

*The Waking* follows two archetypal progressions: a passage through the four seasons, and a journey of the soul from darkness to enlightenment. “Plaint”, the first and darkest of the poems, is set during “late November days”, and the writer pleads for transcendence of the oppressive and mundane present. He writes, “In hell there is no change.” Set in winter, one would expect the next work to be darker still, but in the purity of the snow-covered landscape, the poet finds hope. Nowhere in these poems is the relationship of the physical to the metaphysical better expressed than in Roethke’s lines, “Was it light? Was it light within? Was it light within light?”. He invites the soul to be still and wait for the return of its lively spirit. The rushing waters of the spring thaw are invoked in “The Cycle”. Although the poet doesn’t make explicit the spiritual symbolism, it is unnecessary, as the metaphor of rebirth and awakening is obvious. Lastly, inner peace and enlightenment occur in the “The Waking” (one of two poems that share the title), but it is not a goal to be arrived at, rather a realization that the quest for enlightenment is its own reward. The plea of the first work, “Where is the knowledge that could lead me to my God?” is answered, “I learn by going where I have to go.”

The poetry of Theodore Roethke is simple, pure, free of pretension, and his symbolism is easily comprehensible. Perhaps this is the voice of the “lively understandable spirit” of “It was beginning winter”. Roethke was an individualist and secure in following his own path. For example, he often wrote in rhyme (three of the four poems used here have strict rhyme schemes) at a time when free verse was dominant. Indeed, “The Waking” is written in the very old form of a villanelle, with its unyielding pattern of repeating lines. At the same time he is thoroughly modern. In this he is like Bartók, contemporary but rooted and comfortable with tradition. These are elements that resonate strongly with me as a composer.

The poems in *The Waking* are not presented in the chronological order of their writing. I am greatly indebted to Tom Beczkiewicz for selecting these particular texts, and for suggesting the program that links them. I am also very grateful to Paul Krasnovsky for inviting me to write this work, and for his generous comments in the final editing of the score.

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