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In honor of
Annie Ransford

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PREFACE

In honor of the year-long centennial celebration of Theodore Roethke's birth in Saginaw, Michigan, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature presents a rich and varied collection of scholarly re-examinations and tributes. Our readers are invited to join in the celebration by visiting the Roethke House in Saginaw, Michigan. Annie Ransford and the Friends of Theodore Roethke welcome us and provide photos, inviting us to share in the celebration. Our readers are invited to enjoy his works once again, join with us as some of the cloud cover over his life lifts, and contribute their own insights at the May, 2009 SSML conference as we look forward to even more rich discoveries.

Contributors also take us inside individual poems and sequences of Roethke's works through their new readings of the greenhouse poems (Norman Chaney) and the many visions "beyond the greenhouse" (Linda Bearss), the "North American Sequence" (Christian Knoeller), Roethke's prayers and elegies (Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw), and the North American mysticism of "The Rose" (Matthew Falk).

Several essays re-examine the connections between Roethke's works and events in his life, particularly alongside the influences of, and parallels with, other major writers such as William Blake (Clint Burhans) and Ernest Hemingway (Annie Ransford) as well as a long overdue re-evaluation of the role of women in Roethke's work as it is interconnected with his often misunderstood bipolar disorder (Diana Hoover). Melissa Klammer invites us to begin looking anew at the "Afterlife" of the important work Roethke left unpublished and how it will play a huge role in ongoing reassessments. Returning to a subject at the heart of SSML research over the decades, Kayleen Schumacher explores how Roethke and others were "composing place" as their literary visions were shaped by the regions that nurtured them.

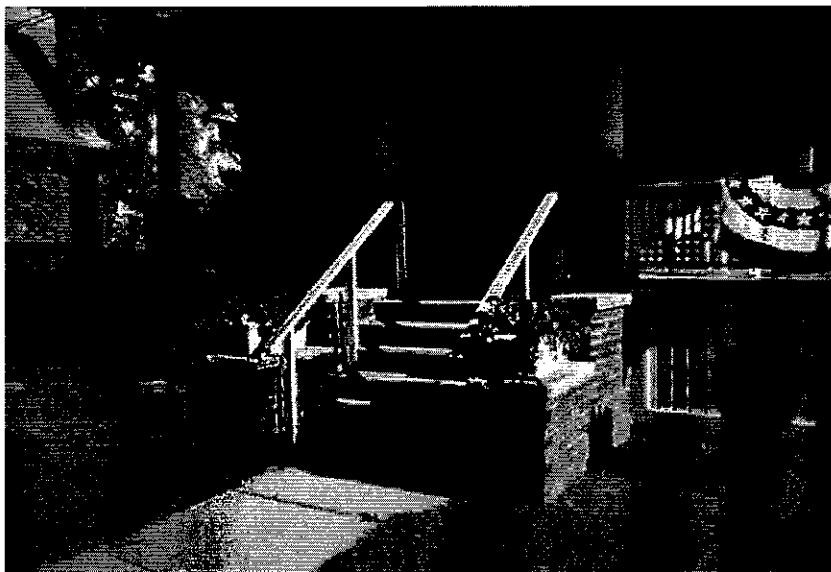
Three special tributes from fellow artists focus on unique elements of Roethke's creativity: five poems by Rod Phillips, a reflection by the SSML Mark Twain Award-winning poet Herbert Woodward Martin, and a remembrance by one of the many students Roethke taught who have earned success and fame: opera composer William Bolcom, who reflects on the special musical qualities of his teacher's poetry.

In this centennial year, National Public Radio has paid tribute to Roethke's roots in Saginaw. NPR correspondent Megan Cottrell brings our collection full circle as she shares what she learned at the Roethke House while making her feature for *All Things Considered*.

The weight and variety of this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* testify to the importance of Roethke's life and work and to the vitality and expertise of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, now entering its thirty-ninth year.

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The Theodore Roethke House



The Theodore Roethke House
and the Carl Roethke Development Center
Saginaw, Michigan

WELCOME TO THE THEODORE ROETHKE HOUSE AND CARL ROETHKE DEVELOPMENT CENTER

ANNIE RANSFORD

Welcome to the Roethke Houses. Since 1998, Friends of Theodore Roethke volunteers have worked steadily toward our mission: to promote, preserve, and protect the literary legacy of Theodore Roethke, a Michigan Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, by restoring his family residences in Saginaw, Michigan, for cultural and educational opportunities.

We are a nonprofit foundation, 501c3, with community volunteers, collaboratively working toward goals larger than ourselves. The Roethke House activities require energy and hours to organize and promote, along with constant maintenance of housework and yard work. Volunteers have been faithful to this present process, as they hold a vision of future possibilities to further impact Saginaw life.

We are a teaching house and consider the homes, 1759 and 1805 Gratiot, to be one landscape. As the Roethke family originally worked together between the houses in the family floral business, the Roethke residences will continue to interact with ongoing educational activities: poetry workshops, literary picnics, student tours, writing on site, a museum of first-hand experiences, a residency for visiting writers to work and teach in area schools, and a cultural center, a community meeting place to promote literacy and serve as a catalyst for community-based education.

We celebrate our Midwestern culture through offering the Roethke houses and our local community as a resource for learning. We foster local pride since Roethke came from German immigrants from a Saginaw neighborhood in the 1920s, and Saginaw, its time and place, has significance in shaping his work. It is our hope that a day

spent at the Roethke House can become an experience in community-making within our community, a day that will encourage pride in our local history and an understanding of the diversity that makes up Saginaw.

Friends of Theodore Roethke have previously received state designation with a Michigan Historical Marker and national attention with a National Register of Historic Sites listing and National Literary Landmark spearheaded by Linda Farynk, Director of SVSU Library. We have been visited by Beatrice Roethke, the poet's widow, who has given her blessings for our efforts, and Patricia Shek, founder of the Theodore Roethke Memorial Foundation has given her blessings. Mrs. Shek's foundation, with combined efforts from SVSU, offers the Theodore Roethke Memorial Prize every three years to an outstanding American poet.

The Theodore Roethke Home Museum is conducting an oral history collection of Saginaw memories during Theodore Roethke's lifespan: 1908—1963. In an effort to preserve stories relevant to Theodore Roethke, the Roethke family, and the community in which they lived, Friends of Theodore Roethke is sponsoring an oral history project to canvass the Saginaw community, collecting stories that span the context of the poet's lifetime before they are lost to time.

Last spring, three humanities scholars met with Arthur Hill High School students and White Pine Middle School students to coach them about collecting stories from elder participants. The students interviewed community elders and recorded their conversations in this intergenerational project that offered new historic perspectives. Over the next few weeks, the students wrote stories from the recordings to create a written account of the history and then transformed the stories into narrative poetry that will be preserved in the archives of the Castle Museum of Saginaw County History, the Hoyt Library, and the Theodore Roethke Home Museum. We collaborated! At a presentation last May, held at the Castle Museum, students read their poetry to their elders and presented them with a carnation. We hope to continue this project and always need volunteers and names of volunteers. Stories collected by the project were contributed to Saginaw's Sesquicentennial Celebration in 2007 and Theodore Roethke's Centennial birthday in 2008.

We value our community elders and define you as people having authority by virtue of age and experience. You have stories to tell. We believe these historic memories will not only preserve part of

Saginaw's history but will also restore a sense of community because oral history archives build community history and identity.

We hope this project is just the beginning of ongoing community oral history collections and that more elders will step forward with stories and memories. We are reapplying for a Michigan Humanities, Strengthening Michigan Communities Grant in order to continue this good work.

Just contact Annie Ransford if you wish to sign up for this larger project: 989-928-0430/aransford@centurytel.net

Saginaw Michigan

MANIC DEPRESSION AND LOVE: THEODORE ROETHKE'S POETIC WOMEN

DIANA HOOVER

The first series of Theodore Roethke's love poems, published in *Words for the Wind* in 1958, received a great deal of critical attention. His second group of love poems in *The Far Field* (1964) garnered less, perhaps because they were published posthumously. While these volumes are not Roethke's only poetry concerned with women, they make up the lion's share in his conception of them. Previous scholarship about the role of women in Theodore Roethke's poetry suggests a man who, early in his career, portrays women as animalistic and with the power to swallow him, or men in general, whole. Scholars see a later Roethke, while not completely letting go of his fears, as having emerged from a generally negative and immature depiction of women to a more balanced view of them, i.e., poetry in which women are his equals and love is something to be welcomed rather than shunned. While oblique references to Roethke's mental illness occasionally appear, what scholars have failed to take into account adequately is the role the poet's bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depression, played in his outlook on women, his sense of identity, and his relationship to love. As he moves toward greater vulnerability with women, depicted in his later poetry, it is not because he has matured as a man who was once too self-absorbed; instead, in his later years, I submit that Theodore Roethke experienced a shift in perception regarding the impact that his mental illness had on his identity and on his appreciation of women. This essay documents the changing female images from Roethke's earlier love poems to his later work, as well as an adjusted perspective on the scholarly criticism of his love poetry in light of his bipolar disorder.

To understand the poet's evolution in his depiction of women, it is necessary to understand something of bipolar disorder and Roethke's personal history with it. People with bipolar disorder experience continual changes in energy, mood, thought, and sleep activity. Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric disorder characterized by mania (or elevated, expansive, euphoric, and irritable mood) and depression (APA). It is thought to have its roots in genetics, the patient's early environment (sometimes referred to as life experiences), and neurobiology. In severe cases, people with bipolar disorder can experience delusions ("false, strongly held beliefs not influenced by logical reasoning"), hallucinations, impulsivity, social and occupational impairment, paranoia, and rage (NIMH). Bipolar disorder is often treated with mood stabilizers, such as lithium carbonate, a salt, which must be monitored for toxicity. Hospitals did not start experimenting with lithium until the 1950s (Shepherd). Medical literature reported some success with it in the mid-1960s; however, the Food and Drug Administration did not approve its use until 1970 (NAMI).

The foregoing information about bipolar disorder was not available to Roethke nor to those who treated him. Allan Seager, a friend and colleague of Roethke's, writes in his biography of three distinct tragedies that occurred within a three-month period when Roethke was fourteen years old: the family's greenhouse was sold; his uncle committed suicide; and, the worst of the three, his father died of cancer. All three events were to have a significant impact on Roethke as a man and a poet. Seager reports that Rolfe Humphries, a poet and friend of Roethke's, remarked that "[t]here was a lot of self-hatred in Ted . . . Everyone who knew Ted well recognized this eventually, that he was host to a mass of free-floating guilt that made him loathe himself" (78). It is not possible to determine whether Roethke's life experiences or his biology had a greater effect on his mental health; regardless, he was a man haunted by the losses he had endured in his childhood.

Reportedly, at the age of twenty-three, when he was teaching at Michigan State College (formerly Michigan Agricultural College, now Michigan State University), Roethke experienced his first "bout of mental illness" (Seager 86). Seager states that two contemporaries reported that Roethke was "drinking a great deal . . . [of] whisky and beer," as well as "dozens of cups of coffee and cokes every day. He was also taking aspirin tablets by the handful" (90) and "stimulants" (96). Although there is debate as to its pervasiveness, it is not uncom-

mon for people with mental illnesses to self-medicate their symptoms, and Seager writes that there were concerns that Roethke had become an alcoholic in the process. On November 11, 1935, while at Michigan State College, Roethke walked into a wooded area one night and had what he later called "a mystical experience with a tree" (Seager 90). Poorly dressed and walking in the cold for "several miles," he then hitchhiked back to Lansing (91). He did something similar the next day and then went to the Dean's office, after which he was hospitalized and "barricaded himself naked behind a mattress in the corner" to avoid taking medication (92). Later that year he went to Mercywood Sanitarium near Ann Arbor, where he was diagnosed with hypomania. According to Seager, "he had many later episodes and under treatment, he was diagnosed by his psychiatrists as a 'manic-depressive neurotic, but not typical' and as a 'paranoid schizophrenic'" (101); however, Roethke would not receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia today. In Roethke's manic episodes:

He became increasingly excited, simultaneously cheerful and alarmed, eager to talk and talking incessantly, and [was] full of extravagant projects. He indulged in eccentricities of dress . . . would make dozens of phone calls to friends all over the country or even abroad—[and] he liked to think himself rich during these times, rich and powerful. He slept little. (Seager 105-6)

More atypical of someone with bipolar disorder:

[h]e did not stop working when he was ill. His friends, his doctors, and his notebooks all attest to this. Well or ill, he wrote poetry or took notes for poetry nearly every day of his adult life. Poetry was the central fact of his life, and everything else, his states of mind, his friendships, enmities, his loves and hatreds, even his amusements, clung to it like filings to a magnet. (Seager 109)

As he wrote, what stood out in stark relief in his poetry was his representation of women. In his first set of love poems, woman is frequently portrayed as an animal. She is sexualized, often dehumanized, and is connected to suffocation, the loss of identity, and even death.

Woman as a person is devalued in the early love poems. In "Words for the Wind," the speaker refers to his lover as "a lovely substance" (*Collected Poems* 118). Defined in relation to him, the speaker says, "She sways whenever I sway" and "She likes wherever

I am" (CP 118, 119). In "The Pure Fury," the speaker "love[s] a woman with an empty face," who "squeaks in Pure Plato" (CP 128), someone who "represent[s] the very nothingness he dreads" (Floyd-Wilson 65). Harry Williams remarks that in "The Pure Fury," "inevitably it is the woman who is undeserving of importance, a mere sounding board" (146). Kenneth Burke states that in Roethke's first love poems, woman is generic: "the Feminine as attribute of a class" (107). The early love poems reveal a poet at odds with his conception of woman.

Woman is also highly sexualized in the early love poems, and animals, creatures, and beasts stand in for her. In "Words for the Wind," the woman is a "creaturely creature," who "frolics like a beast" (CP 121). In "The Sensualists," woman is seemingly an animal to be ridden in sex: "And breathing hard, as that man rode / Between those lovely tits" (CP 131). His lover remarks: "No matter which one is beneath, / Each is an animal,—" (CP 131). Coburn Freer points out the "witty sexual puns" in "I Knew a Woman" (52), as in "She moved more ways than one," "Coming behind her for her pretty sake," and "(But what prodigious mowing we did make)" (CP 122). In "I Knew a Woman," woman is a container: "Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one: / The shapes a bright container can contain!" (CP 122). In the "Fourth Meditation," the speaker asks: "What is it to be a woman? / To be contained, to be a vessel?" (163). Mary Floyd-Wilson charges that such characterizations depict woman as "merely a sexual recipient or a bearer of children" (68). For Williams, "If Roethke is celebrating sexual love, as he does in 'I Knew a Woman' and 'Words for the Wind,' then perhaps an idealized partner (one who responds without question to the poet's needs) will suffice for that kind of poetry" (146). The first set of love poems shows sexuality to be a powerful force for Roethke.

Women in Roethke's early love poems are connected to a loss of identity, suffocation, and eventual death. Sex and death are intimately connected in "The Sensualists," where a "ghostly figure" that is "[w]rapped in the tattered robe of death" hovers in the lovers' "sensual pen" and then "tiptoed down the hall" (CP 131). For Roethke, according to Randall Stiffler, "Love can violate his sense of privacy, his sense of self, and claustrophobia is the result, best illustrated in 'The Sensualists'" (135). Spoken by the woman, yet perhaps conveying Roethke's experience, his lover in the poem complains: "'There is no place to turn,' she said, / 'You have me pinned so close;

/ My hair's all tangled on your head, / My back is just one bruise; / I feel we're breathing with the dead; / O angel, let me loose!" (CP 131). Claustrophobia reappears in "The Pure Fury" when the speaker remarks: "How terrible the need for solitude" (CP 128). Fittingly for this point in Roethke's evolution, according to Floyd-Wilson, woman is "explicitly indicated in a title such as 'The Other,' [because Roethke's poetry] provides endless examples of the culturally-conceived view of female as Other" (77). In the poem, the speaker asks: "What is she, while I live?— / Who plagues me with her Shape," and later asks: "Is she what I become? / Is this my final Face?" (CP 125). In "The Renewal," Roethke writes: "Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?" (CP 130). In "She," love is equated with death: "I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?—" (CP 124). In "The Pure Fury," the speaker remarks: "Dream of a woman, and a dream of death" and soon asks: "When will that creature give me back my breath?" (CP 129). Fighting all-consuming desire, Roethke struggles to hold onto his very being in the early love poetry.

What has been said by scholars about why Roethke portrays women so negatively in his first set of love poems? Themes of desire, the need to distance love, and a tenuous identity are offered by way of explanation. Floyd-Wilson reports: "In order to maintain his own identity in the face of love, the speaker alternately idealizes and belittles the woman, never recognizing her as an equal. He views her and love as invading impurities that will destroy his sense of self, without acknowledging the woman as an individual with her own selfhood" (63-4).

Stiffler states that Roethke "is most drawn to the woman of the Love Poems when she is least human, most animal" (118). He writes: "Intensely sexual, partly animal, wholly overpowering, this woman is, in a sense, one dimensional, a creature only, a desirable and desiring creature but, as Roethke says earlier, only 'lovely substance' . . . By making her less human and more animal, Roethke's desire for her grows" (134).

Williams writes: "As usual with the women in all of these [first love] poems, she is closer to the animal than the poet" (144). To Stiffler, "the kind of love Roethke seems most comfortable with [in the first love poems] involves a kind of safe distance," although "He responds to his desires" (118). Furthermore, Roethke is "uneasy in the new poems of the 1950s about losing his identity, a loss it appears he thinks love, like death, necessitates" (Stiffler 118). Rosemary

Sullivan informs her readers that "'The Pure Fury,' was written after a period of intense illness and anxiety in the fall of 1957" (105). She writes:

In his letters, Roethke comments on the sense of desperation which characterized his depressions . . . All this philosophizing . . . [that philosophers do, of which the poet complains in "The Pure Fury"] is mere verbiage to a man in extremity who has actually confronted the awareness that the self can be totally, utterly annihilated. (105)

According to Floyd-Wilson, "Roethke . . . only responds to the enigma of woman," as she is "an abstraction," since "the sensations of individual human love overwhelm" him (63). However, she comes closest to explaining what is happening with Roethke when she states that in "The Pure Fury," the "speaker finds himself on the edge of psychic disintegration, and he blames his 'darling' for his despair and mental instability" (65). Freer says something similar: "'The Pure Fury' now carries us right to the edge of the abyss: the speaker's fear of losing his self in the woman leads him very near a state of derangement" (54). This is what I believe is at the heart of the matter for Roethke. As a man suffering from mental illness, he is most fearful of what might propel him into madness and, in his early love poetry, he fears that if he loses himself in a woman, he will lose his self.

"Elegy for Jane: My Student, Thrown by a Horse" is an exception to Roethke's earlier poems in that it shows the poet's capacity for intimacy and his personalization of women. Burke believes that Roethke's poetry in general lacks what he calls "personalization" or the "individualizing of human relations," particularly with respect to women (108). In "Elegy for Jane," however, unlike his love poems in *Words for the Wind*, Roethke names her and does not hold back from expressing deep affection for her. She is, however, not his lover: "Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love: / I, with no rights in this matter, / Neither father nor lover" (CP 98). This profoundly moving poem shows a deeply sensitive poet.

"Meditations of an Old Woman," the last of the first love poems, Floyd-Wilson sees as "a transitional piece between the two series of love poems" in *Words for the Wind* and those in *The Far Field* (67). "Meditations of an Old Woman," Ralph J. Mills states, is "modeled on the poet's mother . . . an aging lady . . . who muses on her past, on the meanings of an individual's existence, as she faces the prospect of death" (40). In his poem, "Roethke creates for himself an accessi-

ble persona in the old woman in terms of her wisdom and intellectual approach to life" (Floyd-Wilson 68). This woman is described as "tough . . . brave [and] aware of life" and, according to Floyd-Wilson, Roethke is able to "enter a relatively permeable female consciousness" through her (68). This poem sets the later love poetry in motion as Roethke's configuration of woman develops.

Sullivan writes about the second set of love poems that appear in *The Far Field*: "The burden, the enormous threat love poses to the integrity of the self is still on the poet's mind" (171-2), but "Some of . . . [Roethke's] deepest affirmations of love are here" (172), as in the poem "His Foreboding," which reads: "I, living, still abide / The incommensurate dread / Of being, being away / From one comely head" (CP 208). Sullivan states: "In 'Her Reticence' the young lover seeks to give fragments of herself, not daring to give the whole" (172). In "Wishes for a Young Wife," "recognizing their age difference" (Floyd-Wilson 76), Roethke writes: "May you live out your life / Without hate, without grief, / And your hair ever blaze, / In the sun, in the sun, / When I am undone, / When I am no one" (CP 210). In "The Young Girl," the speaker is "coming to love" and is "At times content to be two" (CP 200). Lovemaking is less frenetic in "Light Listened" than in the earlier love poetry: "O what could be more nice / Than her ways with a man? / She kissed me more than twice / Once we were left alone" (CP 205). In the same poem: "We live by what we do" shows a serene maturity. "These are the poems of the older poet aware that in love so much has been given only to be lost again to death" (Sullivan 172). More loving toward woman than in the first set of love poems, Roethke now experiences love as redeeming, lamenting its eventual absence upon death.

Unlike the first set, the second series of love poems reveals many examples of Roethke's personalization of women, usually his wife, whom he married late. In "The Happy Three" it is "my darling wife"; in "The Shy Man" he refers to "O'Connell's daughter," Beatrice's maiden name; in "Her Wrath" simply "Beatrice" and in "Wish for a Young Wife" he refers to his wife in the poem's title (CP 206, 209, 210). In "The Shy Man," Roethke says of his wife: "I knew that I did love her. / But my lips they, / My lips they, / Said never a word" until finally at poem's end: "O! my lips they, my lips they, / Say many a word," (CP 209), now able to speak his love for her. Seager writes of the poet's growing love for his wife: "But finally, he came to see how much she meant to him as a woman, how great his dependence on

her was, and hesitantly, even reluctantly perhaps, he admitted her into those labyrinths within himself . . . and he began to love her . . . with a true love . . ." (238).

Roethke is no longer afraid to experience the dependence inherent in love. His marriage in 1953 may be offered as evidence of this. Gone are the images of woman as animal in the second set of love poems, as are negative characterizations of women in general. "Her Wrath" does something that none of the earlier love poems did — "recognize[s] the woman's emotions (a circumstance completely absent from *Words for the Wind*)" (Floyd-Wilson 75). An argument with his wife as described in "The Happy Three" is mitigated by love, portrayed through the couple's pet goose named Marianne (after the poet Marianne Moore). When Marianne nudges the poet, "All rage was gone" until Roethke, Beatrice, and Marianne "romped out again . . . Three in the sun" (CP 207). In this second set of love poems, "the poet recognizes woman as another 'I,' equal, actual and particularized" (Floyd-Wilson 63). Floyd-Wilson states: "The final love poems, therefore, mark a personal achievement in emotional maturity and wholeness in terms of Roethke's approach to the female" (63). No longer threatened by it, Roethke shows his growing acceptance of love in his later poetry.

Sullivan says that Roethke's "work is . . . a compulsive and continual reassessment of the nature of identity" (191). Less about identity, I believe Roethke worked to resolve how his mental illness created in him a loss of self and deprived him of love. In "Her Longing," "the girl proves herself willingly to confront the darkest aspects of" herself (Floyd-Wilson 72) and, like the phoenix in the poem, she does what Roethke does in *his* life — confronts the darkest places within him and rises like a phoenix in his eventual love and respect for women.

Sullivan reports that some critics saw Roethke as "an egocentric poet, his theme remaining entirely and only himself" (191-2). M. L. Rosenthal wrote in 1965 that Roethke's poetry is an "expression of an unresolved hysteria in the face of the demands of actual life. His only source of energy is his uncontrolled riotous psyche . . . [and] Moreover he used himself up after the first wild orgies of feeling in his early poems" (Sullivan 192). When Rosenthal wrote such sentiments, much less was known about bipolar disorder, making his statement that Roethke made his "poetry a couch for the rehearsal of his psychological problems" (Sullivan 192) seem unkind. Sullivan

reports that Martin Seymour-Smith believed in 1954 that "Roethke's is a poetry of therapy, of raw ego: 'little more than a rehearsal of common paranoia'" (192). Bipolar disorder may have been less understood at that time, but these critics reveal their ignorance of what it is like to live with mental illness in general and do not appear to see the miracle of creativity that Roethke brought forth *despite* his mental illness.

In his second series of love poems, Floyd-Wilson states: "The love poems of *The Far Field* reveal a more generous spirit and emotional maturity than their predecessors" (69). "*The Far Field*'s speaker acknowledges the value of the woman's inner self by seeking her wisdom," and "the poet speaks directly to his lover [in "Song"], and asks her for the answers," very different from the poetry of *Words for the Wind* in which "he mocks his lover" (Floyd-Wilson 74). Floyd-Wilson also writes of a new "unselfish Roethke" in *The Far Field*, able to recognize "the other's reality as equal to his own . . . an important step in Roethke's journey out of the self" (76). I do not think, however, that Roethke was interested in a journey out of self. I believe he was interested in a journey into self, such that he could resolve his conflicting feelings and begin to love what had always frightened him — woman. He was not a selfish man or poet; instead, he was a man struck by a debilitating illness. Would we call someone with cancer selfish? Are ill people who focus on their survival considered self-absorbed? I submit they are not, lack of knowledge about bipolar disorder during Roethke's lifetime notwithstanding.

In the early poems, Roethke does dehumanize the female, but he does so because he is frightened of what losing himself in something as magnetic as love would do to him, to his fragile psyche. Theodore Roethke had more to lose than most. He does not devalue women because they are not his equals or because he thinks himself superior to them; he devalues them because he fears that in love he will be swallowed whole, starting with his sanity. Only Roethke knew what it was like for him to survive an episode of mania or depression, and he had plenty of experience. Early in his life, to Roethke, woman was a threat to his mental health. As his love for his wife grew, he no longer feared engulfment. He, of course, still had bipolar disorder, but he no longer saw woman as having the potential to push him into the abyss of madness and the psychological disintegration he hoped would never return. He was not looking for a journey out of self; he was looking for an integration of self, and, in his acceptance of love,

he found it. Love now a retreat for him, Roethke emerges as a man able to take love in, no longer needing to blame outside influences for the precarious state of his supremely creative mind. His journey in understanding woman is not marked by narcissism turned to inclusiveness; it is a journey from the fear of losing his sanity at the hands of love to an understanding and acceptance of self and an eventual embracing of love. As he says in a "1962 New Year's greeting: Now I adore my life, / With the Bird, the abiding Leaf, / With the Fish, the questing Snail, / And the Eye altering All; / And I dance with William Blake / For love, for Love's sake" (Mills 9-10).

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THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF ADAM IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S GREENHOUSE POEMS

NORMAN CHANEY

The book of Genesis tells us that God "formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (2:7). The biblical poet portrays this act of human creation from the perspective of the Creator. Theodore Roethke, in his sequence of fourteen greenhouse poems, portrays this act of human creation from the perspective of the "man" who is created. In the reading of the greenhouse poems offered here, I enter the poems as though they were the expression of the poet's imagining his own emergence and growth from the "dust."

Some details concerning Roethke's life are relevant for appreciating the dominance of the greenhouse as a symbol in his work. Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan, in 1908. He was of German heritage, his paternal grandfather having immigrated to America in 1870 from East Prussia, where he had been Bismarck's head forester. In Saginaw, Roethke's grandfather started a floriculture business that he passed on to his two sons, Charles and Otto, the poet's father. Roethke says of this business:

When the firm was at its height, around 1920, it took up twenty-five acres within the city of Saginaw with a quarter of a million feet under glass. We lived in a frame house which was in front of the greenhouse and my Uncle Charlie lived in a stone house which was next door. (*Selected Letters* 253)

Roethke's life-long intimacy with the world of nature owed a great deal to his family background. At mid-career in 1950 (Seager 166), Roethke in a public lecture declared the greenhouse in which he played and worked as a child to be his "symbol for the whole of life,

a womb, a heaven-on-earth" (*On the Poet and His Craft* 39). The poet's acquaintance with the physical world of the greenhouse itself, however, came to an end when he was still in his teens. In 1922, Otto and Charles had a dispute, which resulted in their selling the family-owned business. And in 1925, Roethke left Saginaw to enter the University of Michigan, beginning an academic career that eventually took him to Harvard, as a graduate student, and then to a number of other colleges and universities—Lafayette, Penn State, Bennington, the University of Washington—as a professor of literature.

In an essay that he wrote for a rhetoric class when he was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Roethke spoke of his deep responses to the world of nature. "I have a genuine love of nature," he said:

It is not the least bit affected, but an integral and powerful part of my life. I know that Cooper is a fraud—he doesn't give a true sense of the sublimity of American scenery. I know that Muir and Thoreau and Burroughs speak the truth.

I can sense the moods of nature almost instinctively. Ever since I could walk, I have spent as much time as I could in the open. A perception of nature—no matter how delicate, how subtle, how evanescent,—remains with me forever.

I am influenced too much, perhaps, by natural objects. I seem bound by the very room I'm in. I've associated so long with prosaic people that I've dwarfed myself spiritually. When I get alone under an open sky where man isn't too evident,—then I'm tremendously exalted and a thousand vivid ideas and sweet visions flood my consciousness. (*On the Poet and His Craft* 4)

These words so typify Roethke's responses to nature that they might well have been written as a postscript to his career. His imagination was heightened by solitude in natural surroundings, "dwarfed" by commerce with persons, a theme reminiscent of Wordsworth and of a Romantic naturism that pervades Roethke's poetry from beginning to end.

The greenhouse "occupies the same place in Roethke's poetic evolution as the hills and dales of the Lake District do in Wordsworth's (Wain 61)." For it was here, as John Wain observes, that Roethke "received those early messages from the deeper reality that underlies and supports the quotidian reality of existence." These "messages," however, are not simply, as Wain suggests, "of a joy

welling up pure and irresistible from the mere presence of life (61). As a body of poetry expressive of Roethke's enthrallment with nature, and about his life in relation to nature, the greenhouse sequence embraces a rich and strange array of apprehensions, of nature's beneficence and beauty as well as of its threatening maleficence.

The historian of primitive thought, Mircea Eliade, speaks of a primitive experience of nature that lingers in the consciousness of modern humanity. He describes this as the "mystical experience of autochthony, the profound feeling of having come from the soil, of having been born of the Earth in the same way that the Earth, with her inexhaustible fecundity, gives birth to the rocks, rivers, trees and flowers" (164). Roethke offers a condensed version of this experience in "River Incident" (not one of the greenhouse poems):

A shell arched under my toes,
 Stirred up a whirl of silt
 That riffled round my knees.
 Whatever I owed to time
 Slowed in my human form;
 Sea water stood in my veins,
 The elements I kept warm
 Crumbled and flowed away,
 And I knew I had been there before,
 In that cold, granitic slime,
 In the dark, in the rolling water.
 (*Collected Poems* 49)

This poem testifies to Roethke's profound sense of being a creature of the Earth, and it also affords a clue to the experience that is conveyed in the first two poems of the greenhouse sequence.

In "Cuttings," Roethke expresses an awareness of the most elemental beginnings of life:

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
 Their intricate stem-fur dries;
 But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
 The small cells bulge;

 One nub of growth
 Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
 Pokes through a musty sheath
 Its pale tendrilous horn.

(*Collected Poems* 37)

In the opening line, sticks "drowse" and "droop" as though they were barely alive. The mere fact of their being in stasis, however, rather than dead, gives the hope of revival. The promise of new life is suggested through the poet's use of the phrases "But still" and "keep coaxing," while the allusion to bulging cells suggests a potential.

But this suggestion is followed in stanza two by a suggestion of the obstacles to life being overcome. Before the "One nub" can emerge from the "sugary loam," it must nudge away the "sand crumb." The "musty sheath" must be rent before the young plant can appear, pale and weak in the light of day. This idea of the strain of becoming is continued in "Cuttings (later)":

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
 Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
 What saint strained so much,
 Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

 I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
 In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
 The small waters seeping upward,
 The tight grains parting at last.
 When sprouts break out,
 Slippery as fish,
 I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.
 (*Collected Poems* 37)

The struggle of the "Cut stems" to "put down feet" or attain "new life" is so fierce that the speaker can only "quail" in its presence. The phenomenon of the "urge" for life is something that not only fascinates him but also terrifies him. He "lean[s] to beginnings, sheath-wet" in the knowledge of the most elementary agonies attending the process of "coming alive," the terrible miracle of growth.

The notion of the struggle and pain of existence is also expressed in "Root Cellar," in which Roethke describes an event in the life of the child-protagonist who is working in the greenhouse. The locus of this event is subterranean:

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
 Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
 Shoots dangled and dropped,
 Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,

Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.

And what a congress of stinks!—

Roots ripe as old bait,

Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich

Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.

Nothing would give up life:

Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

(*Collected Poems* 38)

Karl Malkoff says of this poem that the "root cellar is itself a dark and fertile womb" (51). But it is a womb that is also a kind of chthonic underworld. Within this hell, the "Bulbs," "Shoots," and "Roots" comprise a lascivious throng, "Lolling" in the life-laden but stinking soil. Here Roethke's image of the mire connotes a condition of life on the level of the ugly and grotesque. And the image is augmented in "Weed Puller":

Under the concrete benches,

Hacking at the black hairy roots,—

Tugging all day at perverse life:

The indignity of it!—

Me down in that fetor of weeds,

Crawling on all fours,

Alive, in a slippery grave. (*Collected Poems* 39)

Both "Root Cellar" and "Weed Puller" hint at a negative meaning of nature, which the protagonist aspires to overcome. (He compares himself to an animal, "Crawling on all fours.") And they offer a further commentary on the processes of growth described in "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (later)." Just as plants must struggle out of the mire, so must the child-protagonist who is "Alive" but "in a slippery grave."

At least three other poems in the sequence allude to the negative meaning of nature: "Orchids," "Moss Gathering" and "Child on Top of a Greenhouse." In the first of these, the poet hints at a sinister quality of the tropical orchids:

They lean over the path,

Adder-mouthed,

Swaying close to the face,

Coming out, soft and deceptive,

Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird's tongue;

Their fluttery fledgling lips

Move slowly,

Drawing in the warm air.

Lips neither dead nor alive

Loose ghostly mouths

Breathing.

(*Collected Poems* 39)

"Orchids" is an example of what Kenneth Burke means when he says that Roethke's experience of the greenhouse often has deathlike connotations: "all about one, the lovely, straining beings, visibly drawing sustenance from ultimate, invisible powers—in a silent blare of vitality—yet as morbid as the caged animals of a zoo" (264). The funereal aspect of the greenhouse world is further accentuated in "Moss Gathering." After describing his childhood chore of gathering moss from the marshes for the lining of "cemetery baskets," the poet declares:

And afterwards I always felt mean,

jogging back over the logging road,

As if I had broken the natural order

of things in that swampland;

Disturbed some rhythm, old and

of vast importance,

By pulling off flesh from the living planet;

As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration.

(*Collected Poems* 40)

In contrast to the marvelous and reverential presence of the "swampland," the greenhouse has about it something that is strangely foreboding. The poet associates it with threats of danger and death, even in the activity of the child-protagonist at innocent play, as in "Child on Top of a Greenhouse":

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,

My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,

The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,

Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,

A few white clouds all rushing eastward,

A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,

And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

(*Collected Poems* 43)

Though these poems in the greenhouse sequence of which I have spoken stress the negative meaning of nature, the remaining poems in the sequence tend to stress nature's positive meaning. As I have previously mentioned, the poet in 1950 described the greenhouse publicly as "my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth." Some years earlier, however, he wrote in the privacy of his notebooks—which were eventually edited and published under the title *Straw for the Fire*—"What was this greenhouse? It was a jungle and it was a paradise. It was order and disorder. Was it an escape? No, for it was a reality harsher than reality" (150).

A significant feature of Roethke's enthrallment with the greenhouse world is the human presence within it as an ameliorating influence on the junglelike characteristics of that world. Certainly the theme of human invention, or art, is implied in the poems that focus on the greenhouse workers, those protectors and procreators of the greenhouse who strive to turn its harsh reality into a flowering Eden. "Forcing House," for example, hints at the dynamic role these workers play in the greenhouse as they place the richest nutrients of the mire into the manure machine, to be forced through life-giving pipes to the pulsing plants:

Vines, tougher than wrists
And rubber shoots,
Scums, mildews, smuts along stems,
Great cannas or delicate cyclamen tips,—
All pulse with the knocking pipes
That drip and sweat,
Sweat and drip,
Swelling the roots with steam and stench,
Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones,—
Fifty summers in motion at once,
As the live heat billows from pipes and pots.
(*Collected Poems* 38)

In this poem the human presence is felt as the means by which the processes of nature are abetted and speeded until there are "Fifty summers in motion at once."

It is not simply the industry of the workers that the poet recalls. It is also their empathy with things, which he recalls in at least three poems: "Old Florist," "Transplanting," and "Frau Bauman, Frau

Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz." In the first of these poems the reader sees

That hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums
Or pinching-back asters, or planting azaleas,
Tamping and stamping dirt into pots. . . .
(*Collected Poems* 42)

And in "Transplanting," the reader stands alongside the poet,

Watching hands transplanting,
Turning and tamping,
Lifting the young plants with two fingers,
Sifting in a palm-full of fresh loam. . . .
(*Collected Poems* 42)

"Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" was not included among the greenhouse poems as they were published in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1949). Roethke later included it in the sequence, however, almost as if to stress the importance of human empathy with nature. Speaking of the women who worked in the greenhouse, he says:

They stood astride pipes,
Their skirts billowing out wide into tents,
Their hands twinkling with wet;
Like witches they flew along rows
Keeping creation at ease;
With a tendril for a needle
They sewed up the air with a stem;
They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep,—
All the coils, loops, and whorls.
They trellised the sun; they plotted for more than themselves.
(*Words for the Wind* 47)

The manner in which these women of the greenhouse touch the world is of lasting significance. By their tenderness and delicacy they keep "creation at ease," and by so doing plot "for more than themselves."

To be sure, the life of the greenhouse workers is not without its adversities. The wrists of the "ancient leathery crones" are "thorn bitten," (*Words for the Wind* 48). And the old florist, who patiently fans "life into wilted sweet peas with his hat," or stands "all night watering roses, his feet blue in rubber boots" (*Collected Poems* 42), is a man worn by his labors. Indeed, the greenhouse is "a reality

harsher than reality" (*Straw for the Fire* 150). But within this reality the human presence is a creative influence, which helps nature to realize its fullest productivity and beauty, such as is realized through the human nurturing of carnations, a flower that for Roethke evokes a vision of

A crisp hyacinthine coolness,
Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,
The windless perpetual morning
Above a September cloud.
(*"Carnations," Collected Poems* 43)

Humans work with what is given in nature. They are not creators in any ontological sense. There are mysteries of growth within nature in relation to which the human being is no more than an astonished witness. An instance of such growth is suggested in "Flower Dump":

Cannas shiny as slag,
Slug-soft stems,
Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile,
Carnations, verbenas, cosmos,
Molds, weeds, dead leaves,
Turned-over roots
With bleached veins
Twined like fine hair,
Each clump in the shape of a pot;
Everything limp
But one tulip on top,
One swaggering head
Over the dying, the newly dead.
(*Collected Poems* 43)

Here in one heap lies the dead and moldering vegetation of the greenhouse, but even this sprouts with the glory of "one tulip." Such glory is the very essence of the positive meaning of nature, and it is with this meaning that the poet is concerned in what is perhaps the finest poem in the greenhouse sequence, "Big Wind."

Kenneth Burke has commented on the structure of "Big Wind," noting that it "reveals . . . how Roethke can endow his brief lyrics with intensity of action" (225). Karl Malkoff has commented on its sexual implications, noting that Roethke associates "the femininity of the greenhouse" with "the child's growing knowledge of a sexual world" (54). And Louis Martz has commented on the artistic motives

of the poem, noting that it is the epitomizing expression of Roethke's notion of "nature sophisticated by art" (26). But critics have tended to slight the metaphysical implications of the poem, and these are crucial to understanding the full scope of Roethke's vision of the natural world.

The first line of "Big Wind" may be taken in its literal sense as a question expressing concern about the safety of the greenhouse in a storm. The poet asks: "Where were the greenhouses going?" However, this line may also be taken in a figurative sense as a question about the very structure of existence, of nature's possibility for overcoming its own negative meaning. The first twenty lines of the poem stress the idea of the struggle for survival. The workers strain to keep the pipes supplied with steam; they stuff burlap in holes of the greenhouse to keep out the wind. If elsewhere in the sequence Roethke alludes to the perils of existence within the greenhouse world primarily in relation to the life of the child-protagonist, in this poem he broadens his perception of peril to include the entire world of the greenhouse itself. "Big Wind" expresses the poet's recognition of how radically the whole of creation is shot through with contingency. This contingency involves all that is transient, chaotic, and discordant in the structure of existence: natural catastrophe, death and anxiety, and all the disparate phenomena of nature. Yet he wants also to speak of a marvelous stoutness in the world which is finally greater than all its contingency, for as he says,

. . . she rode it out,
That old rose-house,
She hove into the teeth of it,
The core and pith of that ugly storm,
Ploughing with her stiff prow,
Bucking into the wind-waves
That broke over the whole of her,
Flailing her sides with spray,
Flinging long strings of wet across the roof-top,
Finally veering, wearing themselves out, merely
Whistling thinly under the wind-vents;
She sailed until the calm morning,
Carrying her full cargo of roses.
(*Collected Poems* 41)

The positive meaning of nature is not merely a product of the poet's fancy. It is something that belongs to nature, as is indicated

by the ability of the greenhouse, in spite of adversity, continually to bear her "full cargo of roses." Throughout his poetry the rose for Roethke represents harmony, perfection, permanence. It is symbolic of something in nature, yet of something that "exceeds" nature. "The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all," Roethke declares in "The Longing," a poem written toward the end of his career (*Collected Poems* 188). If the greenhouse is not a paradise, its ability to produce such a luminous flower as the rose clearly indicates that neither is it a rank jungle. The greenhouse for Roethke is indeed emblematic of paradise, but of a fallen paradise in which the negative and positive meanings of nature are puzzlingly intermingled. The poet's response to this intermingling embraces both terror and joy, but most principally, it embraces his sense of the miraculous way in which nature triumphs over the powers of negativity. For the poet of "Big Wind" and of the greenhouse poems as a whole, the ship sails on "until the calm morning," and it is to this cardinal truth that Roethke's imagination cleaves.

I want to recall the reference to Genesis with which I began this essay. I do not know if the creation story of Genesis was a conscious influence on Roethke in his writing of the greenhouse poems. I do know that in reading the poems I have often been reminded of that story. Roethke's child-protagonist is a type of Adam born of the earth, struggling to grow and survive in a world that bears traces of an original Paradise. The current world of the greenhouse is a place that is both negative and positive in meaning. Negatively it is a world of weeds, putrid odors, human pain, and death. Positively it is a world of astonishing energy and sublimity.

No mention of the Creator God of Genesis appears in the greenhouse poems. The child-protagonist is neither theologian nor philosopher. In these poems, and in large swatches of his poetry as a whole, Roethke leads us as readers on an imaginative journey out of the slime to a vision of "Something More" (Wheelwright 60) that can only be described elliptically. To the age-old question of why the world exists, Roethke offers a poet's answer: it exists to evoke our "Praise to the End!" (*Collected Poems* 85) for the miracle of life that undergirds and interfuses all things.

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THEODORE ROETHKE: VISIONS BEYOND THE GREENHOUSE

LINDA BEARSS

Theodore Roethke's drive to explore and expand the landscape of his poetic vision is revealed as one opens the door of his later works. While Roethke is, perhaps, most remembered for his poetry about nature as a source of understanding relationships and memory, his later work reveals a quest to explore forms, rhythms, personae, and varying philosophies of mysticism. In *Words for the Wind*, Roethke shatters the glass encasement that would threaten to enclose him by crafting new landscapes of color, form, voice and intricate symbolism, creating a seasoned and infinitely effective poetic voice, reflecting his interest in both the development of American poetry and the progressing forms and rhythms of European masters. *Words for the Wind*, particularly in the love poems and "Meditations of an Old Woman," is a turning point in the evolution of Roethke's poetry.

Words for the Wind was published in 1958, between *The Waking* and Roethke's children's book, *I Am Says the Lamb*. Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence, Auden, Eliot, and Rilke were among the influences on Roethke's work during this period (Seager 232). He had spent significant time traveling in Europe and writing letters, conversing with the literary personages of the time. His American influences came from Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as well as Wilbur, Bishop, and W. C. Williams (*Selected Letters* 230; Seager 232). In addition, Roethke used these more mature poems to explore insights gained after more than a year of focused study of various philosophies and theologies (facilitated by a Ford Foundation grant during 1952-1953), including those of Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and Evelyn Underhill. Roethke's personal struggle with periodic episodes of mental illness was an additional internal influence on his work. Roethke was hospitalized a good deal of this time, to which the dark-

ness of his work may very well be attributed. It is sometimes held that Roethke initiated mental lapses for the purpose of enhancing his vision and mental capacities, as some writers have been known to take drugs to attempt to achieve a higher plan of consciousness. In his notes, Roethke writes, "I can't go flying apart just for those who want the benefit a few verbal kicks. My God, do you know what poems like that cost?" (*Straw for the Fire* 87). John Rohrkemper, asserts that "[i]ndeed, he almost seemed to reach for those moments of disassociated excitement as a creative tonic" (30). Roethke's glass house revealed the transparency of his tenuous grip on reality and his need to be viewed and approved by his admiring peers and public. In *Words for the Wind*, the European, American, philosophical, religious, and mental health struggles all come together in influencing Roethke to create a truly dynamic set of poems that moves beyond surface structural changes to explore the depths of human existence and connection with the nature of self and spirituality.

"Mediations of an Old Woman," the closing sequence in *Words for the Wind*, is particularly useful in discussing these influences and Roethke's ever growing skills because the reader is able to observe major changes in Roethke's poetic style and use of conventions, reflecting the innovations in the poetic voices of his era as well as the incorporation of his impressions from his studies in religion and philosophy. In a letter to Marianne Moore, he remarks, "I hope a totality, an evolution, is apparent," as he references his work in *Words for the Wind* (SL 219). Roethke is sometimes criticized for seeing and writing in the moment and not delving to the depths reached by greater poets of his time. Yet, the cadences of this collection are often compared to Yeats, and the structure of the last sequence is repeatedly noted as being parallel to Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Rosemary Sullivan, in "Wet with Another Life: 'Meditations of an Old Woman,'" compares Roethke's choices of symbols and syntax strongly to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, as does W. C. Snodgrass in "That Anguish of Concreteness," asserting that "Roethke's syntax and rhythm are again so similar to Eliot's that the echoes can seem detrimental. Yet . . . Roethke's persona, at once more sensuous and affectionate than Eliot's, lays claim to a very different emotional response" (157). In "Meditations of an Old Woman" we are able to see the depths that he has learned to explore because of his persistent studies.

Departure from traditional masculine rhyme and the manipulation of repetitive sounds in internal and slant rhymes were popular in

Europe during Roethke's time, which did not escape his notice. Therefore, while Roethke's early work was largely designed with masculine rhyme and consistent meter, his work in later years shows a fascination with different forms of rhyme, particularly slant and consonantal and often a total departure from the iambic meter that he used so prolifically in his early years. For example, many of the poems in his earlier *Open House* (1941), favor an ABAB masculine rhyme scheme or couplets, even to the extent of "Ballad of the Clairvoyant Widow," a twenty-six-line poem composed completely of couplets.

In *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), he has experimented with stanzas of varying lengths and internal rhyme, particularly consonantal, but his images are still very concrete; he is still writing about what he knows best: his family, their greenhouse in Saginaw, and the nature of growing things. Roethke uses these images to develop an awe of the spirituality and dominion of nature. Martz asserts that Roethke is steeped in this Romantic tradition because of his spiritual vision of nature (18). In these poems Roethke often lists dozens of concrete images to create a visual picture and experience that move beyond the image to contemplation of a greater dimension of spirituality.

Roethke continues to use concrete images of nature to develop the metaphor between an old woman's declining years and that of the winter season. In "Old Lady's Winter Words," from *The Waking* (1953), Roethke tells the story in three stanzas of 48, 2, and 15 lines respectively. All lines are set flush left and, while they vary in length, the most significant instance of his using enjambments for effecting a movement on the part of the reader is in the last stanza, where the lines gradually decrease in length, following the old woman's declining health and sense of self-awareness. In "Old Lady's Winter Words," the poet has left behind the restraining rhymes that have been so much a part of his work in the past, showing development from his earlier work but falling short of the levels of exploration that he accomplishes in *Words for the Wind*.

In "Meditations of an Old Woman" the poet lets the woman's thoughts flow between present and past, telling a story as she constructs a spiritual reality that provides her comfort as she nears death. This poem takes on a more conversational tone than that of his earlier work. The language and enjambments pull the reader along with the old woman's memories and present reality as if there is no choice but

to follow, yet the memories create journeys that are fluid at times and then jolt the speaker back to the present dark time, in which she finds herself drifting and pulled as she contemplates her future and the termination of life as she has known it. The conversational tone is realistic and gives credibility to the experiences and ponderings of the speaker. "Meditations of an Old Woman" is a more crafted, more polished, and a definitely more convincing voice for the feminine mask.

A point of consideration is Roethke's ability to take on various voices, personifying his changing perspectives and contemplations of the progression of life. Roethke's old woman narrator in "Meditations of an Old Woman," is a work of contrived genius, whose voice is supported and given credibility by the intricate metaphors and symbolism of his word and image choices and the cadence of his lines, creating a realistic pulsing of the reflections of a life's journeys and the contemplation of awareness after death. Regarding "Meditations of an Old Woman," he wrote to Ralph Mills, "I wanted to create a character for whom such rhythms are indigent; that she be a dramatic character, not just me . . . Is my old lady tired? The hell she is: she's tough, she's brave, she's aware of life and she would take a congeries of eels over a hassle of bishops any day" (SL 231).

It is not the first time that Roethke has spoken behind the mask of the feminine gender. He took on a similar persona earlier in the shorter poem, "Old Lady's Winter Words." "Meditations of an Old Woman" is a definite departure from the poet's regular persona and voice, but then Roethke is experimenting with a variety of voices in this collection. Regarding this persona, Roethke, in a letter to Howard Moss (1956), says "—of course, it's my mother talking" (SL 211). His persona in this sequence becomes deeply philosophical, gathering thoughts and experiences through an omnipresent power and bondage.

Roethke's persona moves beyond the storyteller and becomes the personification of self-actualization within the framework of multiple journeys. At a time in American poetry when writers were experimenting with larger, more involved forms, "Meditations of an Old Woman" is Roethke's attempt at the poet's equivalent of the Great American Novel. Yet beyond the extended sequence, Roethke is uniting the sections and meditations through a search for the ultimate introspection of life experiences, attempting to define a mystical reality that transcends terrestrial comprehension. Ladislava Khailova,

asserts that Roethke's sequence shows clear evidence of his study of Buber's I-Thou relationship: "The work, like Buber's study, finally transcends the I's oscillation by creating a spiral with its uppermost destination in the eternal You—God" (1). Sullivan adds the influence of Paul Tillich's and Evelyn Underhill's philosophies of mysticism to Roethke's later work, attributing Roethke's success with the larger form to a "descriptive order and imagery which made sense out of what were obviously personal experiences of inward transmutation" (144). Roethke's old woman is not just reminiscing about her life as she nears death; she is learning to view her earthly experiences in the light of an understanding that only becomes available as one nears the end of one life and approaches the beginning of the next. Roethke's greenhouse poetry is based on memories, but in "Meditations of an Old Woman," he has used memories to craft a philosophical quest. John Rohrkemper agrees: "[M]emory is now the province of meditation and not the free fall of dream . . . There is still some freedom in the movement, but there also is the conscious control of the rememberer" (32).

Roethke accomplishes this personification of human introspection and spiritual realizations through restructuring the rhymes and rhythms of his work as well as carefully crafting the intricate symbolism that creates a more tenacious journey for the serious reader. In discussing both the old man of the "North American Sequence" and the old woman from "Meditations of an Old Woman," Richard Blessing writes, "At the most significant level, both sequences seem to me to be 'about' an exploration in language, the search for rhythms and images which will give substance to those transcendent moments which both comfort and terrify" (120). This sequence provides an effective study of Roethke's maturing manipulation of the elements of form to plow new poetic ground for cultivating his evolving introspection of self, craft, and the philosophical questions of his studies.

In the "First Meditation" of four sections, each stanza is a different number of lines, the only end rhymes are slanted, and Roethke does not seem averse to extending a line well beyond the average length of the others occasionally, a change from his earlier pieces. In this first meditation, the intricacy of Roethke's mature rhymes is already noticeable. In the last two lines of the third stanza of section two, notice "swaying" and "runway," considerably more sophisticated than his earlier repeated masculine rhyme patterns. This stanza also shows his use of movement, swaying the reader "With a wind

from the west and the trees all in motion" as two sparrows (Roethke uses birds, sparrows particularly, in this sequence) represent the confinement or freedom of the human spirit. One sparrow watches the world of men below it while it holds its grip in the wind, and one is free to explore the sunshine of a greater expanse:

Two song sparrows, one within a greenhouse,
Shuttling its throat while perched on a wind-vent,
And another, outside, in the bright day,
With a wind from the west and the trees all in motion.
One sang, then the other,
The songs tumbling over and under the glass,
And the men beneath them wheeling in dirt to the cement
benches, (*Words for the Wind* 40-47)

The men are represented as being enslaved to the physical world and are unaware of being watched or the freedom of the bird outside of their known experience.

Roethke uses colons, whether at the beginning or end of a stanza, to introduce a flashback in time. Early in the century, poets like James Joyce were working with the concepts of cyclical time and stream of consciousness and, while Roethke's piece is still much more traditionally structured than is the typical work of Joyce, this usage seems to be Roethke's attempt at the merging of time and experience. In this section, the way that the old woman drifts back to images from the past that have shaped her present is intriguing and allows the reader to tag along in her mental wanderings. Past and present become blurred as Roethke pens lines such as "Still swimming forward—/So, I suppose, the spirit journeys" (WW 77-78). Yet the wanderings are becoming less overpowering as the pieces begin to fit a purpose in her contemplation of what is to come.

The structure in the second section of the "First Meditation" moves the reader along with the old woman on a variety of journeys. One feels the road beneath the bus seat of the old woman's childhood memories, "And we bounce and sway along toward the midnight / The lights tilting up, skyward, as we come over a little rise / Then down, as we roll like a boat from a wave-crest" (WW 24-26). The reader is slowed by the beat of the extended line (WW 31) and the word "peppermints." Here, the poet causes the reader to stop the movement for a moment and stare at the old woman on the bus. Movement is something that surfaced in Roethke's earlier poems

occasionally, but he has expertly developed it in this piece. Richard Blessing writes, "Life is experienced as motion, and Roethke creates a kind of ethic out of how one responds to that motion" (120). The alliteration in the second stanza rocks the reader along with the narrator's rocky ride between the present and the past, between human experience and spiritual reflection:

their black shapes breaking past;
And the air claps between us,
Blasting the frosted windows,
And I seem to go backward,
Backward in time: (WW 35-39)

In section three, he develops layered movement in the image of a fish fighting the current, "slipping and sliding slowly backward . . . bumping against sticks and bottom-stones / . . . / back into the tiny maincurrent, the rush of brownish-white water" as a metaphor for the old woman's grasp of her memories and attempt to reconcile with an awakening spiritual reality (WW 69-76). The use of soft, slippery "s's," broken by hard consonants, takes the reader on a tenacious ride, fighting upstream against the river's current, being often pulled off course by the dark shadows and bruised "against sticks and bottom stones," paralleling the human struggle and alongside the woman's thought process as she moves from present to past and back again on the reflective journey. This first meditation is a series of journeys, setting the stage for the personal reflection and spiritual lessons to come, often catching the old woman by surprise as she is suddenly aware of new insights, as in this portion when the powerful and "shuddering" black horses freeze for a moment above her before plunging her down and onward:

Journey within a journey:

.....

Or two horses plunging in snow, their lines tangled,
A great sleigh careening behind them,
Swerving up a steep embankment.
For a moment they stand above me,
Their black skins shuddering:
Then they lurch forward,
Lunging down a hillside. (WW 50-62)

In the second meditation, "I'm Here," Roethke's use of enjambements to create successively shorter lines ends the meditation simi-

larly to his earlier choice in "Old Lady's Winter Words." However, it is the summation of an amazing variety of lengths of lines and stanzas through this meditation that moves the reader along with the thoughts of the old woman, showing the changing style and craft of the seasoned poet. His obvious use of dwindling line lengths to end the meditation is parallel to the woman's realization of the nearness of death. The last three lines are powerful as the woman challenges death, the "wind," to take her "If the wind means me / I'm here! / Here" (WW 98-100). It is interesting to note the emotional distancing in the choice of end punctuation of the last two lines; it is as if she acquiesces, then strengthens with a sudden conviction of purpose.

We are pulled with her again into memories in the third meditation, "Her Becoming." What is amazing in this one is our transportation from a set of memories to present context within those memories. The old woman is again free to be the young and open woman that she once was; only now, she sees her place in the world through a romantic fusion with natural elements, not surrounded by her environment but blood kin to it: "A face floats in the ferns. / . . . / A spirit plays before me as a child, / A child at play, a wind-excited bird" (WW 18-23). Sullivan explains the symbolism of the spirit child as "a traditional archetype . . . of the divine child, always a symbol of nascent spiritual life and of immanent rebirth" (150). The old woman in her youth is not feeling the wind on her skin as she runs; she has become the breeze singing and skimming the tops of the grain in the field. The indented stanzas have the feel of an old lovers' tune or melody, "From the folds of my skin, I sing, / the air still, the ground alive, / The earth itself a tune" (HB 13-15). Creating a sense of sound and music in the poetry was a priority of Roethke throughout his career. He has not left the music in the rhyme and iambic meters of his earlier work, but he has continued to develop the rhythms and melodies in a much less predictable and less structured manner, infusing them with mystical and metaphysical connotations.

After describing the shadows and ambiguities of the present in section two, section three takes us back to the young woman as he writes, "My breath grew less. I listened like a beast. / Was it the stones I heard?" (WW 53-54). A particularly beautiful and mystical line occurs when Roethke writes "The moon, a pure Islamic shape, looked down. / The light air slowed: It was not night or day" (WW 55-56). Sullivan links his image of the moon to Yeats's *A Vision* and the "movement from the pure subjectivity of the empirical self to the

higher objectivity that is the ideal of eastern mysticism" (151). Penchant for movement is again present in images of the sea, as he writes "In the back of my mind, running with the rolling water, / My breast wild as the waves . . . Is it the sea we wish? The sleep of the changeless?" (WW 10, 28). Karl Malkoff likens this use of imagery to Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, "viewing life as the process of individuation from the undifferentiated flux of the sea to which we ultimately return" (164). This seeking for self-actualization in the looming presence of death is continued throughout the rest of the sequence.

Roethke resumes his manipulation of time and perspective in the "Fourth Meditation." The old woman's memories become more distant as impending death calls her away from "the white kingdoms" and "drifting with the blossoms" as "But a time comes when the vague life of the mouth no longer suffices" (WW 15-16, 18). He crafts the sounds of the consonants as he applies alliteration and assonantal rhyme expertly in lines like, "In the white kingdoms, I was light as a seed / . . . / A pensive petal" and "The soul stands, lonely in its choice," in which he also makes dramatic use of the long "o" vowel sound (WW 15, 17). The music of youth is over; she accepts the inevitable for herself and turns to philosophize about the lives of women lost because of limited spiritual vision.

This part of the meditation is an admonition to the newer generations of women, urging them to experience life on more significant levels: "How I wish them awake! / May the high flower of the hay climb into their hearts; / May they lean into light and live" (WW 55-57). She ends the "Fourth Meditation" with a new acceptance of what she has become in her old age; the poet writes, "Beguile me, change. What have I fallen from? / . . . / On a dark day I walk straight toward the rain" (WW 77-80). Again, Roethke draws the meditation to a conclusion with descending line lengths in the last stanza as the old woman accepts the inevitable.

In the final meditation, "What Can I Tell My Bones?" there is no repetitive pattern for line or stanza length. The poet's use of the vowel "o" is again an intricate part of the sound and movement of the lines. There are stanzas in which the use of "w" and long "o" sounds is predominant, giving these passages a mood which is interrupted and juxtaposed against stanzas which are built with the sounds of "s" and hard consonants like "ck." He writes, "When the worst is about to arrive; / It is fatal to woo yourself," (WW 36-37). In the second section, the long line, "Oh to be delivered from the rational into the

realm of pure song," is a turning point at which she looks at the future in a positive light—a change from the uncertain perspectives and endings of the previous meditations (WW 55). This section ends with two tercets, indented from the left margin, in which Roethke weaves metaphysical references such as "I rock in my own dark, / thinking, God has need of me" (WW 63-65).

Section three provides the resolution to the previous turning point. Here she has discovered and embraced the other side of death and existence. He writes, "Mercy has many arms. / . . . / I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites" (WW 76,81). Naturalistic elements are still in play and personify the struggle for spiritual awareness, as in "The wind rocks with my wish; the rain shields me; / I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;" semi-colons set apart the parallel sentence structures and set the stage for the last line of the third stanza in section three, "Sometimes I think I'm several" (WW 84). The final two stanzas are indented, a change of pacing, and give a positive and optimistic ending to the collection of meditations. Death may now claim her, as she sees anew the world around her. In section three, the poet writes, "My spirit rises with the rising wind; / I'm thick with leaves and tender as a dove," (WW 89-90). She has come far enough in the journey to see the possibilities on the other side of the mirror and accept the unknown.

Throughout the five meditations of the old woman, Roethke integrates past skills and images, such as exploring memory and naturalistic images grown from the greenhouse years, with new attempts at maturing his style with slant, assonantal and consonantal rhyme, and changing rhythms which produce carefully crafted movement. This final sequence is united through the imagery and symbolism that Roethke has developed in accordance with his spiritual studies. For a larger piece of writing, as was the endeavor of the contemporary writing community, this unification was essential. These technical ameliorations prepare Roethke's naturalistic and romantic earth for the planting and cultivating of questions that seek to explore beyond known earthly existence. Effectively describing such a lengthy and involved journey from the persona of the opposite gender is a tremendous undertaking. Roethke has not only crafted a new greenhouse; he has ventured beyond, cultivating an intricate and engaging new landscape.

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"A STATE OF PARTIAL COMPLETENESS": THE AFTERLIFE OF THEODORE ROETHKE

MELLISSA J. KLAMER

From the moment of inception of the "Intentional Fallacy," the position of the author in the interpretation of his or her own work has been a question of much concern among literary scholars. Roland Barthes's groundbreaking text, "The Death of the Author," added considerable weight to Wimsatt and Beardsley's premise and significantly changed critical processes. This essay attempts to take Barthes's concept one step further, moving from the metaphorical "Death of the Author" to consider instead the implications of physical death, in order to analyze the problem of posthumous publication, particularly as it relates to the work of Theodore Roethke. At the time of his death in 1963, Roethke left hundreds of notebooks and individual pages of incomplete fragments. Eventually, the careful hands of friends and family produced from among this immense output several posthumous works by Roethke, consisting of poems, essays, and fragments. This abundance of published material not directly supervised by Roethke leads to the central question of this essay: What role, if any, should the author have in constructing his reputation and that of his work after his death?

Posthumous publication is an incredibly broad, multifaceted issue. Within this paper, an author's rights are examined not only from the perspective of literary theories, but also in light of legal considerations and authorial ownership of a text. Neither theorists, scholars, nor authors are in agreement, even within their own individual camps, about the amount of control granted to the author in posthumous publication. Yet posthumously published material is a tool often used by theorists to augment their knowledge about specific texts or their authors; the very frequency with which these previously unpublished

materials are used in scholarly research speaks to their immense significance. The scope of the question defies a simple answer. This paper focuses on the literary afterlife of Theodore Roethke. I will argue that although it is impossible to conclude what any author would have wanted, in Roethke's case, there is nevertheless significant evidence that he would have been in agreement with the decisions that have been made regarding his posthumous reputation.

THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR

Roethke was in his late thirties when Wimsatt and Beardsley, drawing upon the work of other scholars, penned "The Intentional Fallacy," arguing that critical interpretations should not be decided solely on the basis of the author's original intent (1374). Twenty-two years later in 1968, when Barthes's "The Death of the Author" made its appearance, Roethke was no longer living. Barthes wrote, "The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (Barthes 1466). Barthes clearly did not agree with this form of interpretation, yet it was already happening with Roethke's works. When Barthes published his essay, two posthumous Roethke works had already been published, the poetry collection *The Far Field* and *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, both prepared for publication under the overseeing eye of Roethke's widow, Beatrice, who had been named his administratrix.

Barthes stated in his powerful essay that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (1469). In other words, the reader, as the destination of a written text, constructs the unity of that text. Barthes was attempting to reverse what he saw as a historical—and problematic—reliance on the author's original intent as the most acceptable reading of a text. Barthes believed that interpretation of any text as exhibiting one predominant meaning, controlled by the author, limits the text unfairly. Barthes based his premise on linguistics, claiming, "The author is never more than the instance of writing," thus the author's role in interpretation cannot exist outside that initial moment of writing (1467). The removal of the author, according to Barthes, creates a space in which the reader is free from such limitation, and the text, liberated from the author's complete control, is able to take on multiple readings: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (1470).

Barthes's answer to the question is clear. According to his theory as presented in "The Death of the Author," Barthes would have allowed Roethke the same role in constructing his reputation following his death as he would have had while he lived: which is to say, Roethke would have had no role at all. For Barthes, Roethke's role as an author—though he himself would likely have preferred the term "poet"—ended the moment his work left his pen, and his opinion thereafter would no longer matter. From the moment of writing forward, the text is "without origin," and limitless (1467).

This theory presents a problem surrounding the validity of posthumously published works, which are often claimed to add context to an author's earlier works through presenting greater detail about either the life or the writing process that led to those works. In Roethke's case, Barthes's essay calls into question the usefulness of the essay collection, *On the Poet and His Craft*, as these essays primarily present Roethke's opinions about poetry and education, presenting a more concise account of his own goals in poetry—an insight which Barthes would have deemed insignificant in the interpretation of his poetry. Another potential problem arises in conjunction with Roethke's posthumous poetry collection, *The Far Field*, the poetry of which was left incomplete at Roethke's death. Posthumous publication of any text revolves around the challenge of creating the best text, and a major consideration in this process is often the question of authorial intention. If the author is not allowed a role in posthumous editing processes, as Barthes's essay would suggest, then editing itself may be unnecessary; the poems should be judged on their merits, as they were when they left Roethke's pen. Yet Roethke the poet did exist, and he wanted to be known in conjunction with his work, as he stated once to a fellow guest at a dinner party, "You're a governor. I'm a poet. We're equals, see? The hell with that professor stuff" (Seager 278).

Although authorial intent alone, as Barthes correctly posits, is not an adequate medium for textual interpretation, Barthes's burial of the author is a fallacious construct. Foucault suggests in "What Is an Author?" that this ideal separation between the author and the text is impossible:

What is necessary to composition, if a work is not something written by a person called an "author"? Difficulties arise on all sides if we raise the question in this way. If an individual is not an author, what

are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others? Is this not properly a work? (1624)

A text does not exist without an author. Barthes removed the author, this necessary element to the very existence of a text, to create from the text "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1468). In his haste to eliminate the "single 'theological' meaning" he feared, however, Barthes overlooked the possibility of the author to speak to the text, not as a controlling entity, but as another participant in the multidimensional space.

THE SEARCH FOR THE AUTHOR

Despite the widespread popularity of Barthes's essay, previously unpublished materials continue to be used today by scholars who seek "the explanation of a work" in every available first-hand account left by the deceased author. Tomes of the collected letters by canonical writers are a treasured, and often expensive, commodity on library shelving, as are authors' diaries, manuscripts, and other fragments, all of which are used to construct any meanings that are not immediately apparent in the text on the page. A case in point is Rose Marie Burwell's "The Posthumous Hemingway Puzzle," which explains that when certain restrictions upon previously unavailable letters between Hemingway and his publishers were lifted in 1992, the letters became instrumental in "put[ting] into literary and biological perspective the four long manuscripts left unpublished at Hemingway's death" (26). In a more recent attempt at reconstructing the author, Massimo Bacigalupo published a volume of the "posthumous cantos" of Ezra Pound in 2002, which consists of "drafts and fragments of cantos . . . and alternate versions and rejected passages" (90). Bacigalupo argues that his volume is valuable in its ability to "be used as a compact guide to [the original cantos'] phrases" and to "remind readers of the stature of Pound the poet" (90-1). Pound and Hemingway are only two of myriad authors whose deaths have created dilemmas for admirers and critics regarding the dissemination and interpretation of unpublished material.

Burwell's and Bacigalupo's arguments for the use of unpublished material as manifestations of an author's conscious thought about his works presuppose a valid interpretive medium in the intent of the author, whether this was the intent of these posthumous editors or not.

According to Burwell, the "literary and biological perspective" created by the posthumously revealed Hemingway letters provides clarification as to the author's intent in his four posthumous novels. With respect to Hemingway's literary career, the letters established the previously doubtful rumor that Hemingway had in 1920 found manuscripts "that [had] been in storage for 30 years," some of which "was pretty exciting to see again" (Burwell 34). The biological perspective to which the letters gave new depth centered on "Hemingway's enmity towards James Jones . . . that was inexplicable when one could read only the letters that Scribner's and Mary Hemingway allowed to be published" (29). Thus, these letters, revealed to scholars only after Hemingway's death, are being used not only to explain his life, but also as an interpretive aid for his creative output.

Like many other writers, Roethke's posthumous works have played a role in constructing his reputation. A cursory glance at Central Michigan University's online library catalog reveals that, in fact, death itself likely aids in this process; of all the Library's holdings related to Roethke, only a handful were published during his lifetime, and only one of the entries dated during his lifetime is not a book of poems that he published himself.¹ Evidently Roethke's reputation improved vastly upon his death. This development may be in part due to the posthumous publications of his incomplete works, which raises yet another important question: What are the determining factors in the decision to publish an author's posthumous works, and what role does the author play in this process?

COPYRIGHT AND LEGALITY

An author's role in his reputation, particularly after death, is not merely the concern of literary theorists. Foucault states that authors have become "objects of appropriation" (1628). The function of the author, uncertain in itself, takes on a new meaning with the application of legal terminology. Although an author's control over the meaning of his text may be disputed, an author's right to his text as property is irrefutable. According to Foucault, this was not always the case, however: "Speeches and books were assigned real authors . . . only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgressive" (1628). This establishment of the text as an author's property led to more legal entanglements: "strict copyright rules were established (toward the

end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century)" (1628).

Copyright rules are complicated, but they do allow an author like Roethke the ability to exercise some control over posthumous publication of his work. Historically, authors have been known to express varying choices concerning the use of these secondary materials. Some authors have made it abundantly clear that they do not want their personal materials to be paraded before the public. Nineteenth-century author Harriet Martineau once requested that her friends return all of her letters "on pain of being denied all future correspondence" (Webb). Martineau "forbade publication of her letters," but her brother made shorthand copies of the letters in his possession before returning them, with the result that some of Martineau's correspondence survives in spite of her wishes (Webb).

In other cases of posthumous publication, it may be known to the executors that an author fully intended the publication of a work in progress but was unable to complete it before his or her death. In such cases, the decision to publish rests less heavily on the author's wishes and instead turns to the problem of creating the best text. Jane Austen was working on the revisions of *Persuasion* at the time of her death and had also heavily revised *Northanger Abbey*, although the latter novel remained untitled. After his sister's death, Henry Austen took it upon himself to publish both novels together, choosing also the title for *Northanger Abbey* (Austen x).

This was the situation surrounding Roethke's own posthumous poetry collection, *The Far Field*. Roethke, according to his biographer, was "working hard every day getting the body of the *The Far Field* poems ready to submit, changing, polishing, pruning" (Seager 285). Based upon this statement and the assumption that Roethke's widow would have been acquainted with his wishes, there is a strong suggestion that Roethke would likely have approved of the publication of this text at least. There is, however, no irrefutable evidence that would allow complete assurance, and what an author might have wanted will always be a point of conjecture.

RECONSTRUCTING ROETHKE: THE POET AND TEACHER

Although there is evidence that Roethke intended to publish the work in *The Far Field*, what remains less certain is how he might have felt about his other posthumous collections. Roethke was a meticulous writer; his essays and notebooks show an intense com-

mitment to making each poem as flawless as he could. Roethke constantly worked to produce mature work, as his process reveals. David Wagoner recounts that at his death in 1963, "Theodore Roethke left behind 277 notebooks . . . full of a miscellany of fragments of poetry, aphorisms, jokes, memos, journal entries, random phrases, bits of dialogue, literary and philosophical commentary, rough drafts of whole poems, questions, etc." (Wagoner 3). Roethke's biographer discusses the way Roethke used these notebooks during his creative process:

He writes lines of poetry, one, two, three at a time, and they are not lines for any poem he has then in mind. Occasionally he rings a line he thinks good; a few pages later, another, and so on until maybe thirty pages later, we see six or seven of the ringed lines written consecutively and it is clear that a poem has started . . . [H]is critical tact lies in perceiving just which lines, juxtaposed, will become coherent, and ultimately take shape as a poem. (Seager 163)

Roethke's process was slow and deliberate; every line and every word counted.

Roethke was deeply committed to the perfection of his poetry, and this commitment presents the strongest argument that, although his wishes can never be fully understood, Roethke may have been hesitant about the posthumous publication of poems he considered incomplete. This concern for perfection is already present in an early essay that Roethke wrote during his years at the University of Michigan: "I do wish that we were allowed to keep our stories until we felt that we had worked them into the best possible form" (*On the Poet* 5). This perfectionism may have been a family trait. Seager writes that Roethke's paternal grandmother had a "favorite command, 'Macht es tüchtig!': 'Do it right!'" (10). Later, Roethke's widow Beatrice also echoed her husband's preoccupation with perfection when giving permission for some previously unpublished poems to be put before the public. Although she granted permission, she made the request that readers be informed that Roethke "might not have considered them good enough to publish—they weren't mature work" (Walker 638).

Roethke's essays also depict a man constantly concerned with his reputation, particularly with his role as a poet. In a self-titled essay for *Twentieth Century Authors*, Roethke wrote, "I mean almost nothing (except for a handful of personal friends) to the people of my own

state, to the man in the street—and desire that regard most passionately” (qtd. in *On the Poet* 15). Allan Seager, Roethke’s biographer, writes about a dinner party at which the host “was introducing Ted as ‘Professor Roethke’ when Ted broke in, ‘I’m a poet’” (Seager 278). There are also fragments among Wagoner’s compilation that speak to this desire for recognition; one poignant line says, “I don’t think anybody ever yearned more for a public than I did” (206).

Despite his desire for perfection, therefore, Roethke’s lifelong desire to be recognized for his accomplishments indicates that he might very well have wanted *The Far Field*, and perhaps also his essays and notebooks, published. Seager writes, “Ted liked to give readings because of the live applause and the money” (226). He wanted to reach people. He states in a self-titled essay, “I have tried . . . to make in this series . . . a true and not arbitrary order which will permit many ranges of feeling, including humor” (*On the Poet* 15). He was obviously thrilled to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Seager recounts the moment, “one day when Ted picked up Beatrice after school, his face was one big grin. ‘I got it, honey,’ he said” (221).

Roethke’s desires are precisely that, and any judgment is merely conjecture, but I believe that Roethke’s need for recognition would have led him to approve of the publication, even in their incomplete state, of the poems he was working on in *The Far Field* following his death. The second posthumous publication, his collection of essays, had been in large part already published. Several of the pieces had appeared previously in magazines or journals, and several more were speeches he had given, suggesting that he would have seen no difficulty in the transmission of these pieces to his public, particularly in light of their ability to increase his reputation.

The final pieces for consideration, then, which leave far fewer clues, are Roethke’s notebooks and previously unpublished poems. One fragment found among the many notebooks he kept during his lifetime, however, may suggest that Roethke would have welcomed publication of the vast montage of unfinished work left at his death. David Wagoner, who was “[Roethke’s] friend and colleague for ten years,” edited the only published volume of Roethke’s unfinished notebook material (Straw 4). As the epigraph for this volume, Wagoner chose these words by Roethke, “The desire to leave many poems / in a state of partial completeness; / to write nothing but fragments” (no pagination). Roethke unquestionably fulfilled this goal, although the reason behind such a statement remains unclear.

Perhaps he thought that there was something to be learned from his process, or perhaps he believed that his poetry was always “in a state of partial completeness.”

As a professor of poetry, Roethke filled his essays and fragments with witty phrases regarding the poetic process and the role of the teacher. He was not the poet who attempted to define his meaning for his readers. In one essay he writes, “I remember a statement from Jung that turned up in a student’s notebook. ‘The truth is that poets are human beings, and that what a poet has to say about his work is far from being the most illuminating word on the subject.’ So . . . throw all this away and read them aloud!” (Mills 43). This statement suggests that while Roethke himself exerted intense control over his poetic process, he agreed with Barthes that his role as an author did not prevent readers from reaching their own conclusions.

Within his notebooks, and perhaps even his poetry itself, there is also evidence that Roethke viewed his work as perpetually incomplete. Roethke seemed to believe that there was always something unsaid in poetry. Thus, he may have believed that the “partial completeness” of his work was a testament to his own sense of the vast world around him. He wrote, again in a notebook, “The poem, even a short time after being written, seems no miracle; unwritten, it seems something beyond the capacity of the gods” (255). Additionally, in the poem “The Far Field,” which appeared in Roethke’s posthumous collection of poetry, these suggestive lines appear:

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
The murmur of the absolute, the why
Of being born fails on his naked ears.
His spirit moves like monumental wind
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
He is the end of things, the final man.
All finite things reveal infinitude:

.....
The pure serene of memory in one man,—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world. (*Collected Poems* 195)

Roethke’s brief statement about leaving his work incomplete is closely linked to the ideas expressed, in a more final form, in the poem given here. Roethke viewed his work as always emerging,

always growing and moving through a process, much like the plants of his father's greenhouses. He saw his words connected to a greater unknown world of absolutes, thus the line, "All finite things reveal infinitude." As a poet, Roethke, felt "faced with his own immensity," as the poem suggests, yet he seems to have believed that, nevertheless, his poetry could reach others. His poetry became the "ripple" that could wind "around the waters of the world."

These lines, together with Wagoner's epigraph, create a case for Roethke's desire to be known to posterity through not only his poetry, but also his many steps toward it, which reveal not only a meticulous poet, but a man who thought deeply and was unafraid to leave questions unanswered. Roethke's notebooks are a manifestation of the "immensity" he faced in his work, and his keen awareness of incompleteness as a poet makes a case for the publication of his notebook material. Whether or not through authorial intent, Roethke did leave much of his work in "a state of partial completeness." Yet this incompleteness attests the genius of Roethke as a writer and also, as Wagoner states, indicates "the most wholehearted, energetic, even uncanny devotion to poetry that I have ever known of" (7).

THE ONGOING DISCOURSE

As Barthes and quite possibly Roethke himself would have wished, an understanding of the poet's work will be perpetually incomplete. Roethke's life and work, however, do not hold a monopoly on "partial completeness." Consideration of the afterlife of Theodore Roethke leads into a vastly incomplete field of inquiry. While Roethke may have welcomed posthumous publication, several authors have expressed varying opinions, thus authors themselves often disagree about the amount of control they expect over their work. The goals of posthumous publication also remain undecided, and the considerations involved in defining and producing the "best text" of a posthumous work have only been partially explored, most often in conjunction with the work of a particular writer rather than collectively. The bridges between literary interpretation, legal rights, and the role of the author within them have only been partially explored. The author is not the only factor in posthumous concerns; family members, executors, and publishers also participate in these decisions, and their roles, too, have not yet been clearly defined within literary circles. Additionally, the role and validity of posthumous materials themselves could be called into question by the answers to

the questions above, particularly by the determination of the role, or the lack thereof, played by the author in textual interpretation.

The questions are unlimited, occasionally overwhelming, but the discourse continues. Roethke himself perhaps provides a reason for this continuation most aptly, in yet another fragment taken from Wagoner's compilation: "What dies before me is myself alone: / What lives again? Only a man of straw—/ Yet straw can feed a fire to melt down stone" (*Straw* 9). Like Roethke's poetic "ripples" that reach the world beyond, literary discourse is perpetually incomplete. This essay only scratches the surface of an immense question within the infinite realm of literary theory. Yet, like Roethke's man of straw, this—and every other unavoidably incomplete mite of literary discourse—takes scholars one step closer to the larger picture, toward the enviable ability to "melt down stone."

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NOTE

- ¹ The item referred to is "14 Songs on American Poetry: Voice and Piano" (New York: Henman Press, 1958) in which Ned Rorem set Roethke's poetry to music.

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BLAKE AND ROETHKE: DIVINE SIMPLICITY

CLINT BURHANS

Many comparisons have been made between Theodore Roethke and American Transcendentalist poets such as Emerson and early Thoreau, as well as nineteenth-century British and American Romantics, especially Emerson, Whitman, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Yeats. Little has been written, however, of the many similarities between the American twentieth-century poetry of Roethke and the nineteenth-century mystic/romantic poetry of the English poet William Blake, and the clear influence of Blake on Roethke. Both poets share much in lifestyle (and accompanying mental afflictions) and literary work, and both poets suffer from a general lack of appreciation or appointment to their rightful place in the pantheon of great poets. The misconception that these are somehow minor poets, especially in relation to those mentioned above, as well as to Pound, Stevens, Williams, et al., is quite likely due to the underappreciation of their often simple-seeming poetry: simple, that is, in rhyme, meter, structure, and apparent or surface subject matter. However, if one looks deeper into these "lesser" poems, much can be divined.

Even including Poe and Coleridge, Blake was by far the most "beyond the fringe" poet among his contemporaries. He was frequently in an altered mental state due to the process of his art. Blake inscribed his poetry backwards into copper plates, into which he also inscribed his linedrawing artwork. While it was not known at the time, the copper sulfate fumes from this process—highly toxic—were slowly killing Blake and altering his perceptions and thought processes as he worked.

In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley describes the effects of mescaline, a naturally occurring substance that has hallucinatory properties similar to copper sulfate fume inhalation or the highs of

certain mental illnesses, including bipolar disorder, from which Roethke likely suffered. These symptoms are described below:

His sickness is a soul not merely unregenerate, but desperately sick into the bargain. His sickness consists of the inability to take refuge from inner and outer reality (as the sane person habitually does) in the homemade universe of common sense—the strictly human world of useful notions, shared symbols and socially acceptable conventions. [The mentally ill man is] like a man permanently under the influence of mescaline and therefore unable to shut off the experience of a reality which he is not holy enough to live with, which he cannot explain away . . . because it never permits him to look at the world with merely human eyes, scares him into interpreting its unremitting strangeness, its burning intensity of significance, as the manifestations of human and even cosmic malevolence . . . (17-18)

Blake was likely very often, especially while working, under the influence of vapors that would open these doors. He would have had an intense high at first as the vapors altered his perceptions and brain functions. This state would have been followed by a “coming down,” much like a severe hangover or deep depression. His mystical, very original visual and poetic artwork and his own mystical brand of Christianity, in which he envisioned Christ an energy, an energy that man was intended to use, not suppress as the Christian Church taught, may have at least been influenced by these hallucinatory vapors. This mystical version of Christianity also got Blake branded as a heretic, perhaps partly accounting for his lesser-appreciated status, at least until recently, compared to his contemporaries.

Roethke as well was not fully mentally stable; he was almost certainly suffering from bipolar disorder, which used to be known as manic depression, and before that as “insanity.” As is common with this mental disease, he was prone to severe “highs,” where his mind raced and reached intensities not available to even the most inspired healthy, sober artist, enabling him to open some of those same doors of perception that were opened for Blake by the first whiffs of the deadly acid fumes. He was also prone to the other half of the disease, the coming down, the deep, dark depression, which was not recognized then and was often self-medicated with copious amounts of alcohol—a very bad combination. The resultant behavior is likely the reason this great and inspired poet died young at fifty-five and is still not as appreciated in his hometown of Saginaw, Michigan, as one would think.

This access to an extraordinary range of perceptions, whether naturally occurring, as in mental illness; derived from intentional ingestion of hallucinogens, or even the accidental result of inhaling toxic fumes for long days over the course of many years, has a remarkably similar effect. One likely reaction to these unexplained effects for these poets would be to see the world through the eyes of a child—sometimes a scared child, sometimes a child innocently open to the magic, wonder, and splendor of a first snowfall or the glistening drops of water that fall from an oar into a lake glimmering in the sunset.

Let us look at part of the previous Huxley quotation: “because it never permits him to look at the world with merely human eyes, scares him into interpreting its unremitting strangeness, its burning intensity of significance, as the manifestations of human and even cosmic malevolence” (17-18). Then let us compare it to a little of Blake, who seems to be doing exactly as described above in this quotation from Plate Ten of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands and feet / Proportion. / . . . / Exuberance is beauty. / . . . / Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without / Improvement are the roads of Genius. / . . . / Where man is not, nature is barren. / Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd. / Enough! Or Too much. (115)

This is not the all-seeing transcendental eye of Emerson, nor is it the romantic, natural exuberance of Whitman or Wordsworth. This passage, in fact much of Blake, especially *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, seems to be an attempt to “[interpret existence’s] unremitting strangeness, its burning intensity of significance, as the manifestations of human and even cosmic malevolence” (Huxley 17-18).

Blake sought to do away with the Western binary duality paradigm: the split between mind and body, with the mind supposedly pure and the body’s desires evil; which was heavily employed by the Christian Church, then as now. He further sought, through his art, to get back to pure and unified elemental explanations of God and man, and of man’s existence, including mental, spiritual, and physical regeneration. These were major themes in many, if not all, of the works of Roethke, as well as Blake, as demonstrated here from Plate Seven of Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity . . .

/ When I came home, on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep / frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil, folded in black clouds, / hovering on the sides of the rock; with our roding fires he wrote . . . (113).

We see many of these same themes, addressed in a similar manner, in Roethke. In attempting to answer the same questions, to "[interpret existence's] unremitting strangeness, its burning intensity of significance, as the manifestations of human and even cosmic malevolence," Roethke, in *The Abyss*, responds with:

Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit; / Too close immediacy an exhaustion: / . . . / Do we move toward God, or merely another condition? By the salt waves I hear a river's undersong, / In a place of mottled clouds, a thin mist morning and evening. / I rock between dark and dark, / My soul nearly my own, my dead selves singing. / And I embrace this calm— / Such quiet under the small leaves!— / Near the stem, whiter at root, / a luminous stillness. (213)

Like Blake, Roethke was not a true mystic, "a man whom [sic] dedicates his life to educating himself to achieve union with God. Rather, Roethke was an artist who experienced moments of deep religious feeling and almost inexpressive illumination. His choice was not traditional religion or atheism, but a reliance upon the mystic perception of his own imagination" (Heyen 101). Or, as Jay Parini puts it so well:

Blake remains the single most important poet for Roethke, not so much on the deeper level of style . . . but at the deeper level of mythopoetic action. Both poets were intent upon making a system or a personal mythos (In Northrup Frye's sense of the term as a sharing principle of literary form), and as this mythos moves beyond allegory to anagogy, so that the characters . . . move towards embodiment. (159)

Parini goes on to compare the mythos of Roethke: "The mind enters itself, and God the mind, / And one is One, free in the tearing wind" with "the heart of Blake's visionary stance (qtd. in Parini 159). Frye observes that in this mythic state, "Unity with this God could be attained only by an effort of vision which not only rejects the duality of subject and object but attacks the far more difficult antithesis of being and nonbeing as well" (qtd. in Parini 160).

This move toward uniting mind, soul, and body is further shown in this passage from Roethke's last poem in his last book, *Once More, The Round*: "Now I adore my life / With the Bird, the abiding Leaf, / With the Fish, the questioning Snail, / And the Eye altering all; / And

I dance with William Blake / For love, for Love's sake; / And everything comes to One, As we dance on, dance on, dance on" (qtd. in Parini 176).

Especially in *The Lost Son*, "Roethke invokes the Blakean dialectic of innocence and experience . . . In Blake's system, the mind pulls into its own orbit those forces which might exist outside of its control; the dialectic absorbs all resistances; necessities become internal" (Parini 161). In fact, repeated throughout Roethke's notebooks from this period is a quotation from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without contraries is no progression." Roethke then, like Blake, wrote many very complicated, allusion-filled, multilayered, and long works attempting to explain creation and life and to resolve the dualities that have long plagued Western thought. Both poets, however, wrote a number of poems that seem simple, almost childish. It is quite possible that they were attempting to divine God in their more simple poetry by following Matthew 18.3: "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Furthermore, Parini points out the similarities between Blake's *Song's of Innocence* and Roethke's poems of childhood, as seen in "I Need, I Need": "Went down cellar, / Talked to a faucet; / The drippy water / Had nothing to say." Similarly, in "Bring the Day!": "Bees and lilies there were, / Bees and lilies there were, / Either to other,— / Which would you rather? / Bees and lilies were there. / The green grasses,—would they? / The green grasses?— / She asked her skin / To let me in: / The far leaves were for it" (qtd. in Parini 169).

In Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, there are very similar rhythms, as demonstrated here in "The Echoing Green": The Sun does arise, / And make happy the skies. / The merry bells ring / To welcome the Spring. / The skylark and thrush, / The birds of the brush, Sing louder around, / To the bells cheerful sound, / While our sports shall be seen / On the echoing green. (qtd. in Parini 171) Both of these poems are in "sprung rhythm," a meter used in Mother Goose rhymes, and make use of "other devices common to nursery rhymes, such as repetition, short lines, internal rhyming, and alliteration" (Parini 170). Again, however, upon further inspection, the same themes that run throughout both poets' work are neatly hidden in these *apparent* nursery rhymes. These poems, ranging from Blake's read-by-every-schoolchild "The Lamb," from *Songs of Innocence*, which ends with: "Little Lamb, who made thee? / Dost thou know

who made thee? / Little Lamb I'll tell thee, / Little Lamb I'll tell thee! / He is called by name, / For he calls himself a Lamb; / He is meek and he is mild, He became a little child; / I a child and thou a lamb, / We are called by his name. / Little Lamb God bless thee" (Blake 84) are deceptively simple, even seemingly childish, as are many of Roethke's.

However, to divine the deeper insights in these "simple" poems requires a more critical reading in order to recognize that both poets often deal with the theme of "the struggle of the lost son in his quest for identity and his efforts to overcome Papa" (Parini 160). Roethke deals with this notion in many works, but especially in *The Lost Son*; Blake does the same in his Orc cycle, which Frye describes one crucial section of as "the allegory of the young striking down the old . . . the son's revolt against the father."

It makes sense that both poets go from writing in the simple syntax and rhyme of the child to the more complex diction of the father, or the Father. According to Jenijoy La Belle, "two kinds of diction [exist] within the context of the narratives . . . The diction of the child is typically monosyllabic, familiar, concrete, naïve, and active . . . While the language of 'the speaker not in innocence' is typically 'polysyllabic' and 'Latinated'" (qtd. in Stiffler 109).

From *Songs of Experience* we have perhaps the darker "not in innocence" companion piece to "The Lamb," also oft repeated by generations of schoolchildren: "The Tyger." This poem is the counterpoint to "The Lamb" and is rife with references, as throughout much of both Blake and Roethke, to intensity, burning with the fire of reality, imagery of burning eyes, fire, wings, dread, terror etc., which crop up, ostensibly innocently on first reading, in many of their darker, yet apparently so simple poems:

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / In the Forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry? / In what distant deeps or skies / Burnt the fire of thine eyes? / On what wings dare he aspire? / What the hand dare seize the fire? / And what shoulder & what art, / Could twist the sinews of thy heart? / And when thy heart began to beat, / What dread hand? / & what dread feet? / What the hammer? / what the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain? / What anvil? / what dread grasp / Dare its deadly terrors clasp? / When the stars threw down their spears / And water'd heaven with their tears, / Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee? / Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / In the forests of

the night, / What immortal hand or eye / dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (Blake 92-93)

This same sort of schoolboy simplicity on the surface in terms of rhyme scheme, meter, brevity, and seemingly simple structure is often evident in the work of Roethke as well. This deceptively simple style may explain the lack of appreciation of Roethke's work in the present day, although that state of affairs seems to be changing of late. Blake's poem above is full of allusions to a wonderful/terrible God and to the mystery of creation, not only for man, but for animals and all creatures of the earth, even the plants, stones, and waters. Roethke's poetry and imagery are even more so.

Let us look at how Roethke addresses some of the same questions. He is perhaps more inclusive in his quest for understanding creation, the creator, and the persistence and regeneration of life, as his poetry was not forged in a copper-plate print shop, but grew organically from his beginnings in a mid-Michigan greenhouse: watching as all forms of life, from the most beautiful rose or women to the snakes and worms that loosen the loam of creation, struggle toward the air and the light. And fester in the dank darkness below.

Before we get into some poetry concerning these questions Roethke shared with Blake, let us consider another reason that Roethke's poetry may not have been receiving the respect it so richly deserves:

In Roethke's *The Abyss* . . . the poem is to some extent the journey of the dark night of the soul and the movement into a [like Blake's revolt against the Protestant Church's duality of mind and body] unitive life . . . Roethke's use of Underhill's five-step mystic way [described in-depth in William Heyen's excellent article "The Divine Abyss: Theodore Roethke's Mysticism"] . . . makes the excellent point that critics who accuse Roethke's poetry of leaping to an unearned affirmation fail to consider that "the happiness achieved in any Roethke poem . . . is not one based on reason, on step-by-step logical confrontation with dissatisfaction, on rational duels with and victories over disquieting thoughts." In most of the poems the movement to "joy is sudden and the realization of happiness is logically unfounded, is intuitive . . . The mystical experience itself is ineffable, does not proceed reasonably." (Ross-Bryant 159)

Evelyn Underhill, as briefly alluded to previously, writes of the five-step mysticism that Roethke was aware of and of which there is evi-

dence in much of his poetry. She "makes it clear that the 'mystic way' can be described in steps only arbitrarily divided, [and that they often overlap]. Underhill describes them this way: 'The Awakening of Self, Illumination, The Dark Night of the Soul, Union'" (qtd. in Heyen 102). William James also has a similar version, which is: "four marks" which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical . . . Ineffability, Noetic Quality, Transiency, Passivity." Heyen claims Roethke's *The Abyss* "emphasizes James's requirements and parallels Underhill's [five steps]. We notice in the works of both poets frequent reference to illumination or the lack thereof. Underhill states 'Light imagery, though most central to the stage of Illumination, constantly accompanies Awakening in the mystic's development'" (Heyen 104).

As Roethke expresses this movement to unity and light in *Journey to the Interior*:

Part One: In the long journey out of the self / There are many detours / washed-out interrupted raw places / Where the shale slides dangerously / And the back wheels hang almost over the edge / At the sudden veering, the moment of turning. / Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling stones. / . . . / Through the swamp alive with quicksand, / The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree, / The thickets darkening / The ravines ugly. Part Two: I remember how it was to drive in gravel, / Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the wheels whined / beyond eighty— / When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale, / The Trick was to throw the car sideways and charge over the hill, full / of the throttle. / Grinding up and over the narrow road, spitting and roaring. / A chance? Perhaps. But the road was a part of me, and its ditches, / And the dust lay thick on my eyelids,—Who ever wore goggles?— / . . . / I rise and fall, and time folds / Into a long moment; / . . . / On the shimmering road, / On the dusty detour. (Roethke 187-188)

In both poets' work we are often reminded, as so well stated by Heyen, "In order to mount the stair to God, one first has to descend" (104). Back to *Journey to the Interior*, and skipping much of part two for brevity's sake, it is best not to skip part three, the conclusion of *Journey to the Interior*, as it relates to everything we have discussed so far:

I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the never receding, / Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the moonlight: / The soul at a still-stand, / At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep, /

. . . / I have known the heart of the sun,— / In the dark and light of a dry place, / In a flicker of fire brisked by a dusty wind. / . . . / The stand at the stretch in the face of death, / Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves, and I roam elsewhere, my body thinking [again, as in Blake, the mind and body are one] / Turning toward the other side of light, / In a tower of wind, a tree idling in the air, / Beyond my echo, / Neither forward or backward, / Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere. / As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning, / I know this change: / On one side of silence there is no smile; / But when I breathe with the birds, / The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing, / And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep. (Roethke 188-189)

This is truly mystical transcendentalism, with the journey "out of the self" into the grey swamp and ravine, "hang[ing] almost over the edge," of the "deep pit," then rising, back to the "shimmering road . . . in a place leading nowhere . . . [where] the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep." Briefly let us compare the previous Roethke poem with this Blakean passage from "The Proverbs of Hell," a section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

. . . Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead. / The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom . . . / The cut worm forgives the plow. / Dip him in the river who loves water. / . . . / He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star. / Eternity is in love with the productions of time. . . . / No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings. / A dead body revenges not injuries. (113)

Both Blake and Roethke were mystic poets, both often misunderstood in their time and today. Both wrote a mixture of complex, multisectioned poetry and seemingly simple poems as well. Upon deeper inspection, however, and perhaps even more so, the simple poems tell of the divine, of mystic seekers, unafraid to careen into the dark pit with the hope, if not the faith, that they would emerge into the light on the other side, and willing to accept the consequences if they did not. In the divine simplicity of these poems lie, undiscovered by many, pure and simple, yet precious and eternal truths.

Both poets used sometimes seemingly simple rhyme, meter, rhythm, and repetition, and sometimes very complex, long poems full of very advanced poetic methods, full of allusions to Heaven and Hell, light and dark, and the beginnings of life and death, from creation to possible afterlives. Blake and Roethke, then, took different

but similar routes to extreme, often frightening or mystical, enlightening, transcendental highs, and equally extreme, deep descents into the darkness of the soul: routes not open to those of us not suffering from chemical imbalances or other, unasked for or even unknown, keys to the doors of perceptions that are open only to a few. Both suffered and benefited from these wild rides into the infinite, these forays near to or even over the edge of normal reality and were able to make it back to what most of us think of as normal long enough to create beautiful, poetic imagery so that those of us who reside mostly in the normal regions could glimpse what is and what could be. Blake and Roethke both burned bright and burned out too soon, fires that burned so bright they could not burn long.

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BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE: HEMINGWAY AND ROETHKE BOTH DANCED "MY PAPA'S WALTZ"

ANNIE RANSFORD

When I was in college back in the early 1960s, Hemingway's middle-aged photo graced many a coed's dormitory room, exuding masculine strength from a black and white glossy, beard and sweater, virile eyes. Papa Hemingway was the man!

Even though an English major, I didn't study Roethke as an undergraduate; it took graduate school to learn that his fleshy German jowls wouldn't have made pinup category. He had a thick body. Buzz Morley describes him as "split high" with thin legs (qtd. in Seager 45). However, since my initial introduction to Roethke, I've seen some handsome, younger photos that would give Hemingway competition. Beatrice Roethke comments that Ted could look noble; he had a wonderful laugh and sense of humor (telephone interview June 19, 2008). After all, Hemingway became fleshy, too, in later years; he considered "aging a personal insult" when his style of living and of writing demanded young physical courage and action. (Hovey 206). They both enjoyed the ladies and commanded the center of attention with their dynamic personalities.

The two never met, even though Midwestern contemporaries. In 1953, when they were both in France, Roethke wrote Hemingway on July 13th. He referred to Hemingway's poetry and suggested that he send copies to Marguerite Caetani, who edited the *Botteghe Oscure*, an international review. He enclosed "Song for the Squeeze-Box," saying, "I thought enclosed doggerel in which you are mentioned might amuse you. It's my belief that you prose writers should look at the versifiers once in a while" (qtd. in Seager 212).

It wasn't Ernest; it wasn't Scott—
The boys I knew when I went to pot;

They didn't boast; they didn't snivel,
 But stepped right up and swung at the Devil;
 And after exchanging a punch or two,
 They all sat down like me and you
 —And began to drink up the money. (*Collected Poems* 107, hereafter
 referred to as CP)

Roethke's letter continues: "I grew up in Michigan and have fished your country there; often have hoped to meet you in the flesh to exchange views on such subjects as What Greb-or-any-smart-hooker-could-do-to-Marciano, etc." (qtd. in Seager 212). No reply from Hemingway was found in Roethke's papers.

According to his widow, Beatrice, Roethke would have liked to have met Hemingway and "box him in lightweight gloves," a sign of man-to-man friendship (e-mail spring 2008) and then most probably drink the night away. One would think that Roethke's poem with its literary swagger would have pleased Hemingway's taste and masculine literary style. Never introduced in person, they were connected by their art. In 1954, Hemingway received the Nobel Prize for Literature and Roethke won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Waking*.

Both wordsmiths wrote in clean, spare styles and told the truth as they saw it. Initially a reporter, Hemingway delivered dark, often violent realism; he wrote with limited vocabulary and simple syntax and according to Hovey, "the power of his art came from his uncanny genius for omission" (210). Roethke refers to poetry as being antisocial in Midwestern America, speaking unwelcome truth, comparing his style to that of a gangster who targets and destroys accepted social facades. Ralph Mills refers to Roethke's style as having "economy and simplicity of diction" (9). A self-prophecy found in "Open House" follows:

I'm naked to the bone
 With nakedness my shield.
 Myself is what I wear:
 I keep the spirit spare. (CP 3)

At one time, each tried the other's genre: Hemingway wrote *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and, when assigned, Roethke wrote school essays and later combined prose passages in *The Lost Son*, a long poem that "commingles prose and verse" (Seager 145). Roethke always wanted to write prose because there was money in it, referring to his poetry as "chiseled prose" in *On the Poet and His Craft*,

published posthumously, in which Roethke, the poet-teacher, explains his writing purpose in his poetry class, *Verse Forms*, with chapters entitled: "Some Remarks on Rhythm and How to Write Like Somebody Else." While Hemingway rejected an academic life style, Roethke embraced it. He was the poet in residence at the University of Washington Seattle, always a teaching writer.

While Hemingway wrote standing up without interruption, seeking secluded places, Roethke wrote parts of summers in his childhood home where he lived between semesters until he married Beatrice when he was forty-five. One wonders how quietly his mother and sister behaved to give him space in a four square house. Beatrice reports that "June and her mother took off their shoes so as not to disturb Ted and that he wrote outside in the daylight. Light was important to him." Beatrice continues: "I saw him in a sunny field, seated in a school desk when I was at Bennington. He sat outside our cottage on Mercer Island . . . Our Seattle house on East John Street had a porch, half covered, looking out to Lake Washington, and he often worked there, or in the study just inside it" (telephone interview June 19, 2008). In Saginaw, he was noticed writing in his backyard on a chaise lounge under an elm tree.

In his lectures and conversations, he considered himself a perpetual beginner, continuously drafting with a unique approach. During the gestation phase, Roethke was known to remove his clothes, as a snake removes its skin, and walk around naked, before redressing in clean clothing, a symbolic casting off before rebirth (Seager 144).

Both were autobiographical writers, "Hemingway stayed close to facts of the life he himself lived and knew first-hand . . . He has seldom, if ever, written except out of experience directly encountered and emotions deeply felt" (Hovey xv). More than once Hemingway categorized his stories as those that actually happened and those he made up (Reynolds 149). He admitted that he'd made up his first short story, "Indian Camp," centering on a doctor-father like his own. (Rovit 238). And Hemingway returned to his earliest memories in "Now I Lay Me" in *The Nick Adams Stories*: "the attic of the house where I was born and my mother and father's wedding cake in a tin box hanging from one of the rafters . . ." (Hemingway 146). Nick Adams inwardly regresses in his childhood prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep," in order to find security amid the violence of war.

Roethke, however, often moved beyond infancy to a primordial condition, as in "River Incident":

And I knew I had been there before,
In that cold, granitic slime,
In the dark, in the rolling water (CP 47)

Roethke, too, chose his childhood experiences because they represented "the deepest emotions of his life" (Seager 164). Kenneth Burke said of his greenhouse poems, "Boy, you've hit it" . . . "Ted had found his vein" (qtd. in Seager 144) when writing about his life as a boy raised near his father's greenhouse. Jim Jackson, a fellow friend and professor at Bennington, also wrote about Roethke's new greenhouse style: "Here the lines commingle, whether as prose or verse and there is a growing, continuing awareness of being your own source, of the unicity of your material and . . . the assurance that the very process of probing the self constitutes an exploration of all human knowledge" (qtd. in Seager 145). Roethke's relationship to his father was unique because his father worked in the greenhouse and Roethke could see "how fine the timing and the temperature had to be, for Easter lilies must bloom at Easter . . . [and that] the end of all this patient calculation and labor was the sale of the bouquet" (Seager 21). Seager calls this "not a bad school for a boy who grew up to write poetry" (20).

But most of all, their early autobiographical writing was framed by their difficult relationships with their fathers. They both danced "My Papa's Waltz." They found their literary voices by returning in their imagination to Michigan childhoods: Hemingway spent summers on Walloon Lake, and Roethke grew up in Saginaw and knew all seasons. It is their fathers who haunt their art and the writer-sons who seek their father's approval. "But I hung on like death / Such waltzing was not easy" ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43).

In reality, Clarence Hemingway was opposed to smoking, drinking, card playing, and dancing (Reynolds 39) so his dancing is a metaphoric waltz. Contrasting the two fathers, Clarence was educated; Otto was not. His hands were clean except for blood from his medical profession; Otto's "palm was caked hard by dirt and his knuckles battered" with work in his greenhouse ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43). Both were experimenters: Clarence in the fictional "Indian Camp" improvised with a jack knife and fishing wire to deliver a child, while Otto grew hybrid roses and orchids that were never sold

and combined colors in his greenhouse Eden for their own beauty. Both were gods, having sway over life and death, imposing order upon nature. And both came to untimely ends: Clarence committed suicide (Otto's brother Carl committed suicide in the greenhouse) and Otto died young, of cancer. A line of depression and mental illness is found in both families.

Hemingway and his father became distant once Hemingway was fifteen, and Roethke was about this same age when his father died of cancer. This loss was especially difficult for Roethke because most of his life he struggled to please a father who was not present. Seager claims that Roethke calls for his father throughout his poetry, as seen in this passage from "Otto":

In my mind's eye I see those fields of glass,
As I looked out at them from the high house,
.....
I'd stand upon my bed, a sleepless child
Watching the waking of my father's world.—
O world so far away! O my lost world! (CP 216)

When their sons were young boys, Clarence Hemingway and Otto Roethke were nature teachers, and their sons gained keen survival skills from their lessons. Hemingway's short story, "Fathers and Sons," remembers this inheritance:

. . . the quail country made him remember him [his father] as he was when Nick was a boy and he was very grateful to him for two things, fishing and shooting . . . for someone has to give you your first gun or the opportunity to get it and use it, and you have to live where there is game or fish if you are to learn, and now, at thirty-eight, he loved to fish and to shoot exactly as much as when he first had gone with his father. It was a passion that had never slackened and he was very grateful to his father for bringing him to know it (Hemingway 258).

While Hemingway was an outdoor man, a hunter, who ventured into Michigan wilderness, Roethke was not. After taking piano and dance lessons when younger at the Saginaw Masonic Temple, he spent the rest of his life proving he wasn't a sissy, according to Seager (28). Beatrice Roethke Lushington recalls that one day when a mouse scampered across their kitchen floor, he grabbed a broom and smashed it before thinking, and when he saw what he had done, sobbed at taking a life (telephone interview 2006). Roethke's father, however, was a hunter, as emphasized in "Otto": "And in a wood he

knew whatever moved; / . . . He always knew what he was aiming at" (CP 216).

By contrast, in a school essay, "Fish Tale," Roethke wrote: "As a small boy, I was always awkward and lubberly. If we went fishing, I rocked the boat; if we hunted, I stumbled and flushed the game too soon. I was awkward of mind as well as body. I asked thousands of questions. I always imagined myself fearfully hungry. All these things irritated my father who wanted, above all, to make me a wise fisherman and a self-reliant woodsman" (qtd. in Seager 24-25).

However, both Hemingway and Roethke were avid fishermen who have recorded detailed descriptive passages of fishing in Michigan. In Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick has a methodical approach as he visually records movements of trout:

Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins . . . He watched them holding themselves with their noses into the current, many trout in deep, fast-moving water, slightly distorted as he watched far down through the glassy convex surface of the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven spiles of the bridge. (177)

Hemingway calls himself "an artist of still life" (Hovey 209). And Roethke's description of "The Pike" comes from his wanderings along the Saginaw River with his eye for detail:

And I lean, almost into the water,
My eye always beyond the surface reflection;
I lean, and love these manifold shapes,
Until, out from a dark cove,
From beyond the end of a mossy log,
With one sinuous ripple, then a rush,
A thrashing-up of the whole pool,
The pike strikes. (CP 225)

In "Indian Camp," Nick's father is the guide, a surgeon-hero whose medical skill saves an Indian mother and baby. He explains his professional procedures to Nick in a calm, straight-forward manner; he is a teacher who doesn't lose his concentration when surrounded by pain and blood. He courageously improvises to perform a dramatic Caesarean delivery with a jackknife and fishing wire while the baby's father, unable to withstand the screams of his wife, commits a silent suicide. A baby boy is born without a father to pro-

tect him. This intense juxtaposition, life in bottom bunk and death in top bunk, underscores the fact that Nick's father is not able to protect his son, either, from human suffering: "It was an awful mess to put you through" (20). The father's postoperative hubris: "He was feeling exalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game" and "That's one for the medical journals" (19) completely dies when he checks on the second patient and sees the suicide. "The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk" (20). He can control his own actions but he can't control the actions of others.

Nick, serving as his father's intern, holds a lantern for them both to see, but it is Nick who becomes more aware of his father's limitations. "In one way and another, the young Nick seemed to be taking the measure of his father, and in doing so he was taking the measure of himself as well" (Watson 37). This awareness makes for a transforming experience, a changing relationship between father and son that develops from when they row over to the Indian camp to when they row back, which Watson calls a "powerful subtext" or suggests that it might be the major text of the story (38).

In a BBC broadcast in July of 1953, Roethke describes the Roethke property as "a wild area of cut-over second-growth timber, which my father and uncle had made into a small game preserve. As a child, then, I had several worlds to live in, which I felt were mine. One favorite place was a swampy corner of the game sanctuary where herons always nested" (qtd. in Seager 23). It was on this land that Roethke walked behind his father; his words quoted by Raymond Benoit in *My Estrangement from Nature* show that Roethke's papa was also a nature teacher and guide:

Nearly every Sunday my father and I hiked over some part of the valley. He was a strange and ideal companion. Lean and hardy as a hickory sapling, he had the tirelessness of an Indian . . . He never rhapsodized over anything . . . he merely pointed. Once he fell and painfully twisted his ankle, yet he never bothered to comment about it. Often we would separate for hours without a word concerning where we would meet. Yet we always managed to find each other . . . I have gone hundreds of miles hurrying behind his heels and wondering what he was thinking. Occasionally,—a time rare and glorious—he would become talkative and reveal himself as the introspective German he was. Thus, for me, Nature and my father became inseparably intertwined . . . It always seemed that nature was more

gracious and revelatory when he was with me Now my father is dead I don't care to hike any more. I always find myself expecting to see his head appear over the edge of the next hill. (Benoit 31-32)

"My mother's countenance / Could not unfrown itself" ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43). Grace Hall Hemingway was an independent artist and talented musician who was a domineering marriage partner. Hemingway saw her drain his father of his masculinity and considered her a threat to his own. Hovey records Oedipal conflict with his parents after Hemingway returned from World War I, wounded and vulnerable:

In one of the most trying periods of the young Hemingway's life—when he had returned home, was still suffering from the more immediate effects of his war wound, had scarcely recovered from the rejection of his love by Agnes H. von Kurowski (the Red Cross nurse who became in part the model for Catherine Barkley), was trying to find his way and trying to write—his uncomprehending parents actually drive him out of the home, the mother being the chief instigator of this harsh action (234-35).

Hemingway rejected his mother's art and culture as feminine and rejected his father's intellectual pursuits as weak and unmanly (Hovey 211-213). In "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," the Doctor encounters conflict from outside and inside his house after he has a "row with Dick Boulton"(25) over drift wood or stolen wood and then must deal with his wife, who quotes Scripture: "Remember, that he who ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city," said his wife. And the story continues, "She was a Christian Scientist. Her Bible, her copy of *Science and Health* and her *Quarterly* were on a table beside her bed in the darkened room. Her husband did not answer. He was sitting on his bed now, cleaning a shotgun"(25), a contemplation of violence close at hand before he slams the door to vent his subdued anger.

Roethke's mother, Helen was a traditional housewife. The center of her life was her well-ordered home and its care and her cooking. When his father died, Roethke sat in his place at the table and, according to Seager, heard his mother "voice complaints about his predecessor. This could not but trouble Ted deeply and it seems to be the basis of the uneasy, resentful relationship he had with her ever after-

ward. He respected her, he admired her courage, but the old candor and affection was finished"(43).

In his notebook from July 1946, Roethke writes, "Even I can be a mother, giving birth to my father" (Seager 167) as he voices the Oedipal complex in reverse. But the last stanza of Roethke's "The Saginaw Song" is filled with an Oedipal image between mother and son:

I saw a figure in a cloud,
A child upon her breast,
And it was O, my mother O,
And she was half-undressed,
All women, O, are beautiful
When they are half-undressed.(CP 260)

"You beat time on my head" ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43). Their fathers were disciplinarians. Hemingway writes a fictional account in "Fathers and Sons" when Nick rejects the close contact of wearing another man's clothing:

Nick loved his father but hated the smell of him and once when he had to wear a suit of his father's underwear that had gotten too small for his father it made him feel sick and he took it off and put it under two stones in the creek and said that he had lost it. He had told his father how it was when his father had made him put it on but his father had said it was freshly washed. It had been, too. When Nick had asked him to smell of it his father sniffed at it indignantly and said that it was clean and fresh. When Nick came home from fishing without it and said he lost it he was whipped for lying. (265)

In a high school essay, "Papa," included in Seager's biography and written shortly after his father's death, Roethke remembers Otto as a "stern, short-tempered man whose love he doubted . . ." as he reacts to discipline; "Papa grabbed him by the collar and boxed his ears until his head reeled" (qtd. in Seager 23-24). He calls himself John in the story: "Sometimes he dreamed about Papa. Once it seemed Papa came in and danced around with him. John put his feet on top of Papa's and they'd waltz. Hei-dee-dei-dei. Rump-tee-tump. Only babies expected dreams to come true" (26). Roethke again refers to his father's discipline in "The Saginaw Song":

My father never used a stick,
He slapped me with his hand;

He was a Prussian through and through
 And knew how to command;
 I ran behind him every day
 He walked our greenhouse land (CP 260).

"At every step you missed/ My right ear scraped a buckle" ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43). After painful discipline, the boys felt angry towards their fathers. Hemingway recalls this through Nick Adams in "Fathers and Sons": "After (the whipping), he had sat inside the woodshed with the door open, his shotgun loaded and cocked, looking across at his father sitting on the screen porch reading the paper, and thought, 'I can blow him to hell. I can kill him.' Finally he felt his anger go out of him and he felt a little sick about it being the gun that his father had given him"(265). This ancient Oedipal urge to kill his father prophesies the family's self-destruction as father and son both commit suicide with shotguns.

After Roethke was disciplined, he wrote in "Papa,": "There was laughing in the next room. When he looked through the door, he saw Grandpa's maid in Papa's arms. He gasped and stared. The world seemed to spin around. Then he crept out the back door, feeling quite happy. He wouldn't have to worry any more. He hated Papa"(qtd. in Seager 42). Most sons have moments when they hate their fathers and then forget but "it is somewhat different with Ted; his sensitivity was greater than the average boy's and this hatred, however temporary it was, seems to have stayed in his mind and secreted guilt" (Seager 26).

"Then waltzed me off to bed/ Still clinging to your shirt" ("My Papa's Waltz," CP 43). Hemingway and Roethke needed the approval of their fathers throughout their lives. But when Hemingway and Roethke became writers, they stepped away from family expectations. Clarence Hemingway was a doctor and wanted his son Ernest to go to college to become a doctor (Watson 44). But Ernest's actions were probably considered irresponsible by his conservative father because, married with a baby son, he gave up his journalism job in Toronto and moved to Paris to devote himself to his writing and live off his wife's modest inheritance.

When copies of *In Our Time* were returned to the Paris publisher by Hemingway's parents, this was "deeply hurtful, a gesture he remembered for the rest of his life"(Reynolds 39). In response to this action, Hemingway wrote this letter from Paris on May 7, 1924:

Dear Family,

My publisher told me that 5 copies of the first limited edition of *In Our Time* were returned from someone named Hemingway in Oak Park. He was glad to get them back as they are already worth much more than the sale price. Under a separate cover I am mailing you a review of some of my stuff that appeared last week. I wonder what was the matter, whether the pictures were too accurate and the attitude toward life not sufficiently sentimentally distorted to please whoever bought the books or what?

I have no time nor inclination to defend my writing; all my thoughts and energies go to make it better and truer and a work of art that is really good never lacks for defenders, nor for people who hate it and want to destroy it. Well, it doesn't make any difference. They can't destroy it, and in the end, it just frightens them and they back away from it. (May 7, 1924)

"A year later, in March 1925, he wrote to his father explaining what he was trying to do as a writer. He was glad his father liked one of his stories (probably 'The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife'), and he thought his father would like a long fishing story that was then just being published called 'Big Two-Hearted River'"(Rovit 153-4). He wrote to his father, "Such writing depends first upon a capacity to get the feelings of the actual life across, not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing"(Hovey xxi). Hemingway needed his father's approval for his chosen writing career, but "his father's view that literature should be uplifting and inspirational ran counter to his son's commitment to unflinching realism, a realism that often included violent and degrading human experiences" (Reynolds 39).

The last sentence of "Indian Camp" shows Hemingway's new perspective about his father: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure he would never die" (Hemingway 21). According to Watson,

[Hemingway] wanted to show that the writer, in being able to see more of the world as it really was than his father could, had powers of understanding greater than those of even the most skillful and ingenious physician . . . It was his way of asserting the validity of his own calling in the face of his unsympathetic and uncomprehending father, a father whose love and approval he nonetheless still wanted. (43)

Roethke was the first member of his immediate German immigrant family to be sent to college to become a lawyer, but he didn't have the head for law. His childhood friend, Judge Eugene Snow Huff, remembers Roethke approaching him for help on an assignment during their first semester of law school and realizing that Roethke didn't understand basic legal procedures (personal interview 2001). Often middle-class Midwestern families wanted to secure their social position with sons who followed law or medicine. Poetry was considered an antisocial avocation. Otto Roethke died before his son chose his teaching-writing career, a life work so foreign to his father's greenhouse world and yet similar with experimentation of style rather than plant growth and the family's Prussian perfectionism.

According to Violet Roethke, Carl's daughter, "Uncle Otto was artistic—the white sweet peas would be in the red carnations, and the lavender with the pale pink and the pink would be in the dark pink carnations" (qtd. in Seager 10). According to Theodore Roethke, "My father's chief interest was the growing of flowers" (qtd. in Seager 12). Roethke's father didn't live long enough for Roethke to see his limitations. Otto was never diminished in his son's eyes and remained a powerful authority figure, giving his son orders from the grave.

Roethke wrote *The Lost Son* about his lost father. It begins in the cemetery and charts his childhood irrationalities and free associations as he struggles with grief and chaos emanating from his father's death in "The Gibber," part 3:

Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.
I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother.
Fear was my father, Father Fear.
His look drained the stones. (CP 53)

In "The Return," part four, the son searches for and finds his father in the greenhouse:

Once I stayed all night.
The light in the morning came slowly over the white
Snow.
There were many kinds of cool
Air.
Then came steam.

Pipe-knock.

Scurry of warm over small plants.
Ordnung! Ordnung!
Papa is coming! (CP 54)

In his notebooks, Roethke refers with anger to his lost father: "Wait. Watch. Listen. Meditate. He'll come when. No, I know he won't come. He doesn't care about me anymore. No, I mean HIM, the Big He, that great big three-cornered Papa . . ." (*Straw for the Fire* 169).

When Roethke was fifteen, his Uncle Charlie shot himself and his father died three months later of a "kink in the bowels" (Seager 42). According to Seager, his father "was a man of indomitable will and he persisted in dressing himself although he was very weak, coming downstairs. Later, when this was beyond him, he would be taken to the back porch on sunny days in a chair and sit there looking out toward the greenhouse" (42-43).

Creative personalities, both Hemingway and Roethke were chased and caught by their personal demons: "I feel the slime of a wet nest" ("The Pit," CP 52). Hemingway born July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, experienced depression and entered Mayo Clinic for multiple shock treatments before he committed suicide on July 2, 1961, in Ketchum, Idaho. He had declined physically and emotionally in the years before his death. In *Papa Hemingway*, A. E. Hotchner describes Hemingway "as a desperate man, sick in mind and heart" (qtd. in Hovey xiv) who violently destroys himself. Hovey says that Hemingway's eyes in photographs before his death "look frightened, almost pleading" (206). Near death, Hemingway was convinced that he was running out of money, a worry his father held all his life, pressing his children to have a habit of keeping account books (Reynolds 38-39). He lived most of his life rejecting but needing his father, all to merge with his father's anxieties and means of self-destruction in death. Clarence Hemingway committed suicide in 1928.

Roethke, born on May 25, 1908, in Saginaw, Michigan, died of a coronary occlusion on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle, Washington, on August 1, 1963. His manic cycles became more pronounced and out of control near his end; he had realized years before that his mental illness was more than self-induced. Seager asserts that Roethke's

relationship with his father was the most important relationship in his life (104). Otto died in 1923.

And I think of roses, roses,
White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses,
And my father standing astride the cement benches,
Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells, and his
own elaborate hybrids,
And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon
me,
only a child, out of myself.

What need for heaven, then,
With that man, and those roses? ("The Rose," CP 197)

Finally, "My Papa's Waltz" repeats the rhythm of their paternal relationships as Hemingway and Roethke both dance "My Papa's Waltz":

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt (CP 43).

The Theodore Roethke Home Museum and
Carl Roethke Development Center

Saginaw, Michigan

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"SOUND AND SILENCE": THEODORE ROETHKE'S NORTH AMERICAN MYSTICISM IN "THE ROSE"

MATTHEW FALK

"A rose is a rose is a rose."—Gertrude Stein

In her 1911 book, *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill writes that the act of contemplation is fundamental to both artistic creation and mystical experience (300-1). Theodore Roethke's long poem, "The Rose," the culmination of the "North American Sequence" from his last book, 1964's *The Far Field*, dramatically exemplifies Underhill's statement. Her book provides a useful lens for reading and interpreting "The Rose" as not only a detailed, evocative description of a Pacific Northwestern littoral zone, but also an allegory of the poet's quest for mystical unity with nature.¹

Close observation and contemplation of the natural world are at the heart of much of Roethke's poetry, and the same practices underlie most traditional Western mysticism. Underhill describes what the process entails: all one has to do is to "look ... in a special and undivided manner" at something, whether a tree, a river, or a bird; concentrating on the object, the mind becomes quiet, which leads one to an awareness of "a heightened significance" of everything, and the "barrier ... between subject and object" then dissolves (301-2).

That account may well remind a reader of the following passage from Roethke's essay, "On Identity":

[A] very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being — and in some instances, even an inanimate thing — brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. [This feeling] can be induced ... simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you. (40)

The parallels, even at the level of word choice, between Roethke's and Underhill's accounts are so striking that they are certainly not accidental. It is obvious that the poet read *Mysticism* and took it to heart. Neal Bowers supports this assertion, noting that Roethke was quoting Underhill's work in his notebooks as early as 1946 (26).

Roethke's spongelike reading habits are well known; having absorbed Underhill's work, he quickly moved on to explore further the mystical tradition set forth therein. Various critics have identified the poet's debts to various mystics. For example, Rosemary Sullivan cites the anonymous fourteenth-century treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as an influence on the poetry (176). Similarly, Ann Foster finds in Roethke's notebooks references to the medieval German monk Meister Eckhart (136), who once instructed his students, "[S]et your mind in virtue to contemplation [of] the object from which your attention never wavers" (Blakely 91). The monk's words can be fairly applied to Roethke's usual way of generating poetry. His best work depends, as William Martz points out, primarily on the strength of his "acute powers of observation" (6). This is true not only in the early greenhouse poems, in which he masterfully depicts the minimal world of plants, but also in his powerful late work, of which the "North American Sequence" is representative.

In "The Rose," Roethke writes: "There are those to whom place is unimportant, / But this place, where sea and fresh water meet, / Is important" (ll. 1-3). Significantly, the distinction made here is not just between places that are or are not important, but between people who do or do not recognize the significance of a place. As Underhill explains, anything can become an object of contemplation; it is simply up to the observer to look at it properly (301). In this case, Roethke chooses to observe a Pacific coastal scene abounding with plant and animal life.

In such a context, Roethke's powers of closely detailed observation are fully displayed. For example, the first two stanzas of "The Rose" consist largely of the poet's careful listing of different kinds of birds: hawks, eagles, gulls, crows, a heron, a towhee, finches, a kingfisher, a scoter, geese, an owl, and a "whooper" (presumably a crane). Yet beneath this surface simplicity, there lurks a mystical program. The association of birds with mysticism goes back at least to St. Francis of Assisi, who preached to them and thereby broke down "the barrier between human and nonhuman life" (Underhill 260), and Roethke's avian catalogue serves a similar function. Furthermore, the

list culminates in a rhetorical question: "Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment / While on a far point of the rocks / The light heightened" (ll. 26-8). The spiritual dimension of the scene is made explicit by that biblical allusion: a crown, not of thorns, but of birds. Roethke also employs parallel phrases to suggest a kinship or a correspondence between himself and the birds: for example, the word "sway" links the behavior of the hawks (l. 4) with that of the poet himself (l. 22; l. 104).

As the poem proceeds, its spiritual elements are increasingly foregrounded. Part two opens with an image of a sailing ship, not only signifying the movement of the poet's soul, but also setting up the poem's shift in emphasis from the external seascape to the interior world of Roethke's memories. The eponymous rose, introduced in the second stanza, is the mystical emblem that brings these two modes together; Sullivan calls it "an objective ... expression of an inner subjective synthesis" (163).

Despite the rose's rather hoary history as a poetic symbol, Roethke rescues it from the concretions of tradition by emphasizing its particularity. He is not talking about just *any* rose, but about "this rose, this rose in the sea-wind, / ... / A single wild rose, struggling out of ... / the tangle of matted underbrush" (ll. 39-45) on the shore. Roethke again employs the poetic device of the catalogue, scrupulously listing the plants that grow nearby: morning-glory, briars, clover, hay, pine, oak, and madrona. Sullivan states that one effect of this list is to call attention to the diversity of nature, in order to contrast it with the purity of the single rose (163).

Having isolated this rose, however, Roethke quickly points beyond it to other roses: those grown by his father in the greenhouse where the poet grew up. He describes a scene from his childhood, in which his father held him "high over the four-foot stems, ... / And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself" (ll. 54). The mystic rose thus connects the poet's past to his present, just as it connects the natural world outside with the world in his head.

Underhill divides the process of mystical awakening through contemplation into several stages. The middle, transitional stage is the experience that Roethke recounts in part three of "The Rose." It is characterized by the regression from advances already made: "the self," writes Underhill, "is tossed back" (381). The aspiring mystic is made painfully aware of the inadequacies of this efforts, and the

"once-possessed power [of] contemplation now seems wholly lost" (381). As distressing and difficult as this is, it must be gone through in order to continue to the next level of awareness.

"The Rose" captures that moment of doubt and frustration: the poet's struggling intellect intrudes onto the scene, asking, "What do they tell us, sound and silence?" (l. 58). In his effort to arrive at an answer, Roethke leaves the Pacific coast behind, roving across the American continent. The noises of nature, particularly birdsongs, grow gradually more cacophonous until they eventually give way to sounds of machinery and industry, such as tearing shingles, sand-blasters, and finally "the deep chorus of horns coming up from the streets" (l. 72). The progression suggests the encroachment of human activity upon the natural world, and this encroachment seems to alarm the poet. It sends him scurrying back to attend to "a sound so thin it could not woo a bird" (l. 77)—the sound of his still-searching soul in the midst of civilization's sprawl. He returns to "the place of my desire," where he can think of singing rocks and "light making its own silence" (ll. 78-9).

Part four of "The Rose" finds the poet, now safely regrounded, once again contemplating his rose in the sea-wind. His frightening digression from his mystical path has changed him and given him a deeper understanding, so that he now observes the scene, and himself, with a profound serenity. He seems to have found at last the oneness with nature he has sought for so long. Now he "live[s] with the rocks, their weeds, / Their filmy fringes of green, their harsh / Edges: (ll. 89-91). Once more he is able to identify himself with "the bird beyond the bough, the single one / With all the air to greet him" (ll. 108-09). Finally, the poem closes with one last look at its title image, that agent of reconciliation between self and other, as the rose "gather[s] to itself sound and silence— / Mine and the sea-wind's" (ll. 113-4). In this way, all the perceptions and experiences that have brought the poet to this still point are finally unified and emblemized.

The Far Field was, as noted above, Roethke's final volume, published posthumously. That fact gives "The Rose" and its companion pieces in the "North American Sequence" additional resonance. One wonders what direction his work might have taken if the sense of peace and acceptance displayed at the end of "The Rose" had been reflected in his life and his future poems. Speculation aside, though, *The Far Field* stands as a strangely suitable end to Roethke's career.

The reader can't help but share in the poet's joy when he finally achieves his longed for goal of unity and wholeness.

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NOTE

- ¹ N.B. Throughout the essay, I will refer to the speaker of "The Rose" as if he were interchangeable with the poet himself. This is somewhat contrary to accepted critical practice, but my sense of Roethke and his work seems, if not to require such a conflation, at least to permit it.

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COMPOSING PLACE: THE DYNAMIC FUNCTION OF REGION IN LITERATURE

KAYLEEN SCHUMACHER

INTRODUCTION

In literature, the concept of place has often been overlooked as a source of critical analysis because it has typically been viewed as the base upon which the greater issues of a work are posed. The existence of such a perception is mentioned in the works of a number of critical theorists, including Michel Foucault, who recognized that, "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (qtd. in Soja 4). However, upon recognizing this loss of place/space as a detriment to literary studies, a faction of theorists began to reconceptualize the nineteenth-century idea of regionalism in order to reincorporate place in contemporary literary theory. The critical theories resulting from this approach are new regionalism and critical regionalism. These theories have now become influential when examining an essential construct of place: the region. The word "region," is a relational term that signifies the commonalities in the complex sphere of space, politics, culture, and economics within a wide network of places. Presently, an extensive collection of literary works is classified as regional.

However, there are inconsistencies that can arise in the translation of a region into text. Mainly, there is an inherent incongruity between the nature of the region itself and its method of presentation in a text. A region is characterized by multifaceted, multilayered interactions of composite spheres while the construction of a text allows for only a strict linearity of presentation. If a text were to account truly for all the dimensions of a region, it would become an awkward collection of layers. Due to the innate complexity of a region and the need to create a text of interest, authors find them-

selves making conscious choices over which elements to include or exclude from their representations of a region. In this manner, regions become a dynamic element within the text as they are represented (or perhaps even misrepresented) to better convey the specific intentions of a text. Thus, it becomes essential not only to recognize the dynamic role of the region within a text but also to analyze (rather than complacently accept) what authors have purposely chosen to include in their representations of a region.

CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND PURPOSE OF REGIONALISM

Before delving into a direct examination of a representation of region within a text, it becomes necessary first to have an understanding of the context and purpose of these new approaches to the study of regionalism. In the traditional sense, the concept of regionalism has been utilized within the field of English since the nineteenth century to describe how authors' works (where applicable) were heavily tied to and dependent upon the specific characteristics of place. In doing so, these authors attempted to "preserve distinct regional cultures in the face of increasing homogenization or to resist the particular spatial divisions of labour being imposed by expansive market integration and the equally expansive national state" (Soja 165). This aspiration reaches beyond the scope of a parallel genre of literature termed "local color fiction," which looks "to the past for its values, seeing in the dying economies and vanishing folkways of its pictured regions an America that never existed" (Campbell 8). Currently, it is regionalism's basic concept of preservation/distinction that has resurfaced and been reinterpreted within the contemporary view in the study of regionalism. From a general perspective, Frank Davey specifies that "regionalism is a discourse . . . As a discourse, it represents a general social or political strategy for resisting meanings generated by others in a nation-state" (qtd. in Fetterley and Pryse 5). This concept is further reflected in the work, *New and Critical Security and Regionalism: Beyond the Nation State*, by James J. Hentz and Morten Bøas, when they indicate that "Modern day regionalism is a defense mechanism against the effects of globalization" (11).

This perceived need to counter the effects of globalization has served as an influence in the emergence of the critical theories of new regionalism and critical regionalism. Also, even though these concepts are typified in the work of two different theorists from two dif-

ferent areas of study, these ideas share a similar conceptual base. The theory of new regionalism was developed by Edward Soja and published in 1989. In a recent interview, Soja defined new regionalism as being "an intensified interest in conceptualizing regions and regionalism as fundamental components of all social theory, of all social life, integral to the very nature of human society. Regions at various scales shape our lives in significant ways, and, at the same time, we shape our regions" (Ehrenfeucht 6). Similarly, Douglas Reichert Powell describes the goal of critical regionalism as "being aware that writing about a region creates and sustains a definition of that region and, in doing so, deliberately defines the region to create new, potentially revelatory perspectives on it" (7). Further, critical regionalism is "simultaneously [viewed as] a theory, methodology, and a praxis for recognizing, closely examining, fostering, but also linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities (Limón 7). In both of these theoretical approaches, it becomes clear that regions are primarily socially constructed entities. In addition, it is this concept of the socially interactive and socially dependent malleability of the region that becomes both crucial and problematic to the study of regions in literature.

THE ISSUES ENCOUNTERED IN REGIONAL REPRESENTATION IN TEXTS

Spaces Are Open Multiplicities

The inconsistencies in the representation of a region are first encountered when the inherent social quality of the region is disregarded, and it is, instead, perceived to be a closed, consistent structure. In fact, in order for a region even to be defined, the structure must have an open dialectic with the boundaries of other regions and even the "imagined totality" of the nation itself (Dainotto 6). According to Jonathan Murdoch, "space is not a 'container' but is something that is always dependent on the process or substances that go into 'making it up'" (19). In other words, a region does not simply exist for people to be placed within. Instead, the region is created by people in terms of their language, governance, expressions of culture, etc. This awareness is reflected in Michael Kowalewski's observation that, "The best American regional writing tends to be less about a place than *of* it, with a writer's central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location" (7). Through this process of social

construction, "[s]paces and places are therefore multiplicities—that is, they are made of differing spatial practices, identifications, and forms of belonging" (Murdoch 18). Also, due to this socially dependent method of creation, the boundaries of a region and the core definition of that region are in constant flux. Even though it might appear that a region is able to maintain its integrity over time, these "local identities, however, are not fixed practices" (Limón 7). As the population adapts to technological changes, accepts different cultural artifacts into their patterns of daily life, and formulates different discourse communities over the progression of time, boundaries are erased, reconceptualized, and redrawn to reflect these evolutions. Thus, what can be represented in a novel is just a snapshot in time of that region. Essentially, what is true is only true for that specific moment in time. The depiction of a region should never be viewed as being a constant, perpetual truth.

Depicting Simultaneity

Furthermore, these multiplicities within the definition of a region are all interacting synchronously in space, which increases the difficulty of representing a region in a text. This simultaneity of elements makes it impossible to capture the diversity of interaction in the region within the linear institution of a text. As further described in the writings of Edward Soja, "What one sees when one looks at geographies is stubbornly simultaneous, but language dictates a sequential succession, a linear flow of sentential statements bound by that most spatial of earthly constraints, the impossibility of two objects (or words) occupying the same precise place (as on a page)" (2). Essentially, with the diversity of the region and the limitations imposed by the lines of a text, it becomes necessary for authors to make conscious choices about which elements of the region they want to include within their depictions. In order to represent a region effectively within this medium, "[a]ll that we can do is re-collect and creatively juxtapose, experimenting with assertions and insertions of the spatial against the prevailing grain of time" (Soja 2). Any element or sphere of a region that does not have a direct impact on the plot of the story, the life of the characters, or the context of the setting can be neglected—leaving only a simplified sketch to represent the complexities of the whole.

Disguised Purpose

Additionally, how an author chooses to construct a region (at any level of scale) is often completed with specific intentions in mind. As indicated in Powell's text, "when a region is evoked, described, or defined, it is for some particular purpose: to achieve certain changes in the physical or cultural landscape, often changing one by changing another" (5). Even from a geographical perspective, geographer Stephen Birdsall and his colleagues state that, "Because maps begin with the mapmakers' goals, no one regional scheme is necessarily better than another" (4). For instance, geographers frequently reference climatic regions, physiographical regions, economic regions, and thematic regions. Despite the fact that each classification involves a different set of information, these regionalizations are all valid constructions because they fulfill the purpose for which they were designed. Thus, a regionalization "is acceptable if the scheme meets its creator's requirements, if those requirements have been thought out reasonably, and if the map is executed correctly and factually" (Birdsall et al. 4). This concept becomes useful in the analysis of texts because it can also be utilized to present a false impression of the region—either one that is too negative or too positive. As alluded to by Soja, "We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of the social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (6).

Also, this plasticity of a region's definition brings into debate what representation of a region is the "correct" one. Such an effect is recognized by Murdoch as he states, "There can be acute struggles over whose 'reading' of space should take priority. Thus, strategies of domination and resistance ensue around spatial identities and spatial practices" (18). In other words, a region is what one chooses to make of it; and the definition of a particular region is a matter of subjective opinion. An author's creation of a seemingly concrete and whole region is nothing more than an illusion of his/her own design. A region, then, is always drawn with a particular purpose. Subsequently, in theoretical analysis of a text, it is important to conceptualize what this intention might be and postulate its results on the text itself. In describing the goal of critical regionalism, Powell asserts that it is the task of this particular theoretical approach to determine "whose interests are served by a given version of the

region" (7). Therefore, the manner of the depiction of a region is worthy of a critical review just as any of an author's other literary choices in areas such as characterization, symbolism, theme, or motif.

CASE STUDY: WRITING THE MIDWEST

The Geographical Perspective

In order to move out of this realm of theory and exemplify how these issues of regional representation occur within a text, it becomes crucial to conceptualize not only a scientific perception of a specific region in its entirety but to also analyze how that perception is subsequently presented in works of fiction. For the purposes of this study, the region known as the Midwest will be explored and examined.

From a geographical perspective, the term "Midwest" and the area that this expression encompasses reflect more cultural value than actual scientific value. The term itself is derived from that fact that "Europeans settled North America from east to west. Midwest implies that the West begins in the Appalachians, with the closer Midwest gradually merging into the Far West somewhere in the general area of the Rocky Mountains" (Birdsall et al. 205). Geographers, however, have a tendency to recognize and define the area of the Midwest in terms of its prevailing thematic function. Thus viewed, the area that is often described as the Midwest becomes a combination of the Agricultural Core as well as the North American Manufacturing Core (Birdsall et al. 206). These two perceptions of the primary functions of the area of the Midwest (agricultural production and manufacturing) are often fused together because "[m]uch of the manufacturing core's urban development and manufacturing capacity was initially stimulated by the demands of agricultural producers and the tremendous volume of food they produced" (Birdsall et al. 204). Thus, in this region, agriculture and manufacturing coexist to give the Midwest region its unique character.

The concept of the Agricultural Core reflects the agrarian culture promoted by the relatively level landscape, suitable growing climate, and ample water resources. This region produces a great volume of the raw food goods that are consumed by the rest of the population. Much of the farming activities that typify the region consist of a mix of livestock raising and cash crop farming. When considering the humanistic geography of the region, many of its residents are descen-

dants of immigrants from the North Western European countries (such as Germany, Scandinavia, and Britain) who originally migrated and settled into the area in the nineteenth century (Birdsall et al. 206). Overall, the general character of the culture in the region epitomizes that of small-town, rural America.

The concept of the Manufacturing Core revolves around the area's primary function of the mass production of a wide range of industrial goods, from vehicles to processed foods. The area developed into an industrial center mainly due to the presence of mineral sources (coal and iron ore) as well as many natural "accessibility resources" (Great Lakes and numerous highly navigable rivers) that served to interconnect these source areas (Birdsall et al. 90-91). Also, as methods of transportation advanced, the Manufacturing Core was able to expand through increased networking. The majority of the major cities of the Midwest expanded in part due to their specialized focus on one aspect of manufacturing. For instance, the city of Chicago developed from the meatpacking industry while Pittsburg benefited from the production of steel. Also, as a direct result of the high concentration of industry, there were ample opportunities for employment. Subsequently, the industrial centers experienced a high level of cultural diversity. This diversity is largely still found within the current cityscapes. In total, the concept of the Manufacturing Core seeks to reflect the characteristics of the modern urban landscape.

Region as Urban Grunge in Sinclair's *The Jungle*

In contrast to this rather objective, holistic geographical conceptualization of the Midwestern region, author Upton Sinclair selectively seizes upon the grit of the industry within the Manufacturing Core to accent the price of progress upon the welfare of both the surrounding physical and human geographies. In general, Sinclair's body of work typifies what is regarded as a regionalist novel because his text abounds in "symbols of purification, demarcation, and punishment of transgression" (Dainotto 15). Subsequently, in his display of affected (or infected) geographies, Sinclair utilizes these regionalist qualities of his texts to advocate for social change and betterment through the mass adoption of socialistic principles. This effect is most apparent within Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, which is the first in a series of his texts to focus on how various forms of industry (meat-packing, oil, steel, coal, etc.) affect the destiny of the common man and his environment. Specifically, *The Jungle* is set within

the early twentieth-century stockyards of a developing Chicago where the accelerated industrialization of meat-packing and over-consumption of resources collide. These stockyards "on the south side of the city, were the largest ever constructed. The city's one-time concentration of meatpackers, amounting to nearly one-half the entire U.S. meat industry in 1900, similarly has never been surpassed" (Hudson 207). By focusing on the rampant pollution and blatant abuse of the poverty-stricken immigrant worker, Sinclair oversimplifies the region of the Midwest as a source of filth and social depravity in order to better accentuate his championship of socialism.

For instance, when depicting the landscape of Chicago, Sinclair details the pollution resulting from the increased corporate control over the landscape, space, and the natural world that surrounded the city (Cronon 212). One such example of corporate control was the alteration of the city's water drainage systems. In general, the "[d]ecaying organic matter, whether in the form of packing wastes, manure, or raw human sewage, was the chief water supply problem the city faced" (Cronon 249). Chicago's water supply was considered a "site disadvantage" due to its unpleasant taste and smell, and the practice of emptying waste into the water compounded the problem (Birdsall et al. 103). The immediate solution to this problem was the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which reversed the flow of the Chicago River. Subsequently, instead of the waste traveling through the city and into Lake Michigan, the water now flowed southward through the Illinois River, which resulted in Chicago having fresher drinking water from the lake (Cronon 250). Despite this solution and others (like reducing the waste products produced by the meat industry), Sinclair still writes of extensive water pollution plaguing the Chicago neighborhood of Packingtown. In fact, "Packingtown remained one of the smelliest and most environmentally degraded neighborhoods in all of Chicago, and the water that flowed from its sewers was extraordinarily foul" (Cronon 252). One specific reference that Sinclair gives in his novel is the description of what he terms as "Bubbly Creek." Sinclair writes that "'Bubbly Creek' is an arm of the Chicago River, and forms the southern boundary of the yards; and all the drainage of the square mile of packing houses empties into it, so that it is really a great open sewer a hundred and two feet wide" (Sinclair 97). Sinclair then seems to

suggest that the only solution to rid the city of this pollution is to abolish the industry that created it.

In addition to descriptions of water pollution, Sinclair also highlighted the effects of industrialization on the air quality and subsequent land quality of the city. One of the first features that the reader encounters (as well as the characters in the novel) is the description of stench and smoke emanating from the factories in Chicago. As the main character, Jurgis Rudkus, and his family travel to the city with hopes of great fortune, they encounter the odors and "they were not sure it was unpleasant, this odor; some might have called it sickening . . . It was an elemental odor, raw and crude; it was rich, almost rancid, sensual, and strong" (Sinclair 29-30). The characters seem to realize that these odors are an essential component of the urban industrial environment that they are entering. Also, other essential components to the landscape were the smokestacks that emitted the black smoke. As the characters of the novel travel within the city, Jurgis observes, "half a dozen chimneys, tall as the tallest buildings, touching the very sky—and leaping from them half a dozen columns of smoke, thick, oily, and black as night" (Sinclair 30). Aside from acknowledging that the prevalence of smokestacks resulted from Chicago's emergence as a "dominant city of the interior manufacturing core," Sinclair emphasized that such features are unnatural to the physical environment and should be anything but tolerated (Birdsall et al. 103). This effect is accomplished by the author emphasizing how the appearance of the land is affected by the close proximity of this industry to the urban center. As the characters in the novel travel toward the city, they notice that "[i]t grew darker all the time, and upon the earth the grass seemed to grow less green . . . the colors of things became dingier; the fields were grown parched and yellow, the landscape hideous and bare" (Sinclair 29). For Sinclair, the urban industrial setting translated into the corruption of the American landscape and the decay of natural beauty for the unreasonable purpose of profit.

As well as these descriptions of degradation to the natural environment of the region, Sinclair includes references to the human geography in the city of Chicago to further his message of socialism. Due to Chicago's role as a manufacturing center and transportation hub, "Chicago grew rapidly, absorbing hundreds of thousands of European immigrants throughout the later nineteenth century" (Birdsall et al. 104). Chicago progressively grew larger as wave after

wave of European immigrants were employed in the meatpacking industries (Hudson 207). However, "[t]he growth in demand for urban labor, as fast as it was, did not match the growth in the number of potential workers" (Birdsall et al. 45). This situation created overpopulated urban centers as well as a general decrease in mobility since immigrants did not have the means to move out of the city. Also, "urban growth was seen to present increasing problems of crime and an exploited working class" (Sauer 253).

Using this reality of an increasing stagnant pool of workers, Sinclair communicates through the narrative how the urban landscape (dominated by the throes of capitalistic endeavors) proceeds to destroy humanity. Through depictions of desperation, the author alludes to his belief that industrialization creates an effect of "social Darwinism." In this manner, Sinclair points toward the human element of Chicago as an additional source of disgrace and disgust. One example of this belief is how people in management in the packinghouses took advantage of immigrant laborers. As immigrants arrived in the city and found work in the packinghouses, they eventually became spent commodities as they gave the best of their lives to earn low wages for intense labor only to be replaced later by new immigrants who were stronger and more fit for work. Overall, the novel showcases how corporate greed has caused squalor, low wages, and hunger for the residents of Packingtown.

Region as Seen Through the Trees in Alexander's *White Pine Sucker River*

In order to further this concept of how a region can be selectively manipulated to convey a certain purpose, it becomes telling not only to contrast the geographical definition of the region to its fictional counterpart but also to juxtapose two fictional representations of a region with each other. The degree of a region's plasticity becomes apparent when considering the representation of the Midwest within Robert Alexander's collection of prose poetry, *White Pine Sucker River: Poems 1970-1990*, versus the previously discussed piece by Upton Sinclair. Both authors are, in effect, attempting to represent the same region; however, their final products prove to be quite contradictory.

Throughout his text, Robert Alexander offers a more varied and complex vision of the region of the Midwest than does Sinclair since the specific settings and topics for the majority of Alexander's prose

poems constantly vary. In effect, when Alexander's work is read as a whole, the text is capable of capturing a broader scope of the region because it offers a multilayered and multifaceted presentation. Additionally, Alexander's translation of the Midwestern region into text also contains an intentional theme/purpose (nostalgia and self identity). Since Alexander and Sinclair present different main themes/messages in their texts, this factor subsequently contributes toward the inherent contradictions in their respective representations of the region.

Furthermore, Alexander takes a more holistic approach to the presentation of the Midwestern landscape than Sinclair. However, Alexander's text still presents a skewed representation of the region. Instead of focusing, as did Sinclair, on the industrial toll on the landscape to communicate the need for socialistic governance, Alexander presents a more naturalistic perception of the region to communicate an overwhelming sense of nostalgic reverie. By focusing on nature in this region, Alexander is able to move the Midwest away from a definition that consists of the area's dominant functions—manufacturing and agriculture. Essentially, Alexander seeks to showcase the region before it came to be defined by human activities. For Alexander, it is the landscape of the Midwest that serves to define as well as to store the definition of the individual. In other words, nature becomes the storehouse of personal memories, and it is nature that can provide individuals with self-recognition.

More specifically, through Alexander's consistent focus on the beauty of the indigenous, unspoiled landscape, his prose communicates how individuals can attempt to regain an understanding of themselves within the context of nature. Much of Alexander's writing focuses on a speaker's internal reflections about particular places—mostly rural settings—in relation to the speaker's own understanding of his past. When in these places, the speaker seems dependent upon the nature around him to help trigger long-forgotten memories. For instance, in the prose poem, "Rain," the speaker in the text is at home looking out of his window upon the rainy landscape, which first activates his cache of memories concerning rain. As the text opens, "It's raining. . . As if flipping through postcards he can see other rains: the northwoods with their fir and spruce, the smell of the northwoods . . ." (Alexander 48). This spontaneous journey back into his memories is solidified into a specific instance as he

remembers the rainy day that became the beginning of the end of his marriage. As Alexander's text continues:

In ten minutes he has to leave for the office, just two blocks away . . . but for now, sipping his fourth cup of coffee of the day, he can sit here thinking about the smoke-filled woods. That summer there'd been a fire in the bird refuge and the state was suing the federal government because the fire had spread into the state forest, and every day, unless the wind was blowing off the lake, they could smell the haze. It formed the backdrop on the last little drama of his marriage, he thought to himself. (48)

Throughout the rest of the prose text, Alexander intersperses reflections on the rain with connections to nature, which lead to the memory of the final days of the speaker's failed marriage. The speaker proceeds to remember the particulars of the fight he had with his former wife, how they met, the good times they had together, and their ultimate separation. The speaker's remembrances of nature trigger his reflections which in turn help him to remember a lost or subconscious portion of himself. Nature allows him to recognize that he misses the times with his wife and creates an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for this past life. Consequently, by interpreting a region in this manner, the region is defined through an intensely personal lens; and the reader is only presented the portions of the region that are important for Alexander. In effect, the landscape of the Midwest becomes a personal journey through meandering signifiers of nostalgia in an attempt to achieve a new, complete conceptualization of one's true self. It is through place (and thus, through region) that Alexander attempts to communicate the natural landscape as a sacred, essential institution.

Although Alexander's collection is dominated by images of nature, there are also some selections of prose where characters are in more urban settings, which allows those texts to be more directly compared to the work of Sinclair. Also, these prose selections allow the reader to conceptualize better Alexander's different perceptions of the rural Midwest with respect to the urban centers in the region. In general, Alexander's appreciation for the urban scenarios seems less genuine and more forced than his respect for the natural landscape. However, his representation of the urban is not as severe as that of Sinclair, who depicts the urban as nothing more than filth and a source of human depravity.

Also, for both Alexander and Sinclair, the urban landscape holds a similar sense of anonymity. It is because of this anonymity that Sinclair degraded the urban; however, this same quality makes Alexander praise it. In essence, Alexander develops the urban as a refuge from the storehouse of memory that is kept within the natural, rural landscape. According to Alexander, the city and the urban become a place to forget one's self. For example, in Alexander's prose piece, "Supermarkets," the speaker reflects that, "I like the anonymity of supermarkets: I'd drive miles to get to a supermarket where I could be sure of not being recognized" (59). The rest of the prose piece describes an incident in which he was successful in keeping his anonymity as he encountered the ex-wife of a friend. They met in the frozen food aisle, and he studied the contents of a bag of vegetables while she examined the orange juice concentrate (Alexander 59). He then reached past her and grabbed a cheaper brand (Alexander 59). Even though he almost touched the woman, she did not recognize him; and his anonymity remained intact. Also, according to Alexander, it is this sense of anonymity that gives the urban its own sense of beauty. This notion is in direct contrast to Sinclair's viewpoint that all aspects of the urban are merely tools of production and not sources of comfort.

Region as Cultivation for Roethke's Works of Poetry

With the analysis thus far, a continuum of regional representation begins to take shape as the work of Upton Sinclair serves to anchor one extreme of depictions that emphasizes the negative aspects of the Midwestern region while Robert Alexander's text serves as the base of the antithesis. Within this range, it is valuable to conceptualize what types of texts could define the middle area created by this spectrum. However, it must be emphasized that this middle ground does not necessarily serve to describe an inherent "correctness." Rather, it pertains to a particular balance that is struck between both an author's praise and criticism within the representation of a region in a text. An example of such a balanced text is found within the collection of works of Theodore Roethke, as the totality of his texts presents both strong admiration as well as harsh rebuke in his eclectic depictions of the Midwestern region. This particular balance is recognized by C. W. Truesdale when he comments on how, "[m]ost of what we call the American archetypes find themselves again in his [Roethke's] work (in unexpected ways), and above all the sense of

land—the vast, the particular, the wasted, the utterly beautiful and the utterly exploited landscape of America” (Williams 15). In this manner, Roethke’s work becomes characterized by his ability to present equally dialectical elements of the same subject—the American Midwestern landscape.

Despite this balance of perspectives, the regional representation within Roethke’s collection of texts—like those of both Sinclair and Alexander—is still not free from his own intentions. For Roethke, the region/natural landscape becomes a platform upon which he voices his central concerns about life in modern society. Principally, his greatest concerns are outlined as follows: “(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 poetry; and (4) the nature of God Himself” (Williams 33). With these interrelated concerns always driving his creativity, a sizable majority of Roethke’s life’s work tends to center on similar messages. Specifically, Roethke feels that the nature of the Midwest is a conduit to greater self and cultural knowledge. Thus, whether he praises the landscape for its beauty or reproaches modern industry for its effect on the environment, Roethke selectively chooses different aspects of the Midwestern region to communicate perpetually this central purpose. In other words, Roethke’s poetry consistently serves to portray both sides of the same coin.

This effect can clearly be viewed when analyzing Roethke’s poems that are intensely focused on nature as well as those that concentrate on aspects of modern culture. For instance, in the greenhouse poems, Roethke alludes to the absolute necessity of the connection between humans and nature as he attempts to define both the reality of the region as well as of the self in the infinite minutia of organic systems both inside and outside of the greenhouse. Even though Roethke never specifically mentions that the region he is representing is actually the Midwest, it is assumed among scholars that he is doing so because the setting of the poems parallels the biography of his life. With a childhood that was intimately bound to the landscape, “For Roethke, nature was not only religion brought down to earth, a container of emblematic meanings and an embodiment of human consciousness . . . nature was the script of his life—myth and autobiography bound into one. The natural world was the reality in which his childhood was lived and his family’s drama acted out”

(Balakian 7). Thus, in a manner similar to that of Robert Alexander, “Roethke’s vision of place and landscape was personal rather than public” (Barillas 106). Throughout the greenhouse poems, each small element of this personalized landscape (moss, roots, buds, and blossoms) offers insight into life, death, and survival. More specifically, in “nature’s process of change and transformation, he [Roethke] finds corresponding relationships to the self and imagination” (Balakian 27). These relationships, in turn, provide definition and insight into the human condition. In essence, for Roethke, the landscape is more than a trigger for remembrance and nostalgia as it was for Alexander. Instead, the nature of the Midwest also provides an understanding of one’s own role within the world system as well as clues into the universal aspects of identity. Accordingly, the objects of the landscape are only as important as the self-truths that they serve to reveal. Thus, if an element of the region did not allow for or produce such an insight, it was neglected in Roethke’s catalog of organic systems of growth and meaning. For Roethke, the nature of a region must be absorbed and understood in order for one to live truly.

This essential bond between man and the landscape is even communicated through Roethke’s poems that serve to criticize the increasingly industrial Midwest. According to the themes in his nature-based poems, nature serves to define the region and the region, in turn, serves to define man. Anything that might act to obstruct this pathway of exchange is judged to be false and obscene by Roethke. Subsequently, since the characteristics of the urban enforce undue formalities as well as obstruct natural processes, Roethke perceives the urban landscape of the Midwest as an unnatural construction that has been unwillingly imposed on the natural order. In this manner, Roethke uses his characterization of the urban as leverage for social change in a manner similar to that of Upton Sinclair. However, instead of advocating socialism, Roethke uses his poetry to stoke a rebellion against modernity—specifically man-made order, complexity, and formality. For instance, in the poem, “Dolor,” Roethke portrays an infinite sadness found within the endless tedium and repetition of institutional settings: “Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard, / The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher, / Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma, / Endless duplication of lives and objects” (1). When commenting on his rationale behind the poem, Roethke explained that “the trivia of the institution

is, in human terms, a disorder, and as such, must be resisted" (qtd. in Williams 33). Roethke's depiction of the desolate office setting serves to stress the need for a clear connection between nature and man or risk the loss of comfort or opportunity to achieve a totality of the human spirit.

In addition, Roethke's message of unity between man and the environment is furthered by his emphasis that the urban landscape is something that needs "to be escaped from." This quality is particularly apparent within the poem, "Highway: Michigan." In the poem, Roethke has the speaker at the edge of a field observing workers leaving their work in the city. In his descriptions, Roethke inserts a kind of madness and frantic chaos into the actions of the commuting workers as they flee the city limits. Roethke writes that "[a]cceleration is their need: / A mania keeps them on the move / Until the toughest nerves are frayed. / They are prisoners of speed / Who flee in what their hands have made" (3). These lines serve to indicate a cause and effect relationship between man and the environment. However, for the workers in the poem, motion and speed have replaced the function of nature as the basis for understanding life, which ultimately results in destruction of both mind and body. As further indicated by Richard Blessing, "Roethke is sometimes afraid of the dizzying pace of life in the twentieth century. 'Highway: Michigan' evokes that pace . . . a sense of a speed which increases and increases until disaster is inevitable. The body, the machine, cannot withstand the terrible energy within" (47). In other words, incorporating speed as the central need in life only produces a sense of unfulfillment and frenzied desperation. In this manner, even though this poem is focused on a urban setting, it still evokes a need to know and understand the fundamentals of nature.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing these three samples (Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Alexander's *White Pine Sucker River*, and Roethke's poems), the dynamic role of the region within the text becomes apparent. Due, in part, to the three theoretical issues (spaces as multiplicities, presentation of simultaneity, and disguised purpose) pertaining to the translation of region into text, both representations of this region can be considered valid. However, the depictions possess distinctly different characteristics.

Sinclair's depiction of region becomes a catalyst of persuasion in his argument for social reform. In order for his argument to be persuasive, the region had to be depicted as an area of rampant pollution, squalor, depravity, and devaluation of the human soul; thus, Sinclair's novel is filled with images of putrid pools, foul smells, and smoke-filled skies that poverty-stricken immigrants were thrust into and forced to survive within. Sinclair's vision of the early Midwestern city can be interpreted as a "consume or be consumed" environment.

By contrast, for Alexander, the Midwest is a more enjoyable environment, as he uses it to communicate his message of nostalgia and memory. For Alexander, the land is not a spent and abused commodity. Instead, it is a source of richness and fulfillment of an individual's life. With Alexander's juxtaposition of the imagery, feelings, and message within his pieces of prose, he communicates that the urban is a space of anonymity where one can lose one's self while the rural/nature settings hold onto the true memories of one's self. Alexander posits that by connecting with nature, an individual can have the opportunity of fully conceptualizing his/her self. In this manner, Alexander views region not as an object that is defined by humans, but rather as truly helping to define the human.

In further contrast, Theodore Roethke uses both the beautiful and the repulsive characteristics of the Midwest to communicate his belief of the vital connection between man and the natural environment. Even though Roethke highlights the grit and chaos of the Midwestern cities, as does Sinclair, and the intricate beauty of the surrounding nature, as does Alexander, Roethke utilizes these features to convey his own theme—that the nature of the Midwest is a conduit to greater self and cultural knowledge.

After examining the works of three different authors, it can be concluded that region is not stagnant, static, innocent, or universally understood and acknowledged. Instead, a region is a dynamic, constantly evolving structure that must be thoughtfully considered as authors compose the particulars of place.

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"I'LL BE AN INDIAN": REREADING ROETHKE'S "NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE"

CHRISTIAN KNOELLER

*We have failed to live up to our geography.
All roads lead to the self.
When shall I arrive at a true sense of history...?
Theodore Roethke*¹

While Roethke famously spent his later years in the Pacific Northwest teaching at the University of Washington in Seattle, his roots as a Midwestern writer are deep.² Born in 1908 in Michigan at Saginaw—a valley named for “a version of an Algonquin word that means ‘the place of the Sauks’”—his affinity for nature was nurtured early (Seager 2). Recollections of childhood experiences in the family’s greenhouse, for example, grace the pages of his second collection, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), a volume that at once marked a turn toward organic form and signaled his tremendous potential (Wheatcroft). As Peter Balakian observes, “If in the greenhouse there was a blend of the natural and the artificial, in ‘North American Sequence’ we are in a world of raw nature” (134). It is telling at the end of his career such Midwestern images would well up so powerfully in his final work, *The Far Field*, particularly in the “North American Sequence,” revealing how being reared in the region had indeed left its lifelong mark. In fact, though the sequence culminates in the Pacific Northwest, Roethke “returns to Michigan in every poem” (Barillas 136).

Beyond rendering impressions of particular places, this monumental poem relies on the trope of journey and the passage of time since memories of his Michigan childhood are juxtaposed with later experiences in the West. Such travels across America metaphorically come to represent the exploration of self on a spiritual level. As William Barillas explains in *The Midwestern Pastoral*, “By means of a recurring metaphor of automobile travel, Roethke symbolizes tran-

scendence as 'a long journey out of the self,' which is also a 'journey to the interior' of North America" (130). This duality—both a physical journey across the continent and, metaphorically, a spiritual one—is sustained throughout the sequence. As Jay Parini points out, "The metaphorical nature of the journey is given immediate prominence, but the details rapidly make the car trip across the American West the poem's literal setting," with the Great Plains and Teton Range providing a rich array of landscapes and images—replete with flora and fauna, of course, but occasional traces of a landscape's human history as well—that in turn "lends a note of realism to what might be wholly metaphorical venture" (164-65), as in the following passage from the opening of "The Far Field":

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,
The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone.
(*The Far Field* 25, hereafter cited as FF)

In such detailed descriptions, the reader readily recognizes the particularity of lived experience refracted by memory.

The intensity of spiritual exploration is suggested by its geographical extent: "longing to discover exactly what he can be united with in nature, especially in his 'true place,' which encompasses the North American landscape from southern New Hampshire (Oyster River) through Saginaw to Seattle" (Wolff 100). This litany of place names grounds the narrative of a journey across the continent and, metaphorically, a spiritual exploration of place. Setting is crucial, as Neal Bowers notes, since the landscapes described effectively reflect the poet's state of mind at moments when self-awareness is heightened by a deepening recognition of relationship to nature. This progression ultimately culminates "by describing the particular point in the symbolic landscape where the poet's spirit is most fully expressed in the details of time and place" in the final section of the sequence, "The Rose" (Wolff 109). At the heart of Roethke's meditations, then, is the desire to perceive a spiritual relationship to nature in the particulars of place.

In the *Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke*, Jenijoy La Belle characterizes the trajectory of the sequence this way:

A journey through our continent, from its center to its Western boundary. As Roethke moves from his own beginnings in the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest, he considers the means by which a poet can come to know and join with the natural images he meets . . . He gives us a journey in space that is at once both personal and profoundly historical, and a journey in time that is both a reminiscence and a critique of literary history (149-50).

By the time *The Far Field* was published posthumously in 1964, Roethke was already a celebrated figure, of course, having been awarded the illustrious "triple crown" of poetry prizes including both the Bollingen and Pulitzer as well as a National Book Award. Still the 'North American Sequence'" from that volume has long been singled out, hailed by critics as a masterpiece. Some have been tempted to speculate that it seemed almost as if Roethke realized that this might well be his final book, and that he knowingly rose to the occasion with a single sequence expansive enough to tie together a lifetime's worth of concerns (e.g. Parini 160-67; Bowers 148). Parini claims "*The Far Field* contains some of Roethke's very best writing, especially in "North American Sequence" (130), while in the words of critic Ralph J. Mills it represents "not only some of his finest work but a number of the most astonishing mystical poems in the language" (Stein 135). It is hard to imagine higher praise.³

Much has been made of Roethke's place in literary history. Some critics (e.g. La Belle) have likened his intuitive attunement to nature to that of British Romantics such as the Lake Poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. His kinship with the British Romantics can indeed be seen in those moments when his experience of nature approaches the sublime. Yet, like fellow Midwestern poet James Wright, the Romantic impulse can also be recognized in his revulsion at the desecration of nature by industry as seen in these lines from "The Longing": "The slag heaps fume at the edge of raw cities:/ The gulls wheel over their singular garbage" (FF 13).

Others have noted similarities of the "North American Sequence" to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (e.g. Balakian, Barillas, Mills, Parini). There are both stylistic parallels, including the use of long lines and catalogues, and philosophical ones—a debt that Roethke himself recognized and readily confided in a letter to Mills (Selected 230). To

illustrate Roethke's use of catalogues in the manner of Whitman, consider the following passages from the first section of "The Rose":

A time for watching the tide,
For the heron's hieratic fishing,
For the sleepy cries of the towhee,
The morning birds gone, the twittering finches,
But still the flash of the kingfisher, the wingbeat of the scoter,
The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water,
The last geese crossing against the reflected afterlight,
The moon retreating into a vague cloud-shape
To the cries of the owl, the eerie whooper,
The old log subsides with the lessening waves,
And there is silence. (FF 29)

The detailed depiction of the natural world, in this case the cacophony of birds, ultimately brings the poet to an inner state of stillness and "silence." The poem continues:

What do they tell us, sound and silence?
I think of American sounds in the silence:
On the banks of the Tombstone, the wind-harps having their say,
The thrush singing alone, that easy bird,
The killdeer whistling away from me,
The mimetic chortling of the catbird,
Down in the corner of the garden, among the raggedy lilacs,
The bobolink skirring from a broken fencepost,
The bluebird, lover of holes in old wood, lilting its light song,
And that thin cry, like a needle piercing ear, the insistent cicada,
And the ticking of snow around oil drums in the Dakotas,
The thin whine of telephone wires in the wind of a Michigan winter.
(FF 31)

Tombstone, Dakotas, Michigan: Roethke's sequence—like Whitman's *Song of Myself*—is also a "journey through America" (La Belle 154). Above all, "North American Sequence" seems Whitmanesque in its inclusiveness and its yearning for a direct sense of the sublime.

Yet perhaps the most compelling case for influence involves no less than T.S. Eliot, specifically *Four Quartets*, a carefully structured sequence centering on themes of place, time, and classical elements—earth, air, water, and fire—all of which are echoed in

Roethke's "North American Sequence" (Parini 162-63). Throughout the sequence, the classical elements are invoked repeatedly, as they are in Eliot's *Quartets*. References to water, for example, are incessant, beginning with his pronouncement in "The Longing": "I would be a stream." Aqueous imagery is positively central in the first and second sections of "Meditation at Oyster River," with its evocation of water in motion:

Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,
Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without sound, toward
me,
Running along the narrow furrows of the stone, the rows of dead clam
shells;

.....
With these I would be.

And with water: the waves coming forward, without cessation,
The waves . . . (FF 16-17)

Long lines such as these are among those most reminiscent of Whitman stylistically. This description at the mouth of Oyster River rekindles memories of watching other rivers in the Midwest during childhood. This device of changing timeframes frequently recurs throughout the sequence:

I shift on my rock, and I think:
Of the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April,
Over a lip of stone, the tiny rivulet;
And that wrist-thick cascade tumbling from a cleft rock,
Its spray holding a double rain-bow in early morning,
Small enough to be taken in, embrace, by two arms,—
Or the Titebawasee, in the time between winter and spring,
When the ice melts along the edges in early afternoon.
And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving . . . (FF 17)

The closing section of "Meditation" moves from these images of water to spiritual identification with these lovely lines: "Water's my will, and my way,/ And the spirit runs, intermittently, /In and out of the small waves" (FF 18).

"The Long Waters" is similarly filled with aqueous imagery such as estuaries, prairie lakes, and irregular shorelines: "Where the fresh and salt waters meet,/ And the sea-winds move through the pine trees,/ A country of bays and inlets, and small streams flowing seaward" (FF 22-23). Once again, such meditations on the natural world give rise

to spiritual experience: "I lose and find myself in the long water;/ I am gathered together once more;/ I embrace the world" (FF 24).

In addition to incorporating repeatedly the classical elements (e.g. water, earth, air, and fire), another device that Roethke appears to have adapted from Eliot's *Quartets* might be termed "paradox," such as in the following passage from "Journey to the Interior": "Neither forward nor backward, Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere./ As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning, I know this change:/ . . . The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing" (FF 21). Finally, like Eliot, Roethke chose the rose for a crowning image, declaring emphatically in "The Longing," "The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all" (FF 14). It is in fact also the culminating image that Roethke returns to at the very close of the sequence in "The Rose."

A close reading of the "North American Sequence" alongside Eliot's *Four Quartets* reveals still other (albeit more subtle) echoes in language and diction. Beyond simply tracking such instances of intertextuality, however, (or even echoes of Eliot that merely hint at intertextuality) it is worth considering how Roethke shaped the "North American Sequence" in response to Eliot. As Balakian points out, "Roethke is often in dialogue with Eliot. And he not only realized the impact of both Eliot and Whitman on his last poems but also understood the subtle relationship between the two" (130).

It is no secret that Roethke systematically studied Eliot, repeatedly copying out *Four Quartets* longhand, for example (La Belle 155). Transcribing Eliot's writing in this way undoubtedly allowed him to internalize its language, to trace every turn of thought. This is not to suggest that Roethke's sequence is merely derivative in the sense of imitation or appropriation. To the contrary, it should be viewed as a response to *Four Quartets*—an extension of Eliot at a time when he was widely regarded as the most influential living poet writing in the English language. Roethke presumably hoped not only to enhance his reputation as a major American poet but also to stake his claim to a place in literary history. Certainly he aspired to no less.

In years since, Roethke's legacy has been said to include an impressive body of poetry associated with the Pacific Northwest, including the work of Carolyn Kizer, William Stafford, and arguably Pulitzer Prize winner Gary Snyder (although the latter is more likely a case of affinity than influence). Several others who studied with him, such as Richard Hugo and David Wagoner, have carried the

torch by mentoring subsequent generations of writers. Roethke's work has also profoundly influenced Midwestern poets, of course, such as Jim Harrison, for example (Barillas). Roethke's writing has even been credited by Duane Niatum, prominent Indian poet of the Klallam tribe, with contributing to the "renaissance" of Native American writers (Barillas 137). While tracing the lineage of literary influence is inevitably speculative—allusions to Eliot aside—suffice it to say that the "North American Sequence" holds a central place in establishing Roethke's enduring reputation to this day.

Yet critics also note Roethke's ambivalence toward Eliot's work—seemingly a mixture of admiration and envy bordering on dismissiveness—as John Wheatcroft describes:

Without doubt, Roethke's great sequence of meditative poems, "The North American Sequence," completed shortly before his death, owes a debt to Eliot's last great meditative sequence, *Four Quartets* In "East Coker," the second of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot had written, "Old men ought to be explorers." Roethke mockingly echoes this line and punctuates it with a question mark at the end of "The Longing," the first poem in "North American Sequence." "Old men should be explorers?" Then thumbing his nose at Eliot, he replies, "I'll be an Indian." (66)

These lines are in fact often cited due to their explicit intertextuality with *Four Quartets*. While such references to Eliot can be readily recognized, critics have interpreted this pivotal passage from the close of the first section of the sequence in a variety of ways. Rosemary Sullivan suspects that Roethke sought a primal sort of experience in his encounters with nature: "Beginning to sense the lines of continuity with an earlier, primitive past, he attempts to identify himself with the Indian" (155). Another common reading holds that Roethke concurs with Eliot; that is, the Indian is taken to be a type of explorer (e.g. Williams) likening him to a "pioneer," a "backwoodsman," a "native explorer," and an "aboriginal" (Balakian 133-35). It is my contention, however, that the sequence actually revises Eliot. As Barillas concludes, "By refusing to adopt Eliot's explorer archetype, he rejects the expatriate poet's Anglo-Catholicism; by assuming that of the Indian, he professes an autochthonous spirituality of place" (133). I believe this distinction to be crucial: Roethke seeks to write a poem indigenous to America—a nation state and its

landscape, the continent and its history. To do so suggests a number of profound oppositions with Eliot:

ROETHKE	ELIOT
Indian	Explorer
New World	Old World
America	Europe
Native	Expatriate
Indigenous	Immigrant
Nature	Civilization
Animist	Anglican ⁴

These two worldviews are clearly poles apart. In *Sing with the Heart of a Bear*, his ground-breaking study of the influence of Native American writing and culture on poetry by non-Indian authors, Lincoln characterizes the "North American Sequence" as "Post-native and tribeless, Roethke's lament is that of the lost connection to nature, the suppressed knowledge of totemic animals, the descent from the given world of creatures and guardian spirits" (225), and even more pointedly, "in the spirit of endangered beasts and a botched civilization begging native redemption" (Lincoln 218). Accordingly, Sullivan deems the sequence "a penitential act of reintegration with nature" (148).

Whatever the surface similarities to *Four Quartets*, then, in terms of structure, style, or theme, the "North American Sequence" charts new territory—a fitting culmination to Roethke's life work of articulating a revisionist perspective worthy of America's splendid geography, abundant wildlife, and indigenous history.

There are a number of reasons to believe that Roethke envisioned the project in this way himself. "As early as 1944," Sullivan recounts, "he was writing to William Carlos Williams of his need for a device to organize his ideas about the American Midwest. His sequence was to be a celebration of the landscape" (167-68). Further evidence can be found among his published letters, including a proposal in 1959 for funding from the Ford Foundation that suggests how he had begun to conceptualize what was to become in part the "North American Sequence."⁵ What he proposed was essentially a revisionist history: "A sequence of serious poems beginning with a long dirge which will express through suggestive and highly charged symbolic language the guilts we Americans feel as a people for our mistakes and misdeeds in history . . . this would not be chronological, yet

would expose some of the lies of history" (qtd. in Williams 114). Williams argues that the historic "tragedy of America" that Roethke meant to revisit necessarily includes the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century such as befell the Oglala Sioux at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, concluding that "There is a sense of guilt in the poem for a broken nation, and Roethke seems to have had a collective sense of guilt in mind in composing 'North American Sequence'" (114).

According to Allan Seager's biography, *The Glass House*, Roethke may even have envisioned a sequel to the sequence: "Some of his last notes spoke of an epic dealing with the injustices done to the Indians and based on an automobile journey across the continent where he would pass the site of each tribe's final defeat or betrayal" (279). Seager speculates that this impulse may well have been Midwestern in origin, stemming from childhood "memories of what he had heard there of the debasement of the Chippewas and the extinction of the Sauks" (279).

Part of what makes the sequence so expansive, of course—even Whitmanesque—is its geographic inclusiveness: spanning the continent from where Oyster River empties into the Atlantic to the headlands of the Pacific Northwest. A single section of "Journey to the Interior," for example, depicts images from a wide array of landscapes as "all flows past":

The highway ribboning out in a straight thrust North,
To the sand dunes and fish flies, hanging thicker than moths,
.....
The towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters,
Their wooden stores of silvery pine and weather-beaten red court-
houses,
.....
The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle of the prairie,
.....
And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the Tetons,
.....
The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house. (FF 20)

In aggregate, its far flung landscapes include such disparate settings as the upper Midwest, the Great Plains, and the Teton Mountains. Examining the interaction of journey, place, and memory in the sequence, Mills concludes: "Roethke uses automobile trips through a variety of landscapes as outward counterparts of the expe-

dition to the center of the self, that is, to the spirit . . . Each of the poems in the "North American Sequence" is occupied with the spiritual journey with the *details of place, through or from which moments of vision occur*" (124 emphasis mine). In the following passage from the opening of "Journey to the Interior," Roethke establishes this central metaphor: journey as spiritual quest:

In the long journey out of the self,
There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places
Where the shale slides dangerously
And the back wheels hang almost over the edge
At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.

.....
A chance? Perhaps. But the road was part of me . . . (FF 19)

Similarly, Bowers suggests that for Roethke, journeys served a "metaphor for the contemplative process" itself (162). This, indeed, seems to be the imaginative process giving rise to the poem—an approach that allows Roethke to "meditate" on spiritual experiences in relation to nature while shaping a narrative of journeys. Roethke's personal travels undoubtedly catalyzed a change in his perspective: a deepening appreciation of the expansiveness of the continent and a heightened sense of his spiritual response to its many landscapes:

What broadened his vision was a late meditation on American landscape, apparently originating in a cross-country trip he made in 1950, the first time he had seen the nation by automobile. The poetic result of Roethke's excursion was the "North American Sequence" . . . a sweeping view of the continent, from the Pacific Northwest to the Great Plains and the poet's beloved Michigan . . . and for mystical union with the forms of nature—plants, animals, rock, and water—that he had encountered in particular places in North America (130).

Yet for Roethke, each landscape is imbued with personal history, as Sullivan describes: "The sequence begins at the Pacific, yet Roethke often reminisces back through the interior continent to Saginaw, Michigan, landscape of youth and childhood, a movement which reproduces the interior journey into the deeper reaches of the self" (150). Similarly, Balakian describes Roethke's "almost ritualistic necessity of making passage—of voyaging toward something unknown. Roethke's territory is the topography of the journey out of the self; there is no passage *to*—only a passage ceaselessly unfolding . . . He converts the meaning of a frontier into a terrain of the

soul's progress" (133). In the process, the sequence defies simple chronological narration since it weaves repeatedly and without transition between the present and the past, a quality shared with *Four Quartets*: "For Eliot and Roethke the sense and identification of place are a stimulus to the memory as it moves back and forth from past to present" (Sullivan 155-56). Consequently, as Sullivan concludes, the "North American Sequence" is a poem with "no clear-cut paraphrasable meaning" (165), which may be why attempts to explicate this sequence so often seem circular.

La Belle traces Roethke's trajectories in the poem by setting them against Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Just as each of the *Quartets* takes its title from a particular location, so also Roethke's poems echo with place names: the Bullhead, the Dakotas, Oyster River, Michigan, the Tittabawasee, the Tombstone. For both poets these places have a double significance—the locations have personal and historic meaning . . . Roethke moves west rather than east, from Michigan to the Dakotas and the Rockies and finally to the Pacific Northwest. These east and west journeys recall the physical movement of each poet's life, but in their poems the cardinal concern is with a movement in the other direction, back from where they are to where they came from—the Midwest. These journeys into the interior—both of the self and of the continent—have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension . . . (155-56).

The sequence depicts "a symbolic journey westward through an American landscape" (Sullivan 157), inviting readers to experience the jumble of geography and memory from which personal and collective histories are conceived. Mills points out how Midwestern landscapes remembered from childhood, such as the spring breakup of river ice on the Tittabawasee, "correspond . . . with the present condition of the poet's inner life . . . analogous to his own spiritual advance" ("In the Way" 123).

Place names such as Tittabawasee repeatedly serve to ground passages in specific locales, as well as to trace the motion of the poem across various landscapes. According to Barillas, this "land aesthetic"—which I will term Roethke's poetics of place—demands particularity to establish "place as the true source of culture. America to him was rivers, lakes and landforms: it is the Bullhead and the Dakotas" (132). Accordingly, reference to specific place names is characteristic of the sequence as a whole. Abstractions will not suf-

fice. As Roethke recognized, our identities—individually and collectively—have both geographic and historical dimensions. Recognizing such dimensions is essential to appreciating the “North American Sequence.”

Seager actually opens *The Glass House* with a lyrical evocation of the upper Midwest as Roethke’s “birthplace” from Tocqueville’s travels on the Saginaw River in 1831, popularized in *Journey to America*, which depicts the region’s primordial, virgin forest in reverent tones (betraying both the romanticism and sexism of the era): “The river watered an immense forest . . . The wilderness was before us, just as six thousand years ago it showed itself to the father of mankind” (1). Roethke’s sensibilities developed in relation to this very landscape and his family’s history there:

He knew the “native” in American, the untamed in the dark wood, the primitive in the Indian, for he was of their world, as his Old World fathers tended virgin timber (the last pure Michigan stand in the First World War) and replanted forests felled by careless pioneers . . . The poet worshipped in the New World, a native, at the axed roots of virginal trees cleared for pastures. And the trees dwarfed him as they had staggered Columbus. (Lincoln 220-23)

At the opening of his essay, “An American Poet Introduces Himself and his Poems,” Roethke identifies with the Midwestern landscape and its history:

Everyone knows that America is a continent, but few Europeans realize the various and diverse parts of this land. The Saginaw Valley, where I was born, had been great lumbering country in the 1880’s. It is very fertile flat country in Michigan . . . It was this region that my grandfather came to in 1870 from Prussia, where he had been Bismark’s head forester. (7)

The timber boom of the late nineteenth century irrevocably altered the landscape of Michigan, converting primeval forest into cropland and second growth woodlands. Yet by the time of Roethke’s birth in 1908, that boom had run its course: “By 1900, it was all over. A few virgin stands of timber were left, islands in a sea of stumps” (Seager 6).

It is telling that Roethke would introduce himself as writer in this way, first and foremost in terms of geography and history. While the area had long been Algonquin/Sauk territory, an alliance of Chippewas, Huron, Pottawatamies, and Menominees had displaced them centuries before white settlement. Seager recounts the history

of Roethke’s childhood home: “Eventually all that was left of the Indians in the [Saginaw] valley was the sibilance of their place names, Saginaw, Shiwassee, Tittabawassee.” These are in fact the very sorts of places named in the “North American Sequence” (2). Seager points out that while as a boy Roethke “must have been aware of the Indians, for he collected a shoebox full of flint arrowheads in his rambles along the riverbanks,” it was not until late in his life that such prehistory emerges in his notebooks and poems (8). The “North American Sequence” became a vehicle for exploring his own relationship to place against this deep historical backdrop.

How might the actual geographic trajectory of Roethke’s life have shaped his relationship to place? His first personal foray into the American West actually came in 1947 at the behest of the University of Washington that had offered him a beginning position on the English faculty teaching literature and writing. George Lundberg, a professor there who had been instrumental in lobbying for Roethke’s appointment, sent him a letter playfully depicting what was to be expected when traveling through the storied “Wild West” en route to Seattle:

As for transportation out here, you will find that trains go as far as Missoula, Montana, after which you go by 24-mule team to Spokane and then walk the rest of the way. You should pick up an Indian squaw for a guide as Lewis and Clark did and she will take care of you the rest of the way . . . When you arrive, if you send up the proper smoke signals, Chief Seattle will conduct you to your lodgings . . . You can easily live off of the dead buffaloes the train will kill as it picks its way westward. Bring a full set of shooting irons because the Indians will be sniping at you from every bush and street corner. (qtd. in Seager 171)

Such a journey westward is, of course, among the most iconic narratives of America—explorers and soldiers, trappers and mountain men, pioneers and gold miners—wave after wave in the wake of Manifest Destiny. To “Go West” still evokes such a folk history, and with it a mythology of discovery and renewal. In the “North American Sequence,” Roethke is clearly an heir to this heritage and with it, to the counter narrative from a Native American perspective.

In the poem, this trope of the journey West as a personal quest across a storied landscape is linked to the vivid account of driving through such country himself. It was not until 1950 that he actually

had the chance to do so. As Seager recounts, "In September he bought his first car and drove it cross-country back to Seattle. The journey impressed him deeply. It was the first time he had experienced the breadth of the continent except in glances from a train window" (193). Soon after that trip, Roethke began a letter that reveals how immediately he viewed the experience as potential material for future writing: "I don't know just how the material will be resolved but for next or possibly later book will be a happy journey westward—not along the Oregon Trail but on Route 2; in a word, *a sym-bolical journey* in my cheap Buick Special toward Alaska" (194). Roethke himself apparently realized the audacious nature of the project, adding the following disclaimer in the next paragraph of his letter: "Grandiose? Perhaps but it's already more than a plan and will, I believe, have a real imaginative order without the support of the boring footnote or the pretentious allusion" (qtd. in Seager 194). That Eliot's *Four Quartets* might provide a foil (if not a prototype) had apparently not yet entered his mind.

He actually began composing the poems that would become the "North American Sequence" years later, in 1960-61, while living in England. He confided in a letter to critic and editor Louis Untermeyer in February that he was "trying to say something about America that I don't believe has been put down yet," and referring explicitly to "some longer pieces" he was working on already titled "Meditation at Oyster River" and "Journey to the Interior" (Seager 271). Seager speculates that this time abroad in Britain may have provided the distance—and perspective—that finally enabled him to frame the sequence. Little wonder that he would also have Eliot on his mind, given his proximity in London.

The final two years of Roethke's life were a flurry of creative activity. Seager reports that right up until the day of his death on August 1, 1963, Roethke "had been working hard every day getting the body of *The Far Field* poems ready to submit, changing, pruning, and polishing" (185). As he often did, Roethke seemed driven up until the last, trying to extend the reach of his imagination, his vision, his poetry:

He continued working on the poems that went into *The Far Field* and he seems to have been mulling over a work whose subject matter . . . would have been fresh and new, a sign of a change in the set of his mind from the long contemplation of the self to a world outside him-

self and past . . . He had been reading history about the Indians, for there were reference [in some of his last notes] to Custer, Crazy Horse, General Crook, Black Elk, and Chief Joseph. If we think in terms of the growth of Ted's mind, it seems to have taken nearly his whole lifetime to come to terms emotionally and spiritually with the presences of the Saginaw Valley. (Seager 279)

Rereading the "North American Sequence" with an eye to landscape and literature, geography and history—and, above all, the journey as metaphor for spiritual quest—suggests that it is, indeed, a central text for appreciating Roethke's poetics of place. In this magnificent sequence, we discover how a narrative of journeys across America has at last allowed him to explore the spiritual experience of nature in relation to landscape and history.

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NOTES

- ¹ Epigraphs from Roethke's notebooks published in *Straw for the Fire* (Wagoner).
- ² William Barillas suggests that "Roethke's ties to the Pacific Coast have been overstated, his Midwestern character too readily slighted" (136).
- ³ W.D. Snodgrass and M.L. Rosenthal were among the few critics in the 1960s to question initially its loose structure and "stock cosmic pieties" (Rosenthal 113).
- ⁴ In fact, in *On the Poet and His Craft*, Roethke equates his belief that "all living things, including the subhuman, can come to our aid in the quest for identity" with a primitive attitude: animism" (qtd. in Lincoln 219).
- ⁵ Given Roethke's organic process of composing poems, he did not follow the ideas outlined in this proposal to the letter, of course, as Seager notes.

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"AN INNER WEIGHT OF WOE": ECHOES OF SORROW AND THE ACT OF WEeping IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S PRAYERS AND ELEGIES

LISA M. BARKSDALE-SHAW

"As a child, Augustine said, one learns to 'avenge oneself by weeping'—and if one matures the same device by the use of adult material, one may paradoxically be said to have found a way of 'accepting' life even while symbolizing its 'rejection'" (Burke 44). Kenneth Burke offers this comment on the elegiac style in *Attitudes Toward History*.¹ Similarly, Theodore Roethke's poems, specifically his prayers and elegies, exact some existential satisfaction from the lamenting process. In a truly introspective manner, Roethke examines himself, the nature of loss, and his relationship with his higher moral authority, God. This natural and spiritual mourning manifests itself in the act of weeping. This intensely moving act of weeping reveals an intimate portrait of Roethke within the framework of these poems. Jacques Derrida, observes Gary Kuchar in his essay, "Andrew Marvell's Anamorphic Tears," asks: "What is weeping a metaphor or figure for? What does the body mean to say by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, or of saying, of meaning and of rhetoric?" (qtd. in Kuchar 345).

This paper considers how Roethke's poems serve as metaphors for weeping. I argue that Roethke's acts of weeping through his elegies and poems illustrate a tragic archetype, which manifests itself in trauma, confession and cathartic nature of tragedy. Not unlike their literary predecessors, his poems reverberate the voices of sympathetic and despairing moral quandary, which not only illustrate but shape the tortured soul. The influence of John Donne's elegies, valediction, and divine poems on Roethke's poems becomes difficult to ignore as he, years later, continues this conversation of self-analysis.

Donne exists within in a special class of what Lloyd Whitesell calls Roethke's "poetic forefathers" in his essay "Men with a Past: Music and the 'Anxiety of Influence'" (155). Throughout many of his poems, Roethke repeats the phrase, "I hear I hear" So attuned with nature, he constantly listens to his natural and spiritual environment for guidance. Specifically, in his poem, "In a Dark Time," Roethke writes: "I hear my echo in the echoing wood—/A lord of nature weeping to a tree"² (231). In this manner of weeping, he endeavors to discover his internal and external self in this traumatic journey. He tries, through these prayers and elegies, to juxtapose the paradoxes that he unveils, flee them, and then attempts to abandon this self-imposed mourning to carve out what can only be called hope.

Roethke's elegies and prayers present a compelling act of weeping. As he examined the notebooks that he had accumulated for years, the poet developed a working method that turned these memories from his personal history into poems. His biographer, Allan Seager, suggested the poet possessed "a pointillist memory—small echoes, single lines." Yet, he struggled with expanding upon those single lines to achieve a greater objective, in his own words: "What I want is themes" (164). After rereading the many notebooks that he had accumulated over the years, Roethke was able to recover the memories of his childhood. Like someone who had experienced great trauma, his own words were "mosaics of lines written months, even years apart, gathered from different notebooks" which evolved into a conception and eventually a poem—eventually many poems (164). In this process, Roethke was able to recover memories that had been traumatically silenced by his father's physical death and his mother's emotional absence. Within these moments of recovery, he recovers from the trauma of rejection, reveals the suffering of his personal tragedy, recognizes his own culpability through confession, and creates a cathartic movement from despair to hope. These acts of weeping are examined through the lenses of Aristotelian theory of tragedy and catharsis, Augustinian and Derridian confession, and trauma theory. However, not only is Roethke able to recover his memories in spite of his significant moment of trauma, the death of his father, his prayers and elegies serve as illustrative episodes in his recovery process. He effectively translates his psychological injuries into moments of healing.

Elegies can be traced to a long literary tradition that is both biblical and classical. Lamentations, emphasizes David R. Veerman, has been referred to as the "book of tears" and authored by Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet."³ book is a dirge written in the style of ancient Jewish funeral songs or chants. Lamentations emphasizes prayer and confession and has a message of hope in the midst of tragedy. Although Joseph Reed argues in his essay "Ovid's Elegy on Tibullus and Its Models" that Ovid derives his style from Greek antecedents like Bion of Smyrna's "Epitaph on Adonis," in which songs of celebration shift to weeping lamentations of death, the Roman classical poet's elegies serve as models for many poets (261). Easily adaptable, these poets imitate, Jeanne Addison Roberts insists in her essay on Ovidian influence in Early Modern poetry, this classical predecessor's conversational tone, verse forms, themes, and poetic conventions for their own purposes. Some of Ovid's themes include "exile, death, and the influence of capricious gods on men" (52). Although many poets, like Shakespeare and Milton, find several aspects of the Ovidian elegies to emulate, they define their own meanings and values. Since Ovid, *Three Old English Elegies*, compiled by R.F. Leslie, preserves the tenth-century elegies "The Wife's Lament," "The Husband's Message," and "The Ruin."

Like the elegy and lamentation in *Beowulf*, these poems, which find refuge in the elegiac form, have powerfully dramatic and psychological aspects.⁴ They strongly evoke a mood of loneliness, sorrow and woe (2-4, 11). Emphasizing loss and mutability, John Donne's elegies, written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, relate to a sense of elegy and lament and are considered love poems. His poems reveal "a pattern of intermingled lament, eulogy and consolation" more complex than in any of the funeral elegies proper, submits W.M. Lebars in "Donne's Anniversaries and the Tradition of Elegy," and "intensified by juxtaposing the expression of grief and despair with the sense of the qualities that the world has lost on the death of the subject of the elegy" (550). Theodore Roethke gleans much from Donne's style and tone. He adeptly illustrates the conventions' painful loss, sorrowful woe, and poetic tribute. Although Helen Gardner makes considerable comparisons between Donne and Shakespeare, this modern poet "is [also] stimulated by situations, some literary, some imagined, some reflecting the circumstances of his own life, by things seen on the stage or read in the study, or said by friends in casual conversation to make poems" (xviii

[insert added]). Yet, this act of weeping within his elegies presents a person who is developing an inner conflict beyond the mourning of those persons eulogized. Notably, the book of tears declares that "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (1323). Divine compassion lies in the hint of hope, according to Jeremiah. This hope that Roethke expresses in his elegies exceeds Donne's consolation.

Despite their breadth, these elegies and prayers demonstrate Roethke's underlying struggle with the concept of woe in this act of weeping. When considering the biblical and literary antecedents of the phrase, "woe is me," they become relevant. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the source of the phrase with a reference to a verse in the Book of Job: "Woe unto me: I am distressed, afflicted, unfortunate, grieved" (OED).⁵ This reference offers an insightful glimpse into the image that Roethke creates in these despairing poems. In these prayers and elegies, the poet examines the source and consequences of his afflicted, and sometimes conflicted, state in the act of weeping. His final stanza in the poem, "Silence," from *Open House* remarks:

If I should ever seek relief
From that monotony of grief,
The tight nerves leading to the throat
Would not release one riven note:
What shakes my skull to disrepair
Shall never touch another ear. (21)

Within this grief, Roethke discovers the source, yet *his* silence creates an emotional paralysis. He creates striking imagery to convey both psychic and physical turmoil. Yet, this wordlessness causes a problem. Trauma theory scholar Laurie Vickroy explains the problem of silence: "Silence can represent a traumatic gap, a withholding of words because of terror, guilt, or coercion; it characterizes traumatic memory as wordless, visual, and reenactive rather than cognitive/verbal when facing the unspeakable" (187).

As Roethke moves beyond recovered memory to the actual subject of his woebegone trauma, he consciously determines to safeguard such secrets. He dutifully protects the secrets from revelation. For even if his mind relinquished those secrets, his body would rebel against any traitorous attempts. Vickroy further opines that "the desire to repress knowledge can come from motivations as disparate

as personal fear, ideology, or maintaining social order" (170). Roethke's silence in the face of working out his psychic trauma may suggest his susceptibility to that "masculine stoicism" which was prevalent at the turn of the century, notes Vickroy, and would have been an expectation in his phlegmatic household (16).

This theme of woe is most pronounced in his poem entitled, "Elegy" from the collection of poems in *Words for the Wind* (138). Although Frederick Lenz posits the constant tension created by Roethke's battle between his spiritual aspirations and his physical desires, the poet presents a poignant illustration of sorrowful grief (96-97). This overwhelming burden from which he suffers can only be relieved by the divine. In this poem, Roethke begins the first stanza with the philosopher's war with reason, sin, guilt, and the potential for redemption:

Should every creature be as I have been,
There would be reason for essential sin;
I have myself an inner weight of woe
That God himself can scarcely bear. (138)

In this elegy, Roethke offers a logical justification for the sin in which he has indulged.⁶ Yet, for this indulgence, he must surrender to this wretched existence. This disconsolate state requires living with this internal sorrow that he can barely seek forgiveness from the divine. In his essay, "Augustine, Aynbrite, and Ulysses," Mitchell Morse analyzes Augustine's concept of "essential sin" and in one line of analysis considers sin with the eyes (1157, 1154). Here, Roethke's use of the phrase "essential sin" harks back to Augustine, who suggested that "all sins can be summed under three heads: the lusts of the flesh, intellectual curiosity and pride" (1149). Even though Morse highlights that Augustine believed that the essential sin is pride, this modern poet uses Augustine's three heads of sin in each of the prayers and elegies as his source of woe in this act of weeping. The second couplet describes the depth of the natural and spiritual burden that Roethke bears: "I have myself an inner weight of woe / That God himself can scarcely bear" (138). His description effectively offers the listener a sense of the tremendous internal and external burden that the poet possesses. The repetition of this couplet in the second and final stanza evolves from merely beckoning to demanding the listener's empathy. In an essay on rhythm, Roethke wrote that "repetition in word and phrase and in idea is the very

essence of poetry . . . and rhythm gives us the very psychic energy of the speaker" (*On the Poet and His Craft* 77, 79). This elegy becomes his own song of lamentation where he struggles, through its rhythms and repetition, to move beyond the trauma. Vickroy maintains that "within the traumatic context, repetition can be an attempt to attack one's own fears" (90). As noted earlier in the poem, "Silence," disclosure of these psychic secrets becomes Roethke's fear.

In the third stanza, Roethke reveals his vulnerability: "I have myself one crumbling skin to show; God could believe: I am here to fear" (138). In this mode, he offers a redemptive persona where his "crumbling skin" demonstrates a literal and figurative existence. Roethke's crumbling skin represents the evolution of his mortal and his spiritual body. At this place of psychic trauma, he acknowledges his own mortality and the temporal frame in which it resides. Within this act of weeping, there is both confession and the hope associated with the cathartic release and with the poet's "access to language" that will relieve his emotional burden (90). Roethke, like the weeping prophet Jeremiah, clings to the hope of divine compassion that God will bear the weight of his woe. In the midst of this fear, he begins to understand the reason for his existence.⁷ By the fourth stanza, in recognizing his own mortality and God's immortality, Roethke achieves a successful audience before God where He "leans down His heart to hear" as the poet grieves (138).

Like most elegies, loss becomes a recurring theme throughout Roethke's poems. However, within this act of weeping, the poet conveys a loss without succor that surpasses tradition. His father's death occurred during a life-defining period of his youth. Roethke was inconsolable, yet his familial and cultural duty was to demonstrate unwavering fortitude. Citing one of the leading trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth, Vickroy avers that "faithfulness to the dead is a common burden of traumatized survivors" (8).⁸ The poet's indefatigable faithfulness to the dead may explain his adeptness for elegy. Unsurprisingly, Donne's poem, "A Funeral Elegy," conveys a sense of loss: "Tis loss, to trust a tomb with such a guest/ Or to confine her in a marble chest" (283). Donne expresses a slight resentment for having to yield this young woman to the soil, however hallowed. Likewise, in "Elegy for Jane" from *The Waking* and "Elegy" from *The Far Field*, Roethke regretfully laments the death of two different women. In the "Elegy for Jane," the poet reveals the considerable sorrow experienced when a young person dies accidentally. He

describes her youthful essence as commingled nature's elements. He reminisces about this student Jane whose "neckcurls" and "sidelong" smile are likened to the most delicate plants and her character to the smallest birds. Yet, Roethke's elegies surpass those of Donne where this modern poet conveys inconsolable grief:

My sparrow, you are not here,
Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,
Nor the moss, wound the last light. (98)

Her very existence influenced not only man, but also plant and animal. He expresses the depth of the loss that he feels about her unexpected death barely compares to that of a father or love, yet the loss overwhelms him.

Roethke illustrates a different sense of lamentation in the 1964 poem, "Elegy," where this act of weeping is imbued with rejection. This act represents the agony within tragic sorrow. The woman mourned in the poem represents those persons who live on the periphery of life. Unlike "Elegy for Jane," his loss does seem consolable. The tone has a cross-pollination with woe and self-satisfaction. In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, David Richter assesses Aristotle's influence on literary theory and asserts that Aristotle believed many tragic portrayals of suffering and woe achieve "through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (46). With this woman he laments, the poet describes someone who has lived a significant portion of her life, as evidenced by "her face like rain-beaten stone" (215). Again, this description mimics William Butler Yeats's 1914 poem, "The Magi,"

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye
In their stiff, painted clothes the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones. (Ramazani 167)

Roethke effortlessly weaves Yeats's line into his own elegy. This noble woman persevered through the challenges that life presented herself and others. She served others in a manner that demonstrated a natural and spiritual selflessness. Still, this charitable woman did not, as Dylan Thomas said, "go gentle into that good night." She died a painful death after having "rage[d], rage[d] against the dying of the

light," against those who would harry the good, the defenseless, the poor (1181). In this poem, Roethke borrows the phrase, "betrayers of the poor," from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (1904). With the use of both Yeats's and Conrad's phrases, Roethke effectively amplifies the listener's outrage that this dissatisfied and betrayed woman must be avenged by the listener's weeping. Her worth does not culminate until the listener acknowledges, along with the poet, this woefully tragic loss. This worth moves from the periphery to the center, if only for a moment. Although in "Elegy for Jane," the poet wants to wake young Jane from her death sleep, in this 1964 elegy, the depth of his loss of Aunt Tilly becomes diminished by the comforting image of her continuing her selfless work in a more heavenly venue.

The tradition of prayer is well documented in biblical and literary forms. Psalms is pre-eminently the book of prayers and praise. In these few verses, Psalms 32 presents an ardent example of confession as an act of weeping:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered
When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the
day long.

For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is
turned into the drought of summer. Selah.

I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid.
I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest
the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (978)

Reminiscent of the passages of Lamentations, here divine compassion comes after an unexpurgated confession. With humility, David seeks forgiveness of his sins. He acknowledges that failing to confess only increased his torment. Donne's "Divine Poem No. 3" emphasizes the integral relationship between weeping and confession in the following excerpt:

O might those sighs and tears return again
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
That I might in this holy discontent
Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain;
In mine idolatry what showers of rain
Mine eyes did waste! What griefs my heart did rent!
That sufferance was my sin, now I repent;
Because I did suffer I must suffer pain. (310)

Donne offers sorrowful woe with his ineffective sighs and weeping. He recognizes that he causes his own misery for his sins. Yet Donne cannot find absolution from his confession because he has not actually relinquished his transgression: "To poor me is allowed/No ease; for, long, yet vehement grief hath been/The effect and cause, the punishment and sin" (310). The idea of the weeping confession is complicated further by the scholarship of Augustine and Derrida. In his article, "Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer," John D. Caputo argues that what lies beyond being for Derrida is "tears, prayers and tears, tears shed beyond being, prayers sent like sighs beyond being, truth, and knowledge (95)." The weeping and the sighs create a higher level of truth and rationality than mere words because they become inextricably a part of and contiguous to the prayer act. He also suggests that "a prayer is a performative act 'the very act of directing one's words to God is the prayer' with a unique reflexivity, so that to pray for the prayer itself, to pray that one be able to pray is already to pray" (100). Here, an articulated intent to confess is included within the framework of prayer. The act of praying is complete when the confessor internally decides to confess—before making an external attempt. This notion of intent is not unfamiliar, as it has been used in civil and criminal jurisprudence for centuries. Even further, in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (1997), Caputo argues, consistent with my thesis, that for Derrida, the act of weeping encompasses the performative act that is prayer (292).⁹ In sum, prayers demand earnestly humble petitions, which are presented with weeping and sighs.¹⁰

In a 1948 poem from *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, Roethke offers a compelling confession with more vivid imagery in his response to what at best can be determined is a newspaper photograph of the decaying aged and starving children. This image of the malnourished children with swollen bellies and the decrepit elderly with graying faces beleaguered the poet from morning until night. As the image of newborns birthed into this state of starvation haunted him, the poet sought the ear of the divine. He petitions God for a heavenly favor for the human race: "May the blessings of life, O Lord, descend on the living" (46). Yet, when the poet considers those people whom he deemed as less worthy of a divine blessing, he petitions God again for a gentle death for them: "On all these, Death, with gentleness, come down" (46). This request for a judgment of

death becomes no surprise. He describes these "fallen" men and women as decaying human beings whose lifestyles of debauchery already posit them on the precarious demarcation line between life and death. Ironically, this poem is entitled, "Judge Not." Is the irony in the title intentional? The simple answer is yes, but such an answer is not without complexities. After having convicted these men and women, Roethke appears to struggle between the natural desire to help the helpless and the spiritual need to help, unwaveringly, the entire human race—whether sinful or sinless. In this fashion, like Donne, Roethke's prayer of confession becomes intertwined with a seemingly unrepentant theme.

The phrase "confessional poets" was derived from Robert Lowell's intimate expression of mental and physical experiences in *Life Studies* and attributed to those American poets whose narrative and lyrical style fostered similarly personal poems as opposed to the impersonal qualities that T.S. Eliot and other poets maintained, notes L.S. Dembo (415-416). Although many of these confessional poets expressed non-Christian subject matter, Roethke seemed to embrace the religious foundations upon which these poems borrowed from Augustine's *Confessions*. Likewise, Jacques Derrida embraced the spiritual nature of Augustine's *Confessions* in his own essay, "Circumfession." In *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confession and Circumfession*, John Caputo observes that Derrida defines the word, "circumfession," as "not so much a confession of an event—which would be an intentional act on my part—as an event of confession, which would overtake me" (4). Caputo asserts that within this event of confession, "*Circumfession* tells the surprising story of Derrida's conversion from these secular texts and languages to a certain Hebrew, to his life of faith and passion, of prayers and tears" (*Prayers and Tears* 285). This definition, for Derrida, makes the act of confession the central focus rather than the confession itself. As noted earlier, the intention of the confessor becomes paramount. In his introduction to *Augustine and Postmodernism*, Caputo contends:

If "Circumfession," or any other confession made in *litteris*, is to be a success, we will all find our stories there. We are all (at some time or another) observing a death watch over our mother; we are all circumcut from the faith of our childhood home; we have all stolen grapes or pears or something; and we all confess to rightly pass for an atheist, or a theist—at least, at best, rightly passing for something. (6)

He avers that one's faith will be relative to an individual's culture and experiences. Each person forges his or her own faltering path within this faith. In each of these confessions, Augustine and Derrida reveal secrets. Augustine reveals his struggle with the flesh. Although perceived an atheist, Derrida reveals the secret that he, reared in the Jewish faith, actually prays.

In his meditations, Augustine confesses specific transgressions of his five senses in Book X, entitled, "Memories." Along with the other senses, he reveals the concupiscence of his flesh (touch) and of the eyes (223-235). Roethke situates himself before this spiritual audience in his poem, entitled, "Prayer," from *Open House*. Here, Roethke prepares himself for loss in his grief. Although considered by David Rampton as "the most inward-looking American poet of the twentieth century," Roethke presents himself as contemplating which of his five senses he would keep if he had to lose the others (53). This poet's natural awareness of his physical elements somehow translates nature and spirit together. For Roethke they are one. As he prays, Roethke readily abandons those senses that represent fleshly sin:

My Tongue is generations dead,
My Nose defiles a comely head;
For hearkening to evils
My Ears have been the very devil's
And some have held the Eye to be
The instrument of lechery,
More furtive than the Hand in low
And vicious venery—Not so! (8)

While the tongue has become useless, and the nose tainted, the eyes garner much of Roethke's attention in this spiritual request. Although sight has been reputed to be a conspirator of evil, the poet protests this moniker. Because the eyes cannot rape, the safety found in his eyesight is comparable to the safety of a virgin with a eunuch. Conceding that the hand succumbs to fleshly desire, the eyes are likened to the most sacred love—Platonic. The eyes represent "so singular a blessedness" (8). In this line of the poem, Roethke echoes not only Donne's but also Shakespeare's fascination with divine love particularly in this reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "singleblessedness" (1.1.78).¹¹ So pure are the eyes that this divine blessedness is associated with a life dedicated to celibacy, thereby untainted by sin. The eyes conspire to usher forth this divine love.

Although the other four senses are surrendered, this sense of sight gives the speaker a closer proximity to nature and a closer proximity to the divine.

The act of weeping includes the portrayal of tragedy. David Richter explores tragedy as expressed in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle defined tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, having magnitude, complete in itself" in the medium of poetic language and in the manner of dramatic rather than of narrative presentation, involving "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions" (qtd in Richter 46). The experience of tragedy takes one to the heights and depths of emotions. Yet, rather than a deluge of grief, one experiences the exalted state of catharsis. Catharsis, according to its Greek derivation, means purgation or purification (OED). The poet may, in his recovered memory, divest himself of the pain and trauma of his childhood. In her book, *Bodily Discourses*, Michelle Payne argues that "pain is language destroying" (xxii). However, Roethke demonstrates that during trauma, language can be recovered. For the reader, catharsis has the effect of the pleasure of pity and fear.

The act of weeping may include tears of despair as evidence of psychic pain. This struggle with despair is illustrated in the poem, "Prayer Before Study" from *Open House* (23). The tone and mood of this prayer do not exude the hopeful tenor of the weeping prophet Jeremiah but are somehow closer to the despairing King David's book of Psalms. Here, Roethke begs God to deliver him from himself. He wishes to flee the introverted mask of solemnity that he exudes for a more meaningful relationship to himself and his surroundings. This plea is powerful: "Deliver me, O Lord, from all/ Activity centripetal" (23). John Freccero's discussion of Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" shifts the attention to Dante where Roethke's couplet echoes one of Dante's angels from *Vita nuova* who, appearing as Love, admonishes: "I am as the center of a circle, to which all parts of the circumference stand in equal relation; you, however, are not so [emphasis original]" (335). Although Dante and the other humanists did not reside in the perfect circle that represents angelic love, they also avoided, according to Freccero, moving directly and insatiably to the center as beasts are wont to do (336). Roethke believes that he resides in that bestial center, unable to break the shackles of his fleshly prison: "Constricted by my tortured thought, I am too centered on this spot" (23). Yet, he demanded more

of himself. His plea for God's deliverance also mimics several petitions that strong King David, who conquered man, woman and beast, makes in the book of Psalms: "Deliver me O LORD from mine enemies: I flee unto thee to hide me. Be pleased, O LORD to deliver me: O Lord make haste to help me" (1069, 988).¹² Like David, Roethke seeks help. He desires to be rescued from a seemingly natural and spiritual bondage that inhibits the poet. He observes that he has become too satisfied with his static condition. Frederick Lenz contends that Roethke's "even progression of the octosyllabic couplets creates a feeling that the poet is pacing back and forth in a confined area longing to break out of his confinement" (97). He develops an awareness that he has become his own impediment. In this self-awareness, Roethke follows Emerson's epiphany in his *Essays, First Series*, "History," where he writes:

There is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time. As the air I breathe is drawn from the great repositories of nature, as the light on my book is yielded by a star a hundred millions of miles distant, as the poise of my body depends on the equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, so the hours should be instructed by the ages and the ages explained by the hours.

Here, Emerson expands upon Roethke's dire need to move beyond his fleshly nature where he can aspire to greater purpose. For every thought that the poet can untangle from his hindered mind, he may achieve this revolution to which Emerson espouses.

When faced with tragic psychic sorrow, the weeping prophet of the book of tears, Jeremiah, called for the "mourning women" who would "take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids gush out with waters."¹³ In "Women in the Economic Life of Late-Ottoman Damascus," James Reilly explores the social, cultural and economic lifestyles of women in this ancient locale. These women were professional mourners hired by the general public to lament the deceased with their skillful grieving (98). In this tradition, Theodore Roethke, a professional mourner in his own right, portrays the act of weeping in each of its facets within his prayers and elegies. The act of weeping evolves from the tragic death of his father whose rejection by death represses childhood memories later to be recovered by the act of writing. Roethke recalls his torment and despair as he imperfectly navigates his traumatic psyche. In her essay on trauma and recovery, Karen DeMeester suggests that

modernist literature is a literature of trauma . . . which reveals why modernist forms are so well-suited for depicting the traumatized mind but ill-suited for depicting recovery. . . Trauma inevitably damages the victim's faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world and leaves him struggling to find new, more reliable ideologies . . . to give order and meaning to his post-traumatic life. (649-650)¹⁴

Although Roethke struggles mightily with the weight of his woe that becomes almost too much for him to bear, he finds some level of recovery. His confessional poems encapsulate these struggles. With some help of his "poetic forefathers" like Donne, Shakespeare and Yeats, Roethke creates the echoes of these skillful mourners. He avenges himself through his poems, in Augustinian fashion, beyond the space of rejection to a space of acceptance. Eventually, his act of weeping, his creating poetry, moves from a place of despair to one of hope. Roethke's unconscious purpose may have been to bring faint echoes of divine matters to earthly ears to hear the call of woes, so hearers might develop their own lamentation in overcoming despair to arrive at hope.¹⁵

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NOTES

- ¹Kenneth Burke refers to the "elegiac" as "the wailing wall." The word, "wailing," is mentioned several times in the ninth chapter of the book of Jeremiah. See Zertal, Idith. "From the People's Hall to the Wailing Wall: A Study in Memory, Fear, and War." *Representations* 69 (2000):96-126 for further discussion of the Wailing Wall (or Western Wall), a Jewish religious site in Jerusalem.
- ²All references to Theodore Roethke poems are to his book entitled, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (1975) unless otherwise cited. Jenijoy LaBelle uses a phrase from this line for her book entitled, *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (1976).
- ³All references to biblical verses are to the *Life Application Study Bible* (LASB) in which David R. Veerman is a contributor. The reference to this text will appear as the initials only within these notes.
- ⁴Leslie, 2. See "the elegy of the last survivor in Beowulf, lines 2247-66 and the father's lament in lines 2444-62 of the same poem."
- ⁵LASB, (915 [italics original]). Job 10:15: "If I be wicked, woe unto me; and if I be righteous, yet will I not lift up my head. I am full of confusion; therefore see thou mine affliction."
- ⁶Although for sometime I considered alternating the phrase, "the speaker," in reference to the voice in the poem, this proposition was rejected. I argue that Roethke is the speaker in his poems. Interestingly, Allan Seager writes that Roethke's material "was his own experience (which included his readings; which included a greenhouse and a father; which included madness) and the ideas or notions he had arrived at—but he wrote not in order to embody ideas; he wrote to make poems. Out of love for not the poetic art, he wrote to

make objects of that art" (xii). Seager also notes that Roethke "saw poetry as a mode of expressing truth" (59).

⁷LASB, 1090. Proverbs 9:10: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

⁸For texts on trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, see *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; and, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

⁹Sagaser, Elizabeth Harris. "Shakespeare's Sweet Leaves: Mourning Pleasure, and the Triumph of Thought in the Renaissance Love Lyric," *ELH*, 61.1 (1994): 14. Citing Rosmarin, Sagaser insists that the soliloquy, specifically Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, is "the most sincere speech act" (14).

¹⁰There are several biblical passages that discuss other acts, like supplication, included within the prayer act. For instance, Philippians 4:6: "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (LASB, 2091).

¹¹Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream. The Norton Shakespeare Based on the Oxford Edition*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997, 816.

¹²LASB, 1069, 988. Psalms 143:9 and 40:13.

¹³LASB, 1251. Jeremiah 9:17-18.

¹⁴Consider Freud's theory of trauma and W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness on one's sojourn to an identity.

¹⁵Grover-Friedlander, Michel. "Echoed Above." *The Opera Quarterly* 21.4 (2005): 675. Grover-Friedlander cites Michel Poizat who in discussing the medieval treatise, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, writes: "It is a seraphim's task to transmit these divine and silent hymns down through the celestial ranks, one sphere at a time, until the musicians of the terrestrial church, discerning the faint echo of the heavenly songs, convey them, in the form of a now audible music, to human ears. It is in this sense...that one can speak of the 'angel's silent song.'"

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FIVE POEMS FOR THEODORE ROETHKE

ROD PHILLIPS

In September 1935, at the age of twenty-seven, the poet Theodore Roethke took a teaching position in the English Department at what was then called Michigan State College. Roethke rented a small room at the Campus Hotel in East Lansing and settled into the routine of teaching courses in freshman composition.

He was, by all accounts, a remarkable teacher. Blending a poet's sensitivity for language with a sincere interest in his students' ideas and their development as writers, Roethke's courses were a welcome change from the grammar drills and formulaic five-paragraph themes that characterized most college composition classes of the era.

The poet's stay at Michigan State was troubled, however. In November, midway through the fall quarter, he suffered the first of what would be several mental breakdowns. Roethke became obsessed by his reading of the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's mystical diary, written while he was in an asylum in San Moritz. Fueled by heavy alcohol consumption, enormous doses of coffee and Coca-Cola, and by Nijinsky's insistence that the path to knowing reality truly was through a trancelike madness, Roethke spiraled into in a psychotic break that left him wandering shoeless, freezing, and incoherent in the woods near campus.

Treatment, first at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing and then at Mercywood Sanitarium near Ann Arbor, gradually allowed the poet to regain his footing, but his time at Michigan State was over.

The Ledge

"he glows for a moment
on the extremest verge."
Walt Whitman,
Leaves of Grass

Since I first heard the story
 I can't look at Morrill Hall
 without seeing you, Ted Roethke,
 slipping out the window
 of your second story classroom
 on that gray fall morning of 1935.
 Easing along the thin wooden ledge
 that girdles the rust colored building—
 an unwieldy bear on a tightrope,
 with no other purpose in mind
 but to give your class the gift
 of a fresh, unexplored essay topic—
 ("Now watch" you told them
 as you backed out the window
 "Write about this.")
 I see you waving at them, making faces
 through the rippling distortion
 of the thick window glass.
 Glowing for a moment on that ledge,
 that high thin extremest verge,
 just six weeks before your breakdown—
 the dizzying fall from sanity
 that ended your brief time here
 at this Midwestern cow college,
 and closed you behind the barred
 windows of Mercywood Sanitarium.

The Campus Hotel

"I want to write and cannot. I can write in a trance
 and that trance is called *wisdom*."

The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky

No sleep for three nights,
 none needed, only the pounding
 drum solos of Gene Krupa
 on the small record player
 in your rented room, and coffee,
 and Cokes—endless coffee and Cokes.

You paced, danced alone, and read aloud—
 Auden, Shakespeare, that simpleton Robert Frost,
 and Vaslav Nijinsky, the Russian dancer's mystical insanity
 pulsing to Krupa's cymbals and traps,
 given meaning and measure
 by the shaking of your pale hands and the rush
 of blood flowing in the solid bone of your own skull:

*"I went on and came to a tree. The tree told me that no one could
 talk here, because human beings do not understand feelings. I went
 on. I was sorry to part with the tree because the tree understood me."*

It was all too big to keep indoors;
 if the trees had souls as Nijinsky said
 you had to verify this immediately,
 before clarity was lost and you fell
 back into the world of man.

In the darkened street below
 Krupa faded, his rhythms replaced
 by your labored breathing,
 as you ran towards the fellowship
 of elms and sycamores.

The Secret of Nijinsky

It was the creaking of the trees
 in the night wind that brought you back
 into yourself, sweating and shivering
 in the November woods, waking
 from a two day vision, stumbling
 out of the campus woodlot into the glare
 of headlights, the slamming of car doors,
 their murmurs of "drunk" and "crazy."

You stood squinting and shivering
 in the 2:00 A.M. headlights,
 your incoherent words leaving you
 in frozen plumes: "The trees. . . alive. . .
 the stones. . . Nijinsky. . .
 I know the secret of Nijinsky."

A stranger wrapped a blanket
around your heaving shoulders
as you were helped into a cab,
the turning car's headlights
swept across the woods,
the trees glowing a moment
with an electric light
that only you noticed.

There is Another Story

There is a story about the next morning,
a crazy quilt made from scraps
of your threadbare genius.
They say you showed up
at your 8:00 class, dressed only
in a bathrobe and one shoe,
teetering on the edge of the abyss.
They say that you hurriedly assigned
a narrative about some interesting event
in their 18 year old lives, and dismissed them,
trying to get home before the world imploded.
But before you could make the safety of the door
a young woman in the back of the room
called out: "But Professor Roethke,
nothing interesting ever happens to us."

They want to believe that you turned,
winced, threw open your robe, and yelled:
"NOW something interesting has happened;
go home and write your paper about THIS!"

The truth is less appealing.
You cut your class that day
and found yourself in the dean's outer office,
demanding to see that "Harvard son-of-a-bitch,"
pacing and ranting about Nijinsky,
trying to explain the unexplainable
vision of the glowing trees,
as the final ambulance was called

that would take you away
on soft rubber tires and tranquilizers.

Later, when a doctor began to suggest
that mental states like yours had produced
some of history's finest literature,
you cut him off in mid-sentence,
braced his arm and asked
"Don't you know what poems like that cost?"

At Mercywood Sanitarium

As you doze into your medication,
the clanking steam heat of the sunny dayroom
recalls your long-dead father's greenhouse,
but the flowers here have no scent.
You stare past your carpet slippers at floral linoleum—
trailing vines of rose and geranium under scuffed wax.
No sound, save the ramblings of the broken Ford dealer
from Mount Clemens, the soft slap of cards
from an endless lobotomized euchre game,
the false and cheerful optimism of nurses
mocked by their own squeaking shoes.

Only in the dark hydrotherapy chamber, "the Baths,"
do you again feel the tug of your senses. Eyes closed,
head thrown back, floating in the great metal whirlpool,
the water is the Saginaw River, the pulsing pump
the bittern's call.

James Madison College
Michigan State University

A MOST MUSICAL POET: AN OPERA COMPOSER REMEMBERS REMEMBERS THEODORE ROETHKE'S CLASS

WILLIAM BOLCOLM

In 1956 I was a precocious, obnoxious eighteen-year-old, a sophomore English minor at The University of Washington in Seattle, majoring in music, when I was accepted in Theodore Roethke's poetry class as a secondary student. In my class was the great poet James Wright. Already published and famous but sitting at the master's feet, other class luminaries included William Kittredge—all of these people much older than I—and I had told the great man that I only wanted to understand how to set poetry, in what I felt the best way to do so: to try my hand at it myself.

Roethke had an odd, gangsterish demeanor in class, probably taken on to support the dubious legend of his involvement with transporting bootleg liquor in the twenties. A fattish man, often in seersucker suits, he sounded a little like George Raft and looked even more like Sydney Greenstreet, but the tough guy image was undercut by his long, slim, sensitive hands with which he gesticulated emphatically to show the beat pattern of a poem he was reciting. His study of lyrical poetry concentrated on line lengths—trimeters, tetrameters, and the like. We were asked to find examples of each length we liked, and he would then read poem examples (often from the seventeenth century) we were to admire. In our writing assignments I did do a couple of poems he professed to like, but as my goal had never been to become a poet, perhaps my work did not excite his strong competitive streak; he did have a large careerist bump, caring a good deal about his standing in the poetry world.

After each course (we had three quarters, so this was three times in the year I studied with him) he would march us all to the Red Robin, a tavern over the University Bridge, where he would buy 3.2

beer for all of us for the first hour. I was underage, but no one checked my ID; I was regularly playing piano in bars, burlesque houses, at frat parties, and the like to pay my way through school, and I was never carded in all that time!

The other youngster in class was the wildly talented Canadian poet Errol Pritchard, whom Roethke was quite excited by. Errol and I were great friends; he was clearly homosexual and I think TR thought that Errol and I were having an affair. Pritchard had a beautiful furred speaking voice, and TR asked him to do a poetry reading of Roethke's work. It was a time when many major poets gravitated to Seattle—Randall Jarrell, Stanley Kunitz, Carolyn Kizer, and other well-known names came to reside and read. I have often been asked about Richard Hugo, who, like Roethke, had taken on an unlikely persona, sort of like Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones*, with a motorcycle jacket which hardly went with his soft doughy figure; all I can remember is that Hugo hung on the periphery of the TR crowd at the other major poets' watering hole, the Blue Moon.

Roethke was the most musical of poets, a terrifically shy man underneath the bluster, and I feel I owe him a very large part of whatever skill I have acquired in setting poetry. A large cycle with orchestra, "Open House," and my Fourth Symphony containing a setting of "The Rose" are my most important settings of his work, but I'm hardly alone in finding Roethke gratifying to set. His sense of the plasticity of vowel and consonant, the physical feel of the word, are what attract so many composers to his work.

University of Michigan

A SMALL REFLECTION, A SLIGHT OBSERVATION

HERBERT WOODWARD MARTIN

I never sat in a class that Theodore Roethke taught, although I wish I might have. I think I did the next best thing. I was associated with a group of students at The University of Toledo who delighted in coming upon a poem that had in it a unique turn of phrase, a startling image, and, above all else, some stately music. I am not so sure who introduced me to "My Papa's Waltz," and that infectious villanelle "The Waking," with its abrupt end-stopped lines:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Was it Wayne Threema, or Mary-Ella Holst Hall? No matter—one of them had somehow discovered Roethke and wanted immediately to share their findings with everyone else on campus who had declared their secret designs on becoming a poet.

On hindsight we were amazed at how much could be said with so few words. It was amazing, miraculous; it was magic. How had it been done? Could we detect the underlying structure? Would it show us how to do it? Was there a shadow we could imitate? What one word drove the poem around the corner into new territory? We were an excited group of individuals all trying to discover our identifiable voice as well as say something refreshingly new. Pound's utterance was already in the air, "Make it new, boys!" and we were aiming for that in particular, but again on hindsight, we missed the mark hugely. Still I must say that Roethke's poem took on the dreaded familiar Waltz King's strict form of 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3. He was impeccable in matching this dance rhythm to poetry.

The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

Then the poet brilliantly does the unexpected when the poem's rhythms are transformed into something else in the second and fourth lines of stanza one and three when it is danced by the slightly inebriated father. It is the words: "dizzy, easy, knuckle and buckle" that embellishes the rhythm. Similarly, stanzas one and three stagger between two and four. Thus, stanza and words delineate the misstep of the father. His inability to balance every action and to keep everything orderly is brilliantly shown. And that is contrasted with the mother's furiously calm demeanor, which the observant child notices while equally not knowing that she or he is trapped between these two parents. So much energy and gesture are packed into these eighteen lines, which at once call and do not call attention to themselves.

At the same time we were all caught up in the thrust of the villanelle on the international scene by Dylan Thomas. Roethke's poem comes a year after Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." We almost did not recover from that decade. We were flooded with the possibility of villanelles: some good, some with an ease of rhyme and music; some not so nearly as good as the former. Thank goodness for Roethke's ease of rhyme, meter, and music. Nothing slaps you as memorably across the bridge of the nose as his musical lines. They have cyclic action that is perfectly measured. And yet his slight of hand is magical; his hand is nowhere to be seen. How was the effect achieved? That is always the mystery of not only good but great poetry. Maybe what we learn, in the end, is what the narrator knowingly observes in "I Knew a Woman":

I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

This was the music of the craft that we all aspired to, and discovering Theodore Roethke and his signal poem, "My Papa's Waltz," in particular, cleared a path less traveled by for each of us to learn how to achieve magic within the boundary of language.

WHY ROETHKE? THE MAKING OF AN NPR FEATURE

MEGAN COTTRELL

I wasn't horribly nerdy in high school, but I wasn't a cool kid either. I like to remember myself as being fairly popular in my own circle of friends. But there was one thing that made me very geeky—a geekiness that even my quiz bowl, band geek friends couldn't even understand—poetry.

I loved to read poetry, and I don't mean just reading my quiet little book in the corner at lunchtime. I loved to read it aloud. In our eleventh grade Advanced Placement language class, I was the one whose hand shot up when we needed a volunteer to read. Not only did I like to read it aloud, but I always felt (and still do) that I couldn't really understand a poem until I heard it read.

Theodore Roethke's "I Knew a Woman" was one of those poems. It's triple circled in my blue, dog-eared poetry textbook. I'm pretty sure that I didn't understand all of the poem's sensual metaphors at sixteen, but I knew I couldn't get over the way the poem sounded. To me, the words are onomatopoeic—they slide over your tongue the way you can imagine the beautiful, untouchable woman Roethke describes walking through a room. "Oh the shapes a bright container can contain!" he writes. It was the only poem by Roethke in the textbook, and I read it aloud many times that year. I didn't know who the man with the thick German name was or that he would come to influence profoundly my life a few years later.

Around Christmastime last year, I was working as a reporter at WCMU public radio in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, when I was assigned to cover a local event in Saginaw, an open house and German dinner at the Theodore Roethke House. The name "Roethke" rang a bell, and after looking up the pronunciation on Wikipedia, I

set out to call Annie Ransford, president of the Friends of Theodore Roethke Foundation.

Annie was a dream to talk to. She was funny and friendly and seemed so passionate about her cause. I did the story, and it ran, but something about Annie stayed with me. If she was so interested in Roethke, I guessed there must be something to him. I did some research and learned all the facts. I learned about the greenhouses, the manic depression, the many teaching posts and women he loved. But there was one detail that stuck out to me—the death of his father when Roethke was just a boy.

It's funny how a small detail about someone's life can suddenly make you see him or her in a different light. My own father had died too, when I was only eleven. Before I learned about his father's death, Roethke had seemed to me to be a giant. He had written seven volumes of work and won the Pulitzer Prize, after all. But learning about this aspect of his life opened him up to me in a way I hadn't anticipated. I felt even more drawn to the story and somehow knew that it should be mine to tell.

The other day, a friend was telling me about an uncle of hers who has terminal cancer. She said, "I just can't really imagine that he would die. I know it could happen, but I can't imagine it." I really had no idea how to respond. It was unthinkable for me to *not* be able to imagine your loved ones dying. It was nearly all that I had imagined since I was eleven years old. My father's death was the first time I truly understood the world was not a safe place.

I feel a strange connection to other people whose parents died when they were children. It's like we live in the same world. In response, I began to read Roethke's poetry with new eyes. I saw his desperate longing for a relationship with a father who was lost to him. And I saw the utter joy he took in living, the kind you can only have when you're bitterly aware of the alternative. The night before I went to his childhood home to begin my story, I curled up on my couch and read a collection of his work aloud. The words were as silky and rich as I'd remembered, but now they had new significance and meaning to me.

In the five months it took me to finish my story, the kinship I felt with Roethke continued. In fact, I felt it strengthen as I realized I was responsible for telling his story. He survived so much—not just his father and uncle's death, but his own mental illness and instability—and yet he wrote and did so with breathtaking talent. Throughout the

process, I felt the need to tell his story honestly and directly, firmly facing the often grim details that made him who he was. I couldn't shy away from the reality of his life any more than I could shy away from the reality of my own. I felt a lot of outside pressure to make the piece a "nice" story—a breezy Sunday afternoon feature that would end with a satisfied sigh—but I couldn't do that. Part of Roethke's beauty lies in the glaring faults and rampant eccentricities that came with his brilliant mind and silver pen.

Of all his work, my favorite piece is "The Geranium." To me, it captures this balance of liquor and loose women with thoughtfulness and a tender heart. From the first few lines, when he takes pity on the ugly plant he's about to throw out, to the last line where he admits his utter loneliness, I am always moved by the sense of despair that's so subtle and so human. He writes, "Near the end, she seemed almost to hear me—/And that was scary—/So when that snuffling cretin of a maid/Threw her, pot and all, into the trash-can,/I said nothing. But I sacked the presumptuous hag the next week, I was that lonely." As a journalist, I tend to think about expressing an idea as clearly and directly as possible, but—instead—Roethke gives us this rich picture of feeling so alone that we think of an inanimate object as a friend. Of all the beautiful things he wrote, it's this combination of coarse living and plant life that gets me every time.

I know journalists aren't supposed to care what their subjects think of their work, but a part of me can't help but wonder if Roethke would be pleased. I hope so. And I guess I hope if someone ever has the task of writing *my* story, I hope it will be someone who can see the world as Roethke did—in all its utter despair and transcendent beauty. One hundred years after his birth, the words he wrote are still crisp and tangible, full of laughter and life. I'll be reading them aloud for years to come.

Chicago, Illinois

(Megan Cottrell's NPR story ran on *All Things Considered* on May 23, 2008, the 100th anniversary of Roethke's birth. Hear the story at www.npr.org and enter Megan Cottrell in the "Search.")