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**NATURE AND
MYSTICAL
IDENTITY**

**THREE JOURNEYS
TO THE ABSOLUTE**

**MAYADA MAHMOUD
AL-SHEREEF**

2005

WALLACE ANNEX

Thesis
2005/79

2005/79

2005/79



**The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Nature and Mystical Identity:
Three Journeys to the Absolute**

A Thesis Submitted to

The English and Comparative Literature Department

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

By:

Mayada Mahmoud Al Shereef
Bachelor of Arts

December 2005

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Approved By:

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Dec. 18, 2005

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21/12/05

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Abstract

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Title: Nature and Mystical Identity: Three Journeys to the Absolute

Author: Mayada Mahmoud Al Shereef

Advisor: Dr. William Melaney

This thesis demonstrates three kinds of the Absolute and three different ways of approaching them. Farid Ud-Din Attar, Kate Chopin and Theodore Roethke take different roads to reach their Absolute. Similarities among the three works tackled in this thesis are represented by the role of nature in the spiritual journey to attain a mystical identity, and by having an ultimate goal of the journey called the "Absolute". On the other hand, differences are represented by the different definitions of the Absolute that the three authors offer. This thesis also presents different notions like annihilation, unity and illumination that the passengers in the three mystical journeys encounter. The author of this thesis maintains that literature allows us to envision a kind of Absolute, whether as God, Identity or the Divine.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Professor William Melaney for showing a genuine interest in my thesis, spending a lot of time with me discussing many other themes related to my topic and finally for editing my work. I am also very thankful to Professor Ferial Ghazoul for being the first who triggered my interest in mysticism and the question of identity, for providing helpful references and also for giving me guidance and suggestions to present my thesis in its best shape. My very sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Sahar El Mougy, the beautiful poet and professor in Cairo University, Faculty of Arts, for suggesting *The Awakening*, for providing me with very helpful references, and for being exceptionally inspiring in our discussions about the relationship between Nature and mysticism. Finally, I am greatly indebted and thankful beyond words to my family for giving me all kinds of support and help throughout the Master of Art program. Thank you.

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General Introduction

Before embarking on our journey in this book, we would like to offer a few words of encouragement and advice. First, we would like to thank the many people who have supported us in this journey. We would like to thank our families, our friends, and our colleagues for their love and support. We would also like to thank the many people who have helped us in our research. We would like to thank the many people who have helped us in our research. We would like to thank the many people who have helped us in our research.

All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide thy Sustainer's Self, full of majesty & glory.

(Qur'an 55: 26-7)

General Introduction

Before embarking on our own journey in this thesis to examine the three mystical journeys of Farid Ud-Din Attar, Kate Chopin and Theodore Roethke, let us examine some important terms that will be frequently used in this research. The word 'mystic' has its origins in Greek mysteries. A mystic is a person who is allowed into those mysteries that endow her/him with abstruse or arcane knowledge of divine things and has been "reborn into eternity." The goal of the mystic's journey is to transcend our world, that is confined in time and place, to reach "eternity and timelessness." This secret wisdom or knowledge that the mystic comes to possess after getting in contact with the divine entity is forbidden to discuss in language. The Greek origin of the word 'mystery' (*mysterion*) is the verb *muo* which means to close the eyes or lips (Happold 18). It is consciousness of the *beyond*, of something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material phenomena, of an *unseen* over and above the seen (18-9). F. C. Happold presents some definitions of the term "mysticism." Medieval theologians said that it is "experimental wisdom," "a stretching out of the soul into God through the urge of love," or "an experimental knowledge of God through unifying love" (Happold 37). Von Hartmann, says Happold, defines mysticism as "the filling of the consciousness by a content (feeling, thought, desire) by an involuntary emergence of the same from the unconsciousness." Goethe says that mysticism is "the scholastic of the heart, the dialectic of the feelings" (Happold 37). On the other hand, Steven T. Katz defines the mystic by saying that the mystic is "the great religious rebel who undermines the orthodox establishment, placing his own experience above the doctrines of the accepted authorities, and who not infrequently engenders serious opposition even to the point of being put to death for heresy" (Katz 3). My own definition of mysticism would be an insatiable appetite for knowledge, a quest for wisdom, for the realization of what is *beyond* or for an Absolute, regardless how each one of us defines it. The fuel for this quest could be love for the Absolute, or maybe just love of knowledge but it ends with unity with the Absolute and ultimate love for it.

That leaves us with a question: Is mysticism a quest of the heart or of the mind? I have mentioned in my own definition of mysticism that the impetus could be love for the Absolute or love of knowledge. If it is the first then mysticism here is a quest of the heart. And if it is the second then it is a quest of the mind. However, I believe this distinction exists only at the early stages of the quest. Later on, the distinctive line between the heart and mind dissolves. The seeker gains knowledge and is endowed by the love of her/his Absolute. However, I believe that Love for the Absolute is a more *flammable* and stronger passion. It gives the seeker a stronger push towards her/his goal.

Childhood, nature, and mysticism often overlap in Romantic thought. We can see the importance the Romantics placed upon childhood and how they lamented being adults and losing the rapture of children. William Wordsworth, for instance, has glorified childhood and referred to the "child of joy" (Wordsworth, line 34). He laments in this beautiful poem, "Ode on Intimation of Immortality," the loss of a bygone time where he could see the world "apparelled in celestial light" (4). He wonders what has happened to the "visionary gleam," (57) "where is it now; the glory and the dream?" (58). Children can better communicate with nature, they are closer to it because they are not, unlike adults, spoilt by the material world. They understand the language by which nature passes on knowledge to them. In the very same poem, Wordsworth proclaims that there is a heaven we have been to before our birth. Our life and birth are nothing but "a sleep and forgetting" (59). As adults, we lose every trace or memory of this heaven, but "heaven lies about us in our infancy!" (67). Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaims, "the sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (Emerson 75). Emerson does not confine the humans' enjoyment of nature to children only, but he stresses that the person should keep the spirit of infancy alive through adulthood.

Since we have mentioned Romanticism, we cannot but highlight the strong, undeniable link between it and mysticism. The most famous representative of the mystical trend in Romanticism is William Blake's first stanza of his "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour. (Blake, lines 1-4)

Let us briefly examine the commonalities between Romanticism and mysticism. First, both Romantics and mystics are interested in the individual or what the latter called the Self. Romanticism has the individual as its centre and focus – as opposed to the Neo-classicist centre, society. As for the mystics, the self is usually the starting point of their mystical quest. The common path that the mystics followed to reach their Absolute was to destroy the idol of the self. Second, both sides are concerned with Nature, at least to some degree. For the mystics, specially in the middle ages, Nature as the creation of God was considered yet another "book" of His whose signs can be interpreted along with His sacred and revealed books. This is echoed by Emerson's statement, "the happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship" (107). The Romantics saw nature as a great tutor with a mystical power. Nevertheless, we might also recall that nature for the Romantics was sometimes the reflection of the individual's thoughts and feelings.

In his essay "Nature," Emerson speaks of the effects of nature in isolating man from the material world and getting him in touch with the beyond. He says that if a person wishes to be alone, s/he should look at the stars because the light radiating from them would separate him from the physical world around him (74). He states:

Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God. (76)

Emerson mentions that the moral influence of nature upon a person is measured by the amount of truth it demonstrates to her/him. (95). He draws a very strong and vital comparison between nature and the Divine when he says that Nature speaks of the spirit and that “it suggests the absolute” (107). Man, after communicating with this divine nature becomes, to some degree, himself divine (104).

Having mentioned many times the word “knowledge,” let us discuss it further here. Man is born with very limited knowledge and can perceive the facts of life in only limited ways. God says in his Holy Qur’an that “you have been granted very little of [real] knowledge” (Qur’an 17: 85). But what kind of knowledge has been given to us? And what are the varieties of knowledge? There are two kinds; worldly/material knowledge (physics, chemistry ... etc.) and metaphysical knowledge (mysticism), or as Happold explains, knowledge of “matter” and that of “spirit.” We know of two worlds: “an *outer* world of material phenomena and sense perception and an *inner* world of thoughts, emotions and feelings.” (24). We know so little of the *inner* world. It is noteworthy that the *complete* previously mentioned Qur’anic verse reads, “They will ask thee about [the nature of] divine inspiration. Say: “This inspiration [comes] at my Sustainer’s behest; and [you cannot understand its nature, O men, since] you have been granted very little of [real] knowledge.” (Qur’an 17: 85). Thus, it is specifically knowledge of the spirit with which man is endowed but little. Mysticism is a quest to gain more knowledge, to see what is beyond, to explore lands none has trod before.

The Self is another very important and crucial term in mysticism. Happold says that there are two urges of life inside humans: "one is towards selfhood, individualization, and separation; the other towards an escape from the loneliness of the self into something bigger than self." One clings to one's selfhood and is so much concerned with the self; but at the same time yearns for a re-union with an entity that is bigger than one's self, and that promotes a sense of belonging (40).

How can we recognize the mystical state? William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* states the characteristics of the mystical experience. First, ineffability; mystics always believe that human languages are deficient in expressing the mystical state (343). D.T. Suzuki says: "When language is forced to be used for things of this (transcendental) world, it becomes warped and assumes all kinds of crookedness: oxymora, paradoxes, contortions, absurdities, oddities, ambiguities, and irrationalities" (Schimmel, *Veil* 166). Thus, it is more of "a state of feeling rather than a state of intellect" as Happold explains (46). It is impossible to relate an experience or feeling that one has gone through to someone who has never been there. There is no better example than the one that William James gave: describing and defining drunkenness can never be the same as being actually drunk (364.) Second, the mystical state has a noetic quality. This is because of the insight into the beyond and the wisdom that the mystic gains after achieving her/his mystical experience. Ninian Smart says that it does not have just a noetic touch, but also it is "the noesis of the transcendent" (127). Third, the mystical state has a transient quality. This is due to the fact that the mystical experience is hard to sustain for long. Fourth, there is passivity quality inherent in the mystical experience. The mystic feels that her/his own will is suspended, that there is a higher power controlling the most insightful moments (James 343-4.) Happold adds to these qualities that the mystic is conscious of the oneness of everything. S/he can perceive God in everything and sense that everything exists in God. Happold finally mentions that in mystical experience, the familiar ego

is not the true Self. The familiar ego is usually the re-defined self covered with heaps of worldly concerns (46-48).

Where does Truth lie? The general perception is that truth lies in the outside world. That is why people embark on journeys to find the Truth. Mystics only, after experiencing this Truth, know that it lies within. Let us hear Robert Browning singing of it:

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
 From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
 There is an inmost centre in us all,
 Where truth abides in fullness; and around
 Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
 This perfect, clear perception – which is truth. (qtd. in Happold 57-8)

In the three chapters of my thesis, we will see how three writers start on a journey to the outside world and end up by finding the truth within.

Happold says: "God can only be fully known by *becoming* God, by taking Him into the inmost self as the fulfilment of that self, and by the self's being taken fully into the divine life and being transformed therein" (62). I disagree with Happold here. God cannot be *fully* known. We get only glimpses of what He allows us to know about him. Unity with Him does not mean that we have comprehended His whole existence or entity. It is rather that we have comprehended the triviality of our own existence and entity compared to His all-present, omniscient being. Thus, the knowledge and insight we obtain are more pertinent to the truth of our own existences than to the truth of His own.

Humans in themselves have a touch of divinity, which is why it is not really hard for us to return to our divine origins. God says in his Holy Qur'an: "Now, verily, it is We who have created man, and we know what his innermost self whispers within him: for we are closer to him than his neck-vein" (Qur'an 50:16). This means that God is actually within. We do not have to wander outside to realize Him, we just have to delve deep within to find Him.

We said before that the seeker has to start with the Self to find the Other or what we would call the Absolute. But what occurs after the realization of that Other? What happens to the self? I believe that this self-other polarization disappears, and the term "self" is redefined to mean the One Self, the One Centre with no opposed entity whatsoever. When the mystic can realize this *redefined* self, only then does s/he realize the Absolute and attain unity with it.

The moment of unity is so important that it has been left unspoken of in this introduction. Happold says that it is nothing but "the final triumph of the spirit, the attainment of complete and permanent synthesis and reconciliation between the *within* and the *without*" that would result in having a "permanent change of consciousness." (94). We have said before that one of the qualities of the mystical experience is transience, but the effect of going through this experience lasts for a long time and causes this "permanent change of consciousness" where our perception of everything around us changes.

Concerning the moment of insight, Happold says that "illumination may be gradual, almost imperceptible, or sudden and violent" (52). If we examine closely the three works analyzed in this thesis, we will find that this moment of illumination is gradual in *The Awakening*, while sudden and violent in *The Conference of the Birds* and Roethke's poetry. Warner Allen describes this moment of illumination in *The Timeless Moment* by saying that it is accompanied by a "feeling of

amazement, of intense joy and peace, and, at the same time, intense unworthiness" (qtd. in Happold 53).

In searching for the Absolute, people follow different paths to realize their centre. This centre can be within or without, depending on the person's perception of her/his own existence. The mystical journey takes different paths in the three chapters of my thesis. The passenger in each narrative uses a different means to realize the Ultimate. Some take a journey within to reach a centre outside, and others wander outside to finally embrace a centre within. The perception of the Ultimate is different in the three chapters in this thesis. Farid Ud-Din Attar in *The Conference of the Birds*, Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* and Theodore Roethke in "In a Dark Time," offer different centres and different means to reach them.

In writing about Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, I have consulted two translations. The first is by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis and the second is by C.S. Nott. However, all the quotations in this thesis are extracted from the first, as I found it more appropriate to use because it is done in the form of heroic couplets as well as it is easier for the reader to understand and grasp. I have also used Muhammed Asad's translation of the Holy Qur'an because it offers a clear translation of such a complex, sophisticated sacred text as the Qur'an.

Chapter One: Farid Ud-Din Attar Flying Far to Reach the Near

Like Rumi and Hafiz, the name Attar conjures up images of passionate attraction to the divine. Farid Ud-Din Abū Hāmid Muhammad B. Ibrāhīm Attar was born some time previous to 1150 A.D. in a village called Kadkan near Nīshāpūr, which was known as the centre of Islamic mysticism (Smith, *Persian Mystics* 11). He worked as a druggist (Attar) for some time before being interested in Sufism. For almost forty years, he studied the heritage of the Sufi saints before entering into complete seclusion to contemplate the Divine Essence. His masterpiece is the *Mantiq ut-Tair* (The Conference of the Birds), a long allegory of the soul's search for divine truth. His many other works include *Tadkhirat al-Awliya'*, (Biographies of the Saints) which contains biographies of many Sufi mystics (Smith, *Mystics of Islam* 80). He also wrote *Pandnāma* (The Book of Counsels), *Jawahar al-Dhāt* (The Inner Nature of the Divine Essence), *Asrār Nāma* (The Book of Mysteries) and *Ilāhī Nāmā* (The Book of Divine Knowledge) (Smith, *Persian Mystics* 17-18). Before discussing Attar and his *The Conference of the Birds*, let us dwell upon the historical and spiritual background of his path, Sufism.

The aim of Sufism is to remove the veils between God and the person (Frager 1). The Greek origin of the word mysticism or mystery is *myein* which means "to close the eyes." Sarraj defines the Sufis as "people who prefer God to everything" while "God prefers them to everything else" (qtd. in Frager 2). Sufism started around the ninth century A.D.. The word "Sufi" has its origins in Arabic; it means "wool" or "pure." This is because early Sufis used to wear wool garments and sought purity of the self (Frager 2-3).

Sufism developed out of the "meditation of the Koran and the faithful imitation of the action of the Messenger of God" (Schimmel, *Islamic Tradition* 130.) Annemarie Schimmel says that the focal point of the Muslim's faith is the acknowledgement that God is one. This affirmation was further

developed by radical mystics, who changed the phrase "there is no deity but God" into their doctrinal phrase, "there is nothing existent save God" (Schimmel, *Veil* 22). This echoes the Quranic verse: "All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide thy Sustainer's Self, full of majesty and glory" (Qur'an 55: 26-7). This means that God is the only eternal, true and one entity in this world.

As William James and Happold discuss the qualities of the mystic state, Frager elaborates about the four stages of Sufism. First, *shari'ah* (laws of religion) refer to the teachings and principles of Islam. Second, *tariqah* (the mystical path) means the practice of the Sufi to reach the goal with guidance from the Sufi teacher. Third, *haqiqah* (Truth), is "the direct experience of the mystical states of Sufism, direct experience of the presence of God within," and finally, *ma'rifah* (Gnosis), which is the ultimate wisdom the seeker gains about the spiritual truth. These stages should be followed successively in order to reach the higher stage, Gnosis (Frager 12-3).

Happold states that "Islam is the most transcendent of all the higher religions." We find "a subtle blending of the experience of God as the Divine Lover and of utter Self-loss in Him." (Happold, 96.) There is a story that emphasises the idea of divine love in Sufism: The lover knocks on the Beloved's door. The latter asks: "Who is this?" The lover says: "It is I." "This house will not take you and me," the Beloved replied without opening the door. The lover is dismissed in grief, crying and praying alone. Then, after a long time, he came back to knock on the door of the Beloved again. The beloved asks again: "Who is this?" This time, the lover answers: "It is you!" Immediately, the door is wide open for the lover to enter the house (Happold 79). Thus, we see that there should be a loss of "I" before any unity (metaphorically, entering the house) can occur.

This narrative does not support Bernard McGinn's definition of spiritual unity in which "God became human so that humans might become God." (McGinn). I strongly disagree with this

description, which echoes Mansur al-Hallaj's statement, "I am the Absolute Truth." The moment of unity that al-Hallaj experienced with the Truth should dissolve the egocentric self as represented by the pronoun "I." Some mystics, being drunk in the ecstasy of unity with their Absolute, move from self-renunciation to self-glorification as in al-Hallaj's statement and Bayazid Bistami's exclamation, "Glory be to me" (Schimmel, *Veil* 163). These extreme statements are psychologically analyzed and explained by Muhammad Ghazzali. He said that they do not attest to states of union between the two Sufis and God, but they should be interpreted as "words of lovers in a state of erotic intoxication which are to be folded up and not related further" (Ritter 649). Some mystics utter only one word when they are in their mystical states; "Allah / God." In this tendency of uttering His name, He becomes the *only* Truth, the *only* Existent. As He fills the mystic's hollow soul, the "I" ceases to be and perception becomes centred around His existence. Mystics know how the experience of unity with God is very dangerous and fatal to be expressed, or rather betrayed, in mere words. That is why some mystics from Baghdad around 900 developed a special language or means of communicating this experience by using subtle allusions that only those who have been there can wholly understand (Schimmel, *Islamic Tradition* 133.)

Self-renunciation does not mean world-renunciation. On the contrary, Self-renunciation allows us to see the true reality of the world, to see it as it really is or as God sees it. Only when the mystic's senses are purified, her/his heart can be "the measure of divinity" (Happold 249). Ninian Smart says in her essay, "The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path," that the person attains purification of consciousness through a system of contemplation where the person wipes away all the images from her/his mind – whether internal or external images (Happold 117). This would leave the person with an empty consciousness which makes the mystic highly receptive to divine love and knowledge. Meister Eckhart expresses this idea when he uses the "gravitational model" to the effect that water flows downhill but can only flow into what is hollow or empty. We become empty by getting rid of the egocentric self with its desires and concerns (McGinn). Smart says that

the mystic "sacrifices her (daily) self, tames her passions, rises to a kind of objectivity of feeling, a sublime peace" which we can consider "transcendence of ordinary concerns, a rising therefore above what is worldly" (McGinn 127). In other words, to use the Sufis' favourite image, the 'mirror' of the heart has to be constantly polished by actions of piety in order to remove all the egocentric concerns to finally reflect nothing but Him (Schimmel, *Islamic Tradition* 134).

Sufism has the love of God as one of its central points. The Iraqi woman saint Rābi'a was the first to introduce this idea of worshiping God for the love of Him (Schimmel, *Islamic Tradition* 132). Only through love are the lover and the Beloved united. The great Sufi poet Rumi sings of this love:

I've spent my life, my heart
 And my eyes this way.
 I used to think that love
 And beloved are different.
 I know now they are the same.
 I was seeing two in one. (qtd. in Frager 15)

This love is not one-sided, it is mutual. God says in his Holy Qur'an: "O you have attained to faith! If you ever abandon your faith, God will in time bring forth [in your stead] people whom He loves and who love Him" (Qur'an 5:54). This shows that God's love for his people has even preceded their love for him. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says:

"Allah says: '... if he comes one span nearer to Me, I go one cubit nearer to him; and if he comes one cubit nearer to Me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running.'" (USC-MSA [1])

Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has indicated that we are born with *fitrah* or good nature. At the same time, there is a verse in Qur'an that says: "Man's inner self does incite [him] to evil, and saved are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows his grace. Behold, my Sustainer is much forgiving, dispenser of grace! (Qur'an 12:53). The explanation of those apparently contradictory statements is that the *fitrah* is different from the *nafs* (soul/spirit). The *fitrah* is the unpolluted, pure nature that we are born with, while the *nafs* is the soul polluted and stained by civilization, culture, desires, etc. We can see this opposition clearly in Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, which depicts Hayy with his *fitrah* that leads him to reach God in contrast to Absal whose *fitrah* has been transformed into *nafs* under the influence of culture and society. I believe this is what Attar meant when he said: "if your spirit is at enmity with your soul, sacrifice your soul and you will be able to go on your way unhindered. If your soul is a distraction to you on the road, cast it aside..." (qtd. in Smith, *Mystics of Islam* 81). The "spirit" and "soul" for Attar are the *fitrah* and *nafs* for prophet Mohammad (PBUH) respectively.

Many Sufi books mention that Abī Yazīd al-Bistāmī is the first who used the term annihilation (Dawood 156). Ibn Qaim al-Gouzeya defines *fana'* or annihilation by saying that it is the stage when the person achieves self-renunciation before God and that this does not entail the cancellation of the person's consciousness (qtd. in Dawood 151). The other face of annihilation is *baqa'*. Dawood says that *fana'* is exterminating the person's own traits, qualities and trivial existence and that *baqa'* is glorifying God and acting as He requires (153). Some other Sufis said when they were asked about the meaning of annihilation by saying that it means that God becomes the eye with which the person sees and the ear with which the person hears (155). This definition echoes the honourable *hadith* of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH):

“Allah says: ‘... and the most beloved things with which My slave comes nearer to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing *Nawafil* (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks.’” (USC-MSA [2])

However, it is noteworthy to mention that Ibn ‘Othaimīn has offered his own commentary on this *hadith* (saying of the Prophet – PBUH). “I become his sense of hearing with which he hears” is interpreted as implying that God protects the person’s hearing such that s/he hears only what would please God (vol. 2:157).

Abdel Bāry Dawood says that the idea of unity or incarnation (*hulūl*) is rejected by Islam and that al-Hallaj’s statement “I am the Absolute Truth” is metaphorical and not actual (Dawood 102-104). I agree with Dawood who shows us that unity is not comprehensible or possible because the two sides – God and humans – are different from one another. However, the appropriate word to use in this case is “annihilation,” which suggests how the person loses her/his entity in relation to God’s existence *without* acquiring any traits from God.

Margaret Smith says that Sufism has started when the early Sufis rejected the formalities of religion and developed an indifference to it. They did not want to look at God as the Absolute Ruler of human destinies, but they wanted to acquire knowledge in order to love Him and see Him as the Beloved. They believed that the person should free herself/himself from self-love and attachment to worldly things in order to be able to receive divine wisdom (Smith, *Mystics of Islam* 1-2). Traces of Sufi asceticism can be found in the Islamic rituals like fasting during the holy month of Ramadan,

the five daily prayers and the forbidding of wine. These examples of asceticism are intended to direct the soul from the material world into the spiritual realm (Smith, *Mystics of Islam* 2).

Some Sufis tried to reconcile Sufism and Orthodoxy. One of those is Abū al-Qasim al-Qushayri who said that “*mahabba* (love) is a state which man feels in his heart, too delicate to be expressed in words ... it is more appropriate to describe the lover of God as annihilated in the Beloved than to describe him as perfectly knowing the Beloved” (qtd. in Abrahamov 34). Another Sufi whose writings were consistent with Orthodoxy was Abu Talib al-Makki, who pointed out that that the person’s love for God is closely related to her/his belief as shown in the Qur’anic verse: “Those that believe love God more ardently” (Qur’an 2:165) (Abrahamov 34-44).

The only reliable account of someone who drew the closest to God is in the journey of the Prophet’s ascension. However, there is no proof that he actually saw God, but he reached the lote tree of the farthest limit. God says in his Holy Qur’an: “[This fello-man of yours appearing in the horizon’s loftiest part, and then drew near, and came closer, until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer... by the lote-tree of the farthest limit” (Qur’an 53: 7-15).

If we concentrate upon the mystical teachings of Attar regarding the Divine Essence, we will find that he believes that God is incomprehensible and that our knowledge of Him is so inadequate and based entirely on a limited number of ideas. The Divine Essence and Existence are impossible to be grasped by the limited human mind. However, the only way to come closer to God is through love and ecstasy, which are His gifts. To Attar, God is the Only Source of everything in the universe. He is the only Real Existent. All creatures long to be united again with the Source. The world is crying for its Origin. In discussing the relation between God and the soul, Attar says that man is created in the image of God and that in every soul there is a hidden Divine treasure. Consequently, man is the only real existent in the world because s/he alone has Divinity within. But this divinity existing in

the soul is imprisoned within a material cage – the body. Hence the divine spirit always strives to fly like a bird to its Source. We might dispute Attar's statement about his statement that a human is the only real existent in this world. If a sculptor carves a statue that looks like her/him, and after a while this statue perishes, the sculptor would remain the origin, and his existence won't be touched or affected by the perishing of her/his statue. By the same token, when we perish, God's existence continues because He is the Source and Only Real Existent. To the degree that God dwells in the world, His mode of being is that of real existence.

For Attar, in order to come closer to God, one has to go through a long hard journey until, through suffering, poverty and darkness, one finds the Divine Light. However, one cannot depend only on one's own efforts alone; God's grace and help are essential to reach this destination. (Smith, *Persian Mystics* 20-24). This would agree very much with what Saint Augustine has revealed in his *Confessions* that God's grace is the only light in the journey towards God. This also agrees with Islamic theology in general. God says in the Holy Qur'an: "Verily, thou canst not guide aright everyone whom thou lovest: but it is God who guides him that wills [to be guided]" (Qur'an 28:56). On the other hand, we have Ibn Tufyl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* stressing that reason only is the guide towards God. In the long journey towards the Divine Light, Attar stresses the importance of Love. He says: "if you are without Love you do not know the first letter of the alphabet in this realm of the spirit" (Smith, *Persian Mystics* 25). Love for Him means that the person would give up all worldly concerns for God (Smith 25). Attar has a peculiar theory about good and evil. He believes that evil does not exist because everything in this world comes from Him, and what comes from Him is good and not evil (Smith 21).

If we move now to discuss *The Conference of the Birds*, we will see that it uses allegory (symbolic meaning parallel to but distinct from literal meaning) to illustrate the Sufi doctrine of union between the human and the divine. It is the journey of thirty birds who, guided by the hoopoe, travel a very

long distance to find their king, the Simorgh. *The Birds* deal with the development of the human soul in its journey towards God (Schimmel, *Veil* 53). The journey for Attar is not through seas and gardens, but through deserts and valleys to reflect the hardship and coarseness of the journey. Attar chose to reflect certain human types by certain kinds of birds – the hoopoe is the wise leader, the nightingale is the lover, etc. This can be related to Emerson's view that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" (Emerson 58). The Sufis also believed that birds are representatives of the human spirit. This goes along with the words of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH): "The peoples that will dwell in Paradise have hearts like the birds" (Ibn 'Othaimin, vol. I:299).

The influence of Qur'an on Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* is obvious. The title "Mantiq ut-tayr" is mentioned in the Qur'an (27:16). Besides, the choice of the hoopoe to be the leader is significant. King Solomon chose the hoopoe before to be his messenger for the Queen of Sheba in order to invite her to worship God. He is considered by the Sufi as a symbol of wisdom and guidance (Qaysi 505-6).

The obstacles that Attar places in the journey of the thirty birds are those that any Sufi would face in her/his journey towards God. Attar gives examples of the worldly attachments that would hold a person back from pursuing the Path of Love. Worldly attachments like love (the nightingale's excuse), freedom (the parrot's excuse), feeling unworthy of such a great quest (the peacock excuse), and so on. The hoopoe in return shows, through anecdotes, the trivialities and transience of those obstacles and how great and timeless the goal is. He encourages them to "Give up the intellect for love and see / In one brief moment all eternity" (Attar 30). Additionally, he tells them about the true existence of the Simorgh and their own when he says: "When long ago the Simorgh appeared- / His face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared - / He cast unnumbered shadows on the earth" (52). Thus, he says that the Simorgh is Light, which agrees with the Qur'anic verse: "God is the Light of

the heaven and the earth" (Qur'an 24:35). He also says that humans are just shadows in order to make them see the worthlessness and insignificance of their worldly existence.

It is noteworthy that in Sufism, there is a very strong stress upon the leader or *sheikh*. Frager mentions that the sheikh is often described as the sun and the seekers as the planets, or he is even the mirror that reflects the light and blessings of God (24). Franz Heidelberger says that the teacher teaches the disciples how to become links (6). The disciple is taught only by the teacher (9). In some extreme Sufi sects, the seekers have to have the *baraka* or blessing from the *sheikh* before starting *dhikr* or remembrance of God or praying. This does not quite agree with the orthodox teachings of Islam that says that there is no mediator between God and the Individual. The hoopoe in Attar's allegorical epic does not tell them that they *are* the Simorgh. However, he leads them to the destination where they can find Him and he answers their many questions. He is their leader and a seeker like any one of them. He takes the journey with them and goes through hardships they do.

The kind of love that Attar chooses to celebrate in his allegorical epic is not conventional or normal love; it is what the outside world considers forbidden such as that between an inferior and a superior, people from different religions (like the story of Sheikh Sam'an), or homosexual love (Darbandi & Davis 19-20). One cannot help wondering: Sufis have Divine Love as their focal point, so how can they celebrate this forbidden love in their works? Is this indicative that there is something in common between the two kinds of love? Perhaps this shared reality is hard to fathom. However, Attar does not really clarify the relation between the two kinds of love in understandable terms.

In a very few pages of *The Birds*, Attar sets the path, the goal, and the method to reach it. The path is the quest to find a king, the Simorgh. The goal is reaching him. As for the method, Attar states it plainly: "destroy the mountain of the Self" (Attar 29) and "Shut your eyes and souls to earthly

claims" (32). And he foreshadows the end when he says: "And He is always near to us, though we / Live far from His transcendent majesty" (33). This echoes the Qur'anic verse: "We are closer to him than his neck-vein" (50:16). The hoopoe did not state from the very beginning the fact that the birds are themselves the Simorgh. He only said that he is near. However, when each bird declared an excuse and the hoopoe falsified it, they all protested in a final attempt to give up the journey. Only then, the hoopoe told them: "He makes a mirror in our hearts – look there / To see Him, search your hearts with anxious care" (53). He indicated now that the journey has to be in the outside world in order to reach a goal within. A typical Sufi method is to take a long journey to the far end of the world to reach the deepest part of the soul. It is interesting that although the hoopoe told the birds about the final conclusion of their journey they still had to actually take it. This is because this conclusion is not only to be known, it has to be *experienced* and *realized*. Knowing it did not make the birds *feel* it, they had to live the hardship to really *grasp* this fact.

The hoopoe's leadership and guiding skills are manifested when he tells the birds that the Simorgh is very near them and that they are far from him. This is like an indirect instigation to the birds to take an action. It is also psychologically intelligent to mention that the goal is near in order to encourage people to act, and then tell them about the hardships of the journey because if the leader reversed the order, people would never set on their way. This is exactly what the hoopoe did. He told the thirty birds that their goal is near, that they have to *just* give up the Self. When their wills were heated up, he told them in detail that they should leave behind all their worldly attachments that are dear to them.

Negm al-Dīn al-Kobra says in his book, *The Ten Fundamentals* that there are three ways to reach God. The first method is to perform the required rituals like praying, fasting, paying charity and going on pilgrimage. The second is refinement of morals, purification of the heart and chastening of the self. The third is love, which is marked by ecstasy (Qaysi 235-7). Attar takes the second road.

He always struggled to beat his *Self* and to be far above worldly interests. In *The Conference of the Birds*, he usually described the Self as a “dog” or “hell” (Attar 96). Attar does not deny the fact that man should worship God through the rituals He instituted but he sees that this is not enough. Refining and taming of the Self is the best way to reach God (Qaysi 235-7).

From among all the anecdotes, which are all significant to the plot and to Attar’s Sufi path, I have chosen two anecdotes to bring to the foreground because I believe they carry the core of the Sufi teachings. The first is “The king who stopped at the prison gates” (Attar 125) and the second is another short anecdote; “The moths and the flame” (206). The first anecdote, which comes almost in the middle of the book, is concerned with true love. A king, who just returned to his town, is not stopped by the luxurious ornaments that rich people scattered around him and at his feet. However, prisoners ornament the prison with their “iron gyves, / Chains, severed heads, racked limbs and ruined lives” (125). The king is touched, sets the prisoners free, and pays them in gold. When asked about this strange action, he replies that the rich people are “Like rowdy children playing with new toys” and each one of them is “careful to please himself as much as me” (207). This shows that true love should be free from any selfish pleasure for the lover. It should be directed only towards the beloved. This is what the hoopoe wants to convey to the birds, that even taking pleasure in love will not make it a true one. The king says about the prisoners: “This spectacle (at the prison) was made for me alone.” This reminds us of what prophet Mohammad said:

"The reward of deeds depends upon the intention and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. So whoever emigrated for Allah and His Apostle, then his emigration was for Allah and His Apostle. And whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration was for what he emigrated for" (USC-MSA [3]).

This means that deeds should be for God only and not for any personal pleasure.

The second anecdote is "The moths and the flame" (206). It can be found towards the end of the book where the seven valleys are mentioned. Its location under the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness cannot be more appropriate since this is the last valley in which the Sufi doctrine is fully pictured. This story shows the Sufi path, goal and method of reaching it. It is about a group of moths led by a mentor who wanted to know the truth about candlelight. One of them draw near a candle and looked at the flame from behind a window, and then flew back to his fellow moths to tell them about what he knew. But the mentor said that this moth knew nothing of the truth. Another more eager moth flew nearer to the flame and came back to tell the rest about what he thought he knew. Again, the mentor said that he knew nothing of the truth of the flame. In the meanwhile, a moth headed for the flame intoxicated by love such that "his dizzy flight / Turned to an ardent wooing of the light" (206). Then it entered into the blazing flame to be lost in it. Only then the mentor cried: "He knows, he knows the truth we seek, / that hidden truth of which we cannot speak" (206). As I mentioned before, this particular tale presents the Sufi path, goal and method of reaching it. The goal is the Light, the path is a journey towards the goal, and the method of reaching this goal is through love and annihilation as the mentor maintains: "No creature's Self can be admitted here, / Where all identity must disappear." (206).

The Seven valleys that the birds have to cross are the Valley of the Quest, Love, Insight into Mystery, Detachment and Serenity, Unity, Awe and Bewilderment, and finally, the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness. Perhaps the order should have been different; Bewilderment, Quest, Love, Detachment and Serenity, Insight into Mystery, Unity and finally the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness. In order to start a quest, a person should be puzzled or bewildered about something and seeking knowledge of it. This would be the first spark for starting a journey or a quest. After moving forward in this journey, this person will gain love for his aim or goal. Then s/he achieves insight into mystery after detaching her/himself from any worldly interests. Finally comes the stage

of being united with the target of the journey (though, as indicated before, we might consider calling this stage annihilation). The person ultimately loses her/himself in a larger entity and turns into nothingness.

Attar chose number "seven" probably because it is known that there are seven skies above which God resides. This is like the seven valleys that the thirty birds crossed to find the Simorgh's palace (Qaysi 341). This journey, however, is not an external one. The idea that finding God is attained through a journey into our interior is a familiar idea in the Neo-Platonic philosophy. Otfried Becker says that "turning to the Highest and the Absolute is attained through the state of a higher turning to oneself" (qtd. in Ritter 637). This echoes the *hadith*: whoever knows himself (his soul), he knows His God" (qtd. in Ritter 637).

In the finale, when the birds finally reach the Simorgh's palace, they are not admitted to His presence. At this moment, they lose all worldly interests and they say echoing the tale of the moth and the flame: "'How can a moth flee fire / When fire contains its ultimate desire?" (Attar 216). They show here that they are ready for the final step, unity or annihilation. Then they were admitted and the veils were uncovered; "They were the Simorgh and the journey's end / ... / That this is that, that this, the goal is won" (219). This echoes al-Hallaj's cry: "I am the Absolute Truth." They saw in a mirror that they *are* the Simorgh. The image of the mirror is very significant for the Sufis. As Julia Ching states: "The image in the mirror no longer represents merely the *external* form of the person as seen by others, but a more interior principle. In both Eastern and Western religions, it frequently represents the soul – or its equivalent" (Ching 226). Annihilation attained, the journey is completed, and "the goal is won."

Chapter Two: Kate Chopin Collecting the Shattered Pieces of the Mirror

Kate Chopin (Catherine O'Flaherty) was born in St. Louise on February 8, 1850. She is a novelist and a short-story writer who is famous for her daring treatment of female independence, freedom and sexuality (Gibbons v). Chopin began her reading early in life as an escape from the grief she felt after the death of her brother. After finishing her classes at the St. Louise Academy of the Sacred Heart, her reading habits changed. Reading ceased to be an escape from sadness and turned into a means of "finding the inner passageway to her truth, her mystery, the psychology of herself that would later show her how to dissect the mind and heart of Edna Pontellier" (Gibbons xv). Chopin in her most celebrated and controversial novel, *The Awakening*, does not support the much-feared old order and traditional ways. She affirmed women's freedom of speech and sexuality (Gibbons xxii). Edna Pontellier's independence is, to a great extent, a reflection of Chopin's independence. Chopin, after the death of her husband, Oscar Chopin, had supported a family of six children through publishing her short stories in national magazines like *The American* and *The Century* (Gibbons xxii - xxiii).

There are many literary movements that have affected and formed the literary background and frame of *The Awakening*. First, the novel is considered Romantic with its stress upon the individual with her/his capabilities and influential abilities. The novel sustains a noticeable and powerful presence of nature. Additionally, the spiritual relation between the individual and nature, which usually entails emotional expression, is brought to the foreground. This relation involves self-discovery, inner contemplations and scenes from childhood. Edna Pontellier's journey towards an absolute was a "quest for a holy grail, a grail of self-definition" (Wyatt, www.vcu.edu 10 November 2005). On the other hand, Chopin is also influenced by realism, which stressed the real over the imaginary. Realism often supports the naturalistic belief that the individual is limited in this life by uncaring nature, and biological fate. In *The Awakening*, Edna is trapped in being a woman, wife and

mother. Freud maintained that female anatomy shapes her destiny. However, it does not *control* but rather *hinders* her destiny, which is self-realization. We make our destinies, we choose to let our anatomy control us or we control it. Finally, Chopin is influenced by the Local Colour movement, which tried to maintain a unique way of life in the face of industrialization: "Women local colorists were concerned with the place of women in society and the moral designs called for in a life" (Wyatt, www.vcu.edu 10 November 2005). In *The Awakening*, local colour appears in the portrayal of characters and the places. The characters are not just types of people, but belong to places where they are located (Wyatt, www.vcu.edu 10 November 2005).

While reading Chopin's words of Edna's fate as "damnation" one might be disappointed She explains Edna's function in the novel in terms of her method as a writer:

"Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late." (qtd. in Gibbons xl)

There is definitely an underlying ironic tone in this explanation. It is as if Edna has created her own fate by herself, which actually enforces the fact that she is an independent woman who makes her own decisions. Edna's character is a cry in the face of Freud's "Anatomy is destiny."

It seems that Kaye Gibbons based her reading of the novel on the superficial tone of Kate Chopin when talking about the damnation of Edna. Gibbons believes that the journey of Edna is self-discovery and self-destruction as well. Edna believed in the "eternal rights of women" but she went

too far when she took Alcée Arobin as a lover, and if it had not been him, it would have been anybody else. Gibbon says: "What cannot be covered by the feminist umbrella is the thoughtless manner in which she claimed her womanhood" (xliv). Edna could not be moderate in her claim for her rights. The need for balance is a theme that runs throughout the novel. Mr. Pontellier needs to balance between his needs and his wife's. On the other hand, Edna needs to create a balance among her awakened sexuality, journey towards self-discovery and her role as a mother and a wife (xliv-xlv). However, Edna's journey was not towards self-destruction. On the contrary, it was towards self-construction; her relationship with Arobin is a challenge to a rigid society that denied her rights. On the other hand, it is also a fulfilment of an aspect of her identity - sexuality. While Gibbon's view of Edna's ways in achieving her womanhood is inaccurate, we might just as strongly disagree with Edna in her means of realizing her identity. Going against society should not be degrading if carried out in a proper way. Edna could have asserted her identity without inviting Arobin to her bed. Leaving her husband's house was a good and wise move that helps her achieve her financial and personal independence, but the succumbing to the seduction of Arobin is another matter. There seemed to be no remorse on her side after taking Arobin as a lover. She states: "there was neither shame nor remorse" (Chopin 301).

The very first lines open the novel with a reference to a beautiful parrot in a cage that can speak "a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood" (Chopin 171). This might be a reference to beautiful women imprisoned in the cage of marriage or social customs and traditions. They speak a language nobody can understand, maybe the language of freedom and a wholesome identity. There is no communication or understanding between these women and the outer world. The only being that can understand this language is "the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence" (171). Only other women, like Mademoiselle Reisz, can understand Edna's language, and they support her with maddening persistence upon her rights. The mocking-bird with its fluty notes is a clear reference to

Mademoiselle Reisz with her skilful piano playing. Chopin has chosen the word “maddening” to indicate that self-expression does not make women mad, but rather it is imprisonment that breeds madness. If men keep imprisoning women, with persistent will, women will drive men mad as well.

Now comes the question: Who or what is Edna’s Absolute? A plausible question that should be asked first might be: *who is Edna?* She is a human being, just a human being, with a name but no identity, a belle dame that society alone has the right to define and provide her with an identity, but is she a *woman*? The person who is supposed to be the closest to her – Mr. Pontellier – looks at her as a “valuable piece of personal property” (173). He even denies her a human identity. Thus, we have a living being whose identity is set by society as a wife, mother, and personal property. It is logical that she should look for an identity for herself, to find a centre to maintain. Her Absolute is her mystical identity, an identity fragmented by the society that saw a woman as a decoration in a businessman’s house. Her journey towards the Absolute is a mystical journey of collecting the shuttered pieces of a mirror to perceive her identity as a whole. To hold her Absolute / Centre, she has to let go of her obligations – husband, children and society. She also has to let go of her old fragmented self to build a new self. The moment where she would embrace the Absolute is when she can truly realize her whole self and identity as a *woman*. This agrees with what Carol Christ maintains: “I believe women’s quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death” (Christ 8).

Christ says that there are two types of women’s quests. First, there is the *social quest* where women seek newly defined relations other than the preset ones that society has enforced upon them. women seek “nonoppressive sexual relationships, new visions of mothering, creative work, equal rights as a citizen” (8). Second, there is *spiritual quest* that is related to women’s exploring the depths of their souls and their place in the universe. This quest includes contemplative moments where basic questions are asked: “Who am I? What is my place in the universe? In answering these questions, a

woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience" (8-9). Edna Pontellier sought the two quests. She was fortunate enough to reach her destination in the spiritual quest. She could finally answer the question concerning her personal identity. She knew where she stood in the universe and in her relationships with others. Edna maintains: "she could only realize that she herself – her present self – was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect" (Chopin 232). However, when she embarked upon the social quest, she went nowhere. She could not redefine her relations with others. All she could do was to reject them. Thus, she failed in her social quest.

Edna was not dead before her awakening. She does not undergo a resurrection. Carol Christ says that the word "awakening" "suggest that the self needs only to notice what is already there" (18). She always waged a battle within but needed a push to wake her up. She used to look at objects "as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought" and "her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features" (Chopin 174). She is not a beautiful, dull woman. She knows there is a quest she has to embark on, but her power is not sufficient to give her ship the first push. The verbs that Chopin chose to attach to Mr. Pontellier are "instructed" (174) and "reproached" (178) to show what kind of treatment Edna receives. Ironically, he was considered by the women of New Orleans "the best husband" (180). Edna is being treated as an object, a careless object. Her husband reproaches her for her inattention to their children. He explicitly tells her that even the identity that is bestowed on her by society is too valuable for her and that she cannot handle it. When she cried, Chopin chose to describe her state as: "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (179). She is oppressed and denied self-expression. She cannot speak, she can only cry with voiceless tears that correspond to the sea's "mournful lullaby" (178).

Chopin presented other models of women like Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Adèle is an example of the perfect woman, as society would want her to be. However, if set in contrast to Edna's subtle features, "there was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent" (182). She is more related to the physical aspect of the female psyche than to the spiritual / emotional aspect. She is considered a "sensuous Madonna" (187). If Edna is opposed to with the Creole women represented by Adèle Ratignolle, the Creole women are more often said to resemble birds:

fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any hard, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.
(181)

On the other hand, Mademoiselle Reisz is the spinster whose enchanting piano playing captures Edna's heart and gives her the anticipatory vision of the naked man on the seashore. She cares only for Edna; she knows she is a kindred spirit. She understands Edna as the mocking-bird understands the parrot. She tells Edna: "you are the only one worth playing for" (210). Elizabeth Elz says that both Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz likened Edna to a bird and wanted her to grow wings. However, "the type and purpose of the wings are radically different." Adèle, as a Creole "mother-woman" wanted Edna to "grow wings as ministering angels" (181) and to act as the "True Woman" (Elz 16). Mademoiselle Reisz in contrast wanted Edna to grow stronger wings that would enable her to fly above customs and traditions and to act like the "New Woman" (Elz 18). Edna chose to grow the strong wings that Mademoiselle Reisz wanted her to grow.

The sea is the central and most powerful presence in the novel. It has an “everlasting voice” (Chopin 178); its cleansing water clears Edna’s vision and allows her to re-define her centre. It is the mirror that allows her to see herself as a whole entity. This reveals the clear influence of Romanticism that asserted the mystical aspect of nature. Images related to the sea always imply sensuality as well as enchantment: “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation” (190). Its voice is like a “maddening persistence” that invites the person to lose the body and contemplate the soul.

It is peculiar and interesting that Chopin chose sensuous images. But is it physical sensuality that she is rendering or spiritual life? The sea has an enormous power that speaks to the spirit but attracts the body as well. This might remind us of the “the Moth and the Flame” tale in Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, where the flame attracts the moth until it is annihilated in it. However, the difference is that the flame is the Absolute for the moth, while the sea is not the Absolute for Edna. The sea is a supernatural, transcendental power that awakens her long-sleeping soul. It calls her to “dare and defy.” The Gulf had an influence upon Edna. Its “sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty” (189). It was the water that took her hand and led her to start her mystical journey towards her centre.

The familiarity that Edna feels towards the sea has its roots in her childhood. She remembers a girl (herself) who used to run in a vast meadow, casting her arms in the long grass like someone swimming in a spacious ocean (194). These recollections come back to her to remind her of her childhood, which calls attention to yet another Romantic tendency in the novel.

All her life Edna lived according to a discovery that she made at a very early stage of her life. She realized “the dual life – the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions”

(190). Anca Parvulescu claims "Edna's drama is that she experiences herself as a double." The oscillation between polar sides of her existence tortured her (Parvulescu 478). That is why she is always seen thinking about or contemplating her status. After her awakening, she disavowed and renounced her earlier beliefs. She got rid of her outward existence and brought the inward to the surface. She no longer conforms and always questions the role that society has set for her. She acts according to the guidance of her heart.

Edna calls one of Mademoiselle Reisz's musical compositions "Solitude." When she listens to it "there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hapless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (Chopin 209). This image is a clear foreshadowing of Edna's fate. At the very end of the novel, she will stand naked on the seashore and drown watching her soul flying away from her.

When was Edna first awakened? Some would say that this happens when she encountered the frankness of the Creole women telling about their intimate life. However, this encounter only taught her about the outer world. I believe that her first awakening occurred when she heard Mademoiselle Reisz playing the piano that night. She could see emotions passing before her eyes and could experience them to the fullest. Then came swimming "at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (210). The night of her awakening had "no weight of darkness; there were no shadows" (211). Chopin chose to have her heroine's awakening in the night where usually people resort to sleep. In the night, under the supervision of Nature's Masters, the moon and the sea, Edna witnessed her first light in a mystical journey towards a centre. She was like a child "who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (212). She shouts for joy when she sees herself swimming, and "a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import has been given her to control the working of her body and her soul" (212).

Swimming in this context is a spiritual triumph as well as a physical one. Now she is fully awake. Her soul is pregnant with power and confidence. This is not her first encounter with the sea, but it is her first encounter with it while she is awake. She becomes open to what the sea has to teach her and can attentively listen to the knowledge that imparts to her, knowledge about herself.

Chopin explains Edna's ambitions: "She wanted to swim far out, where no other woman had swum before" (212). All the women in her society were satisfied with their preset identities. Now that Edna is awake, she wants more; she wants an identity that *she* sets and defines. She knows that this is not easy and that she needs to go "far out." That is why she does not participate in their swimming groups but stays alone, exploring this newly discovered self.

After this hard experience of awakening, Edna remarks: "I'm very tired." Robert answers, "I know you are." At this point, she almost explodes: "you don't know anything about it, why should you know? I never was so exhausted in my life. But it wasn't unpleasant. A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don't comprehend half of them" (214). She is tired after her encounter with the different fragmented pieces of her soul. Maybe she saw her identity as a whole, which confused her because she is not used to this view of herself. The pressure and weight of this vision made her tired. This is a woman's experience, and because it is a new one, Edna is swept away by a flow of emotions that she could not comprehend. Robert claims that he knows about it. But how can a *man* know about it? Just a few seconds after this conversation, when Robert and Edna were still together, "she took his arm, but she did not lean upon it" (215). This shows that her journey of independence has begun. She depends on men no more.

When they reached their house on the beach, Edna preferred to stay outside, which was the first sign of independence and rebellion. She wanted to stay awake, conscious and alert. She wanted to enjoy the ecstasy of her first awakening. Mr. Pontellier asked her to get into the house but she

What does Edna think of her awakening? She tells Robert: "I love you [...] It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (340). However, it seems that Mrs. Pontellier has not yet gained full insight into the facts of life. She is still under his spell. Edna's relationship with Robert is irritating because she is *too* attached to him. She achieved independence from her husband but she could not achieve independence from Robert. He left her twice; once in Grand Isle and the other time, in New Orleans. After the first time, she grew even more attached to him. Only after the second time she could break the chains, only then she could be truly freed from the influence of men upon her. It would seem that he helped her more when he deserted her than when he was keeping her company. Even with Arabin, the reader feels that she was the one in control. She would tell him when to meet her and when to keep waiting.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Chopin says: "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (350). This same sentence occurs earlier (190). Why does Chopin use the same words in describing the sea in two different places in the novel? The first time was very close to her awakening which demonstrated the role the sea played on her consciousness. This image is related to the theme of spiritual solitude. In the second time, the awakening has been completed and the realization of her identity attained. The solitude described is primarily physical.

The Sufis likened the soul to birds. What about Chopin? We see at the beginning of *The Awakening* that women are likened to birds. Edna Pontellier is a caged parrot and Mademoiselle Reisz is a mocking-bird. The first speaks a language that nobody can understand except the mocking-bird. Birds also appear in the novel when Edna listens to the piece that Mademoiselle Reisz plays and which she calls solitude. An image crosses her mind of a naked man standing on the seashore and a bird fluttering away. The bird here symbolizes freedom of the soul, and the naked man represents someone who threw away customs and traditions. The last time when a bird was mentioned was in

the very last scene when Edna stood naked on the seashore watching a bird with a broken wing that tries to fly but finally drowns in the sea. This bird is a symbol of Edna herself. She is a bird who tried to fly high above the social traditions and customs, but was socially defeated.

In her last encounter with the sea, Edna saw “a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (350). She realized her Absolute, but she could not persuade society to accept her with her new identity. She achieves a mystical triumph yet a social defeat. The tragedy of her life is that she could not combine the spiritual quest with the social one. Chopin indicates that “spiritual awakening without social support can lead to tragedy” (Christ 27). However, we might have a feeling of restlessness and irritation in reading this image. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate if Chopin had used the same image that crossed Edna’s mind before – the naked man on the beach with a bird flying high.

When Edna stood naked before the sea, throwing all ties and chains along with her swimming suit, she thought: “how strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (350). This is annihilation and rebirth. It is annihilation of the old self and the rebirth of the new one, the one united with the Absolute. At this very moment, we can say that Edna’s journey is completed.

When Edna first learned how to swim, she was afraid of not being able to return to the shore. There were still ties that connected her to the land. Now, after losing all connections to the shore, “she did not look back” (351). She remembered the meadow she used to think of as a child, the meadow that looked like a vast, endless sea. As in the Romantic tradition, there is a stress upon childhood and the pleasure and bliss of returning to it.

In the night of her awakening, when she was swimming, "a quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses" (213). However, she fought back and regained life. Why did not she give up, since in the end she actually chose to die? Perhaps at that stage she had not yet realized her Absolute. It was just the first step. However, when she committed suicide, she attained her Centre and embraced the Absolute that she had briefly known.

Anca Parvulescu speaks of this vision of death, saying that Edna has lived her life between *two selves*, "the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (qtd. In Parvulescu 478). When she was swimming, a moment of rupture occurred when she was neither this nor that. She was in-between. At this moment, she has experienced "insight into death." (478).

In *The Five Awakenings of Edna Pontellier*, Otis Wheeler claims that the act of swimming performs a symbolic function in Edna's life enabling her "refusal to accept any of the roles available to her: wife, mother, or lover. To refuse is finally to alienate herself from life-defining and life-supporting relations" (qtd. in Elz 20). After being awakened, she does not want her identity / existence to be based on her relation with others. She wants to be free of confining human relations. She does not want to be defined as a "mother" or a "wife." She just wants to be a "woman."

Edna had a childhood infatuation of finding a man who would complete her. However, after having relationships with three men, Léonce, Robert and Alcee, she finds out that there is no person who can fulfil her (Elz 24). That is why she detaches herself from all men and works on collecting the shattered pieces of her identity as an independent, whole, complete woman.

The medieval Sufis said: "death is beautiful because it is a bridge that leads the lover to the beloved" (Schimmel, *Islamic Tradition* 135.) Edna, however, has fully realized her Absolute before

committing suicide. Death here is not an action of unveiling the Absolute. It is rather an expression of the social defeat Edna has encountered.

Carol Christ says that women's stories have been always written by men. Consequently, men have formed for women their perceptions of self and world. Women are strange to those perceptions because they did not actually live or experience them. Hence, they need to write their own stories; they need to define their own selves and their own world (Christ 4). In *The Awakening*, men shaped women's identities and lives; mother or wife. Edna wanted to have an identity that *she* forms, to live in a world that *she* creates. She wanted to write her own story / fate.

Carol Christ says that women's spiritual quest begins with an experience of nothingness, where women "reject conventional solutions and question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value" (13). Awakening usually happens through "*mystical identification*," which is achieved only through women's relation with nature or other women (13). We can see this clearly in *The Awakening*. Edna's awakening is achieved through her encounter with the sea and with her relation with Mademoiselle Reisz. Awakening, Christ says, is preceded by a new naming of the self and of the world. "This new naming [...] often reflects wholeness, a movement toward overcoming the dualisms of self and world, body and soul, nature and spirit, rational and irrational" (13).

Jennifer B. Gray has almost the same view of Edna's death as Carol Christ but puts it in another frame. She says that the new awakened soul of Edna makes her "ill-suited for the limited female roles, those of the hegemonic ideal and those opposed to this ideal, offered her by her nineteenth-century society" (54) Because she is a mother, she found herself unable to move towards the oppositional roles (like that of a lover or free woman). On the other hand, because of her awakening, she cannot perform the hegemonic role set by patriarchal society as dedicated mother or

Chapter Three: "The Edge is What I have": Theodore Roethke on the Precipice of Darkness

Theodore Huebner Roethke (1908-63) was born in Saginaw, Michigan. He studied at Saginaw's Arthur Hill High School, University of Michigan, and later the Harvard Graduate School. His father's death in 1923 of cancer is considered a trauma that greatly affected Roethke's creative and psychic imagination. He worked as a professor in Lafayette College, Michigan State College at Lansing, Pennsylvania State University, and finally in Bennington College. His first volume of poetry is "Open House," and then came "The Lost Son and Other Poems," "Praise to the End," "The Waking: Poems," "Words for the Wind" and "The Far Field" (Kalaidjian, *Roethke's Life*, www.english.uiuc.edu 19 Nov. 05). These poems received some critical acclaim when they were published. Their literary significance can be related to the manner that they challenge a basic tenet of New Criticism concerning the separation of the author from his/her work. Roethke's poetry attempts to communicate spiritual meaning in an intensely personal way.

A (probably) Syrian monk called Dionysius the Areopagite says in his *The Mystical Theology*: "For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness" (qtd. in Happold 212). This agrees very much with Roethke's perception of the Divine, but does not go along with the Qur'anic verse: "God is the Light of the heaven and the earth" (Qur'an 24:35). We can see that Sufi discourse is more about nothingness and blankness rather than darkness. Saint John of the Cross speaks of two kinds of "night." The first is the night of the senses; the second is of the spirit. In the first, there is still some light as the faculty of reason is still operating while in the second there is utter darkness; what remains is a pure yearning for the Absolute (Happold 60)

Nathan Scott describes some of the spiritual implications of Roethke's poetry in traditional terms:

What one finds, then, as a central quality of Roethke's poetry and a distinctive mark of his basic vision of the world is a profound sense of all earthly reality as invested with a power and presence and as touched by a kind of glory that make it man's principal obligation to offer, in turn, a humble *pietas* as primary response to the mysteriousness with which all created things reflect the splendid fecundity and holiness of Being. (87).

This was Roethke's relationship with the outer, natural world. He was aware of the reality beyond the visible world. His poems are a series of journeys taken to try to gain knowledge about the other side of our existence. He knew that through the visible, he could reach the invisible, which is why his poetry is not a mere meditation on the surrounding world but a rather aggressive, fierce confrontation with it.

Childhood has a great influence upon Roethke's psyche and consequently his poetry. The most influential element from his childhood that greatly affected his imagination and consciousness was his father's greenhouse. His father and uncle, Otto and Charles Roethke, had a twenty-five acre greenhouse, which formed the setting and playground for Roethke's childhood exploration (Scott 88-9). Roethke describes this greenhouse as "both heaven and hell [...] It was a universe, several worlds, which, even as a child, one worried about, and struggled to keep alive" (Kalaidjian, *Roethke's Life*, www.english.uiuc.edu 19 Nov. 05).

Roethke says that in our own reality and existence, we have four principal themes: "(1) the multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The way, the means of establishing a personal identity, a self in the face of that chaos; (3) the nature of creation, that faculty of producing order out of

disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) the nature of God Himself" (Roethke, *On "Identity"* 19).

Neal Bowers contends: "Roethke's poetry is a journal, the record of a man that attempts to discover his identity and his place in existence" (2). On the question of identity, Roethke says that being aware of the identity of other beings, sometimes inanimate, might lead to a deeper awareness of one's own identity as well as a realization of the oneness of the universe (Roethke, *On "Identity"* 25). This is what Roethke calls "steady storm of correspondence" in his poem "In a Dark Time." This poem records a stream of correspondence between the speaker's own identity and that of other beings.

Roethke connects annihilation to the feeling of oneness. The feeling of oneness is "the sense that all is one and one is all" (Roethke, *On "Identity"* 26). This is accompanied by the annihilation of the egocentric self, the "I." However, Roethke states: "I cannot claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. no, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be duelled with: that is perhaps my error, my sin of pride. But the oneness, Yes!" (26).

On the question of Nature and its influence upon Roethke's poetry, we can hear the poet himself saying: "I have a genuine love of nature [...] A perception of nature – no matter how delicate, how subtle, how evanescent, remains with me forever" (Roethke, *Some Self Analysis* 4). He is the poet of virgin nature with a love of forests, animals, rivers (Southworth 418). The natural world forms a "vast landscape of the psyche." The defining line between the outer and inner world dissolves (Kalaidjian, *Roethke's Life*, www.english.uiuc.edu 19 Nov. 05). Roethke uses the technique of projection to reflect what is within on the basis of the outer, natural world. It is not clear that nature is a source of illumination for him, but it is always there, always present. The journey, even into the interior, is through nature. Nature is the road and the means to the Absolute. Roethke says:

"everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life ... Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling in a sense, upon God" (Roethke, *On "Identity"* 24-5).

On the question of the Edge, Roethke considered the "edge" as "a kind of psychic threshold or border among shifting mental states and phenomena" (Kalaidjian, *Understanding Theodore Roethke* 171). It is a sign of the awakening that is known to the mystics. S/He feels that there is in this world more than our naked eye can see. In his 1946 notebook, Roethke expresses this idea of the edge in these terms:

"The feeling that one is on the edge of many things: that there are many worlds from which we are separated by only a film; that a flick of the wrist, a turn of the body another way will bring us to a new world. It is more than a perpetual expectation: yet sometimes the sense of richness is haunting: it is richness and yet denial this living half a step, as it were, from what one should be" (qtd. in Bowers 50).

Like Dante, Roethke has to descend to the inferno to ascend to paradise (Bowers 69). He has to endure darkness in the abyss in order to be worthy of light in the height. John Senior says: "To discover the highest form of Self, we must live through the lowest first – Hell is a necessary condition of Heaven" (qtd. in Bowers 83-4). This agrees with the Qur'anic verse: "And every one of you will come within sight of it" (Qur'an 19:71). Roethke himself says: "I believe that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward" (Kalaidjian, *Roethke's Life*, www.english.uiuc.edu 19 Nov. 05).

Again we are faced with the question: what / who is Roethke's Absolute? The Divine, God, or identity? Neal Bowers discusses the mystical implications of Roethke's work:

Roethke's poetry represents a man's search for identity. But more than that, it maintains that Roethke's search follows the path of mysticism, that his poetry may be viewed in terms of a mystic quest, a search for identity and ultimate reality that closely parallels the struggles of the mystic toward God or the Absolute. In this respect, Roethke's search for self is not an egocentric journey, and his preoccupations with his own life and his own personal history do not identify him, as some critics would have it, as a narrowly confessional poet (3).

So is he an "Attar" or a "Chopin"? Attar believed in the utter annihilation of the egocentric self in the divine presence. Only God's entity remains the one, true Existence. On the other hand, Chopin's end was her identity. It is an egocentric, human identity that forms an Absolute for Edna Pontellier. What about Roethke? He is an exotic mixture of both. He calls for the annihilation of the egocentric self, but he emphasizes the possibility of maintaining a universal, human identity -- a divine, universal, human identity.

One can see that the moving forces in Roethke's poetic, psychological and mystical growth are actually two: the need for God and the childhood, symbolized by the greenhouse. For Roethke, there was always a "the terrible need for God," (qtd. in Balakian 56). This longing for God was a driving force for a poet who felt himself "on the edge of many things." This force helped him in discovering / creating a new self: "There was, for Roethke, a correspondence between the muse, the poetic act, and the reality of God" (Balakian 56). To write a poetry that explores the secrets and beauty of the creation meant that the poet should seek knowledge of God (Balakian 57). The greenhouse is the other driving power in Roethke's self-discovery and growth. Roethke says of the greenhouse: "it was a jungle, and it was paradise; it was order and disorder: Was it an escape? No,

for it was a reality harsher than reality" (qtd. in Balakian 56). It was a symbol of birth, rebirth and self-discovery.

"In a Dark Time"

Now that we have explored the mystical dimension in Roethke's poetry and the major influences on his work, let us examine one of his most mature poems where he manifests his visions and views of the Absolute. "In a Dark Time" was written during a later stage of Roethke's life. All that he believed is clear in it.

Emerson contends that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" (Emerson 58). Roethke uses the images of light and darkness to talk about knowledge and ignorance. He has a peculiar way of treating light and darkness. He suggests that one does not see in the light, but only in the darkness. What does Roethke mean by "darkness"? Is it physical or psychological darkness? Roethke's personal history indicates that he endured periods of psychological darkness. He was institutionalized for periods due to severe mental depression. He was kept in mental asylum due to his suffering from severe conditions of depression. Roethke's poetry wavers between hope and despair. It also shows us that a ray of light can be born from the darkest night.

"In a Dark Time" is one of the poems in *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical*. These poems are written in the form of the quartet, which is of course points to the influence of T. S. Eliot (Southworth 413). These poems are concerned with the struggle and conflict between body and spirit (Staples 189). Such poem assumes the form of a mystical quest that ends in fulfillment (Southworth 414). Each poem is a journey to reach the "One" or the Divine. The journey is undertaken through long winding roads, with sweat and tears. Roethke believes that one begins to gain insight when the night of the soul is at its darkest stage. The journey keeps getting darker but

deepens with every second. Roethke's protagonist is a man who escapes from himself to find himself (Bowers 3). Maybe escape is an attempt to redefine the identity, to deconstruct the centre and re-locate it again. Roethke, who is also the persona of the poem, meets his shadow during this journey. His shadow can be a symbol of the dark part of his soul, his evils and desires. When he proceeds, he hears his echo that stands for every unreal thing in this world. Roethke skillfully used two birds to show two extremes; the heron is a bird that is always seen on the ground, while the wren is a small brown bird that always flies. The polarity of sky and earth, high and low corresponds to that of light and darkness.

In the second stanza, the voyager takes a journey within and contemplates the meaning of some notions like madness. Madness is generally defined as the absence of all rational thinking or explainable behaviour. However, Roethke surprises us with his definition of "madness": "What is madness but nobility of soul / At odds with circumstance?" The questions that Roethke asks in his poem show that he has entered into a state of discovery and intuitive knowledge.

It seems that Roethke has a special fascination for edges. Edges connote that the person is on a high place, which threatens to plunge him into an abyss of darkness and uncertainty. But is this the case for Roethke? For Roethke, the edge is what actually allows him to achieve certainty. It is not an edge where he could descend downward but ascend upward.

In the third stanza, there is a "storm of correspondence" between the poet and the surrounding nature. Nathan Scott says that Roethke's father's greenhouse taught Roethke that there is a "steady storm of correspondence" going on "between the human and nonhuman modes of being, between the life of man and the 'minimal' domain of weeds and flowers, of newts and beetles" (Scott 89). Many natural elements are mentioned here to show that they share the journey with him. This poem also refers to a "tearless night" which is not like the compassionate sea in *The Awakening*.

However, the last line in this stanza shows us that all of these natural elements actually manifest the transcendental “unnatural light” that shows him the way.

In the fourth and last stanza, the night gets darker. The speaker's soul has turned into a summer fly that “keeps buzzing at the sill” with persistence. This fly is maddened by the heat of the quest. The confused question “Which I is I?” shows that the process of annihilation has begun. The poet has lost himself in his mystic quest. At this point, the reader is faced with the paradox of a fallen man who climbs out of his fear. This is the stage before utter annihilation and unity. Those who go on this quest should not be afraid of losing themselves in the winding roads of the journey. In the last line, the poet becomes one with his Absolute. Finally, the poet is free, aiming at no destination. He takes leave and is carried away aimlessly by the “tearing wind.”

There are usually three states of mind in Roethke's poetry: “a strong desire for purity and the ideal, a demonic drive for the sensual, and the struggle for becoming” (Southworth 417). Roethke has expressed these three states in separate poems in earlier sequences, but in this particular sequence (*Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical*), there is an underlying conflict among struggling desires in each poem. Roethke's ego is “completely off centre.” He steps outside of his being to universalize his quest.

Is the poet the best critic of his poems, or the worst? Let us briefly examine how Theodore Roethke interprets his poem, “In a Dark Time.” He says that this poem is “a dictated poem, something given, scarcely mine at all. For about three days before its writing I felt disembodied, out of time; then the poem virtually wrote itself, on a day in summer, 1958” (qtd. in Hobbs 57). He drew the attention towards the underlying fact in the first line that in a dark time the eyes do not behold the whole Truth, but only begin to see. The opening refers to the first step in a long journey. The experience in this poem is not a “Wordsworthian celebration of the soul man shares with nature” (Hobbs 58). On

the contrary, nature in the poem is indicative of death and darkness more than life and light. In the second line, Roethke says that "shadow" is the reminder that he is going to die. By the word, "shade" Roethke intended to evoke "hades, if not hell," which is perhaps to be a far-fetched suggestion. The "echo" is his "verbal shadow," Hobbs says that "weeping to a tree" shows a person crying to an "unresponsive tree" which stresses "the distance between man's suffering in the face of death and the nature that at other times appears to correspond to his feelings" (59). We might argue, however, that the act of weeping to a tree shows that the weeper is certain that he will receive compassion, only from nature. He knows that in being emotionally naked before nature, he will perceive and move towards the "One." Roethke says: "the tears fall, not from self-pity or self-denigration, but out of an awareness of the human condition that has not yet, as yet, been transcended" (qtd. in Hobbs 59). As a child, Roethke did literally "live between the heron and the wren" as Roethke himself says, the heron "nested in the corner of my father's preserve" and the wren "in our backyard" (qtd. in Hobbs 60).

In the second stanza, Roethke is concerned with the notion of madness because the mystics' mental health is sometimes questioned. Roethke, the interpreter, says that the word "madness" is a sociological term because its definition differs from one place to another. But, of course, we should acknowledge that Roethke's mental health was a dominant concern for him throughout much of his life. The dream-like, hallucinatory tone in many of his poems suggests psychological disturbance. "The day's on fire!" is a peculiar statement that we might find difficult to interpret. Roethke saves the reader too much thought when he says that he comments on this sentence: "the mind is on fire: this is the ultimate burning of revelation" (qtd. in Hobbs 61). This interpretation a bit far-fetched but it is hard to provide any other. The speaker then returns to his shadow that is "pinned to a sweating wall." This conceit of the sweating wall implies that the surroundings share the voyager's breathless anxiety (Hobbs 61). Why is this shadow pinned to a wall? If we take Roethke's interpretation of the word "shadow" to refer to a reminder that he is going to die, then its being

pinned to a wall means that the poet forgets his mortality and seeks perpetual existence. The word "shadow" could also refer to the dark side of the self, which would imply that the journey becomes easier as the self becomes purer. A third interpretation, which seems to be the most plausible, is that "shadow" means the *Self*. The shadow being pinned to a wall symbolizes the heavy weight that hinders the person from carrying on his mystical quest.

In the third stanza, when Roethke says, "a man goes far to find out what he is," he transfers the journey from a personal sphere to a universal one. The journey is not only a quest for personal identity, but it is a quest to define the human condition and psyche (Hobbs 61). At this point, "the natural self dies in the blaze of the supernatural" (Hobbs 62). The self dies in "unnatural" light and not supernatural light to hint of the danger and the divinity hidden in this experience.

In the last stanza, the mundane reader might not notice the intense self-disgust that Roethke is demonstrating by referring to a fly. For him a fly is "a more intolerable thing than a rat" (qtd. in Hobbs 63). After this long, hard journey, the speaker still cannot embrace its Absolute. He expresses a disgust towards an imprisoned self in an eternal cage called the body. Following the pattern of paradoxes, Roethke writes, "A fallen man, I climb out of my fear." Now the seeker has to leave his fear behind and delve deeper into his own consciousness. The idea of "A fallen man" suits the previous context of a mountain-climbing journey. "Tearing" suggests that the poet feels that nature might show compassion towards him (or towards man in general). John Hobbs remarks: "Roethke proves to be a fascinating but finally inadequate reader of his own poems, because he does not seem to trust its language to communicate – he wants words to carry either more or less than they can hold" (66). Sometimes it is difficult for the reader to understand the intense experiences that Roethke is trying to convey in words.

Is there a Self for Roethke? "In a Dark Time" projects a Self clearly. When the speaker exclaims, "I know the purity of pure despair." The tone / ego is loud here. Does the poem account for a journey of both self-discovery and the Absolute? In this poem, the Absolute seems to be a transcendental power, beyond human perception and horizon. It is a divine presence that one can get in touch with only through a hard experience, a long journey. The journey itself is to be lived and experienced.

It seems that Roethke has read and was influenced by Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1955). Underhill states that there are five stages that the soul goes through in its experience or encounter with the divine; "(1) Awakening to a sense of divine reality, (2) Purgation of the self, (3) Illumination or a sense of the divine order, (4) Dark night of the soul, (5) Singleness, or the discovery of God in oneself" (Kalaidjian 17-8). "In a Dark time" is skilfully structured to reflect those five stages. The first stanza reflects the first stage of Underhill's mysticism, awakening: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." The second stage of the mystical state, purgation, is mirrored in the second stanza. In the hard journey to embrace the Absolute, the senses are purified and the true seeker comes to realize "the purity of pure despair." (Bowers 182-4). Bowers says: "realizing that the self must be purged of its imperfections before it can look on the Absolute, he undergoes a process of mortification, a symbolic crucifixion, as reflected in the image of his 'shadow pinned against a sweating wall'" (184). But the soul has not yet been purified; it is hovering still outside the abyss on the winding roads, in a cave, and over the edge. In the third stanza, what Underhill calls illumination occurs:

A steady storm of correspondences!
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
 And in broad day the midnight come again!
 A man goes far to find out what he is
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,

between man and nature, following an early encounter with a "tearless night," or a state of ripping destruction that connotes the state of utter annihilation.

The motifs in Roethke's poems recur with persistence. There is the motif of narrow spaces like tunnels and roads. Another important motif is darkness. The roads are always getting darker. Additionally, the edge is yet another predominant motif in Roethke's poetry. Moreover, there is the motif of the dream-like, hazy vision. This connotes an uncanny atmosphere where what is real is hard to distinguish from a mere reflection or shadow. Finally, there is the motif of the journey that appears in almost all of Roethke's mystical poems. Images of roads, tunnels and waterways are always present to support this motif.

Conclusion

Now, if we examine the three works under discussion more closely we will see that there are some similarities as well as differences among them. The key similarity among them is that they have the journey as their central theme. The three works are nothing but Homeric journeys full of hardship, obstacles, rocks, mountains to climb and seas to cross. The three personas have an Absolute they are looking forward to embrace or reach. *The Conference of the Birds* is a journey to reach a King, *The Awakening* is a temporal journey to realize an identity, and "In a Dark Time" is an arduous journey towards the "One." Nature also was a common setting in the three works. Nature in Attar's work was more of purification in stages represented by the seven valleys. In Chopin's novel, nature is a master that helped Edna in her awakening and at the same time was the most compassionate and responsive companion to her troubled soul. Finally, Nature in Roethke's poem is not particularly sympathetic to the poet's quest. It is a dark, harsh nature; however, it is the only road towards the "One."

On the other hand, the differences among the three works are even more interesting than the similarities. First, the entity of the Absolute is totally different. In Farid Ud-Din Attar's allegorical epic, the Absolute is God, while it is a transformation of identity in Kate Chopin's novel. Roethke comes mid-way between Attar and Chopin. His Absolute is not simply the Divine, but rather a mix of the Divine with the human Self. The roads the three authors take are completely different from each other. Attar accompanies the birds and their leader in a long, weary journey at the far end of the earth to reach their Simorgh that they finally find in the deepest part of their souls. The journey is external but is accompanied by an internal action that assimilates the self. The Absolute is realized only when the self is destroyed. On the other hand, Chopin helps her heroine collect the fragmented pieces of her identity. Throughout her journey, Edna puts together pieces of the puzzle in an attempt to achieve a complete identity that *she* defines, rather than others. She undertakes an

external journey in society in order to obtain long-stolen rights. This journey also awakens her long-sleeping psyche. Roethke's journey is to reach a distant Absolute. There is no clear assimilation of the self here. The journey is external through winding roads and forests, and internal through the mountains and abysses of the psyche. The Absolute lies beyond the self rather than within the Self as in Attar's epic. In Attar's epic and Roethke's poem, the embrace of the Absolute happens all at once. The journey towards it takes time, but the realization of it happens in a moment of illumination and revelation. On the other hand, Edna Pontellier takes time in realizing her Absolute. The realization here is done in stages or levels; individual, financial, sexual, emotional. Were the three narrators aware of their goal? Attar's birds are aware of their goal. They know they are heading towards their King. However, they do not know where He lies. Later on, they realize He has been within them the whole time. On the other hand, Edna's awareness of her goal is not clear from the beginning. A clear vision of her Absolute emerges gradually. Each step leads to another. Finally, the persona in Roethke's poem projects a clear vision of his Absolute. The realization of the Absolute does not come as a surprise as it does in Attar's book.

The three works discuss the notions of annihilation and unity with the Absolute. What is annihilation and unity? Annihilation is losing the self to foreground another entity while unity occurs when two entities dissolve to form a new existence. In the process of annihilation, the self ceases to be. What remains is the other bigger entity. On the other hand, in the process of unity, the two entities change and acquire qualities from each other. In Attar's book, there is annihilation and unity. The birds lose themselves into the Simorgh and are united with Him so that they finally realize that they *are* the Simorgh. With Chopin, there is no annihilation simply because there is no distinct self to lose. It is rather a "capturing" of the Absolute. As for Roethke, there is no clear annihilation but there is unity, "one is One."

In his seminal essay, "Nature," Emerson contends: "How calmly and genially the mind apprehends one after another the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the councils of the creation and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE!" (Emerson 93). Thus, nature is not only the road to the Divine, but it also teaches the person lessons about being, about existence. It is a road to the soul as well which may be the starting point in the mystical quest. Moreover, and most importantly, it is a teacher concerning a very important trait of the Divine, namely, Oneness. As Emerson emphasises, "the unity of Nature – the unity of variety [...] All the endless variety of things make an identical impression" (95). And finally, Nature leads us to the Absolute: "Whilst we behold unveiled the nature of Justice and Truth, we learn the difference between the absolute and the conditional or relative. We apprehend the absolute. As it were, for the first time, *we exist*" (104). We can conclude from this that Nature is the guide that existed even before the word "religion" had any meaning. It is the guide that teaches us about ourselves, existence, and about the Absolute.

Carol Christ compares the mystical path of men and women by saying that "The male mystic's quest is arduous and difficult. Men have often found it difficult to give up conventional power and ego gratification to open themselves to union with the power of being" (17). Women are denied power and identity. Thus, the mystical path is easier for women. Women need only to reject the ideology that tells them that they are fulfilled by their roles as wives, mothers and daughters. They only need to open their eyes to the emptiness of their lives, the fragmented identities they possess, which of course requires a lot of courage to do. But the fact remains that they have less to lose than do men. This is why it is easier for them to reach mystical identity (18).

Ntozake Shange says: "I found god in myself / and I loved her / I loved her fiercely" (qtd. in Christ 97). These lines agree with the Sufi belief that God is within and that the notion of love is involved in the mystical journey. On the other hand, they also agree with Edna Pontellier's mystical insight,

because the word "her" does not connote the general perception of "God" but rather an Absolute like Edna's – an identity.

At the end of this journey, where we ourselves have been passengers, we cannot help but think and wonder: What is our Absolute? Are we aware of it? Are we on the right path? Are we willing to abandon the temple of our Selves and embark on a journey towards our Absolute? Are we willing to stumble down, sweat and bleed for the realization of our Absolute? The answers are safely locked in our hearts.

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