

INTRODUCTION

Theodore Roethke's concern is the self, a fact which causes embarrassment to even the most ardent of his admirers and generates a genteel disgust among the more socially responsible critics. Exclusive self concern, like smut, has no redeeming social importance, and a poet who does not reflect the concerns of his age must be relegated to the minor leagues as an interesting, but ultimately insignificant craftsman. Since Roethke appears to emerge from the self only rarely and only partially, he is often considered in this class. M.S. Rosenthal echoes the sentiments of many modern scholars when he complains,

...for the most part Roethke had no subject apart from the excitement, illnesses, intensities of sensuous response, and inexplicable shiftings of his own sensibility. The greenhouse poems enabled him to objectify it for a time, but then he had no where to go but back inside himself...The confessional mode, reduced to this kind of self-recharging, becomes self echoing as well as uses itself up after the first wild orgies of feeling.¹

Were this attack valid, it alone would be sufficient reason to call a post mortem on Roethke scholarship. But there is more.

Paradoxically, the second major criticism of Roethke is his reliance upon others, particularly Yeats. So much of the later poetry is considered marred by echoes of the master's voice, the early poetry having been spoiled by

servile limitation of lesser poets. Defenses of Roethke have never dealt adequately with this problem: thus although Karl Malkoff can prove that Roethke did not use Yeats exclusively, his argument is a defensive one.

Roethke's purposely unsophisticated use of end-stopped lines is far closer to the techniques of Davies and Raleigh than of Yeats. Yeats' ghost is certainly invoked in an effort to reestablish the "universal dance", and even has a modifying effect on the poem's rhythms, and its occasional slant rhymes... but there is by no means any slavish obscuring of Roethke's own identity.²

To prove than Roethke's "own identity" is obscured by Yeats, Malkoff shows how he imitates Davies and Raleigh, presumably for variety. Roethke, among other critics of his works, also points out other sources: Adams, Auden, Blake, Clare, Eliot, Milton, Smart, Thomas, etc. Which-ever way one turns, one faces a "source" and not the poet. Roethke's concern is the self, but, we are asked to believe, he has no self.

It is important to free Roethke's poetry from these paradoxical charges, not because they are not true, but because they reflect and intensify the limitations of the reader far more than they contribute to an understanding of the poems. My concern is not to prove these criticisms false, but to explore the absoluteness of their truth. Roethke's self concern, so interrelated with the works of other poets, is a concern for the "self", as opposed to him self. This self, as the single functioning unit of

life, the smallest unit of identity, is explored both in relation to its individuality, its uniqueness, and to its universality, in a methodical sequential pattern which includes all of the Collected Works: the concern throughout and the ultimate conclusion of this study is the extinction of the concept of self, including the concept of Roethke the self as opposed to Yeats the individual, Wordsworth the individual, and so on.

Roethke's poetry, so deeply concerned with the "self", follows a sequence in the whole of his collected poetry that is bent upon annihilating the concept of self. And the pattern of the sequence is pure Yeats - the mythology far more than the poetry. The extent to which Roethke followed the cycle of the phases of the moon is both astonishing and significant, and to follow these phases he utilized the poets of the various phases. Although even in Open House, Roethke's first book (1941), he exhibits the tendency to shape his sources, to utilize rather than to imitate, the poetry which follows the greenhouse sequence of The Lost Son (1948) is very clearly collaborative rather than imitative. Using other poets because their vision happens to coincide with or inspire his own, Roethke shifted his collaborators as he outgrew their vision.

"Collaborative" exploration of the concept of self is mythic in proportions, and requires extraordinary technical control. There is on the one hand the danger of the loss

of the poet's individuality if the sounds produced sound too much like the works of others, and on the other hand the tendency to lapse into silence, since any poetry that aims at inner truth needs be carefully balanced between sound and silence. The problem, if not the dimension, is described in the work of an Israeli poet, Lea Goldberg.

A young poet suddenly falls silent
because he fears to tell the truth.
An old poet suddenly falls silent
because he fears
that even the best of poems
is a lie.³

As the sequence of Roethke's collected works progresses, the poems illustrate these barriers to communication. In Open House, Praise to the End! (1951) and The Far Field (1964), discussed in Chapters 1, 3, and 5 respectively, silence is skirted, developed, courted, as the study of self breaks through verbal limitations, proving "that even the best of poems/ is a lie". But although the goals of silence are similar in Roethke's first work and his last, he has not come full circle, but has spiralled. What Roethke called "Spiral Knowledge" is throughout his direction and his aim.

Roethke's early poetry uses language as a barrier, ironically, to conceal the self, to preserve the concept of individuality: For the same reasons, Auden, Adams, and other poets are constantly used. Simultaneously, the poems of Open House assert the ideals of communication, that lan-

guage should not be needed, that feelings, universal as they are, should be communicable merely by the will to unite with the audience. "My secrets cry aloud./ I have no need for tongue." (3), Roethke mocks in "Open House", first published under the less subtle but apt title of "Strange Distortion". Despite this innocent optimism, language soon proves an alienating force. The self, wishing to maintain its uniqueness, fails to communicate, and the problem which emerges is that illustrated in the theatre of the absurd. Harold Pinter notes:

The speech we hear is an indication of what we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violence, sly anguished or mocking smoke screen....One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem cover nakedness...I think we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.⁴

The problem is one of the tools for communication, the mechanics, and the whole concept of selfhood as well. For the barriers to communication only arise when the self is conceived of as unique, individual. To solve the paradox of language, Roethke focuses upon the concept of self, and following the direction of the phases of the moon, delves into the self, testing the premises of the self as unique being.

Moving from a hackneyed objectivity when language communicates less than silence because it is so generally in use it has lost its personal meaning, The Lost Son

bases itself on the individual experience, the experience of individuality.

The Lost Son, Roethke's second volume, is far less derivative, far more original, both in its use of language and its use of sources. The connection with the audience is almost lost, not because the poems are subjective (as, for example, is Sylvia Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick" which can be understood only through a knowledge of some biographical details), but because it attempts to communicate on a more basic level, to break through the "constant stratagem to cover nakedness".

Appropriately, the theme is "lostness", the development of alienation in the socialization process. In attempting to trace the unity of all living creatures, the sequence unavoidably follows the growth of disunity, and despite its greatness, The Lost Son is the record of a failure. Thus, while The Lost Son moves from the alienated objectivity of Open House to an overview of subjectivity, it describes rather than personifies. While this technique may create very satisfactory poetry, because its very alienation is the most communicable factor, it is obvious that for Roethke it was insufficient since the same movement of The Lost Son is recapitulated in Praise to the End! on a more subjective, less communicable level.

Silence is the source of Praise to the End!, and the first poem of this sequence, "Where Knock is Open Wide",

begins on the brink of silence, the brink of subjectivity, the brink of knowledge, the brink of isolating sounds. This is Yeats' phase of pure subjectivity. What makes Praise to the End! unsuccessful when The Lost Son is so popular is that Roethke has stepped closer to silence than to sound. The silence of pure subjectivity is the silence of the undifferentiated self for which, theoretically, communication is superfluous. Since there is no distinction between subject and object, poet and reader, communication is at once impossible and unnecessary.

Whether Praise to the End! is successful or not, it is nevertheless crucial to Roethke's sequence, and a significant development in the study of the nature and philosophy of poetry, because it is the logical conclusion of the concepts of communicable art, of art which attempts to come closer to the reader. Wordsworth, finding the common denominator to be childhood and simplicity, continually attempted to reenter and describe that phase because, as he states in his Preface,

...in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated...and...because in that condition the passions of man are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

He links this common experience to the common language:

...arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings...a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they

are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression.

Wordsworth answers Harold Pinter, almost successfully, but Roethke, by finding a lower, more common denominator - not childhood, but birth; not pastoral, but vegetal - completes Wordsworth's attempts. Employing the modern consciousness of Jung and Freud, the ancient consciousness of the old and new testaments, the collective consciousness of a vast variety of poets, and his own conscious and subconscious experiences, Roethke's Praise to the End! works on a level at the same time much lower and much more inclusive than Wordsworth; so that which appears to be infantile babbling is simultaneously collective human experience.

Furthermore, to find the order of the collective experience of man in these poems, it is necessary for the reader to become a participant. In order to make sense of the words, he must give up his own "self" and the notion that his self may be communicated to by another self, and must enter the poem. The Lost Son allows for individuality because of the existence of the pseudo-confessional stance. Praise to the End! does not play the reader's game.

The representation of the loss of unity, which is presented sequentially in Praise to the End! is not, however, a record of a failure. The Waking (1953) and Words

for the Wind (1956), which are direct outgrowths of the study of archetypal unity, deal with human relationships not as a fall from unity, or an attempt to find "bliss", but as new, free experiences. The theme of love, which historically reflects the metaphysical state of man in poetry, is given an entirely different emphasis.

If all three of Roethke's earlier works have been patterned upon a unity and a fall, although on different levels and different phases, it would not be unusual to find the same pattern in the later works. An indeed The Waking and Words for the Wind are also based upon a fall from unity, although their subject is love and human relations. And yet the fall here is a fortunate one, since it is a reintegrating fall. Distinctions between people allow for communication, and this realization of the other human being as a distinct and separate creature, with which one may commune profoundly, forms the basis for a higher level of union. The later works treat man and his relationship to the world and in fact develop a relationship with the world as they progress. For the direction toward objectivity and higher unity is reflected in the manner as well as the matter. The purpose of what Jung calls "objectification" is here poetic as well as psychological and philosophical; how to form a relationship with the reader, with poetry and poets is as important as the lovers and creatures of his poems. The poems them-

selves become more "comprehensible" because they contain what Buber refers to as "Distance and Relation", the acknowledgement of the "otherness" of life and the willingness to encounter it. It is Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Buber's I and Thou inextricably bound together.

Silence in both The Lost Son and Words for the Wind is not a factor. The primary purpose of both is to communicate, although the level of communication is different. But in The Far Field, the level of communication moves once again toward the non-verbal. If Open House may be considered sub-verbal, Praise to the End! pre-verbal, then The Far Field should be termed super-verbal. The poet gradually becomes the prophet as objectivity eclipses "reality" -

In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,

A shining.
(192)

The speaker forsores this experience in North American Sequence, the first sequence in the book, and indeed, this prophecy is later fulfilled. The Collected Poems concludes with a series of poems which lead toward the annihilation of poetry, almost as Keats' "Ode On a Grecian Urn" brings the viewer beyond the artifact to contemplations of nonexistent artifacts and thence to "truth", for which poetry becomes superfluous. Poetry,

the phases of the moon, tradition, are all stepping stones to a mystical oneness, a supravision.

Although it may appear that Roethke here is imitating Yeats and Eliot extensively, and Whitman, Blake, and other major poets occasionally, this is not to his discredit. The higher the vision becomes the more mystical poets are utilized, mysticism being a communal rather than individual art since it brings the practitioner into a realm beyond selfhood.

The classification of Roethke as a limited poet must, it appears, be reevaluated. Because he explores and exploits practically every topic and every form of poetry in the English language: confessional, pastoral, archetypal quest, mythic, love, and religious poetry, it is possible to consider the Collected Poems as an analysis of the questions encountered by modern man and the modern poet, logically organized and methodically answered.

Existential psychoanalysis, in designating the fact of existence as the most significant human realization (called by Rollo May the I-am experience⁵), is a particularly useful analogue to a study of Roethke, particularly since their concept of existence, dependent upon the relationship between the self and the world, is divided similarly to Roethke's divisions, i.e. man-in-relation to the biological world, the environment, man-in-relation to himself, and man-in-relation to the world of humans.

These three categories, however, open up vast territories of learning for use, which also serve as analogues, often consciously integrated into the poetry: biological evolution, psychosexual development, biblical history, philosophical theories, etc. Roethke's poetry, continuously concerned with the art of poetry, is inextricably related to every aspect of human behavior as well, and poetry achieves the status in his work of defining the very bases of existence.

Were all these analogues intrusive, the poetry would be a failure, a philosophic and poetic monstrosity. Roethke's technique is to illustrate, minimally, to suggest, to compress, to mould. Conclusions and foundations must be supplied. Although the following study concentrates on the pattern of poetry and the poems themselves, its purpose follows Roethke's, to show the concentration of the vast myths of modern poetry.