

The Mystic Poetics of Place in Theodore Roethke's "Greenhouse Sequence"

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المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث التجربة الصوفية لدى الشاعر الأمريكي ثيودور رتكه وارتباطها بالمكان ألا وهي البيوت الزجاجية التي قضى طفولته بقربها، وذلك في قصائده المعروفة باسم "قصائد البيوت الزجاجية" المدرجة في ديوانه الثاني المعنون "الابن الضائع" (١٩٤٧). أولى رتكه أهمية كبرى للطبيعة وخصوصاً تلك التي شاهدها في البيوت الزجاجية التي امتلكها والده. ولهذا عدّها المكان الذي أسهم في تكوين شخصيته وحياته، وهو يحاول في هذه القصائد الشعرية أن يظهر ارتباط هذا المكان بالتجربة الصوفية التي خاضها.

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For what we see is never purely seen,

Not final with its final radiance,¹

related to a mystic experience he lived through.

Abstract

The research traces the mystic experience of the American poet, Theodore Roethke, and its relation to the place (the greenhouses of his childhood) in his well-known "Greenhouse poems," which were published in his second volume, *The Lost Son* (1947). Roethke was a poet who associated great significance to nature, especially the one he encountered in his father's greenhouses. Thus he considered the

greenhouse a place that shaped his personality and life. In this sequence he attempted to reveal that his association with the place is The impact that a place imprints on the mind resides for a long time. For many people the places where they grew up are like paradise on earth. They long to them, and feel strongly attached to all their details. Roethke is no exception; rather he is so immersed in the beauties of his birthplace like no other poet and what made his depictions of Saginaw's landscapes distinctive is the intimacy of his personal experiences with it.

Following Roethke's poetry since his early beginnings in the thirties to the early sixties reveals the significance of appreciating his poetry through a chronological approach. In addition to indicating the landmarks in the development of Roethke's poetry, this approach allows for tracing the presence of place and its persistence at different stages of his life. Hence certain poems, like the "Greenhouse poems," are best understood in placing them in their context in the volume. James Southworth does not consider this to be diminishing to the quality of Roethke's poetry, on the contrary, he considers it to be an indication that the "richness of the overtones and the depth and intensity of the poet's feeling become more apparent when individual poems are read in the context of his whole achievement...it means the poet is not static."²

The identification with place could be stronger once the place is left because only then, a person is able to assess the presence of this place on shaping his own world. Although the impact of the Midwest, the region of Roethke's youth, was evident in his poetry, his nostalgic reminiscence of his memories there were lucid in his poetry of *The Lost*

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Son volume and in several poems of later volumes. The effect of place was more intense when Roethke started to have a different view of his new dwelling place westwards, "the move from Penn State westward marked the crucial turning point in his career and the beginning of a serious identification with place in America."³

Even when he moved to teach in Bennington College in 1943, the nature of that place continued to attract his attention. Allan Seager describes this place at various seasonal times,

He was again fortunate in the natural setting of the place he worked. From the campus of the college almost any way you turned offered a beautiful view of the hills. In the fall they took on a marvelous purplish-red color from the turning leaves. Winters were deep with snow but there were many blindingly bright days, and the springs covered the hills with varying tints of Green that shaded to blue with distance. As he did everywhere, Ted went for long walks through the countryside.⁴ Evidently, Roethke was dealing with his connection to place because earlier in his life he was traumatically encountered with irrevocable loss of fascinating world of both the greenhouses and the primitive nature. The death of his father and the loss of his quiet childhood world burdened him with a feeling of inadequacy because he lost a guiding figure in his life.

The greenhouses demanded a great deal of care and sometimes a kind of an artistic sense in managing the flowers and plants into beautifully arranged rows. Thus the death of the father announced the collapse of that heavenly place. As Rosemary Sullivan observes, "in the greenhouses he [Roethke's father] gave expression to a deep sensitivity to the beauty of nature."⁵

Possibly this sensitivity was essential in breeding a love of the greenhouses, especially when observed by a growing child, sensitive to the world going on around him. Kenneth Burke describes the experience of reading the greenhouse sequence, saying that “reading them, you have strongly the sense of entering at one place, winding through a series of internal developments, and coming out somewhere else.”⁶ That is, after all, the essence of Roethke’s lifelong pursuit, to arrive at reconciliation with place and its immutable influence on the formation of one’s life and history. Whether he was able to reach that end or not depends on our identification with his experiences as relevant to our own, and as meaningful to the wider world. And this is the purpose behind the oncoming analysis of the poems.

In a statement from his published notebooks, *Straw for the Fire*, Roethke says, “how bleak and black and dead-ended can be the literal approach to experience: the eye is not enough.”[emphasis original].⁷ This note dates back to the period between 1943 and 1947, the period which is considered by critics to be of immense importance in Roethke’s development. It is the time span which extended between the publication of his first volume and the second more mature work of *The Lost Son* volume. These new poems are as Steven Spender described them “most uniquely Roethke,”⁸ while Bogen considered them to be a breakthrough that is “not only stylistic but also psychological.”⁹

Published in 1948, this volume comprised the famous “Greenhouse poems.” The volume directly relates to Roethke’s childhood experiences in the greenhouses owned by his father and uncle. The world of these greenhouses was a “primitive Eden under glass” where

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Roethke as a boy was "free to explore reproduction, growth, decay and death in a controlled environment."¹⁰ Similar to Coleridge's dome of pleasure in the city of Xanadu, the greenhouses comprised in them life and death, resurrection and decadence. In this world Roethke witnessed the emergence of hundreds of lives in variety of plants, at the same time he saw the struggle these plants went through to keep growing in an austere world. Roethke related his own life to these tiny lives and perceived of his struggle as similar to his own.

Critics almost agree in considering this volume the breakthrough in Roethke's poetry and a mark of his break with the traditional confines of verse form. Meaning and content started to get much significance. The poet's self was able to break the shackles around it and it is now starting to rediscover the world. Roethke's intimate return to nature was the result of his digging deep into childhood memories of the greenhouses, "by an intuitive, intensely personal investigation into nature and the subliminal world which had made him, and in that way to recover his attachments to life."¹¹

Roethke's poems in this volume seem to have emerged from a transition in the poet's mind that was urged by a desire to create a new style, one that is original and experimental. The division of the volume's sections is essential to this understanding. Although the volume is entitled "The Lost Son," the poem under this title appears in the last section in a sequence accompanied by other three poems. The volume rather starts with the Greenhouse sequence, the notable and unique poems of Roethke. The sequence begins with a short poem entitled "Cuttings." Roethke, unlike in the first volume (*Open House*), seems to be emphasizing the connectedness of the poems rather than focusing

on an individual poem. Reviewing his early volume, one can barely think of a link between the poems as they describe separate incidents and events with no definite depth being portrayed.¹²

Part of Roethke's mystics is that he was able to create a poetry characterized with "objectivity," yet the paradox here is in Roethke's dependence on his subjectivity to achieve that end. Stephen Spender states that Roethke's poetry though focused on the "I," the latter is not the central theme in his poetry. It is rather a "medium" through which the material outside the "I" is conveyed, "sometimes... it [the 'I'] assumes into its being the colors of the objects upon which it is laid."¹³ It is quite a remarkable achievement, especially when we consider the fact that the experiences narrated were felt by a child, yet relived and retold by an adult. Stiffler points to a distinctive quality in Roethke's "Greenhouse poems," namely, the detailed descriptions of plants and stems. This intrusion into that minimal world is unprecedented. In reference to the objectivity of the poems, Stiffler notes that Roethke does not "sentimentalize either plant or child, nor does he limit the implications of the Greenhouse world by drawing conclusions about its significance."¹⁴ Those implications are unstated and Roethke does not form any explicit connection between his thoughts of mind and the natural scenery, a thing he did repeatedly in the first volume. This time the experiences are immediate and intimate.

Moreover, what can be a distinctive quality of Roethke's mystics is that he did not want "to achieve a spiritual state beyond the physical world, but that he wants to experience the bliss of spiritual consciousness within the physical world."¹⁵ In his notebooks, Roethke

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poses several inquiries about the greenhouses, which Kenneth Burke elaborated further on,

What is a greenhouse? What might we expect it to stand for? It is not sheer nature, like a jungle; nor even regulated nature, like a formal garden... there is a peculiar balance of the natural and the artificial in a greenhouse... with Roethke the experience... is like merging there into the life-laden but sticky soil.¹⁶

Sullivan argues that Roethke's indulging in "the intuitive investigation into nature" was aided by Henry Bergson's¹⁷ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, of which Roethke owned a copy. The notion revolves around realizing that there are other forms of consciousness apart from human consciousness. These forms comprise "the intuitive, pulsative attachment to life of the biological and the animal types of consciousness capable of complete self-surrender to an external object."¹⁸ It is a way of seeing beyond the intellect, of bestowing a "mystical apprehension" to the reality of the world. Roethke sought to achieve that experience internally. Thus he moved into a mood in writing in which he sees through the latent part of the experience. He sees through the landscape and feels the internal rhythm of life in plants and leaves, as if he is penetrating through a separate consciousness and perceiving some other order that is kept hidden from the perception of the human mind. He intended "to place himself within the object of his contemplation in order to coincide with it, to achieve an experience of identity."¹⁹ Sullivan suggests a partition of the Greenhouse sequence into three distinct parts: (1) the eye closely watching the plants' struggle into growth, (2) the wild world outside the

greenhouse, (3) the yearning for change and transcendence from the greenhouse world.²⁰

The resolution to go back to this personal experience in the greenhouses or in nature generally, is often placing the poet in a critical position. Bernard Quetchenbach (2000) elaborated on this notion, suggesting two approaches to nature for a poet dealing with it on a “self-conscious” level. “the nature writer is, on the one hand, a detached and scientific observer...on the other hand, there is the desire to acknowledge and explore an intimate connection with nature, not as object of study.”²¹

However, it seems that Roethke was so immersed in his experiences nature to the point of isolating himself from society and issues of the time. The absence of social content in Roethke’s poems caused some critics to mark his experiences as “atypical” and so far from the concerns of the age he lived in. Roethke hardly mentions a social theme or a historical event in his poems.²²

This claim rests upon the idea that Roethke was so indulgent and absorbed in his personal experiences that he neglected the world going on around him. However, accusing a poet of being neglectful to social themes, and claiming it a weakness in his poetry, is a flimsy act because the criteria is a matter of relativity. Only a reader’s ability to identify with the experience in a poem or to understand the associations the poet created can truly indicate the extent to which poetry is socially relevant or not. The poet could be presenting an invitation to the reader to realize the outcome of living such unique and self-indulgent experience, leaving him, namely, the reader, to assess

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the degree of influence this individual experience might cast on society at large.

Stiffler maintains that retrieving childhood memories, in Roethke's instance, is, unlike the other experiences of poets, far way from being an escape to the world of pure childhood. As much as childhood recalls innocence and purity, it is not however, free of death and decay. Elements of life and death are present side by side and the way a boy perceives them can be overwhelming and terrible. Roethke objectively speaks through the perception of a boy, not, technically speaking, for the purpose of achieving an effect similar to a child-like voice. It is a sheer and original understanding that truly shaped his boyish thought.²³ Hence the originality of this volume that made it a turning point in Roethke's poetry; a shift from the traditional constraints of the form to the wider scope of meaning and content, "the reimagining not only seeks to evoke the security of childhood, of his "Eden." The poet seeks further to submerge himself in the natural, unconscious process of organic life."²⁴ Roethke expressed this idea in his notebooks, he says about the greenhouse , "Greenhouse: this hell and heaven at once this womb of cypress and double glass."²⁵

Roethke appears in this volume to be opening the possibilities of language, freeing his poetry from the traditional rational speech exploring the "regenerative possibilities of pre-rational speech."²⁶ As James Southworth states that, in this volume, Roethke employs patterns of rhyme yet he never sacrifices the meaning.²⁷ Arguments upon the arrangement of the poems in the Greenhouse sequence emphasized a movement that is not sequential but rather cyclical. There is an alteration between two aspects of the greenhouse world;

the heavenly and the hellish.²⁸ Some poems represent a lively implication of the plants' growth, other poems, however, display aspects of death.

Eventually, the journey through the greenhouses was Roethke's attempt to recover his attachment to place. The dreamy world of greenery formed the glamorous moments Roethke enjoyed most in his childhood, therefore; his recall of the greenhouse memories can be perceived as a way of going back to the essential place which continued to haunt his mind. In every place Roethke lived afterwards, including his moving to the Pacific Northwest, he struggled to identify himself with the place of his dwelling.

The regression to the past, to the "lost place," namely the greenhouses means to Roethke the inception of a mystical allure that will encompass his explorations and reveal to the reader how tremendously can a place reside in a man's consciousness, moreover, awaken his repressed subconscious to bring out authentic and original experiences. Thus the greenhouses derive their meaning not from the symbolism they bear or in Roethke's description of them as real objects, it is rather the intimacy of the personal experience Roethke had in them, an intimacy that he continued to show to natural objects wherever he went.²⁹

The first poem in the sequence is "Cuttings" and it is followed by another section entitled "Cuttings" (later). These poems are very short. The first one is fully quoted here,

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

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The small cells bulge;
One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrillous horn.³⁰

Perhaps the first impression that the poem gives is that of Roethke's use of exact botanic terms to describe the cuttings. The starting of the sequence with this poem is significant to the sequence's course. Roethke begins with a minimal world, with little severed plants struggling to live. The poet captures that moment of the slow and assiduous effort the plants endure to come to life. The fascination that the poet beholds in this process gives this silent progress to life an account in human's recognition of the world around.³¹

In his "From Open House to the Greenhouse: Theodore Roethke's Poetic Breakthrough," Don Bogen mentions the fact that the greenhouse poems were beyond mere depictions of natural processes, they represent the self in its struggle to come to life. If "Cuttings" was a display of the poet's observation of a natural process, then the following poem "Cuttings (later)" involves the kind of relationship the self has with the small plants.³² The following is the full text of the poem,

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. (p. 35)

Bogen further argues that Roethke’s objective voice in the first section “Cuttings” is intentional, and he provides evidence for that in the analysis of the draft from Roethke’s notebook. The opening line of the “Cuttings” appears in the draft as “The best of me droops, in a drowse.” Bogen shows that, compared to the last version, this line has been rewritten with the elimination of the “I.” it is notable that in refining the poem with consideration to an objective perspective, the poet “asserts that the connection between self and nature comes from close observation of greenhouse life and is not applied to the material from the beginning in a kind of arbitrary analogy.”³³

The poet’s sympathy for those plants is so intense that he feels their “urge” and “wrestle” as they fight for life. These poems reveal that Roethke’s “lean to beginnings” is an indication of his new start to delve deep into the interior self–world, “to behold the self’s organic underpinning is also, for Roethke, to suffer one’s own imaginative birth.”³⁴

Thomas Gardner discusses these poems in the light of Roethke’s ability to make contact with the other and “singing the self” at the same time. He states that, “two things happen: the poet struggles through to a fuller more participatory way of seeing, and the cutting comes back to life.”³⁵ The effect here is implied, the poet is struggling to perceive the

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medium, to internalize it after having seen it and recognized its existence. Simultaneously, the cutting is feeling its way into growth and light. He even likens it to a saint,

What saint strained so much,

Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life? (p. 33)

Roethke was working on embracing the medium, the scene before him. Part of Roethke's mysticism is his attempt to weave his "self" into the natural processes before him. However, it is not until his later work, "North American Sequence" that Roethke's techniques developed in achieving that end.³⁶ Thus Roethke's starting in this sequence is remarkable. He begins with the tiny world of cuttings where, "the life-force is reduced to an urge, an importunate breathing."³⁷

The sequence proceeds to the "Root Cellar," a poem that relates to the tiny world of the greenhouse as well. As Martz puts it the poems move "from the darkness of underground."³⁸ A root cellar is a place where root crops are stored. Such a place seems unimportant and can hardly be an interesting subject. Yet for Roethke even in this minimal, isolated cellar there is a glimpse of life which can be significant in deepening our understanding of life's nature. The poet states the truth about the place, "Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch (p. 36)." Yet, in the middle of this darkness there is a break into the light of life, "Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark (p.36)."

It is another strife to grow. The shoots "dangled and drooped," "Roots ripe as old bait," and "Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich/ Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks." All these creatures are there in the cellar, longing for a vibration of life. The cellar is the "darkest, dampest part of the greenhouse," Roethke notices the impulse of the biological

struggle, the “descent into the root cellar is like a descent into a violent inferno of creation.” There is a sense of fear in these lines; a fear of the “severed, disjointed, voracious growth, a chaos of aimless and bewildering multiplicity.”³⁹

Emergence to life is heroically depicted because even when these roots and plants are struggling to live they might face death in their progress. At the end, Roethke forces our attention to move even to the dirt,

Nothing would give up life,

Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath. (p. 36)

This minimal world is revisited in another poem, “The Minimal,” which is not part of the Greenhouse sequence yet included in section three of The Lost Son volume,

I study the lives on a leaf, the little

Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,

Beetles in caves, newts, stone–deaf fishes,

Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds

Squirmers in bogs,

And bacterial creepers

Wriggling through wounds

Like elves in ponds,

Their wan mouths kissing the warm sutures,

Cleaning and caressing,

Creeping and healing. (p. 48)

It is quite remarkable the way this poem comprises details of a very miniature world. Man seems completely unaware of the little creatures whose order of life shows a considerable part of existence, moving

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silently around him. This cycle of life has correspondences to the human life, and particularly to the human psyche. James Applewhite observes that Roethke himself view these poems as "hard-won progressions founded upon a re-immersion of the adult psyche in the primal, chaotic, unconscious world symbolized by memories of his Michigan childhood and its landscape with marshes, rivers and ponds."⁴⁰

Noticing the "Shoots... lolling obscenely from mildewed crates" (Root Cellar) and "bacterial creepers" (The Minimal) is part of bringing the psyche into connection with the universe, particularly with that part of it which man could not feel prompted to explore. Part of the initiation of a mystic experience here is the poet's ability to keep his mind present, to be able to see the connection between the conscious self and the non-self embodied by nature. Nature in this sense is not an instigator, it is the origin, the source of the self's vitality, however, it is left to the self's ability to comprehend the extent of the affiliation. Applewhite assumes that this idea had its origin with the early British romantics, an instance he gave is of Keats's fascination with the nightingale's singing. It was not "merely aesthetic charm and the hope of escape from personal cares in the bird's timeless song," it is rather a state of being where Keats felt "nostalgia of having formerly belonged to this "warm South," this provençal landscape of collective song and underground wine."⁴¹

Similarly, Roethke associates with tiny, minimal creatures not simply to recall beautiful childhood memories from the past so that he could soothe a turbulent adulthood. He yearns for a return to the primal origin to which he feels a strong attachment. Being thus attuned to nature,

the self esteems its presence highly and even the least objects in a landscape can be a manifestation of a greater truth in life. It is part of one's psychic birth, of the self's emergence into consciousness.

The poet's awareness to the subtleties of creation works as a disciplinary force. As the cyclic experience in the greenhouse makes its progress and the boy gets older, his interaction with this world takes another detour. "Weed Puller," "Moss–Gathering," and "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" spot such instants of discovery. In "Weed Puller," the poet narrates a momentous experience,

With everything blooming above me,
Lilies, pale–pink cyclamen, roses,
Whole field lovely and inviolate,
Me down in that fetor of weeds,
Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave. (p. 37)

Stiffler maintains that this is an instance which proves that Roethke's "immersion in his Greenhouse world is no escapist's remove to a childhood fantasy."⁴² Sullivan further elaborates on this notion. She states that in this poem the discovery is about a "fallen world of material growth,"⁴³ yet this discovery of fallen materiality is reached at in the middle of the growth process. Here the natural world does not stand as a symbol of "self knowledge" and "self realization," it rather stands as the source of their formation. "One sees, one hears, one knows and one is. Or at least one begins to be"⁴⁴ in the middle of this natural spot. Louis L. Martz interprets the word "grave" at the end of the poem, as a reminder that death lurks amid these moments of growth, and it is the presence of such antagonistic force that gives the

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life-image its force, "the beauty of growth we see is ambiguous: one can never escape the presence of some poisonous threat."⁴⁵

In "Moss-Gathering," the discovery is painful and is filled with sympathy. The process of gathering moss is described in the beginning of the poem,

To loosen with all ten fingers held wide and limber
And lift up a patch, dark-green, the kind for lining cemetery baskets,
Thick and cushiony, like an old-fashioned doormat,
The crumbling small hollow sticks on the underside mixed with roots
That was moss-gathering. (p. 38)

The poet reveals so many details about this experience, preparing for the later part of the poem where he explores his feelings towards this action,

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.
(p. 38)

The idea is plainly stated. The poet feels that his intrusion caused a kind of disorder in the world of nature. Here the sense of guilt is empowered by the fact that the marshlands area is outside the greenhouse. It is not only the matter of a "place" that is physically far from the greenhouses, it is rather an indication of a lost sense of control over the environment. When the poet was describing scenes from the greenhouse landscape, his descriptions were charged with a voice of human domination over the life of the plants and stems.

Although the greenhouses displayed a beautiful, distinct kind of nature, yet it is a symbol of an artificial nature where man is the sustainer of life for the little creatures. As Martz called them, the greenhouses are “nature sophisticated by art.”⁴⁶

Moss-gathering awakened the poet’s mind to the truth of nature as a force that is operating within its own order. Sullivan counts Roethke’s feeling as “humbled” rather than “repelled” because he understood that there is a rhythm “old and of vast importance.”⁴⁷ A reference can be made here to Wordsworth’s sense of guilt when he is in the presence of nature. However, Roethke’s guilt appears to be derived from a different thought. While Wordsworth appears concerned about a spirituality that is corrupted in nature, or feeling guilt because of the nature’s compelling force in breeding awe to his soul. For Roethke, the act of intruding into nature “signifies the sundering of a primeval link that he has just begun to glimpse, between him and nature.”⁴⁸

In “Orchids,” there is a sense of an aggressive movement with the description of the flowers. In the beginning the image is as follows,

They lean over the path,
Adder-mouthed,
Swaying close to the face,
Coming out, soft and deceptive, (p. 37)

The poem echoes the notion of a growth that is accompanied with a violent force of becoming and establishing. Keralavarma assumes that the “poem does not spiritualize the orchids.”⁴⁹ They are reduced to their stage of infancy if not further back to a “prenatal state,” (so many devouring infants! P. 37). Sullivan argues that in this continuing nearness to the diminutive elements of nature, one sees more of the

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vicious aspect of growth which lies behind any beautiful natural blossom.⁵⁰ The discovery is painful, and physicality is discarded to express that a life is fully delivered when one lives with spirituality.⁵¹

The following poem "Big Wind," demonstrates this notion. Again the force of nature is presented against the greenhouses,

Where were the greenhouses going,

Lunging into lashing

Wind driving water

So far down the river

All the faucets stopped?– (p. 39)

It clearly describes a critical situation in the greenhouses; water shortage during a storm and the struggle to keep the pipes supplied with hot steam. The storm hit worst on the rose-house, which Roethke likened to a "cargo of roses" striving to survive the violent wind. Finally it lands safely,

She sailed until the calm morning,

Carrying her full cargo of roses. (p.39)

What is remarkable in this poem is that Roethke personifies the rose-house, he refers to it with the pronoun "she." The rose-house is a living thing and Roethke feels its struggle with the wind as one worth appreciation. As Stiffler observes, "the greenhouse breeds and nurtures beautiful and valuable things, and Roethke is enamored of those."⁵²

Again, the movement of the poems in the Greenhouse sequence is symbolic of growth. "Big Wind" certainly refers to the lenient power of a self that is striving to "become something" yet is forced to meet hindrances in the world around.

Martz observes a connection between “Big Wind” and the poems following it, “Old Florist” and “Transplanting.” He maintains that the physical properties of the greenhouse mentioned in the “Big Wind”; the “manure–machine,” “rusty boiler,” “cypress window–frames,” all emphasize “the elements of deliberate art in the creation of these flowers.”⁵³ In “Old Florist,” the art is sustained with a brilliant work of a worker in the greenhouse. Roethke marvels over the florist’s achievement,

How he could flick and pick
Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,
Or scoop out a weed close to the flourishing roots,
Or make the dust buzz with a light spray,
Or drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice
Or fan life into wilted sweet–peas with his hat
Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue in a rubber boots
(p. 40)

It is a precise view of the details of the greenhouses structure. Roethke notices even the slightest object in this place. Any occurrence, even on the tiny level of plant growth captures his attention.⁵⁴ Here the growth of plants is connected with the efforts of people who preserve the liveliness of the greenhouse. Denis Donghue observes,

In Roethke’s poems human life is endorsed when it manages to survive a storm, as in “Big Wind,” where the greenhouse – Roethke’s symbol for “the whole life”– rides the storm and sails into the calm morning. There is also the old florist, standing all night watering the roses, and the single surviving tulip with its head swaggering over the dead blooms.⁵⁵

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"Transplanting" echoes this notion as well,
Watching hands transplanting,
Turning and tamping,
Lifting the young plants with two fingers,
Sifting in a palm-full of fresh loam,-
One swift movement,-
The plumping in the bunched roots,
A single twist of the thumbs, a tamping and turning,
All in one. (p. 40)

Sullivan argues that the insistence here is on what can be learned from the vegetal world. "He wishes to recover vital energy from the vegetal realm," Roethke's transcendence is not typical, namely with withdrawal into abstract thoughts, he "identifies himself with the generative reality of the here and now."⁵⁶

The following three poems, "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," "Flower Dump," and "Carnations" resume the growth movement. In "Child on the Top of Greenhouse," the poet confronts the greenhouse in an attempt to let the self ascend. The poet relates a memory of climbing the top of the 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! (p. 41)

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The poet as a child climbs to the top of the greenhouse as an expression of an “eminently human impulse to be released, to be distinguished from the lower physical world.”⁵⁷ Part of the cyclical movement of the self is its fluctuation between experiences of raising and lowering, going forward or slipping backward, which explains the following poem in the sequence “Flower Dump,” a descent to earth.⁵⁸

“Carnations” is the last poem in the Greenhouse sequence,

Pale blossoms, each balanced on a single jointed stem,

The leaves curled back in elaborate Corinthian scrolls;

And the air cool, as if drifting down from wet hemlocks,

Or rising out of ferns not far from water,

A crisp hyacinthine coolness,

Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,

The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud. (p. 41)

The poem seems different in comparison to the previous greenhouse poems. Images of life and death are not evident here. Martz states that the sequence “ends with the triumph of art.”⁵⁹ While Stiffler sees that the poem suggests an insight regarding the greenhouse “cyclical motion.” He observes that, “the cyclical motion of the remainder of the Greenhouse poems is put into dramatic relief.”⁶⁰ Here, Roethke presents an image of a serene landscape, as if motion had all at once stopped. However, Sullivan sees the emergence from the greenhouse’s “pale blossoms,” “stem,” “leaves,” “hemlocks,” and “ferns” to the “windless perpetual morning above a September cloud” as another desire for transcendence, even further to the sky.⁶¹

Keralavarma maintains that the terms “eternity” and “perpetual” allude to a mystical experience, “what Roethke means seems to be that life is

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invincible, continuous, and eternal. Individual flowers fade, fall and decay, but life will reappear in new forms."⁶²

Thus, the alternation between a cyclical and sequential movement attains its significance in the Greenhouse sequence,

In the Greenhouse world of Theodore Roethke, however, history is not only linear, it is also cyclical... in the Greenhouse world, of course, death follows birth, but rebirth also follows death. Out of winter comes the spring, a fact only imaginable in the linear scheme of history. The imagination of Roethke's protagonist is subject to both ways of experiencing history.⁶³

Section two and three of "The Lost Son" volume comprises a number of short poems, of which the study will include "River Incident." The incident is communicated as follows,

A shell arched under my toes,
Stirred up a whirl of silt
That riffled around 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. (p. 47)

A glimpse into Roethke's moments in the outer nature shows how his experiences varied as the place changed. In the Greenhouse poems, Roethke attentively watched and observed the hidden, tiny world of

plants' growth. He associated his growth as a human being to theirs while at times he sympathized with them. However, it seems that when Roethke is in the middle of wild nature, his consciousness reflects on wider truths and renders more profound mystic experiences. Allan Seager, in his biography of Roethke, "The Glass House," relates an incident in which Roethke felt a mystical experience with a tree in the woods.⁶⁴ This fact from his life shows his interest in being in nature as it provides his mind with various states and revelations. Sullivan interpreted Roethke's experience in the river in terms of an intuitive discovery. She assumed that Roethke "discovers his own subhuman origins."⁶⁵ The discovery is sublime. The poet, with "sea water" in his veins, goes back into man's origin, into the primeval state of being, "the psychic residue of ancestral experience."⁶⁶

This period in Roethke's poetry was so intense and rich. It helped him to shape his poetic vision anew, this time aligning it to nature. The personal axis coincided with that of nature and the poet started to see into the depth of things. This contributed to the process of liberation from the dependence on tradition, because now the real source of knowledge is the inner self. In such a state the inner and the outer worlds harmoniously combine to each other, however, the outer world of nature retains every object in it as a separate thing yet a symbol at the same time, an analogue to the inner state. This shows that Roethke's mystic experience was unique in that it merged the physical and the spiritual into one integral whole.

Notes

¹David Wagoner, ed. *Straw for the Fire*, from the *Notebooks of Theodore Roethke*, (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2006). p.24.

² James G. Southworth, *The Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, in *College English*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (Feb., 1996), National Council of Teachers of English, p. 326

³ Kermit Venderbilt, *Theodore Roethke in A Literary History of American West*, ed. J. Golden Taylor, (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), p.447

⁴ Allan Seager, *The Glass House, The Life of Theodore Roethke*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press,1968), p. 131

⁵ Rosemary Sullivan, *Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p.7

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke*, in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 1950, p.69.

⁷ Wagoner , p.151.

⁸ Stephen Spender, *The Subjective Ego in Theodor Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein, (Washington: Washington University Press, 1965). p. 8.

⁹ Don Bogen, *From Open House to the Greenhouse: Theodore Roethke's Poetic Breakthrough*, in *ELH*, Vol. 47, No.2, 1980, p. 399

¹⁰ Fredrick Philip Lenz, *The Evolution of Matter and Spirit in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, PhD dissertation, State University of New York, August, 1978, p.23.

¹¹Sullivan, p.25.

¹² Randall Stiffler, *Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Critics*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1986), p. 39.

¹³ Spender, p. 9

¹⁴ Stiffler, p. 40.

¹⁵ Lenz, p.47.

¹⁶ Burke, p.82.

¹⁷ Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was one of the most famous and influential French philosophers of the late 19th century–early 20th century. Bergson convinced many thinkers that immediate experience and intuition are more significant than rationalism and science for understanding reality. (Lawlor, Leonard and Moulard, Valentine, "Henri Bergson", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/bergson/>>.

¹⁸ Sullivan, p.25.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 26

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bernard W. Quetchenbach, Back from the Far Field, American Nature Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.13

²² Ibid, p. 14.

²³ Stiffler, p. 50.

²⁴ J.D. McClatchy, Sweating Light from a Stone: Identifying Theodore Roethke, in Theodore Roethke, Modern Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom, (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p. 126.

²⁵ Theodore Roethke, On Poetry and Craft, (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), p.87

²⁶ M.H. Abrams, ed. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 5th ed. Vol. 1. (NY; W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.825.

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²⁷Southworth, p. 335

²⁸Stiffler, p. 40

²⁹Quetchenbach, p. 44

³⁰All the quotes of Roethke's poetry in the text are taken from: *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), p.35.

³¹Sullivan, p. 26

³²Bogen, p. 415

³³Ibid.

³⁴Walter Kalaidjian, *Understanding Theodore Roethke*, (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 43

³⁵Thomas Gardner, *Discovering Ourselves In Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p.78

³⁶Ibid, p. 79

³⁷Jay Parini, *Blake and Roethke; When Everything Comes to One*, in *Theodore Roethke, Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p.167

³⁸Louis L. Martz, *A Greenhouse Eden*, in *Theodor Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein, (Washington: Washington University Press, 1965), p. 23

³⁹Sullivan, p. 27

⁴⁰James Applewhite, *Death and Rebirth in a Modern Landscape*, in *Theodore Roethke, Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p. 196.

⁴¹Ibid, p.206

⁴²Stiffler, p.50

⁴³ Sullivan, p. 28

⁴⁴ Roy Harvey Pearce, Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy, in Theodore Roethke, *Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p.67

⁴⁵ Martz, p. 24

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sullivan, p. 29.

⁴⁸ B. Keralavarma, *The Greenhouse Eden: Symbolic Figuration in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, PhD dissertation, The Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, February 2000, p.90

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.88

⁵⁰ Sullivan. P.28

⁵¹ Keralavarma, p.88

⁵² Stiffler, p. 49

⁵³ Martz, p. 26

⁵⁴ William Meredith, *A Steady Storm of Correspondences: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self*, in Theodore Roethke, *Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p. 40

⁵⁵ Denis Donghue, *Roethke's Broken Music*, in Theodor Roethke: *Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein, (Washington: Washington University Press, 1965), p. 47

⁵⁶ Sullivan, p.30

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.29

⁵⁸ Stiffler, p.44

⁵⁹ Martz, p.27

⁶⁰ Stiffler, p.44

⁶¹ Sullivan, p.28

⁶² Keralavarma, p.93

⁶³ Stiffler, p.46

⁶⁴ Seager, p.90

⁶⁵ Sullivan, p.35

⁶⁶ Applewhite, p.197

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