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Self Retrieving in Theodore Roethke's Poetry

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This paper is based on the assumption that the characteristic feature of Theodore Roethke's poetry is his concern with retrieving his tormented self by learning to see the outer and inner worlds in depth. For further revealing the process of Roethke's surfacing his dark inner drives, so that he could control and understand them, Plato's Idea of the Third Man, Bachelard's poetics of elements and Jung's archetypal patterns will be extensively employed.

Keywords: contemporary American poetry, Theodore Roethke, techniques and technologies of the self, poetics of elements, archetypal paterns.

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Theodore Roethke's poetry from the two volumes "The Lost Son and Other Poems" and "Praise to the End" has largely been influenced by Dante, Wordsworth, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot and Hopkins. Such influences can be noticed in his interest as concerns the issue of mortality (La Belle, 14), the ugly of the universe (17), the conception of "an escape from personality" (22), the heroic pattern of quest, etc. All helped him to create an adequate language for his own poems, language employed to properly depict the inner and outer worlds, and consequently, to apprehend nature "as it is implied in human feelings" (26).

Theodore Roethke's poem entitled "Meditation at Oyster River" can be approached in terms of the multiple correspondences that exist between the inner and outer worlds. The complex sensory imagery of this poem can be decoded via Bachelard's poetics of elements based on the psychoanalytical meaning of fire, water, air and earth. The temporal axis is established by the collocation "the deepening light" associated within the first three verses with the image of sea water "moving", "running along the narrow furrows of the shore" and the image of the poet who retires to a higher and safer rock "on the cliff side"; this complex image reveals, on the one hand, the moment of the tide and on the other, a particular interaction that exists between the world of nature and that of the speaker. Moreover, we can assume that the image of the deepening light is built on the symbolic value of fire, through the word "light". Bachelard claims that the image of man contemplating fire, in our case "the deepening light", resembles the pensive solitary individual engaged in a process of acquiring self-awareness. Within such an enlightening experience, the fire, in our case the light, looks as bright and profound as "the conscience of solitude" (23). The same Bachelard claims that the individual is a project of his own wishes, aspirations or reveries. And what could the poet aspire but at interacting and establishing communion with the natural world.

The second image, charged with symbolic connotations, is that of the "light wind", "A twilight wind, light as a child's breath". The word "wind", which can be associated with Bachelard's symbolic air, brings us closer to the third symbol, that of the earth, slightly alluded to through the image of the "low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks", and the higher rock on the cliff-side where the poets retires in order to safely contemplate the scenery. Bachelard associates the earth with the reveries of the will in his study entitled "The Earth and the Reveries of the Will" (our translation). He introduces the syntagm of the function of the unreal", which, in his opinion is as important as the "function of the real" (24), being equally important for social adjustment. According to Bachelard, the reveries of the will correspond to the function of the unreal. Such reveries are viewed as being animating by "unconscious pulsations" and

oneiric forces which reflect the mysteries of our conscious rational life.

The dream like quality of the poem arises from the first two verses of the second stanza: "the self persists like a dying star in sleep, afraid". Allusions to mortality which the poet imaginatively tries to cope with resound in the line "death's face rises afresh" among such beats as the deer, the doe, the snake, and the "humming bird." As if Roethke were eager to surpass failure, inactivity and inconsistency, he poetically expresses his tremendous wish to identify himself with all the shy beasts mentioned above in the line "With these I would be".

If we look closer into Roethke's poetic strategy we may say that his basic technique is that of employing his "material imagination" (24), defined by Bachelard as "the faculty of creating images which surpass reality, which sing and honor reality" (24, our translation). The series of images created in the third stanza inspiringly suggest how Roethke artistically recreates a psychological reality.

The fact that their value is ontological rather than emotional, being synonymous with a profound apprehension of our own existence, arises from the first three verses of the third part "in this hour, / in this first heaven of knowing, / the flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit."

There is to be noticed an opening toward the world as a consequence of a tremendous cosmic trust. Roethke's space is a place of cosmic solidarity because the poet is related to his own profound nature and to nature itself symbolized by the sand piper and the hummingbird and by a "Michigan brook in April", by a "tiny rivalet", by a "wrist –thick cascade", or the "Title bawarsee", in the time between winter and spring.

Such temporal references, associated with beautifully orchestrated poetic images, are meant to assist us in rediscovering the spiritual quality of our life, the pleasure of veneration, of learning to indulge ourselves in astonishment and mystery. The poet's emotional involvement reverberates in the lines: "As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spikes / and the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking." Such an image may refer both to an outer or inner reality, revealing the poetic self indulged in an act of both discovery and creation. And, as such, the spatial image of breaking ice and of the river which begins to move forward, "its bridges shaking", may be interpreted as describing the working of his imagination. The river can be regarded as an intermediary between the visible world and that of a deeper vision with obvious psychological connotations.

A state of complete identification between the poetic self and the natural world is artistically depicted in the fourth part:

Now, in this waning of light,
I rock with the motion of morning;
In the cradle of all that is,
I'm lulled into half sleep
By the lapping of waves,
The cries of the sandpiper.
Waters my will and my way. (Roethke, 191)

The water stands for our unconscious. Jung, in his book about archetypes, has invented the term "enantiodromy" or "self-retreat" (23).

The return within ourselves, which ideally speaking can happen only in the midst of nature, is a condition sine qua non for discovering the power to animate the words, Jehan Calvus claims that only "reanimating", enlivening the words one care get to the essential idea of things.



http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/theodore_roethke/photo

The collocation "water's my will, and my way", can be decoded resorting to Jung's archetypal patterns. One has to have courage and will to face and bring to conscious view his unconscious drives.

Water also stands for the collective unconscious. Jung posits that the collective unconscious represents the depository of mankind's spiritual values.

It is precisely Roethke's "widening sensibility" (La Belle, 140) that has enabled him to incorporate within his poetry various poetic tendencies, starting with Dante and ending with Hopkins and Eliot. Jenijoy La Belle has inspiringly called them "archetypes of tradition" (140).

Since our main concern is Roethke's striving for retrieving his self under rather unfavourable social and personal circumstances, we will mainly focus on how the poet has accomplished "spiritual ends" (144) by consciously and sympathetically imitating Eliot, among other poets. Both Eliot and Roethke were preoccupied with undergoing an inner journey, facing the "darkened" (98) side of their personality. While Eliot moved from positive considerations of the major life cycles, namely death and renewal, only to reject the knowledge associated with them and finally to reach a "stoical acceptance of a negative stance" (102), which constituted the basis of his poetic view, Roethke moved towards the opposite direction. For Roethke, the "darkened" period of considering and reconsidering the cycles of life was followed by a positive response to it; Roethke firmly believed in "spiritual regeneration", in "a restoration to light" (102).

The lines "Was it light? Was it light within? Was it light within light?" in total opposition with Eliot's "o dark dark dark they all go into the dark" (in La Belle, 102) suggest that this strong metaphor of light stems from archetypal patterns rooted in the natural world and positively "experienced through the poetry of his tradition" (103). The above-quoted lines reflect his "personal, direct illumination" (103).

The same type of illumination is present in the last part of the poem we have been concerned with namely "Meditation at Oyster River". Here, the poet's self runs "in and out of small waves, runs with the intrepid shorebirds", poetically wondering "How graceful the small before danger". The noun "danger" may refer to putting in concord the poetic self with itself and with the universe.

Deeper visions are disclosed to us, through the feeling associated with this intense personal experience. Such visions are transmitted to us as an echo, which we can hear through the transfigured poetic language. Since the poetic self is nothing else but "an individualized unitary nucleus" (Rusu, 98), translated into one's conscience from the vital flux of life and of existence, in Liviu Rusu's opinion, sensing one's poetic self is equivalent with sensing one's affiliation the flux of life (98).

The last three verses of the poem, "In the first season of the moon, all is a scattering / a shining" can be interpreted as Roethke's awareness of his spiritual connection with his predecessors who represent precious means for organizing and understanding his past, stimulating his authentic artistic creation. "A shining" can refer to his awareness of being part of the world, in the sense that he has managed to surpass his personal moods and to move towards a much purer and much integrated world where, through impersonal "accents" (Rusu, 98), he puts himself in concord with the pulsations of the objective world (98).

Roethke strongly believes that in order to "go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back" (La Belle, 142). The poem entitled "The Far Field" refers precisely to his successive experiences, to a perpetual slipping – back, and then a going forward associated with the firm conviction that "there is some progress". At the field's end, filled with birds, and young rabbits caught in the mower among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes and broken machinery, "one learned of the eternal", "one learned not to fear infinity" (55).

In the third part of the poem Roethke moves forward from "the sprawl of the wave, the on-coming water" to the "wind fanning the ash of a low fire", to earth and air. Such a movement helps Roethke to become completely engaged in the process of acquiring self-awareness, of retrieving his self.

The fourth part reveals how Roethke, through his verbal structures, makes statements about both the human condition of experience and innocence and the condition of poetry.

An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.
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.

(Roethke, 201)

The three verses "An old man with his feet before the fire / in robes of green, in garments of adieu", "he is the end of things, the final man" can be decoded resorting to Plato's metaphysics built on his Theory of Forms or Ideas. Andrei Cornea's article entitled "What Are We to Do with the Third Man" (our translation) is based on the assumption that all sensitive people "together with the Ideal Man" (14) take part in creating a new Idea of man - the Third Man. In Roethke's poem, the Ideal Man stands for Jesus Christ, called by Jung "master of the collective unconscious" (29) or for Roethke, the child, before having sinned and lost his purity, before having become "the lost son", from the poem which bears the same title. The psychological

connotations of Plato's Ideal Man bring us closer to the second concept, that of the "sensitive man" (15), who, in Roethke's poem, is the poet himself. How can these two entities participate in creating or why not, in re-creating a new Idea of Man? This can happen because both the sensitive and the Ideal Man possess a common feature – their conscience. And yet, the conscience of the Ideal Man is pure, strong, intangible, while sensitive people possess a rather impure, weak conscience due to their being permanently whipped out by all sorts of sensations.



Getting back to Bachelard's symbolism of the fire, the old man with his feet before fire resembles the pensive solitary poet engaged in the process of self-retrieval. Since the same Bachelard claims that the individual is a project of his own wishes, of his own reveries, the collocations "robes of green", "garments of adieu" may refer to the poet's aspirations after his former pure condition. Such an enlightening image sends us to the purifying value of the process of growing aware of our inner dark and hidden tendencies and of bringing them to conscious view. Growing aware of and apprehending the negative meaning of our former experiences lead us to a state of innocence, of spiritual purification which is the condition sine qua non for acquiring the quality of the third man, "the final man" and all the spiritual values organically associated with it (morality, kindness, selflessness, empathy). Such an inner change signifies the recovery of Roethke's artistic purity which is synonymous with an opening toward the world as a consequence of a tremendous cosmic trust.

This is the basic condition of writing inspiring and beautifully articulated poetry, precisely the type of poetry which reverberates from the last line of "The Far Field".

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man, —
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.
(Roethke, 202)

Perhaps Bachelard's essential idea of things or in La Belle's terminology "the final unity" (114) that Roethke has accomplished is to write about the condition of man and poetry simultaneously. This is Roethke's secret key to retrieving his complex and much tormented self.

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