as early in the longer poems as Rexroth claims, certain changes gradually do occur. The visionary experiences presented in the poems following A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy are not always expressed in Christian terminology, and the tendency to render moments of vision solely through direct description of nature begins in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn.

The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart shows a marked decline of interest in metaphysical questions and social criticism, and in contrast to the elaboration in The Dragon and the Unicorn of a view of life embracing numerous aspects of experience, Part II of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart presents a simple interpretation of existence concisely summarized later in the poem by Rexroth:

He who lives without grasping Lives always in experience Of the immediate as the Ultimate. (pp. 294-95)

Thus the truly enlightened are not the mystics who repeatedly experience overwhelming moments of bliss but those persons whose illumination is so habitual that they
Always in light and so do
Not know it is there as
fishes
Do not know they live in
water. (p. 285)

This point of view recalls two other statements by Wittgenstein in the
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, that "eternal life belongs to those who
live in the present" and that the "solution of the problem of life is
seen in the vanishing of the problem."28 Rexroth's aim as stated in
Part II of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart apparently is the same
as that which he ascribes to the poems of Tu Fu: the "vision of spiri­
tual reality is immanent and suffuses every item presented to the senses."
A major theme of Tu Fu's poetry, that "values are the way we see things,"29
applies both to Rexroth as observer and poet in Japan and to the reader
of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. Not only each village, but
every moment is "Its own illimitable Buddha world" (p. 285). If a person
turns away from the crucial issues of the day which loom overhead like
"giant cypresses," he will find in the most mundane situations a countless
number of valuable and exhilarating details, "white stars/ Of dwarf iris
everywhere" at his feet, an image recalling the phosphorescent spiders
shining in the "dusty/ Gravel" (p. 280) at the end of The Dragon and the
Unicorn. Such a briefly stated philosophy of life seems necessarily
inadequate, but Rexroth perhaps believes that an uncomplicated, succinctly
articulated orientation provides greater freedom and range than an
elaborately detailed view with modifications for every contingency, just
as the "light, cheap, paper" kites float easily during the celebration of

28Ibid., pp. 233, 235.
Boys' Day, while the "more durable cloth ones/ Hardly lift and sway at all" (p. 285).

In a poem published in 1940 and entitled "A Lesson in Geography," Rexroth states that

There are rocks
On the earth more durable
Than the configurations of heaven.30

These lines provide a transition in Part II from the hills above Kyoto to the garden of the Daisen-in designed in the sixteenth century by Sōami within the Daitoku-ji, or Zen Buddhist temple, in Kyoto.31 The Daisen-in is a dry garden composed of stones, sand, and shrubs which reproduces in miniature a natural landscape and provides an object of meditation within the temple. This garden is the center of Rexroth's activities in Japan and one meaning of the poem's title. The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart seeks to discover the meaning at the heart of the garden's simple design and how it conforms to the soul of each individual. The allusion to the earlier poem, "A Lesson in Geography," partly indicates the importance of this garden. In "A Lesson in Geography," Rexroth appears as a doomed creature in a universe of ceaseless change and no apparent purpose, symbolized by the stars of the heavenly constellations that inexorably "drift apart." Overcome by the "thought of death," his only


recourse is to fix his eyes upon the "durable stone/ That speaks and hears as though it were myself." As in this earlier work, the stones in the garden at Daisen-in may yield some lasting value to the poet who approaches even closer to death.

Throughout The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, Rexroth juxtaposes images and allusions to classical Japanese poetry and drama with the contemporary setting. While two birds closely associated with the Japanese poetry, the uguisu and the cuckoo, sing as they do in the earliest poems, the swallows mate on the modern "telephone wires" (p. 286). Rexroth hears just outside the temple in the weavers' section of the city "thousands of home looms" which work throughout the night, and this sound recalls the No drama entitled Nishikigi in which the ghosts of two lovers endlessly repeat the rituals of their frustrated courtship. The suitor places colored sticks before her funeral cave as he did in front of her gate for a thousand nights, while she weaves a narrow cloth whose edges, like the hearts of the lovers, cannot meet. At the end of Nishikigi, the prayers of a wandering priest who encounters by chance the ghosts finally release them from their fate. The "throb and clack" of the home looms at work recur throughout The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart.


33Kenneth Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, p. xiv.

Heart, apparently symbolizing the world of organic process, the endless interaction of consequence and possibility from which a weary Rexroth at times seeks disentanglement by achieving a state of constant bliss, but to which he repeatedly is drawn with its appeal of continually unfolding life.

Rexroth's description near the end of Part II of the temple grounds at Daitoku-ji shows that the world of becoming, constantly active with the germination of new life, and the still realm of total bliss are ultimately one. Rexroth reveals the harmonious coexistence of these two worlds by stating that lusting creatures like the goldfish, turtle, and pigeons actually protect the highest revealed truths of Buddhism. Like the goldfish in the moat, "red/As fire" (p. 286), the Buddha word, the essence of the Buddha's message of salvation to mankind,

Is burning like the dry grass on
The Indian hills and like the stars.

This comment is paradoxical because although the Buddha claimed that the burning desire that consumes man causes all suffering, these lines imply that the truth of Buddhism perishes quickly and wastes away like all material things in the universe. This paradox may illustrate Rexroth's belief that supreme enlightenment is beyond qualification and defies all the laws of logic and conventions of language. Not even the most abstract categories can grasp the nature of reality, which lies "beyond being and not being; existence and essence; being and becoming."35

Another possible explanation of this seemingly contradictory statement is the conviction presented in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn that the "still void behind being and not being" which corresponds to the Buddhist concept of Nirvana is both nothingness and, like a womb, the ultimate source of all life. Therefore the indiscriminate mating of the birds illustrates acting in keeping with the Buddha's spirit because it is totally in harmony with the birds' basic nature. In a poem entitled "It Is a German Honeymoon," Rexroth celebrates the exciting flight of the rufous hummingbird in space, mentioning a comment by the painter Morris Graves that birds are divine beings because they "'live in a world/ Without Karma.'" They have escaped the endless cycle of death and rebirth because their existence is perfectly in accord with being, characterized by

No grasping,
No consequence, only the
Grace of the vectors that form
The lattices of the unending
Imponderable crystal.

This crystal is the "Invisible elastic/ . . . womb of space," seemingly the same as the "Great Void" protected by the "lewd/ Pigeons" (p. 287) in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. The flight of the birds apparently represents an immediate and instinctive response to the dynamics of life without attempting to coerce existence for personal advantage. The answer to the question, "'Who/ Am I?'" (p. 284) consists of turning from preoccupation with oneself to an awareness of the "webs/ Of ten thousand lines of force" (p. 287) which define the person. This

36Ibid.

response removes the burden of assuming total responsibility for the content of one's life and encourages a yielding to the flow of experience which sacrifices guilt and gain for a sense of oneness with nature. This approach to life seemingly leads to the disappearance of the self, but Rexroth's championing of the mating birds also reflects an aging man's preoccupation with sexual vitality. By harmonizing the procreative force in nature with spiritual truth, Rexroth sanctions the gratification of basic appetites without sacrificing the satisfaction of withdrawing from the trivial affairs of men.

Rexroth presents three images illustrating the view that the individual is the shifting product of the various forces surrounding him rather than a static entity that persists unchanged in all environments. The first example from nature is the garden of the Daisen-in, and the last two reflect the Japanese setting:

Rocks surrounded by currents
Of raked gravel. Stripes of tigers
Playing in the bamboo shade.
Lichens on ruined dragon stones. (p. 287)

Rexroth then quotes a poem whose theme is common in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, the nostalgia of the wandering exile from the imperial court. Rexroth may feel similarly removed from excitement and glory, but the final lines of Part II describing the water ouzel indicate that obscurity and distance from the centers of worldly affairs is not only acceptable but an integral aspect of the pattern of his life. Rexroth apparently sees a resemblance between his withdrawal and the water ouzel or dipper, that builds its nest "behind the/ Waterfall" and
walks on the bottom of the rushing stream. In both instances, the water ouzel is largely invisible and somewhat amazingly survives the "torrent" by complete immersion within nature. The conclusion of Part II notes that a "different species" of water ouzel inhabits the region around the Kaweah River in Sequoia National Park, a frequent campsite for Rexroth and the scene of the final portion of The Dragon and the Unicorn (p. 275). The persistence of the water ouzel shows a continuity in Rexroth's life, and the integrated personality which it implies perhaps best answers the questions about personal identity which initiated this part of the poem (p. 284).

Part III

Part III illustrates Rexroth's habit of reversing two aspects of an image, a tendency also exemplified in the title of the poem, The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. This device is at times irritating because it seems to be an easy method of expanding the poem while suggesting a possibly specious profundity, and repeated reliance on this technique indicates a decline in Rexroth's poetic inspiration. Certain of Rexroth's beliefs, especially those influenced by Buddhism, do give some religious sanction to this way of interpreting experience. The compatibility between the rutting birds, burning goldfish and the supreme truths of Buddhism set forth in Part II is an earlier example of this viewpoint. Rexroth apparently feels that one way to communicate the insight that ultimate reality exists beyond any attempt to divide existence into mutually exclusive categories like being and not-being is to advocate both sides of a dichotomy. If penetrated deeply enough, the void brings forth
an infinitude of universes; Nirvana, the state of absolute bliss, is equivalent to samsara, the eternal cycle of suffering; extinction of the self and release from the cycle of reincarnation is the same as compassion for all sentient beings. In Part V of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, Rexroth expresses a similar view, but he gives dynamism and credence to this approach by having one side of the polarity evolve gradually into its opposite: "The world flows from the void, the void/ Drinks up the world" (p. 250). In *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, however, the simultaneous affirmation of logically contradictory positions may repulse the reader with the appearance of mere linguistic trickery rather than direct him to the experience which resides beyond all dualities.

One example in Part III of reversing the terms of an image involves the mountain and the sea. Midway through Part III, Rexroth says,

Weary of the twin seas of Being and not-being, I Long for the mountain of bliss Untouched by the changing tides, (p. 288)

and he concludes this section by stating,

Tired of the twin peaks of plus And minus, I float in the Unruffled sea. (p. 289)

The meaning of these poetic figures seems clear: Rexroth wishes to penetrate beyond the polarities which make up the appearance of life in order to obtain the peace of constant bliss. The ease with which Rexroth changes the parts of the image implies an awareness of the inadequacy of language to communicate such an experience of rapture.

Earlier passages in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, how-
ever, claim that the world of sensory phenomena, like the mountain village in Part II (p. 285), is ultimate reality, and the individual therefore should seek to immerse himself so completely in nature that he becomes united with the flow of experience, living unconsciously within illumination as fish in water (p. 285) or birds in air (pp. 286-87). The contradiction between these passages indicates Rexroth's shifting attitude in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* toward the sensory world. He apparently cannot remain content with the goal of oneness with natural process, which would mean accepting the cycles of "Being and not-being" (p. 288) that he longs to escape. Rexroth's description early in Part III of geological processes illustrates the cyclical change that characterizes nature. The same water that builds a mountain later erodes it, that digs out deep canyons will eventually fill them, and there is a constant transition from organic to inorganic life, from "bones and mud" to stone, from the living plant to the fossilized resin.

The ceaseless cycles of life also reveal the power of nature over man, the inevitable ruin and return to nature of the stairs and walls of the grandest palace. A keen sense of mortality apparently makes Rexroth hesitate before embracing nature, for his own life seems as "frail as a petal in/ A world like an insect's shell" (p. 289). Just as the sound of the evening temple bell scatters the peach petals on the stream, the thought of spiritual bliss beyond all the conditions of earthly existence temporarily overcomes Rexroth's desire to yield and float with the river of life.

The conclusion of Part III presents another belief of Rexroth's that the state of bliss lies deep within the individual and despite being
hidden by the countless distractions of the world and the entanglements of one's own thoughts, this "one pearl" always shines "Deep in the heart" (p. 288). At the end of Part III, Rexroth partakes of the healing and purifying properties of water, and he finally achieves the bliss he has longed for, returning to a state like that of the newly born infant, as he washes his

body, spotless from
Its creation, in radiant
Waters, virgin and electric
From the earth womb, pillowed on
Water, a pebble in my mouth.
(p. 289)

The pebble may allude to the pigeons begging in the "gravel garden," filling their stomachs with "uncut stones" (p. 287). Several passages in The Dragon and the Unicorn refer to the uncut stone, a Taoist symbol of returning to a state of unlimited potentiality and simplicity (pp. 156, 200, 278) like that of the birds, completely at one with nature and the elements. Another Taoist symbol of this pure condition is the infant, signifying the individual's "original nature before it was tampered with by knowledge and restricted by morality." The immaculate body Rexroth assumes in the hot spring is an outward manifestation of an inner perfection, the pearl glowing in the depths of the heart, which each person carries within him from the moment of conception.


\[\text{39Compare the statement by Rexroth that each person has at the "final core of self a crystal from which the whole manifold of the personality develops," in An Autobiographical Novel (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. v.}\]

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Part IV

The conflict between yielding to the forces of life and the desire to transcend them continues in Part IV. Rexroth presents this contrast in terms of two opposing elements: water which

Flows around and over all
Obstacles, always seeking
The lowest place, (p. 290)

and an "invisible light" that "swarms/ Upward without effort." The movement of the water forms part of the pattern of the universe, and Rexroth stresses its inevitable descent "Towards the sea" apparently symbolizing man's passage toward death and reabsorption into the matrix of all being. The tendency of water to seek the lowest level is a Taoist symbol for acting in harmony with nature, yielding to rather than dominating the forces of existence.40

Even though Rexroth at times advocates this idea,41 a strong part of his character resists this passive acceptance of the mystery of coming to be and passing away, and the description of the unseen light which "moves reciprocally/ To the tumbling water" passionately expresses his desire to transcend the fate of man. Light throughout Rexroth's poetry has represented the visionary experience, and the association of this particular light with the sound of voices "all chanting/ In a turmoil of peace" further emphasizes the spiritual nature of this force. Rexroth indicates that the ascending light is an inherent part of human

nature, speaking in the "molecules/ Of your blood, in the pauses/ Between your breathing," and therefore just as integral an aspect of the universe as the contrasting movement of the water. Rexroth's opening remark that water obeys the "laws/ That move the sun and the other/ Stars" (p. 289) recalls similar statements in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* that identify the ultimate creative principle of the universe as love (pp. 164, 202, 248), and elsewhere in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, he equates love with the highest vision (pp. 157, 268). These beliefs imply that the unstoppable light in Part IV of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* which moves against the water is love, man's response to the threat of total extinction, the defiant "radiation/ Into the empty darkness/ Between the stars."

Although Rexroth says that he is weary of the "twin peaks of plus/ And minus" (p. 289) and *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* lacks the dynamism of the conflicting forces in the preceding poems, the description of the "tumbling water" and the "invisible light" (p. 290) shows that the dialectical approach to life remains part of Rexroth's personality and the source of his best poetry.

**Part V**

Part V presents the theme that there are an unlimited number of saviors promising peace for the myriad souls that seek release from the world's suffering. A group of birds mentioned in a Japanese poem by Otomo Nō Yakamochi (p. 292) represents the many unhappy souls, and the infinite number of bodhisattvas, individuals who on the brink of Nirvana renounce final enlightenment "Until all sentient creatures are saved"
symbolize escape from pain. These bodhisattvas include the many manifestations of Kwannon (or Kannon), the Japanese form of the Buddhist god of mercy, and the various female bodhisattvas who in their incarnations also provide salvation. At the end of Part I of The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1940-1944) (pp. 72-73), Rexroth also associates these Japanese birds with the savior deities Kwannon and Amida, the Japanese name for Amitābha, another Buddhist god of unlimited compassion who appears later in Parts VIII (p. 299) and IX (p. 301) of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart.

Rexroth translates Yakamochi's poem in Part V:

As my horse's hooves
Splashed through the clear water
Of the ford at Sado the
Ten thousand birds rose
Crying
About us. (p. 292)

In this and the following parts of the poem, the souls that roam throughout the universe unable to find peace, even after death, are represented by the "Ten thousand," or, in some instances, the "thousand birds" (p. 291), and the repetition of Chidori, the Japanese word for this type of bird in the original poem, followed by the name of the merciful god Kannon. The combination of these two Japanese words, "Chidori, chidori,/ Kannon, kannon" (p. 292), apparently attempts to evoke the birds' cries. Another example of this state of unease and suffering is the torment of the ghostly lovers in Nishikigi (p. 286).

Throughout Part V of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, Rexroth uses very large numbers to describe aspects of Japan:
Forty million school children
Sightseeing. Forty thousand
Old ladies praying. (p. 291)

Japan is an island empire
With twenty million women
Each with ten thousand giggles
Every day. (p. 292)

This device apparently reflects the unlimited aspects of being, which
has both bad and good effects. Rexroth believes that each instant has
ramifications, and this quality of experience can produce many oppor­
tunities for entanglement in the immense web of consequence and possi­
bility and create ceaseless diversions from the calm center of being.
The contemplative must overcome such distraction in order to obtain
vision:

Where no waves
Wash the myriad sands
The thousand birds do not
come. (p. 291)

The infinite nature of existence also means that "There is no number for
the/ Saviors of the universes" (p. 294). One example is Kwan­non, "He who
hears/ The crying of all the worlds" (p. 292). Symbolizing his ability
to take on unlimited forms is a statue with

Thirty three thousand thirty three
Heads, each with a hundred arms
And eleven faces, (pp. 291-92)

and all these faces are "Unlike" (p. 292).

Representing the female bodhisattvas in Part V are the Indian
goddess Marichi and a Japanese art student. Rexroth's description of
Marichi and her temple indicates the varied avatars she can assume:

At the end of an avenue
Of boars, like a line of sphinxes,
Is the temple of Marichi,
Patroness of geisha and whores,
And goddess of the dawn.  (p. 292)

A comment in the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems also stresses her protean nature. She has "three heads: a sow, a woman in orgasm and the Dawn," suggesting the wide range of symbolic associations with woman, including coarse sensual gratification, sexual ecstasy, and ethereal beauty. The latest manifestation of the savior goddess is the long-haired art student who tells Rexroth she was formerly a "great Indian prostitute/ Who was really a incarnate/ Bodhisattva" (p. 292).

Before concluding this section with the explicit statement that the "Saviors of the universes" (p. 294) are infinite, Rexroth returns to the garden at Daisen-in and introduces a theme amplified later in Part VII of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. After describing the simple design of the garden, Rexroth mentions that Devadatta, the rival and attempted murderer of his cousin, the Buddha, who tried to subvert the monastic community left to carry on the Buddha's teaching after his death, has thrown onto the gravel garden an "empty/ Film box, red and yellow,/ The colors of fire" (p. 293), which is the Buddhist symbol of the turbulent passions of man. As Rexroth walks home after leaving the garden at Daisen-in, he sees

The greatest of the gravel
Gardens of enlightenment,
A tire tracked gas station
yard
With seven empty oil cans,
And a rack of used tires, and
A painting of an imbecile
Tiger in red and yellow fire.

Rexroth apparently means that for the truly illuminated, enlightenment resides in all objects, not just in special sanctuaries like the monastery.
at Daitoku-ji. The "hidden power" (p. 293) of the vision acquired by Rexroth in contemplation is so great that its influence spreads easily beyond the temple grounds and even touches such contemptible products of capitalism as a Kodak film box and an Exxon gas station. The emphasis on the colors of fire recalls the statement in Part II that the lasciviousness of the birds and goldfish paradoxically safeguards the truths of Buddhism (pp. 286-87). The litter on the revered garden does not offend Rexroth or violate his meditation because the apparent disrespect for the special spiritual significance of the garden reveals to him the profound insight that no spot is holier than another, but all life is equally sacred.

Part VI

As twilight falls in Part VI on the final day of spring, the "Eve of Ch'ing Ming" (p. 294), an ancient Chinese spring festival whose name means "Clear Bright," Rexroth has observed "One more/ Clear, bright day in this floating life." The last phrase alludes to the Japanese school of art named Ukiyo-e, extending from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. One translation of Ukiyo-e is "Pictures of the Floating World," a reference to the evanescent quality of the world of everyday life and common pleasures depicted by this school. This artistic style grew out of the rise of the urban merchant classes in Japan and reached its highest expression in the woodblock prints of Utamaro, Hokusai, and Hiroshige.42

Rexroth's use of the phrase, "this floating life," illustrates the complex attitude in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* toward the phenomenal world. At times he emphasizes the evanescence of life, as "frail as a petal in/ A world like an insect's shell" (p. 289), either quietly appreciating its fleeting beauty or, haunted by its impermanence, longing for an imperishable bliss beyond the reach of its "changing tides" (p. 288). The other view of the sensory world evident occasionally in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* receives in Part VI its most explicit statement:

If belief and anxiety,  
Covetousness and grasping,  
Be banished from experience  
Of any object whatever,  
Only its essence remains,  
Only its ultimate being.  
He who lives without grasping  
Lives always in experience  
Of the immediate as the  
Ultimate. (pp. 294-95)

The same ideal appears in Part V of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* as an integral part of Rexroth's definition of love and contemplation (pp. 262, 263-64, et passim). This viewpoint resolves the dilemmas of the nature of knowledge and being with the Buddhist ethic that the elimination of craving for sense objects brings salvation from misery. This "grasping" causes attachment to these objects and continues the cycle of birth and death with its attendant suffering. Therefore, Rexroth states that the solution

Of the problem of knowing

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And being is ethical.
Epistemology is moral.
(p. 295)

Rexroth in Part II raised this "problem of knowing/ And being"
when he asked, "'Who/ Am I? What can I do? What can I/ Hope?!'"
(p. 284) and the only satisfactory answer to these questions is a moral
way of life rather than a philosophical position. The metaphysical
quandaries symbolized by the seven bridges of Koenigsberg can never be
resolved intellectually, but embracing reality without reservations,
accepting life without trying to grasp its meaning, completely bypasses
such dilemmas. Rexroth responds in Part VI to the attempt to untie all
the philosophical knots (p. 284) with the cryptic statement that the
"knot tied without a rope/ Cannot be untied" (p. 295). This remark
occurs in Chapter XXVII of the Tao Te Ching, whose theme is that perfect
activity leaves no track behind it.\textsuperscript{44} The sage who withdraws from society
in quest of inner salvation creates an imperishable work which the world
cannot destroy.

Rexroth's description in Part VI of the "rutting cock pigeons"
(p. 295) who are fiercely possessive about their territory and their
mates seemingly illustrates the "Covetousness and grasping" (p. 294) that
keep man from enlightenment. This interpretation, however, conflicts
with Rexroth's favorable view of these birds' activities earlier in Part
II (p. 287). The contradiction may illustrate the unavoidable intellec-
tual difficulties which merely impede true insight. Another possible

\textsuperscript{44}Arthur Waley, The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching
and Its Place in Chinese Thought, p. 177.
answer is that such qualities as "belief and anxiety,/ Covetousness and grasping" function only on the human level, and ascribing these responses to animals overlooks what Rexroth calls the "distinction between the natural order and the moral order of men,"45 which he warns against in Part III of The Dragon and the Unicorn (pp. 218-19). The cock pigeons do indicate that "Covetousness and grasping" are inherent aspects of animal life, but only man has the moral responsibility to go beyond these basic instincts and reach a deeper understanding of reality.

Rexroth's use of the word "banish" (p. 294) implies that this response is an act of will, and a clear perception of existence results from an inward disposition, a changed orientation toward life that is illustrated by the lifting of the haze when Rexroth says a "few words" (p. 294). This action also implies that the ultimate realization of this new perspective is that each person is a bodhisattva. As Rexroth says in discussing the Bhagavad-gita, "You are ... reality, truth and bliss--and always have been."46 Thus exceptional states of vision are not only superfluous but evidence of the "sin of gluttony" (p. 295). As Part VI ends, the awe accompanying special religious experiences comes naturally with the sunset, as much a part of the natural order of events as the bush warbler singing "by the temple/ Of the Buddha of Healing."


Part VII

Part VII develops themes either introduced or foreshadowed earlier in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*. Rexroth elaborates the significance of the sound of the home looms briefly mentioned in Part II (p. 286), and he repeats the themes that the meaning of existence does not lie in philosophical reasoning but in the untroubled acceptance of the flow of life, that the potential for enlightenment is inherent equally in all experience and not confined to religious locations or events, and that the immediate is the ultimate.

Rexroth refers again in Part VII to the weavers near Daikotu-ji in order to create a modern counterpart to the two lovers in *Nishikigi*. The happy outcome of that No drama will be paralleled at the end of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* when this modern couple consummate their love (p. 303). Rexroth prepares in Part VII for this conclusion by mentioning that the weavers in this quarter of Kyoto are making obis, broad sashes worn over the main kimono, and the girl who represents the lover in *Nishikigi* weaves with them at night. Rexroth then presents the thoughts of the girl's boyfriend who works during the day at the looms and spends his nights playing pachinko.

The looms and the pachinko games symbolize the interplay of chance and fate in human destiny. Any act is one out of countless possibilities which occur completely according to chance, but once that action takes place, it has irreversible consequences which irrevocably fix a person's future. The steel balls in the pachinko machines represent the "myriad gonads of the/ Human race through history" (p. 296), and Rexroth's description of them indicates the highly random process of reproduction.
Only one among thousands of sperm reaches an e.g., and even when germination occurs, the male element cannot bring forth new life but, having fulfilled its purpose, must fall from existence, just as each person eventually falls from history. The "male will to achievement" is at the mercy of circumstance, and "female continuity, organic process"\(^{47}\) is a grim reminder that past events continually and irreversibly determine the present and future.

Rexroth imagines a persistent refrain for any individual's life, "'If/ Only I could somehow make/ Yesterday today'", (p. 296), which is the pessimistic response to what Rexroth calls in The Dragon and the Unicorn the "necessitous character/ Of consequence," (p. 129), expressed in the Western world by the concept of sin, in the Eastern by that of Karma. Another expression of this deterministic view of life in the refrain sung by the Parcae, or Fates, at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis in Poem LXIV by Catullus: "Currite ducentes subtегmina, currite fusi," which Robinson Ellis translates, "'do you, ye spindles, run on, drawing out as threads /The destinies which are to come.'"\(^{48}\) This refrain recalls that of Spenser's "Prothalamion," "Sweet Themmes, runne softly, till I end my Song," and within the context of Catullus' poem, it is propitious because the child of Peleus and Thetis will be Achilles. Rexroth, however, apparently uses this phrase to express a basically tragic view of the human condition, similar to his definition of fate as the


multiplication of the corrupt will by itself, as it raises itself, step by step, to second, third, fourth, and higher powers of entanglement.49

At the end of a long, tortured meditation on human destiny in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, Rexroth also sees life as the defeat of quality by quantity, of the "determinable future" by the "Irreparable past," and he uses the same refrain as that in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart: "'I should have,/ I could have--It might have been different'" (p. 90). The only solution Rexroth finds in The Phoenix and the Tortoise is a Christ-like, personal assumption of unlimited liability for the infinite potential of each instant (pp. 89-91), and in the final portion of Part VII of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, Rexroth again goes a step beyond a completely dismal assessment of human existence. Just as there are as many possibilities for salvation as there are for pain and suffering (pp. 291-94), the sensory world is the source for countless experiences of illumination as well as entangling consequences. Rexroth's attitude thus shifts again from despair and weariness toward the phenomenal world to a willing immersion in the cycle of life and affirmation of the immediate as the ultimate.

The comic picture of the young man "working himself/ Into a lather" (p. 297) expounding the esoteric meaning of the garden at Daisen-in while failing to see the beauty of either the garden or the five girls listening to his lecture illustrates Rexroth's belief that philosophical speculation inhibits a direct awareness of reality. The baby and the

mating birds that seemingly lack reverence for this shrine realize that all life is equally sacred and do not need hours of meditation to know that the famous garden is actually "all/ Gravel and moss and rocks and clipped/ Shrubbery." If all life is equally sacred, then any object or event can express the "'Wholeness, harmony, and radiance'"50 characteristic of a work of art. Just as Rexroth suddenly discovers that an apparently common swallow-tailed butterfly is instead "one of the rarest that flies" (p. 298), he also sees, as if with new vision, the great beauty of the most ordinary objects. A clerk's handwritten notice of certain items for sale is one of the best examples of calligraphy at Daikotu-ji, and the "three neat piles of rubbish" left outside the wall equal the splendor of the garden within.

This cleansed vision of the sensory world resembles that of the bodhisattva, the being who turns away from Nirvana, vowing not to enter final bliss until all creatures can achieve salvation. The doctrine of the bodhisattva adds a compassionate side to the Buddhist view that enlightenment consists of escape from bondage to the wheel of birth and death. Therefore, the clearest sign of having experienced ultimate reality is reverence for all living beings. The concept of the bodhisattva is compatible with the belief in an ultimate reality transcending the "data of sense or the constructions of experience and reason,"51 because the bodhisattva, as Rexroth points out, makes his vow to take with him


into Nirvana all sentient beings with a

smile of "indifference," realizing that all beings, animals, flowers, things, atoms, have the Buddha nature, and yet realizing that there is neither . . . Buddha nor not-Buddha, neither Nirvana nor not-Nirvana, neither illusion nor not-illusion.\(^{52}\)

The bodhisattva thus acts with compassion for living creatures who do not need it. This doctrine enables Rexroth to find bliss in seemingly exclusive areas, in the "Unruffled sea" (p. 289) of Nirvana beyond the uncertainties of appearance and also in the casual occurrences which make up the world of contingency.

As Part VII ends, a sense of nearly slumberous peace prevails, and the last lines convey the mood of universal well-being by describing a series of mudras, ritual gestures of the hands which define a particular religious attitude or attribute of a deity. The first four gestures probably refer to some specific deity like the Kwannon of 33,033 different heads mentioned in Part V (pp. 291-92), but Rexroth may also accept literally the belief that each person is a "Buddha-to-be," or bodhisattva. The first person pronouns may stand for Rexroth, signifying an inner power like that in Part VI which lifted the haze (p. 294). The last mudra reflects the other side of Buddhism as presented in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, the quest for the "'clear void'" (p. 299) at the heart of both the universe and the contemplative.

Part VIII

The sunset that began in Part VII ends in the opening lines of Part VIII, followed by the rising of the full moon in the night which is the setting for Parts VIII-IX of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart. Part VIII concerns Rexroth's continuing debate about the true meaning of illumination. After contrasting the restless souls with those who find bliss, Rexroth again criticizes the quest for visionary experience. Even though Rexroth knows that the world of "man's affairs" (p. 360) has no real value, his own heart apparently remains troubled, until a seemingly trivial act of compassion opens the way for the revelation which ends the poem.

In the beginning of Part VIII, the rising full moon symbolizes the "salvation of Amida" (p. 299), the Japanese name of the savior deity, Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. The worshippers of Amida believe that he resides in the western paradise awaiting all who have faith in him, and the moon as a symbol of the peace promised by Amida occurs also in Part I of The Phoenix and the Tortoise (pp. 72-73). The lines in Part VIII of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart referring to Amida are an interpretation of an anonymous Japanese poem in which the names of various occupations replace the birds and the insect in the original version:

Though the purity
Of the moonlight has silenced
Both nightingale and
Cricket, the cuckoo alone
Sings all the white night.53

53Kenneth Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, p. 10.
In his notes to this poem, Rexroth explains that the nightingale (actually an uguisu, or bush warbler, in the original poem) can signify a householder, a cricket, a monk or nun, and a cuckoo a prostitute. The four lines following this poem in Part VIII illustrate the same technique, with Rexroth substituting his own symbolic interpretation for the natural images in the original Japanese poem:

The purity of the moonlight,
Falling out of the immense sky,
Is so great that it freezes
The water touched by its rays.

The same procedure appears in the next five lines of Part VIII, which present those individuals still lost in the "stormy ocean of/ Karma" (pp. 299-300):

The guardians of the gates
Of life cannot sleep for the
Cries of the winged bundles
Of consequences that fly from
Life to life, never finding
bliss. (p. 300)

The original poem by Minamoto No Kanemasa reads:

Guardian of the gate
Of Suma, how many nights
Have you awakened
At the crying of the shore birds
Of the Isle of Awaji?

In his notes, Rexroth says that the word translated "shore birds" is chidori, which means sandpipers, plovers, birds like our killdeer and phalaropes. It also means, and is written with the characters for,

\[54\text{Ibid.}, \ pp. \ 121-22.\]
\[55\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 11.\]
\[56\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 37.\]
"the thousand birds."\textsuperscript{57}

These thousands of birds and the word \textit{chidori} appear in Part V (pp. 291-92), and Rexroth repeats this word as the particular cry of the restless souls.

Three other sounds contrast with the "Immense, incomprehensible/Silence" (p. 299) associated with the full moon of peaceful bliss:

\begin{quote}
The looms and pachinko balls
Echo each other and the
\textit{nightjar}
Cries in the incense scented
Garden as the moon shadows
move. (p. 300)
\end{quote}

The first two sounds occur initially in Part VII (p. 296), and echoing throughout the night, they represent the clamorous, everchanging processes of life which contrast with the quiet, unchanging rapture of contemplation. The \textit{nightjar} is the name of a nocturnal bird with a harsh cry that apparently signifies unrest in Part VIII. In a poem translated by Rexroth entitled "Hysteria," the Chinese poetess Chu Shu Chen describes the disturbing effect of the onset of spring, as the loveliness of nature makes more poignant her own unhappiness. At one point she says, "The crying nightjars terrify me."\textsuperscript{58} This translation may explain why the nightjar, or nighthawk, characterized in \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} as "Those happy, happy birds" (p. 275), disturbs the silence of the night. In Part VIII of \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart}, it cries in the "incense scented/ Garden" (p. 300), and this detail implies memories of

\textsuperscript{57}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 124.

romance and sensual pleasure that could agitate the "unruffled" surface of meditation.

Until this point in Part VIII, Rexroth's intention apparently has been to contrast the inestimable pleasure of visionary bliss with the painful entanglement in the world of consequence which blocks such rapture. However, Rexroth suddenly criticizes the quest for vision as he did earlier in Part VI (p. 295). The preceding description of the full moon as an "orb of wonder, . . . growing like an obsession" (p. 299) was indeed ominous. Rexroth now quotes a passage from Chapter XIV of the Tao Te Ching that the "rising of the real moon brings/ No light, its setting no darkness" (p. 300), apparently meaning that the spectacular onset of bliss, like the rising of the full moon, never occurs for the truly enlightened because their lives are evenly illuminated. Chapter XIV of the Tao Te Ching, in language recalling Rexroth's description in Part IV of the "invisible light" (p. 290) which ascends the water, states that the true way is so "elusive . . . , rarefied . . . , infinitesimal" that it cannot be seen, heard, or felt.59

Rexroth continues the reversal of viewpoint in Part VIII by transforming the "orb of wonder" (p. 299) into the "crystal mirror of man's affairs" (p. 300), and the "dust of man's troubles" mentioned in the opening line becomes the spotted surface of the moon. These marks on the face of the moon have no actual existence, just as the various affairs of men are only occasionally distracting illusions. Rexroth uses the various creatures that the Japanese find on the moon instead of a man.

to symbolize the "ghosts of/ Grasping" that animate the phantasmagoria of human activity. The rabbit suggests regret feeding endlessly on itself, the toad pettiness and general ugliness, and the "Dancing virgin" and the "exiled thief" perhaps depict the gulf between possibility and consequence.

Rexroth uses for the third time in this passage the image of the mirror when he says, "My heart is not a mirror./ I cannot see myself in it." This and the preceding reference to the "crystal mirror of man's affairs" derive from a passage in a No play entitled Sotoba Komachi by Kwanami Kiyotsugu, in which two Buddhist priests meet Komachi, a once legendary beauty who is now an old beggar possessed by the spirit of a lover she once tormented. As Komachi talks with the priests, she counters their religious admonitions with a kind of demented doctrine of her own, and in a manner recalling the arguments in various poems by Yeats between Crazy Jane and the Bishop, Komachi and the priests dispute the nature of salvation. As one of the priests begins a pious platitude, Komachi concludes the saying by reversing the conventional meaning, claiming that malice can lead to illumination, that evil is good, and that illusion is salvation. In the conclusion to this dialogue, Komachi continues to interrupt and alter the statements of the priests:

Second Priest.  
For salvation

Komachi.  
Cannot be planted like a tree.

Priest.  
And the Heart's Mirror
This scene could be an influence on *The Heart's Garden*. *The Garden's Heart* because Rexroth is also concerned with the problematical nature of salvation. The comment in Part VIII about his own heart is obscure, but his meaning may be that because his heart is not transparently clear, he needs to turn to the "Inner Light," the "tiny, steady flame of contemplation"\(^{61}\) at the heart of life. The subsequent statement that "Night deepens" implies that uncertainty and gloom intensify within Rexroth until a simple act sheds light on his predicament. When Rexroth saves the spider from the centipede, he acts with the compassion for all sentient creatures of a *bodhisattva*, and Altair and Vega, the cowherd and the weaving girl of Japanese legend, then begin their ascent in the heavens which culminates on the seventh day of the seventh month when Altair crosses the Milky Way and joins Vega. The last two lines of Part VIII indicate the propitious change in Rexroth's fortunes, for even though still separated, the Eagle, or the constellation Aquila which contains Altair, "Plays the Lyre with his rays," or shines on Vega in the constellation Lyra, creating song in the heavens.

**Part IX**

The last night of *The Heart's Garden*. *The Garden's Heart* continues as Rexroth builds toward the climax in Part X. A new, strange sound joins those of the night, either that of unknown birds, tree toads, or the

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\(^{61}\)Kenneth Rexroth, "*Tao Te Ching,*" in *The Elastic Retort*, p. 10.
"clappers of the watchmen monks" (p. 301). At the end of Part X, this mysterious sound will reappear: "Toak. tolk. tock. toak. tolk. tok." (p. 303). As Rexroth and an unidentified person stroll in the night, he wonders, "If the full moon is the symbol/ of Amida, who is the half moon?" and the answer is the "embrace/ Of Shaka and Tara." Tārā is a Buddhist goddess of compassion and aid who in some forms is the female consort, or sexual partner, of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Since both Tārā and Avalokiteśvara are emanations of Amitābha, or in Japanese, Amida, Rexroth associates Tārā and her lover, whom he calls Shaka (Shaka Nyorai, or Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha), with the "full moon.../ Of Amida." The concept of male and female deities as sexual partners derives from Sāktism, or Śāktism, the worship of the Hindu goddess Śākti, whose name in Sanskrit means "power" or "energy." The sexual embrace of Śākti and her consort, Śiva, symbolizes the union of opposites which makes up creation. In a passage in Part V of The Dragon and the Unicorn, Rexroth presents a list of various manifestations of this Divine Couple, including Kali, one form of Śākti:

Tara, the Power of Buddha;
Kali, the Power of Shiva;
Artemis, Apollo's sister;
... . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Act and power, the twin lovers;
Each reflects the other like
The two chambers of the heart. (p. 274)


The Divine Couple also appears at the celebration of Rexroth's honeymoon at the Temple of Poseidon in Paestum, Italy, which is the climax of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (p. 203).

Certain additional attributes of Tārā help explain her appearance at the end of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*. She is a merciful goddess who "helps men 'cross to the other shore," a Buddhist phrase primarily meaning the attainment of Nirvana and implying total release from this world. This phrase may also mean reaching spiritual enlightenment rather than self-extinction. The "embrace/ Of Shaka and Tārā" thus prepares for the union at the end of Part X of the "weaving girl" and "Her cowboy" (p. 302); of Penelope and Ulysses (p. 303); and of the "dark woman" (p. 283) and Rexroth, "wanderer/ Of many devices" (p. 303).

The symbol of the half moon also indicates the return to the theme of the union of opposites, of light and darkness, in contrast to the full moon of quiescent peace which Rexroth seeks throughout much of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*.

Part IX further prepares for the end of the poem by mentioning the sound of the home looms, now "Weaving a kimono" for the girl to wear with her obi when the boy friend comes. Rexroth's description of the colors of the kimono and the obi reintroduces the symbols of the mountain and the sea (pp. 288-89) and associates the weaving girl at her loom and the boy friend playing pachinko with such emblems of continuing life as the "fluctuant/ Ocean" and "Flowers . . . on a summer/ Mountain" (p. 301).

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65Ibid.

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In contrast to the sounds of the night, Rexroth mentions several creatures who fall asleep: butterflies, swallows, pigeons, and bats (p. 301). He has emphasized earlier in the poem the sense of fatigue, oppressive heat, or sleepiness (pp. 288, 289, 294, 298, 299), and this element contributes significantly to the lack of dramatic intensity in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, especially when compared with Rexroth's previous longer poems. The activities around the monastery slow near the end of Part IX until the perfumes of the May night and the "faint smell of incense" coming from the temple convey the deepening spiritual atmosphere. A bell finally rings, and the sounds of worship burst forth: "gongs sound from every/ Compound" (p. 302), and monks chant in all the temples of Kyoto. After describing these sounds of religious celebration, Rexroth concludes Part IX by returning to the darker note of the looms, which "go on as they have always done."

Part X

The primary influence on the last part of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart is Rexroth's interpretation of the Japanese Nō drama. When the "weaving girl dances for/ Her cowboy" (p. 302), the supersaturated atmosphere of "unresolved tensions or longings or irresolutions" created in the first nine parts of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart is aesthetically resolved in the realization that complete absorption in the unconditional essence of being and return to the source of all creative life are the same act of devotion.

The multiform sounds and smells of late spring cloud the mirror of complete tranquillity. By commenting that the mist which forces the "last petals" from the trees also "tears the human heart" (p. 302), he indicates that the end of another spring awakens painful memories of past love. Rexroth thus returns to Part I of The Heart's Garden. The Garden's Heart with this restatement of an initial theme of the poem.

He also reintroduces some of the Japanese musical instruments presented in the opening lines of Part I (p. 283), specifically describing the sounds which accompany the beginning and the culminating dance of No drama:

A long whistling wail
on the flute,
The drummer makes a strangling
cry.
And to the clacking of the sticks,
The weaving girl dances.

(p. 302)

In his discussion of No drama, Donald Keene notes that of all the instruments used in a No play, the flute approximates most closely its Western counterpart, but its "thin, sometimes shrill notes are apt to produce an effect of disembodied sound rather than the sweetness associated with the Western flute."\(^67\) Keene associates the melody of the Japanese flute with a "world infinitely distant from ours filled with a suffering we cannot comprehend." Of the three drums played in No drama, the large taiko is beaten with sticks, and cries from the players accompany the music.\(^68\)

Rexroth's description of the "wail" of the flute and the drummer's

\(^{67}\)Donald Keene, No: The Classical Theatre of Japan (Tokyo, Japan; Palo Alto, Calif.: Kodansha International Ltd., 1966), pp. 77-78.

\(^{68}\)Ibid., pp. 26, 78.
"strangling cry" indicates that the dance performed by the "weaving girl" at this point in Part X expresses her sorrow at still being separated from her lover. In some versions of this myth, Altair, the "cowboy," once a year joins Vega by crossing a bridge formed by the linked wings of magpies, but since the time has not come, the "wings waver/ And break." The following passages in Part X imply that Rexroth's mind dwells on former lost loves, and this attachment to the past, like that of the ghostly lovers in Nishikigi, keeps him for the moment from the unqualified peace of religious vision and a return to the source of all life and death for the purpose of weaving a new pattern for the future. The blossoming of an "unknown tree" in the night intensifies the "Perfume of the death of Spring," and the "cold air" flowing down from the mountain where the trees remain in bloom "fills/ The summer valley with the/ Incense of early Spring" (p. 303). This passage seemingly represents thoughts of earlier life awakening in an old man. One recollection of a "grass hut on/ A rainy night" reveals the endless nature of this process, for this experience consists of a memory within a memory. The reference to the "mountain cuckoo" signifies the cause of Rexroth's former tears, because in Japanese poetry the cuckoo, or hototogisu, "symbolizes the pleasures of the flesh, courtesans and prostitutes."

In the rest of Part X, Rexroth moves toward a climax which combines an experience of bliss transcending the world and a union with the creative principle that abides at the very heart of the world. Although the weaving

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69Kenneth Rexroth, One Hundred Poems from the Japanese, p. 123.
70Ibid., p. 122.
girl and her lover cannot yet meet, she works at her loom in anticipation of the "seventh day of the seventh/ Month," when their reunion will be sexually consummated as the "pachinko balls/ Fall like meteor swarms," symbolizing the regeneration of life and infinitely new possibilities. Rexroth repeats the noises of the night: the shuttle of the loom, the mysterious sound introduced in the beginning of (Part IX (p. 301), and the cries of the anxious souls seeking the salvation of Kwannon. This list of sounds draws together several themes of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart and heightens the sense of impending climax as Rexroth apparently imagines the reunion of Altair and Vega finally occurring at this point in Part X.

Rexroth represents the dual aspect of the poem's conclusion by presenting the flight of two birds of prey, perhaps symbolizing two unquiet souls hunting in opposite directions for bliss. While the flight of the great hawk "down the river/ In the twilight" implies the return to the "valley's soul," to the "dark woman" (p. 283), and death, that of the owl "up the river in the/ Moonlight" indicates the desire for transcendent vision. The combination of these two directions recalls the contrast in Part IV of the water falling "Through the steep mountain valleys/ Towards the sea" and the invisible light radiating upwards "Into the empty darkness/ Between the stars" (p. 290).

As Ulysses, Rexroth associates himself with Altair, the cowboy, and with the souls wandering restlessly throughout life, but as his last longer poem ends, he returns to Penelope, the "final woman who weaves,/ And unweaves, and weaves again." This passage implies a complete yielding of the self to that power in nature which is the inexhaustible source, a
type of fertility ritual in which a simulation of death brings forth new life. These lines also reflect a commitment to the unending processes of nature, to the multifarious threads of life that philosophy cannot reduce to a simple scheme. At the end of Part X, the bridge briefly connects but soon "breaks off" (p. 303); the knots are untied but then tied again.

The last four lines of Part V describe the other aspect of this climax, the achievement of a bliss beyond the natural world. Rexroth's reference to the "moon drenched night" recalls the symbol of Amida's promise of unlimited salvation (p. 299) and reveals that the fragrance spreading earlier "throughout the white night" (p. 302) signifies the onset of vision as well as the glorious memories of past springs. Rexroth uses similar imagery in describing the impact of a No play like Nishikigi. As the prayers of the priest set free the dead lovers, "realization of the meaning of being itself pervades and saturates the minds of the audience, and precipitates a crystal called release."71 Rexroth's statement that the "floating/ Bridge of dreams breaks off" indicates that this final release includes detachment from the phenomenal world, from "this floating life" (p. 294) of pleasures and united lovers. In the last image, the clouds that obscured the clear surface of the mirror "Dissipate," revealing at last the "mountain of bliss/ Untouched by the changing tides" (p. 288), standing alone in the "clear sky" (p. 303), and as the self dissolves, the unruffled peace at the center of being unfolds, floating in the clear and endless void.

"A Song at the Winepresses"

According to the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems, the two addenda to The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart were "finished after the book had gone to the publisher," and their primary intention is dedication of the completed work and summation of the major themes. "A Song at the Winepresses" is inscribed to Gary Snyder, a younger poet who in turn dedicated to Rexroth a volume of his poems entitled The Back Country. The fact that Rexroth and Snyder both worked in the Forest Service in the Cascade Mountains for the same man indicates their similar backgrounds and shared values. Rexroth designates Snyder as the "leading ideologist and critic of the counter culture," and as a poet and spokesman for ecology, Gary Snyder apparently represents the continuation of Rexroth's basic philosophy of life.

"A Song at the Winepresses" is a psalm of praise and thanksgiving for the successful completion of the collected longer poems, consecrating to God the first fruits of the harvest. The setting is Mount Calvary, in the mountains above Santa Barbara, California, and Rexroth notes the similarity between the situation at the beginning of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart and "A Song at the Winepresses":

Here am I--
Another monastery
Garden, another waterfall,
And another religion. (p. 304)


74 Ibid., p. 213.
In lines recalling the title of the preceding poem, Rexroth describes the dry, desert-like environment, which contrasts strikingly with the forests and mountains around Kyoto: "Cactus/ And stone make up the garden,/ At its heart a heavy cross." These verses, which allude to the Garden of Gethsemane and Mount Calvary, the sites of the agony and crucifixion of Jesus, indicate in Rexroth an enduring sorrow which could be either a specific memory, like the "heartbreak" (p. 283) in the opening section of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, or, more likely, an abiding sense of the high amount of tragedy in human life.

Despite this mournful note, the dominant tone of "A Song at the Winepresses" is joyful. Turning from the Buddhist to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Rexroth expresses his gratitude by means of the Catholic setting; reference to two aspects of Judaism: the Feast of Booths, or Sukkoth, and the apocryphal Book of Tobit; and a statement by the twelfth-century theologian, Richard of S' . Victor, which reaffirms the central place of religious vision in The Collected Longer Poems and reveals that contemplation is the highest act of worship.

Sukkoth, a Jewish celebration of thanksgiving, originally was an autumn harvest festival, and this ceremony, also called the Feast of the Ingathering, appropriately coincides with the completion of the volume of longer poems. Part of this ancient rite included celebration of the "end of the grape/ Harvest" (p. 304), thanking God for the earth's fertility and dedicating to Him the first fruits. Another name for Sukkoth is the Feast of Booths, and Rexroth identifies these structures as the
little huts
Of branches in the vineyards
Where the grape pickers
rested. (p. 304)

His statement, "How amiable/ Thy dwellings," comes from the first verse of a major source throughout "A Song at the Winepresses," Psalm Eighty-Four: "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts" (Ps. 84:1), probably an allusion to various buildings around the Temple in Jerusalem, however, instead of the shelters of the grape pickers.

This reference in Psalm Eighty-Four indicates another aspect of Sukkoth, a procession to the Temple in memory of its consecration by Solomon. In his discussion of The Song of Songs, Rexroth notes that this act of dedication to Jehovah was a *hierosgamos*, a "marriage of Heaven and Earth." In order to emphasize in "A Song at the Winepresses" the theme of fruition, Rexroth alludes to passages in two earlier longer poems symbolizing the Divine Marriage, the union throughout creation of the male and female principle, of microcosm and macrocosm, of immanence and transcendence. One example presented in Part X of *The Heart's Garden*, 
The Garden's Heart is the annual reunion of Altair and Vega, the cowboy and the weaving girl. That event now has been consummated:

The weaving girl is pregnant
With another year. The magpie
Wing bridge of dreams has
dissolved. (p. 305)

Rexroth alludes to another *hierosgamos* in his description of the progress of the constellation Capricorn:

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Low over the drowsy sea,
The sea goat moves towards
the sun.

These lines recall the climax of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*: the honeymoon celebration in the Temple of Poseidon at Paestum, Italy (pp. 200-03). While Rexroth and his wife appreciate the Doric temple,

The sea
Breathes like a drowsy woman.
The sun moves like a drowsy
hand, (p. 202)

and at twilight they make love as the "sea/ Prepares to take the sun" (p. 203). The lines in "A Song at the Winepresses" which refer to this high moment in Rexroth's life also mention the "sea goat," the astrological symbol of Capricorn based on a legend of Pan, a god of fertility. The reference to the experience at Paestum suggests another aspect of Sukkoth, the group celebration of marriage rites. Rexroth interprets The Song of Songs as a collection of dance lyrics that have survived from this festival.76

Sukkoth also was a pilgrimage festival. The booths symbolized the huts that the Israelites lived in during the years of wandering in the wilderness, and many Jews outside of Palestine came on this occasion to Jerusalem.77 "A Song at the Winepresses" celebrates, therefore, the successful completion of Rexroth's many years of wandering, both literally as exemplified by the various settings of the longer poems: New York, New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 1, p. 455.

76Ibid., p. 5.

Chicago, and the Far West in *The Homestead Called Damascus*; Holy Cross Monastery on the Hudson River in *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*; the southern coast of California in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*; western Europe and the United States in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*; Kyoto, Japan, in *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*; and figuratively in his quest for a complete philosophy of life and an integrated personality. In Part X of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, Rexroth conveys the theme of a final arrival through the image of Ulysses, the "wanderer/ Of many devices" (p. 303), and in "A Song at the Winepresses," he uses for the same purpose Psalm Eighty-Four. This psalm expresses the joyfulness of a pilgrim to Zion, or Jerusalem. Rexroth alludes to one verse in which the speaker says that those men are blessed "Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools" (Ps. 84:6). The valley of Baca presumably derives its name from a type of balsam, or weeping, tree that oozes gum. This valley, like that of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4), may have only symbolic existence in order to stress that the faith of the pilgrim transforms the arid, hostile, and laborious "pathway to Zion,"78 and makes the valley of weeping into a "place/ Of springs" (p. 304). In a similar manner, Rexroth reveals that the desert surrounding Mount Calvary consists of more than "Cactus/ And stone." The glad eye can find abundant life, a "cascade/ Of living water" breaking the "arid cliffs," like that which flowed from the rock smitten by Moses (Ex. 17:6), and the "same water ouzel" just seen "above Kyoto."

This vision of innumerable forms of life, each taking its appropriate place in the ecology of the region and ultimately in the divine creation, forms an integral part of this song of thanksgiving. Another expression of this attitude appears later in the poem in lines again based on Psalm Eighty-Four:

The sparrow has found her a home,
The swallow a nest for herself,
Where she may raise her brood. (p. 305)

The psalmist uses this image of the birds nesting in the temple grounds as a metaphor for his feeling of well-being in the presence of the altars of the Lord (Ps. 84:3). In a passage reflecting this reference, Rexroth claims that, just as the towhees continue to live on the locations of the now obliterated rancherias, the

swallows still nest
In the eaves of all the buildings
On the site of the vanished Temple in Jerusalem.

This comment apparently signifies the invisible nature of the spiritual element which is present throughout the universe. The lives of the truly illuminated somewhat resemble this description, for just as these birds still feel the presence of the old temple, the illuminated continuously reside within the light of spiritual insight. As Rexroth says in the last paragraph of his introduction to The Collected Longer Poems:

we are unaware that we live in the light of lights because it casts no shadow. When we become aware of it we know it as birds know air and fish know water. It is the ultimate trust.

This sense of "ultimate trust" in God is exemplified in the apocryphal Book of Tobit. In this religious folktale, Tobit, an exiled
Jew living in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, faithfully obeys the Jewish law, especially by burying the bodies of executed Israelites even though forbidden to do so by the Assyrians. Despite his good works, Tobit is blinded while burying a dead Israelite when sparrow droppings fall in his eyes. Similar difficulties beset Sara, the daughter of Tobit's closest relative in another country. Although she marries seven times, on each occasion, a demon named Asmodeus kills the bridegroom on the wedding bed before consummation. When Tobit and Sara pray for deliverance, God eventually rewards them. Tobias, Tobit's son, agrees to travel to a distant land in order to redeem an old debt for his father and rescue the family from poverty. Tobias travels with his dog and a companion who secretly is the angel Raphael, sent by God to intercede for Tobit and Sara. Because of the help of Raphael, Tobias marries Sara, exorcises Asmodeus, acquires the money, and after returning to Nineveh, restores Tobit's sight with a remedy learned from Raphael. Once the angel, whose name literally means "God has healed," reveals his true identity and disappears, the book ends with a long prayer by Tobit of praise and thanksgiving, culminating with a prophecy that Nineveh shall be destroyed, the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt, and the streets of the city of Zion paved with "sapphires, emeralds, and precious stone."79

This legend repeats several of the themes of "A Song at the Winepresses," including the successful pilgrimage and the song of praise for the goodness of God. The lowly role assumed in the tale by Raphael

and the homely detail of the "faithful dog" (p. 306) who accompanies Tobias and the disguised angel recall Rexroth's observation that the birds have found a home in the monastery of Mt. Calvary on the "rumps" of the "two wooden/ Mexican angels" (p. 305) hanging in the loggia. It is also fitting that having completed The Collected Longer Poems, Rexroth should allude to a legend whose theme reflects that of the Book of Job: the vindication of divine justice despite the apparently unmerited suffering of a just man. Throughout Rexroth's career, he has attempted to find a solution for the "waste of value in the world of facts." The title of Rexroth's second longer poem, A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, could apply to much of his work, and the last note of this volume of collected longer poems joyously affirms trust in God. The story of Tobit may appeal additionally to Rexroth because in his old age he too feels rewarded for a lifetime of faith.

Rexroth relates his song of thanksgiving to the main themes of The Collected Longer Poems by quoting a statement by Richard of St. Victor that contemplation in its highest form is essentially an act of worship. Richard of St. Victor's list of the attributes of this state of rapture corresponds exactly to the mood of Rexroth in "A Song at the Winepresses," a poem also characterized by "admiration,/ Awe, joy, gratitude" (p. 305).

"The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing"

"The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" is dedicated to James Laughlin, Rexroth's publisher for many years at New Directions Books, who is honored

by Rexroth in the inscription of another work, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century, as a man "to whom modern literature owes an incalculable debt." Later in that book, Rexroth states that Laughlin deserves such lavish praise because he courageously published avant-garde literature during many years when it "was not supposed to exist . . . at considerable financial loss."81 "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" is a meditation occurring in the "Romanesque chapel" (p. 306) of the Cowley Fathers Order in Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose theme is the redemptive power of love. The primary imagery presents the effect of the fire of love on the heart of man and illustrates Rexroth's statement at the beginning of The Dragon and the Unicorn that "All things are made new by fire" (p. 95).

In an interview with Cyrena N. Pondrom, Rexroth clarifies the meaning of the title of this poem when he explains why the epistemological dilemma of modern philosophy has no meaning to him:

The epistemological steps are bypassed by direct experience . . . . The epistemological process of, for example, Locke and Hume in English philosophy is not anterior to direct experience. The process doesn't come first, it comes afterwards, and the direct experience is the main thing.82

The spark is specifically the scintilla animae, the faint glow enkindled in the soul by God as a sign of man's divine nature. In A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, this response signals the initial turning from despair

81Kenneth Rexroth, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century, pp. [7], 126.

toward union with God (p. 57). Rexroth therefore restates in "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" a major conclusion of the longer poems, that "our experience of reality begins and ends in illumination"\textsuperscript{83} and that illumination is love. The belief in the supremacy of love over knowledge reflects Rexroth's enduring bias against rationalism. Two examples of this prejudice are his criticism in Part I of \textit{The Dragon and the Unicorn} of the analytical reason (e.g., p. 121) and his statement that "Consciousness begins with love, the \textit{scintilla animae}, and ends in love, the beatific vision."\textsuperscript{84}

In the opening part of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing,"
Rexroth repeats the theme in \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart} of the endlessly alternating cycles of existence. The "hiss and clank" of the "wheels/ Of life" (p. 306) correspond to the sounds of the home looms and pachinko balls. Rexroth again finds this process fatiguing, and the unending repetition of the cycles, moving "from zenith to nadir" and back again, ultimately dooms any hope of progress. The innumerable "wheels of life" make up one "Wheel/ Of the Law, that turns without/ Moving."

Rexroth's attitude in \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart} wavers between the desire to escape this cycle into a realm of absolute bliss and the longing to immerse himself in organic process as the source of future life. In "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing," Rexroth also contrasts the alternation "From plus to minus, from black to white" with a

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{83}Ibid., p. 154.
\end{quote}

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transcendent force, but he unequivocally affirms the supreme value of this source of illumination which he now identifies exclusively as love. Rexroth pictures the individual as a creature "lost in/ The illimitable ocean/ Of which there is no shore" who is saved by the power of love which transforms experience just as the faith of the pilgrims makes the "dry valley" of Baca a "place/ Of springs" (p. 304).

Love also changes the phenomenal world from a source of despair with its unceasing interchange of complementary forces into a glorious realm of vision in which all living creatures "turn to jewels of fire,/ And then to one burning jewel" (p. 307). This all-encompassing jewel apparently is the beatific vision which ends the process toward final illumination begun by the scintilla animae.

"The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" also restates the theme illustrated by the title of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart that bliss resides at the center of both the person and the universe. Rexroth says that the effect of love on man is that of

transubstantiation
In which the One drinks the Other
And the Other drinks the One.
The sea of fire that lights all being
Becomes the human heart. (p. 307)

At the end of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing," Rexroth claims that the realization of "Reality enclosed in the heart" occurs in the "Holy Wedding," the marriage of Heaven and Earth, the identification of immanence and transcendence.

Rexroth uses the images of heaven and earth to represent the painful as well as the joyous side of love:
The feathered heart flies upward
Out of this universe.
The broken heart loses its plumes
And hides in the earth until
It can learn to swim in
the sea. (p. 307)

This passage recalls the contrast in Part IV of The Heart's Garden, The
Garden's Heart between the ascending light and the falling water (pp.
289-90) and Rexroth's tendency to use opposing elements as part of the
imagery in the very poem that criticizes the dialectical character of
being.

Despite the possibility of heartbreak, love remains the supreme
value of existence. Disappointment and suffering in love can be over­
come through self-forgetfulness, a process like that presented in Part V
of The Dragon and the Unicorn and in several passages of The Heart's
Garden, The Garden's Heart (pp. 289, 299, 303) of emptying the mind and
merging with the void:

    Empty the heart and peace
    will fill it.
    Peace will raise it until
    it floats
    Into the empyrean. (p. 307)

The conclusion of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" seemingly
resembles that of The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart by affirming at
the same time the experience of total bliss which transcends all the
conditions of the world of appearance and the processes of nature whose
countless threads continuously determine each personality. In Part X of
The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, the unobstructed full moon
symbolizes the transcendent vision, and Penelope, the "final woman who
weaves,/ And unweaves, and weaves again" (p. 303), represents the

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inexhaustible forces of life. At the end of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing," Rexroth describes the state of bliss:

Peace and windlessness and great
Silence arise in midheaven

and makes the following assertion:

That which appears as extant
Does not really exist,
So high above is that which
truly is-- (p. 307)

This comment recalls the statement in his autobiography that repeated visionary experiences raise the possibility that the world experienced by sense and reason in which I seem to live is only the surface of a world incomparably vaster and utterly different in kind in which life is really lived.85

The last four lines of "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing" reaffirm the value of love and conclude The Collected Longer Poems with an image of the infinite number of forces guiding the arc of Rexroth's mortal life:

Innumerable are the arrows
In love's quiver and their flight
Defines my being, the ballistics
Of my person in time.
(p. 307)

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CHAPTER VI

Critical Evaluation

The longer poems of Kenneth Rexroth record the most important aspects of his life. The first two are poems of youth. The Homestead Called Damascus (1920-1925) represents the emergence in late adolescence of the basic components of the personality. Inner conflicts remain unresolved while Rexroth struggles with the problems of loneliness, sexual identity, and personal mortality. A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy (1925-1927) presents a dramatic religious experience culminating in a beatific vision. This event, with its overwhelming conviction of spiritual reality, becomes, as Rexroth indicates in his autobiography, a "focus and stable foundation"1 for all his later life.

While these first two works concentrate on the early development of the self, the third and fourth longer poems chronicle the mature Rexroth's relationship with society as he moves from rejection of the dominant society to creation of an alternative system of values. The tone of The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1940-1944) is anguished as Rexroth faces a world of death. Written in the midst of World War II, The Phoenix and the Tortoise portrays the final breakdown of Western society, the waste of value in the passage of history, and the inevitable doom awaiting all organic life. Faced with a "collapsing system of cultural

values,"^2 Rexroth seeks the foundation for a new system in the personal assumption of universal responsibility. The sudden reversal of opinion and the resurgence of despair in the pendant to The Phoenix and the Tortoise entitled "Past and Future Turn About" reveal the depth of Rexroth's anguish and the immense burden that this doctrine of "unlimited liability"^3 places upon the individual.

In the fourth and longest of these five poems, The Dragon and the Unicorn (1944-1950), Rexroth presents a comprehensive system of values in opposition to those prevailing in the dominant acquisitive society. Rexroth moves away from the narrow emphasis on the individual towards a broader, more stable base of a community of love. The first step in this process is the reciprocal relationship established with another person and sacramentalized in marriage. Direct knowledge of the beloved within this duality leads ultimately to full realization of the community of love.

The philosophy of life evolved in The Phoenix and the Tortoise and elaborated in The Dragon and the Unicorn synthesizes several ideas, and three major influences on Rexroth are Albert Schweitzer, D. H. Lawrence, and Martin Buber. Albert Schweitzer's belief in reverence for all life and his ethical mysticism, the nonrational affirmation of the world and creation which results in an "activist ethic,"^4 directly


^3Ibid.

affect Rexroth's doctrine of "unlimited liability," or the universal responsibility of each individual.

In his introduction to a selection of D. H. Lawrence's poems, Rexroth reveals the important influence of Lawrence on several of his major ideas. Rexroth believes that Lawrence in his poems to his mother overcame his Oedipal problems by a process closely resembling Rexroth's philosophy of "unlimited liability," for Lawrence discovered that assuming complete responsibility for all of reality and its total realization opens the way for "personal salvation." Lawrence's poetry also illustrates that the most direct means for this realization is the erotic relationship celebrated in marriage. The poems written by Lawrence after his marriage to Frieda von Richthofen show that direct communion between husband and wife can lead to a new perception of reality, to a "sacramentalized, . . . transformed world" in which love redeems all objects.

The principal effect of Martin Buber on Rexroth's world view is represented by a work entitled I and Thou, which Rexroth calls "one of the determinative books of my life." Rexroth credits Buber for first emphasizing that the I and Thou dialogue is the "only mode of realization of the fullest potential of each party." This dialogue produces that direct knowledge of another in marriage which eventually results in an increasingly complete awareness of all reality. Throughout The Dragon and the Unicorn and in the addendum at the end of The Collected Longer


Poems entitled "The Spark in the Tinder of Knowing," Rexroth stresses the idea articulated by Buber that the "one realizes itself by realizing the other."\textsuperscript{8} 

In the last longer poem, \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart} (1967), Rexroth responds to his increased age and awareness of death by concentrating exclusively on the unruffled bliss which resides at the center of the individual and the universe. Rexroth shows little concern for social criticism or philosophical speculation, and the poem contains little of the dynamic conflict between contrasting facets of his personality. The spiritual, contemplative side of Rexroth has displaced the secular, active aspect. In \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart}, Rexroth seeks a continuous state of enlightenment achieved either by an experience of absolute bliss transcending the world of appearance or through the realization that for those who have banished grasping from the personality the immediate world is the ultimate. Since both conditions involve an effacement of personal identity, one of the major ironies of \textit{The Collected Longer Poems} is that the highest development of personality entails loss of the self.

The themes of \textit{The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart} reveal that Buddhism also influences Rexroth's philosophy of life. As Rexroth becomes increasingly detached from society, the Buddhist emphasis on emptying the mind and sinking into the still void at the heart of being acquires greater importance. In his later poems, Rexroth emphasizes the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva, the being who on the brink of achieving final bliss turns aside and vows not to enter Nirvana until

\textsuperscript{8}Tbid., p. 130.
all sentient creatures have been saved. This doctrine recalls the
earlier influence on Rexroth of Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life.
Rexroth claims that the doctrine of the void and the bodhisattva are
complementary because "those whose minds have achieved that vision of
peace are unable to violate it by violence or the exploitation of other
living creatures."9 Rexroth in The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart
adds to the alternative system of values presented in The Phoenix and
the Tortoise and The Dragon and the Unicorn the "simple love of all
sentient beings, the Bodhisattva heart."10

The poetic quality of the longer poems varies considerably. The
chief faults are extended passages of flat abstract statement, sections
consisting primarily of numerous allusions whose common relationship is
not identified and occasionally exceedingly difficult to unravel, an at
times irritatingly moralistic tone, and a looseness of structure which
illustrates the general need for more careful editing. The major
strengths are effective descriptions of visionary experiences and impres­
sive lyrical passages, including short love poems, observations of nature,
and elegiac descriptions of the ruinous passage of time and the "vanity
of human wishes."11 These characteristics explain Rexroth's greater
effectiveness in the short poem and make The Collected Shorter Poems a
more impressive work than The Collected Longer Poems.


10Kenneth Rexroth, "Gilbert White's Natural History of Selbourne," in
The Elastic Retort, p. 71.

11Kenneth Rexroth, "Giacomo Casanova, History of My Life," in
The style of the first two poems reflects the poet's youth. Rexroth was in his late teens when he wrote *The Homestead Called Damascus*, which is a collection of short poems more than an integrated work. The various sections reveal a self-conscious attempt to impress the reader with the poet's learning and sophistication. The wide range of knowledge results in numerous classical and mythological parallels to the contemporary situation which too often obscure rather than enlarge the meaning of the present. The apparent desire to avoid the impression of callowness produces a cloying and premature world-weariness and imitations of other poets, especially the early poetry of T. S. Eliot, that within the context of the complete longer poems do not reflect Rexroth's true character. The main strength of *The Homestead Called Damascus* is that despite the stylistic and organizational weaknesses, this first longer poem is, considering Rexroth's age, remarkably good. Rexroth forcefully communicates the intense loneliness and sexual uncertainty that are the core of the poem, and he prepares for the subsequent longer poems with a convincing presentation of the warring sides of his personality as represented by the Damascan twins.

The radical style and high aspiration of *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* signify the daring of youth, but this ambitious product of literary Cubism ultimately fails. Rexroth defines this poetic technique as the "radical disassociation, analysis, and recombination of all the material elements of poetry."¹² The materials of a poem like *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* are divorced from their ordinary associations and

reassembled in unexpected relationships which defy logical analysis. If the reader focuses his attention intensely on this work of art, Rexroth believes that a "process takes place similar to the raptures of nature mysticism.\textsuperscript{13} Thus the poet attempts to induce in the reader a trance state by creating through the methods of literary Cubism "forms that establish the conviction of a new and different order of reality."\textsuperscript{14}

In \textit{A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy}, Rexroth uses this method for describing the attempt to achieve and maintain a transcendent religious experience. The technique is effective in those sections which present extreme emotional states: the initial illumination, the temporary fall from vision into the dark night of the soul, and the final revelation; but the majority of the poem does not sufficiently repay the acute and abnormal concentration that literary Cubism demands.

In \textit{The Phoenix and the Tortoise}, Rexroth seeks a lasting value in a world of ruin and death. The poem presents the difficult struggle to order a very wide range of knowledge instead of the polished final result. Numerous historical, philosophical, and artistic allusions, including many direct quotations, are presented in dense, highly elliptical stanzas. Because of the personal nature of most of the associations and the rapid progression from one reference to another, the unifying theme often is difficult to find. Several of the passages consist principally of abstract speculation, and the combination of a restless

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13}Kenneth Rexroth, "Sappho, Poems," in \textit{Classics Revisited}, p. 42.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Kenneth Rexroth, "Rimbaud, Poems," in \textit{Classics Revisited}, p. 272.
\end{itemize}

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search for a satisfactory value and a corrosive, pervading pessimism considerably inhibits the advance of the poem.

The Phoenix and the Tortoise, however, occasionally rises to considerable poetic heights in short lyrical passages, especially those describing the natural scene and celebrating the sensuous presence of Rexroth's wife, and the poem vividly communicates Rexroth's anguish and alienation. The forceful portrait of the collapse of Western society and the difficult attempt to discover a principle for conserving value convincingly demonstrate Rexroth's urgent need for a complete philosophy of life.

With new assurance, Rexroth in The Dragon and the Unicorn presents his comprehensive world view. His confidence in this approach to reality and his enthusiastic desire to persuade the reader result in greater clarity and much easier comprehension than in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, but the cost is a flat, prosaic tone and some repetitiveness. Rexroth intersperses his philosophical observations with descriptions of an extended trip throughout Europe and the United States, and a hearty appetite, a keen eye for concrete details, considerable pictorial ability, and biting, original social criticism characterize much of this portion of The Dragon and the Unicorn. Rexroth's lyrical ability, seen intermittently in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, appears in a larger number of passages in The Dragon and the Unicorn. The detailed presentation of Rexroth's philosophy of life makes The Dragon and the Unicorn a very long poem, but the revaluation of the past in terms of this system of values allows ample opportunity for the display of Rexroth's erudition as he reinterprets the classical heritage for the contemporary age.
The scope of *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* is greatly reduced from that of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* as Rexroth concentrates on the abiding transcendent experience and a detached observation of nature. While *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart* largely avoids the long passages of abstract rumination found in the preceding works, it lacks the dynamic opposition between contrasting parts of the personality. The passive, meditative side of Rexroth almost exclusively predominates, and a general sense of fatigue prevails throughout the poem, perhaps indicative of his increased age. Influenced by the Japanese Nō drama, Rexroth creates an atmosphere of vague, sorrowful memories, the desire for total immersion within the sensory world, and the longing to transcend appearance. The resolution of this "supersaturated" atmosphere occurs in a final series of images corresponding to the dance and accompanying songs which culminate a Nō play. These concluding images embody all the conflicting moods of the poem, but instead of supporting one alternative or choosing a particular course of action, Rexroth attempts to crystallize the various elements into a unified passage, capable of precipitating an aesthetic rather than a logical realization of the total significance of the poem. This technique seemingly is more effective in a Nō play than in a poem because a dance in a drama can embody diverse elements in one continuous action, while each image in a poem must be read successively. Although this method allows Rexroth to include in the ending of the poem multiple aspects coexisting within his personality, the union of opposites

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seems forced, a fervent hope more than an actuality. The two addenda to
The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart which reaffirm the central role
of contemplation, and love in The Collected Longer Poems express much
more convincingly Rexroth's view of life.

Two major reasons for the often unimpressive poetic skill in the
longer poems are the nature of this particular genre and Rexroth's view of
poetry. In the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems, Rexroth
notes that each poem is partly a "philosophical revery," and the choice
of the word "revery" implies a certain looseness of structure, a meditation
in which, as Rexroth says, "philosophies come and go," marked by the
recurrence of the same themes rather than the step-by-step progression of
a tightly logical argument towards a final deduction. Rexroth even
claims in this introduction that the exposition of a philosophy of life
always forms part of a "dramatic dialogue" and is "contradicted by the
spokesman for the other member of the polarity." This statement, however,
is exaggerated as Rexroth indicates in that same introduction when he
defines the "permanent core" of his thought and declares that the polit-
ical viewpoint "never changes." Although the essence of Rexroth's
attitude towards life remains constant, he apparently uses the longer
poems to test his thought, pondering related topics in order to explore
all possible facets. The repetitiveness of the abstract speculation which

16"Introduction to the Collected Longer Poems," in The Collected
Compare similar remarks by Rexroth that the core of his view of life
remains constant since early youth in "Introduction," in The Signature
of All Things (New York: New Directions, n.d.), pp. 9-10; "A Living
Pearl," in The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (New York:
is especially prevalent in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and *The Dragon and the Unicorn* thus is to a large degree deliberate. Since Rexroth believes that any aspect of experience has an inexhaustible meaning, placing the same idea in various contexts produces the largest number of permutations. The tendency to dwell on a subject in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, those longer poems most devoted to philosophical speculation, perhaps originates in Rexroth's earlier Cubist phase, because a Cubist work like *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy* seeks to make of the poem an object of contemplation which gradually "acquires a significance with unlimited ramifications."17

Another reason for the apparent lack of craftsmanship evident in a large proportion of the longer poems is Rexroth's view of poetry. He feels that the aim of poetry is direct communication from person to person and that the language of poetry does not differ in kind from ordinary speech.18 The poems of Denise Levertov successfully illustrate this approach because they "seem like speech, heightened and purified."19 Although Rexroth's own poetry does indeed "seem like speech," not enough care has been spent to heighten and purify it. Rexroth pinpoints a crucial difference between his and Levertov's poems when he describes the rhythms of her later poetry as a "kind of animal grace of the word,

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a pulse like the footfalls of a cat or the wingbeats of a dove."20 It is
this acute ear for the subtleties of verse that, except for occasional
short lyrical or elegiac passages, seems lacking in Rexroth's longer
poems. Part of the reason for the plain surface of much of Rexroth's
poetry is his stance as an outsider to all establishments, literary or
social. In his autobiography, he states, "From the beginning I had a
strong anti-literary bias."21 His attitude later influences his enthu­
siastic support for William Carlos Williams, and he describes his initial
poetic impulse as an attempt to "feel my way intellectually toward a
hard, rugged, and anti-mellifluous verse."22

Rexroth's aesthetic position combines nonconformity and moralism.
The capacity for honest expression has more importance than the most
dazzling poetic skill. He especially opposes the theory that art should
be impersonal, and his discussion of this artistic theory in the intro­
duction to an anthology of British poets published in 1949 culminates in
one of his most impassioned statements:

I believe that this rigorous rationalism, this suppression of
all acknowledgement of personality, feeling, intuition . . .
is part of the general sickness of the world . . . , the
splitting of the modern personality, the attempt to divorce
the brain from the rest of the nervous system.23

Rexroth reacts so strongly because he feels that this doctrine of imper­
sonality leads to evasion. Excessive attention to poetic devices

20"Poets, Old and New: Denise Levertov," in Assays (New York:

21An Autobiographical Novel, p. 256.

22Ibid., p. 245.

virtually denotes a moral fault for Rexroth. He states absolutely that

Invention is not poetry. Invention is defense, the projection of pseudopods out of the ego to ward off the "other." Poetry is vision, the pure act of sensual communion and contemplation.24

Rexroth frequently describes such carefully wrought verse as "overcooked," a word which appears, for example, in a poem entitled "Codicil":

Most of the world's poetry
Is artifice, construction.
No one reads it but scholars.
After a generation
It has grown so overcooked,
It cannot be digested.25

In his preface to In Defense of the Earth, he states that the objection to his epigrams and discursive poems as "not poetry" . . . is a parochial point of view. I for one am more sure about Martial's poetry than I am about most corn belt metaphysicals and country gentlemen.26

This last sentence refers to an aspect of American literature which invariably incites Rexroth's greatest hostility: the advocates of the New Criticism, the Southern Agrarians, and, in Rexroth's words, the "self-styled Reactionary Generation."27 Rexroth mistakenly believes that this once dominant movement lacked any connection with the most important

international trends and made American literature "totally provincial." He also claims part of the credit for the "great turn in American literature -- away from . . . sterile, academic, contrived verse, so uninvolved and provincial, . . . and toward a poetry of community and communion."29

Rexroth ironically fails to see these same faults in himself. The Collected Longer Poems presents many examples of "sterile, academic, contrived verse": passages containing needlessly obscure allusions in which Rexroth flaunts his learning, flat stretches which read like highly abstract prose, and in the case of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, an entire work in which concern with construction virtually blocks communication. Rexroth's criticism also confuses workmanship with trickery and sanctions carelessness in the name of vision. In the eagerness of his polemic against artifice, Rexroth overlooks the fact that raw food can be as indigestible as "overcooked." An article in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry claims that Rexroth's "dislike of pretentious rhetoric" results in poems which sometimes "convey very little verbal excitement."30 But Rexroth's theory cannot excuse his practice, and his poetry certainly has its own pretentiousness.

Even though The Collected Longer Poems shows that Rexroth has not


29"Introduction," in David Meltzer, Tens, p. xiii.

achieved the simple clarity of a "poetry of the spoken word" that he evidently desires, this volume does fulfill a major criterion of Rexroth's aesthetic because these works together communicate the sense of a distinct and unique person. In his quest for personal integrity, Rexroth raises the fundamental issues of personal identity. Throughout his career he expresses an intense spiritual vision of reality, and in his search for a philosophy of life he vividly portrays the modern crisis of belief and evolves a positive alternative to the destructive standards dominating twentieth-century life.

In the longer poems, Rexroth repeatedly asks what he calls the "ever-recurrent questions 'Who am I?' 'What can I believe?' 'What can I do?' 'What can I hope?'" and these periods of reflection and self-examination enable the reader to be aware more acutely of his own most significant experience. As Rexroth ponders his fate, the reader in a similar fashion confronts the mystery of the self and the riddles of the universe. The plot of The Collected Longer Poems is, in one sense, the "slow, hard achievement of personal integrity," and as Rexroth periodically returns to the abiding issues facing the individual in his relationship to other persons, society, nature, and God, his judgments about the meaning of life do seem to grow in scope, depth, and complexity.

The Dragon and the Unicorn represents Rexroth at the peak of his power,

31 Ibid.


full of curiosity, appetite, and reflection. The extended tour of Europe and the reassessment of the past allow full expression of Rexroth's considerable erudition, and this poem presents the best balance between concrete and abstract, passion and contemplation, society and the wilderness. The various aspects of the personality are most completely realized as Rexroth achieves his finest creative effort.

The Dragon and the Unicorn also illustrates the enduring spiritual aspect of Rexroth's poetry. After the vision achieved in A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy, a "brilliant center of illumination" sustains Rexroth's verse, and some of his best passages in the longer poems describe moments of vision and exaltation, especially after he discards the specifically Christian framework of A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy and presents these experiences primarily through natural imagery. Rexroth claims that such transcendent experiences cannot be qualified in any way and have much greater validity than beliefs, which he maintains are "unstable things at best and . . . easily come by." This attitude helps to explain Rexroth's occasional deprecation of his own philosophical efforts, as illustrated by his remark in the introduction to The Collected Longer Poems that any exposition of a "systematic view of life" is always contradicted and by the statement that imperative statements in his poems are "like quotations" and "used ironically." The fluctuating nature of belief also explains the tendency in the longer poems to reconsider repeatedly the same funda-


35Ibid., p. 337.

mental issues.

Despite these disclaimers, Rexroth does adhere throughout the longer poems to certain philosophical beliefs, and his conviction of the irrefragable nature of transcendent experience is a crucial factor determining the type of world view that he advocates. Rexroth presents in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* a philosophy of life which allows for those experiences which he habitually has had from "earliest childhood." The "determinative core" of his life has been, he says, "occasional moments of vision . . . in which I had seemed to rise above time and space, and momentary flashes of perfect communion with others."37 Several aspects of the system of values in *The Dragon and the Unicorn* reflect this characteristic of Rexroth's life: the bias against logical positivism, rationalism, and finite concepts of space and time; the insistence that any segment of reality is inexhaustible; the idea that the individual realizes himself only in the other person, or through a kind of "unselfing"; the central importance of the sexual act as a source of the most direct knowledge possible; the definition of God as a person and a lover; the attempt to found a community of love; and the identification of love, direct knowledge, and contemplation.

One of the best ways to appreciate the longer poems is to view Rexroth as a religious poet. *A Prolegomenon to a Theodicy*, several passages in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, and *The Heart's Garden*, *The Garden's Heart* reflect the visionary side of his personality, and much of his philosophical speculation and the elaboration in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.

Unicorn of a system of values illustrate his belief in the vatic role of
the poet. One of the ancient functions of the poet was that of the
prophet, and Rexroth believes that his intransigent denunciations of the
evils of modern society place him within a long tradition which includes
Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah. The philosophy presented in The Dragon
and the Unicorn grows directly out of the apocalyptic view revealed in
The Phoenix and the Tortoise. As Rexroth says, even if humanity persists
for a million years, "we are at this moment living morally in the Last
Days." The view of life in The Dragon and the Unicorn moves towards
a community of love and, in terms of the eschatology of the New Testament,
seeks to establish a "Kingdom in the face of Apocalypse." Rexroth's visionary and prophetic view of life represents, therefore, a positive response to the modern crisis of value, which Rexroth
expresses most acutely in The Phoenix and the Tortoise, written during
World War II and reflecting a widespread loss of belief in a society of
progress and optimism. Rexroth's effort to develop a comprehensive
world view is valuable because it seeks to enhance life in a time of
violence and insecurity. The personalist, philosophical, and religious
strands woven throughout the longer poems ultimately form a single design.
Rexroth's "inner life attitude," which is, as he says about a fellow
poet and friend named Robert Duncan, one of "immense seriousness and
devotion," merits our attention because it is an authentic act of love,

38Kenneth Rexroth, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century,
40Kenneth Rexroth, "Facing Extinction," in The Alternative
a worthy "gift of the self to the other."\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{41}Kenneth Rexroth, "Poets, Old and New: Robert Duncan," in \textit{Assays}, p. 239.
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VITA

Samuel Baity Garren was born on January 20, 1943, the son of Martin Thompson Garren and Birdie Rowland Garren and the brother of Charles Martin Garren. He was a graduate from Grimsley High School in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1961; and in the fall of that year he began his studies at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, where he received his B.A. in 1965. After having been a teaching assistant in the Department of English at Louisiana State University from 1965 to 1971, he took an instructorship in that department from 1971 to 1973. While at Louisiana State University, he was a National Defense Education Act fellow.
Candidate: Samuel Baity Garren

Major Field: English

Title of Thesis: Quest For Value: A Study Of The Collected Longer Poems Of Kenneth Rexroth

Approved:

Thomas L. Weston
Major Professor and Chairman

James D. Brownham
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

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