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Returning to Roethke

The poet Theodore Roethke had been dead at least five years when I first began to read his poetry. I did not know then how influential he had been, but I became increasingly aware of how influential he continued to be. And as the years went by, I was aware of a waning of interest in his work, not only my own, which made me reflect at times wistfully and self-reproachfully on my first love. For Roethke was the first poet I thought of as belonging to me, my own discovery, and as I met other poets, older established poets, I asked each their opinion of Roethke, believing there was only one correct opinion, mine and a love like mine. I learned by heart his serious poems, like “Child on Top of a Greenhouse” and “In a Dark Time,” and what he called his lighter pieces and poems for children, “Dinky” (“Oh what’s the weather in a Beard? / It’s windy there and rather weird . . .”) and the animal poems like “The Bat” and “The Sloth” (“In moving-slow he has no Peer”). I gave copies of his Indiana University Press book *Words for the Wind* to new friends, if they were unfortunate enough not to have one. I gave my wife Amy a copy soon after we met.

Now with the publication of this collection of essays edited by William Barillas,¹ it is clear that the enthusiasm and interest in Roethke’s poetry continues among some critics and poet/critics and may point to a revival. Personally I have had to think about my early passion for Roethke’s poetry and how it receded or submerged and to do some excavation of old feelings and re-examination of old attitudes.

After I started reading Roethke, one of the first appraisals of him that made an impression on me was Hayden Carruth’s entry on Roethke in his anthology of American poetry, *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*, in 1970. The passage that stuck with me

¹ A FIELD GUIDE TO THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE, ed. by William Barillas. Ohio University/Swallow Press. \$36.95p.

emphasized Roethke's spirituality. Carruth wrote, "Roethke was interested in the primeval world, and in the mind which inhabited it, God-searching, unencumbered by doctrine; hence he was interested in children." For years, I remembered the last phrase as if it read, "God searching, unencumbered by doctrine, he was interested in children." As you can see, the phrase describes the mind that inhabits the primeval world and implies that it is the mind of the child. Many of the essays in *A Field Guide* treat Roethke's psychology as if it were the source of his spirituality. Nobody comes as close, however, as Carruth does in his brief assessment.

I have also wondered while reading these essays why Roethke's importance has dwindled to a couple of anthology pieces, in particular "My Papa's Waltz" and "Elegy for Jane." Anyone who has tried to teach the former knows how it has been undermined by a willful misreading. It is one of the greenhouse poems from *The Lost Son*, Roethke's breakthrough second book, and evokes his German father who raised flowers professionally in Saginaw, Michigan, where Roethke was born and grew up. The first stanza, as indeed the entire poem, gives a lesson in variation of rhythm and rhyme:

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

One of the hoariest rhymes in English poetry, "breath/death" is played against one of the freshest, "dizzy/easy." And the placement of masculine and feminine endings alternates in the following three trimeter stanzas. The poem is a miracle of verse in 16 lines. I don't know who it was who first claimed that the poem was about child abuse, but I think it has been ruined for some time to come, at least for the contemporary classroom. Yet I remember in graduate school that a group of us made up a parody that suggested it was indeed about some kind of perversity, with lines like "You knew my name was Otto, / But you always called me Lizzy." It is unfortunate what you might do to a beloved poem without realizing that you are spoiling it for more literal minded generations.

As for “Elegy for Jane,” it retains its subtlety, but you don’t need to look far to worry about the objectification of the female subject here. She is identified as “My Student, Thrown by a Horse” and evoked lovingly as “My sparrow . . . My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.” The poem presents an ambiguity of tone which may be dismissed or explained away as arising from the erotics of teaching. Still, from line one, “I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils” to the “damp grave” at the end where the elegist speaks “the words of [his]love”: the poet presses the boundaries of decorum. He ends by claiming not to have “rights in this matter” because he is “Neither father nor lover.” And yet those are the very rights he has claimed. And what seems to follow, therefore, to use that queasy term of modern literary theory, is “problematic.” And it could be that these two marvelous and now misunderstood poems persist in anthologies as occasions for this kind of deconstruction, unfortunately.

It is also possible to sketch an argument for why Roethke, compared with some of his contemporaries, has slipped from major to minor status. Roethke’s romanticism served as a counterweight to the so-called Confessional poets, and his lyricism contrasts with the overt declarations of the Beat poets. If he seems to have been pushed aside by them, perhaps his debts to Yeats and to others, including T. S. Eliot and W. C. Williams and even Whitman, appear more derivative than theirs. He may have been able to improve on Yeats’s rhythm, but did he ever achieve Yeats’s scope? Yeats was an essential part of Irish history, a manifestation and creator of Irish culture. Roethke may claim the immigrant Germans of America’s upper Midwest, but the myth he makes out of the greenhouses of his childhood and out of the smaller things of the natural world, the things that need noticing and tending, can seem merely personal in a way that Yeats’s great story of Ireland is not. Roethke is a lyrical poet of the self, like Whitman and Dickinson, but didn’t they reflect and assimilate their times? Roethke appears to stand apart from his. In his poetry he lives in a world of lyric sound and sense (not unlike Dylan Thomas). Yeats, Auden, even Robert Lowell—Roethke matched them for skill but not, perhaps, for historical impact. So might go the argument. The minor poet, if that is what Roethke finally is (and *A Field Guide* has made me question this), may write the poems we love, but we should be able to tell

the difference between the small success and the larger ambition. There's plenty of awful stuff written by poets who aspire to be the voices and consciences of their times, but those poets aren't even minor, they're just bad. *A Field Guide* attempts to argue that Roethke *is* great because of what he achieved in the sheer memorability of his verse, when serious or light and especially when both, and how he made us care for the natural world around us, whether it was at our fingertips or, as in his childhood, under glass.

Roethke's actual career lasted only 20 years, from his first book, *Open House*, published in 1941 when he was 33, to his last, the posthumous *The Far Field*, published in 1964, a year after he died at the age of 55. *The Far Field* contains some of his most ambitious and original work, though there is a critical point of view that considers it imperfect, incomplete. It is still challenging to move from the Roethke of *Praise to the End!* and the villanelle "The Waking" ("I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go") to *The Far Field* and the opening lines of "The Longing" in "North American Sequence":

On things asleep, no balm:
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.

In *Poetry* magazine in a review of the famous anthology of free verse, *Naked Poetry*, which included a number of Roethke's poems from *The Far Field*, Howard Nemerov compared them unfavorably to his metrical poems like "Night Crow" and "In a Dark Time" and opined that Roethke might have revised them if he had lived. The poet Donald Davie in his poem "July, 1964" claims that Roethke was "slack in his art by the end." This seems to be a common view of some of Roethke's contemporaries. But that view may now be irrelevant.

Roethke's changes from formal to free verse can be seen as a display of virtuosity, like W. H. Auden's, but it may also have been a kind of restlessness that resulted in appropriation. His infatuation with the poetry of Louise Bogan, which he speaks of

frankly in his essay “How to Write Like Somebody Else,”² is clear in the short perfect lyrics of *Open House*, his first book. But that style or influence gives way to William Carlos Williams and Mother Goose in *The Lost Son* and the *Praise to the End!* sequences. Yeats comes next and never leaves. Then comes Whitman and, though Roethke might abjure the thought, the T. S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*. Each of these engagements, if you will, became part of a recurring cycle of Roethke’s poetry. Roethke also loved the verse of Edward Lear and William Blake. It appears often that his love translates into imitation, the highest form of flattery. But what is missing? The authors of *A Field Guide* tend to argue that nothing is missing, their point being that Roethke turned his influences into himself, making his own tradition as T. S. Eliot himself advised. And yet Roethke does not employ a cosmic structure like Blake, who claimed, “I must create a system or else be enslaved by another man’s,” or Yeats who felt the Anglo-Irish responsibility to educate the Irish in their own culture. Roethke’s project, if it can be called that, is existential. In his essay “On ‘Identity,’” also from *On the Poet and His Craft*, he makes that plain, stating, “The human problem is to find out what one really is, whether one exists, whether existence is possible.” He also says in that essay that for him God is manifested not only in the highest and lowest points of human experience, but “in the lowest forms of life.” He adds, about the great theologian of the time, “Could Reinhold Niebuhr love a worm? I doubt it. But I—we—can.” Yet he does know where to draw the line between himself and a Christian pantheist like William Blake. Speaking to the pest who eats the heart out of his garden in the wonderful late poem “Slug,” he asks, “Would Blake call you holy?”

Roethke’s people, the Germans of northern Michigan, if they were imbued with anything, it might have been the finer feelings of the Germans of Pennsylvania, Wallace Stevens’ people. Roethke was a fan of Stevens, as he was of Yeats and Williams. Roethke evokes Stevens directly in the hearty Teutonic “A Rouse for Stevens,” subtitled “To Be Sung in a Young Poets’ Saloon”:

Roar ’em, whore ’em cockalorum,
The muses, they must all adore him,

² *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. with an introduction by Ralph J. Mills (Seattle, 1965).

Wallace Stevens—are we *for* him?
 Brother, he's our father!

And yet Stevens is present in Roethke's poetry in all sorts of ways, through Stevens' own playful nonsensical poems in *Harmonium* ("Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal") and later less playful poems, like "The Idea of Order at Key West." Roethke loved Stevens when he needed Stevens, as he loved Yeats, Williams, even Eliot. In *Straw for the Fire*, the collection of Roethke's notebook entries collected by David Wagoner, Roethke confronts the specter of T. S. Eliot wittily:

Essay: I hate Eliot
 1st sentence. Why?
 Because I love him too much—

Roethke's best poems, the poems that are most his, are the poems of *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!* Still, in those poems you can hear him trying out various guises, as did Williams and Eliot in their poems. It is known that Roethke at times tried to put on a persona as a tough customer and a roarer as with "A Rouse for Stevens." David Wagoner, who in his wonderful play *First Class* meant to evoke Roethke as a teacher, caught this side of him. At one point the play shows Roethke on the phone to his publisher demanding that nine copies of *Words for the Wind* be sent to the Supreme Court justices because they must need his poetry. Roethke apparently also sent Ernest Hemingway a copy of "Song for the Squeeze Box" ("It wasn't Ernest, it wasn't Scott— / The boys I knew when I went to pot") from *Words for the Wind* but never received a response. He might even have cherished a pose from Vachel Lindsay, the preeminent performance poet of his day. The late poem "Supper with Lindsay" is placed last in Roethke's *Collected Poems*. There Lindsay asks Roethke, "Who called me poet of the college yell? / We need a breed that mixes Blake and me, / Heroes and bears, and old philosophers—." Finally Roethke's role as a lover in his poems for his wife Beatrice shows masculine desire and an admiration and envy and a nascent understanding of feminine desire. But for all these personae, it is the androgynous child, just awakening sexually,

who speaks to us in *Praise to the End!* and in the greenhouse poems. D. H. Lawrence knew this persona albeit through a filter of his own theorizing. Roethke's recognition of Lawrence's influence leads him to say some dismissive things about him, but he's a presence throughout Roethke's work, too.

Roethke is basically that child, "God-searching, unencumbered by doctrine," as Carruth said, and oral, too, as well as aural. He does at times recall Blake in his "Songs of Innocence," but in a manner that is crazier, less tame, less likely to be giving a Sunday school lesson. Take this passage from "The Shape of the Fire":

Where's the eye?
The eye's in the sty.
The ear's not here
Beneath the hair.
When I took off my clothes
To find a nose,
There was only one shoe
For the waltz of To,
The pinch of Where.

The Roethke I loved when I was young, the Roethke I expected others to love, was the many-faceted poet who combined all these sides of himself—Yeats-inspired, Williams-inspired, the love poet and the gardener, the enamored Adam. It took me awhile to appreciate the tingling vein of Mother Goose in *Praise to the End!* The child's voice, its genuine oral and earthy fixation, may have embarrassed me and made me just a bit uncomfortable and impatient.

Even steven all is less:
I haven't time for sugar,
Put your finger in your face,
And there will be a booger.

But in "The Lost Son" I could appreciate the implied narrative and the shifts of tone, even as nursery rhyme alternated with Job-like utterance and alarming cinematic tracking shots. After years away from Roethke, I have come back as if his poetry were a

home and recognize that either I have been away too long or else I never left.

Rereading Roethke has been an encounter again and again with lines, phrases, images, whole poems that have blended themselves with my memory, and hearing each again has been a stirring and revealing surprise. Here are some random lines from his poetry as I have remembered them:

*My heart keeps open house
 A single ripple starts from where he stood
 Preserve thy hate thy heart
 The eyes still vivid looking up from a sunken room
 O angel let me loose
 Prickling with all the itches / Of sixteen year old lust
 The teeth of knitted gears / Turn slowly through the night
 I think with pride / A caged bear rarely does the same thing twice
 I met her as a blossom on a stem
 Love, love a lily's my care
 With their bandannas stiffened with sweat
 Lunging into the lashing / Wind
 Come littlest, come tenderest
 Lost in a maze of water
 She moved in circles and those circles moved
 Winding around the waters of the world
 I think the dead are tender shall we kiss
 I know it's an owl. He's making it darker.
 He was all whitey bones and skin like paper
 "Tell Williams I've been here, / and Robert Frost. They might remember
 me."
 I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils, / Neat in their boxes
 Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist.
 I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet*

I could go on. These lines come to me almost unbidden. There is no other poet I think I can do that with, though others have taken his place in my preoccupations. Now I have to ask myself why. I'm afraid it is because while I was an academic I made my living teaching the modern poets who most interested me in a sort of disinterested way. Roethke I kept to myself, and in keeping

him to myself, I lost touch with something of his value. W. H. Auden. W. B. Yeats. Robert Lowell. Gwendolyn Brooks. Elizabeth Bishop. Marianne Moore. William Carlos Williams. Robert Hayden. Each can be placed in his or her social and historical moment and heard as a cultural voice. Roethke might be seen in those terms, too, but I wanted him for myself. Or let me be honest. I didn't want to share him. And as soon as I recognized that his poems could be misread, I was afraid to expose him to criticism.

The value of *A Field Guide* is that its various hands all show how one might teach Roethke's poetry. The essays as a whole reveal two contending or, rather, coexisting critical approaches to Roethke's poetry in the twenty-first century, the psychological and the ecological. Their synthesis may be as a "poetry of spiritual expression," which is offered by William Barillas, the editor. Barillas is also interested in Roethke as a poet long overdue for an "ecocritical study," and others of his persuasion see Roethke's late poems in particular as involving the ecotone, the place of transition between environments or biological communities, like the place where a river flows into the ocean, as in "The Rose":

There are those to whom place is unimportant,
 But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
 Is important—
 Where the hawks sway out into the wind,
 Without a single wingbeat,
 And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,
 And the gulls cry against the crows
 In the curved harbors . . .

The original critical approach to Roethke's work was psychological and in particular Freudian. It explored the struggle with the father throughout the poetry, from the poem "The Premonition" in his first book to "My Papa's Waltz" and "The Lost Son" in *The Lost Son* and finally to the late poem "Otto" in *The Far Field*. Freud also allows us to see how art arises from the compost heap of the self, whereas the ecological might simply see that a good literal compost heap, like a dunghill, keeps the natural world recycling itself. Both approaches have plenty of organic

and biodegradable material to rake through in Roethke's life and work.

I am myself most interested in Roethke's spiritual dimension because when I discovered his poetry, that is what I was after. My search always was for a sense of a presence in the world, one that was not secular per se but which was not hemmed in by dogma, either. As a dialectical product, that spiritual presence doesn't preclude the psychological or the ecological, but it does transcend them. Roethke, that God-searching mind, that child with an adult's artistry, remains the Roethke for me. Still, it is harder to parse or open his poetry except by intuition, feeling, and that personal sense of ownership that one always has with one's original discovery of any great artist, when "unencumbered by doctrine."

I could see that for Roethke the greenhouses were the kind of space that my father's churches, where he worked as a minister, were for me. The buildings where my father worked, the sanctuaries and fellowship halls, including his office with its library, were spaces that I could occupy safely on most days, including Sunday. Roethke had found a music to make out of the greenhouses, and it was his poem "Big Wind" that caught my attention first.

Where were the greenhouses going,
Lunging into the lashing
Wind driving water
So far down the river
All the faucets stopped?—

The poem's driving enjambments, its sense that the space that contained the roses was sacred and to be defended, that the boy Roethke could pitch in to help protect the place, that the greenhouse was a kind of ship with a cargo in a storm: I knew those feelings. When I was six my family had crossed the North Atlantic on an ocean liner traveling for my father's vocation, when he was called to a church in Scotland. We had ourselves been in the core and pith of an ugly storm. In other words, I met Roethke's poetry at a level alien to New Criticism or really to most kinds of literary criticism, on the level of personal connection,

fundamentally and emotionally charged. But whoever I was going to be as a poet was also taken with the headlong rhythm of the poem, the enjambments, the lack of a rhyme scheme, and the extended metaphor of the greenhouse as a ship at sea. His father's greenhouse, my father's house of worship, both shared the sense that the house provided salvation and needed protection from danger.

The other poem that reached me on a personal level was "Frau Baumann, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz." That trinity of women paralleled my own trinity of grandmothers, since my mother's parents had been divorced when she was a child, and when I was a child, all three of my grandmothers (one my mother's stepmother) lived near us in Southern California. They were not the vigorous snuff-dipping gardeners of Roethke's poem, but they had a magical role of enchantment for me, and each offered a different quality, one was even a writer. Again it was sound and form that captured my attention. It was another free verse poem that grew out of the world of the greenhouse, yet with internal sound, rhythmic repetition, the action as the characterization. I had met these things in plenty of other poems already, in e. e. cummings' quasi-ballade "i sing of Olaf glad and big" and in Dylan Thomas' "The Hunchback in the Park" and in Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnet "the rites for Cousin Vit." But this was the first time I identified the effects to myself as effects, as things a poet could do when making a poem. In the combinations of *w*, *b*, and *r*-alliteration and short-*i* assonance, I could hear how image and sound could make each other live on the tongue, audible, fragrant, visual, tangible.

With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
 And their thorn-bitten wrists
 And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me in my first sleep.

The emotional key set by the first line, "Gone the three ancient ladies," appealed to my sense of nostalgia and helped me understand that poetry could fix the past, like amber or a home movie. So, for me Roethke was both magician and minister. There were tricks up his sleeve, and like religious rituals they manifested a spiritual meaning.

“The Lost Son” may be Roethke’s great response to T. S. Eliot. Eliot’s personae in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and as the questor in *The Waste Land* give Roethke his most exciting single invention, the son running away from the graveyard where his parents are buried and back to the place where their memories, especially his father’s, are still alive. When I have taught either of Eliot’s great poems, I have asked students to tease out a narrative, to follow Prufrock’s meandering thoughts like the streets where he never reaches his destination, and to follow the river that passes through the sections of *The Waste Land* as it makes its way to the sea. Roethke learned from Eliot how to thread together fragments on a narrative. And Roethke’s “The Lost Son” is clearly such a narrative, running as in a dream and held in place yet arriving, waking up. That formal essence was for me the portal to other modern poems and the recognition of the plight of all lost sons and daughters, as they made lives for themselves separate from their parents. It was the discrete parts that helped me to understanding, the shifts of rhythm, the way nursery rhymes and other short lyrics could be reflective of the whole, and the way some of those parts stopped you for reflection, so that you had to move yourself along. My favorite passage in “The Lost Son” was and remains the shifting of rhythm and tone at:

I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!
 Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going,
 I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
 I run, I run to the whistle of money.

Money money money
 Water water water

How cool the grass is.
 Has the bird left?
 The stalk still sways.
 Has the worm a shadow?
 What do the clouds say?

I know a Freudian would say that this was about self-pleasuring,

and it certainly has the increase of tension and release of sexual climax. Nevertheless, it's the construction, the shift of tone with the shift of rhythm that amazed me and amazes me still. In Eliot such shifts are always ironic. But not here. Later I learned that one of Roethke's most notable students, David Wagoner, had written a novel entitled *Money Money Money*. And possibly you can hear the song "Money Makes the World Go Round" from *Cabaret*. Wagoner's novel acknowledges the debt to Roethke, but Kander and Ebb's musical doesn't have to. Though it came out after Roethke's death, its chant about money is deeply embedded in human language and desire. "Money money money / money, money, money / A mark, a yen, a buck, or pound / They make the world go round." For me, however, Roethke's verses have become a glossary of all other phrases even if they only nearly or distantly echo his.

As I got older and recognized that there was more to Roethke than the greenhouse poems, I was increasingly drawn to his love poetry. "I Knew a Woman" was the first of Roethke's poems that I knew I had by heart without having to try to memorize it. Though as a child I had learned a process of scripture memorization tied to repetitive action, realizing I know a poem by heart has been more the experience of my adulthood. Why was the poem so important to me? I wanted to be in love, that was always the case, but I didn't know until I met my wife what it was to love someone fully, body and soul, and this was what the poem was about before I knew the feeling. Yes, it is deeply imbued with Yeatsian music and poetic technique (self-contained stanzas, the rhyming "one" with "contain," "hay" with "eternity"), yet with Roethke's own sense of the endstopped iambic pentameter line. I see, too, that Stevens is present, with his embodiment of poetry as a female force of nature in "The Idea of Order at Key West." "I Knew a Woman" includes all the sentiments of English love poetry, even the Jacobean translation of Hebrew love poetry, and shows how the immortal soul and the mortal body are one.

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
 I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
 What's freedom for? To know eternity.
 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).

The poem is full of wonderful riddles, sexy and comic (“Love likes a gander, and adores a goose”) and profound (“She moved in circles, and those circles moved”). And yet there is a riddle that may never be solved. That riddle is the way the past tense of the title and of the poem itself changes to present tense at the end. It is as if we were seeing the imagined love become real, one with the lover, realized. That state of being, which the poet speaks of in his love poem “Words for the Wind,” as to “see and suffer myself / In another being, at last,” has been realized, too. It is an image of ultimate unity like the last lines of “In a Dark Time”:

The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

That union of God and mind, that joining of self with another, is where Roethke’s poetry was always headed, not without risk “in the tearing wind.” I have lived long enough to be able to see that, and I count myself lucky.

And though I have paid only a kind of cursory attention to *A Field Guide to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, I do appreciate the way it has sent me back on my own to revisit the world of this great poet.

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