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"Sometimes Metaphysical": Louis Martz and Theodore Roethke

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In his long and distinguished career as a scholar and critic, Louis Martz declined to limit his attentions to a single mode or period of poetry. His best known books, *The Poetry of Meditation* and *The Paradise Within*, continue to rank among the more influential studies of seventeenth-century poetry, and to most readers Martz's name immediately prompts associations with the English Renaissance. This is understandable: the two works just mentioned fully deserve the admiration they have received, and at this juncture they seem to stand at the center of Martz's achievement. It would be a pity, though, if these fine books were to eclipse awareness of other aspects of Martz's critical *oeuvre*. For many years he taught a popular lecture course at Yale in Modern Poetry, and in the later part of his career he devoted increased attention, as critic and editor, to writers such as Ezra Pound, H. D., and D. H. Lawrence. Earlier evidence of Martz's modernist interests is to be found in his 1966 collection of essays, *The Poem of the Mind*[1] The contents of this volume cover an impressive range of subjects, beginning with essays on Donne and Edward Taylor but proceeding to others on Whitman, Dickinson, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Theodore Roethke. The book is not as miscellaneous as this list might suggest, for the various essays engage, as Martz writes in his Preface, "poetry of the interior life, where the mind, acutely aware of an outer world of drifting, unstable forms, finds within itself the power to create coherence and significance" (ix). As one might expect, one strategy for creating coherence which Martz recurs to frequently throughout the volume is the tradition of religious meditation which

[1]Louis L. Martz, *The Poem of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Further citations appear in the text.

he had studied in great depth and detail in his earlier works. The meditative poem as written by Donne, Herbert, and their contemporaries and stylistic heirs provides a background against which Martz analyzes the works of modern poets. Throughout, he shows himself to be equally sensitive to the similarities and the differences such comparisons reveal.

Among the modern poets Martz considers in *The Poem of the Mind,* Theodore Roethke might appear an outrider. A generation younger than Eliot, Williams, and Stevens, Roethke writes as one who has assimilated many of the stylistic experiments of his elders, and in his adaptation of these to his own purposes he is perhaps better viewed as a post-modern poet. Martz's essay, "Theodore Roethke: A Greenhouse Eden," remains one of the best brief assessments of Roethke's achievement. It chronicles Roethke's complex stylistic development, which has seemed to some readers an erratic donning and doffing of masks. Without denying the poet's veerings and relapses, Martz mounts a sympathetic view of his struggle to find his own voice as a poet—a struggle which Martz believes found success in his second book, *The Lost Son* (1948). Martz sees this volume as an artistic breakthrough which Roethke in his later poems sometimes equalled but never surpassed. As his essay's title suggests, Martz considers the sequence of free-verse descriptive poems that Roethke wrote about his florist father's greenhouse to be the imaginative center, the fertile source of his mature work, and he offers detailed readings of a number of these. He looks closely also at the longer meditative poems in free verse that Roethke began writing at this time, poems which take stylistic cues from Whitman, Lawrence, and Eliot as they attempt to regain the vision of Eden which Roethke as a child experienced in his father's Michigan greenhouse. Martz sees later poems of this kind (for instance, the "North American Sequence" in the posthumous (1964) volume *The Far Field*) as indebted to the strategies Roethke first evolved in the four poems that conclude *The Lost Son*: "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape of the Fire." As one would expect of the author of *The Paradise Within,* Martz finds parallels with Traherne in Roethke's renderings of nature and childhood, endowed as these are with visionary light and a tone of wonder.

I shall not summarize Martz's argument further. I believe most readers will find it as persuasive as I do in its overview of the poet's career. What I wish to do now is to expand upon a few of its less emphasized facets as a means of appreciating Martz's individuality as a critic and Roethke's as a poet. Like any good critical essay, "Theodore Roethke: A Greenhouse Eden" points beyond itself in a number of intriguing directions.

One of the more tantalizing things about the essay is the occasional hint it offers of a personal relationship, a history held in common by the poet and his critic. When Louis Martz graduated from Lafayette College in 1935, his undergraduate career would have coincided with Theodore Roethke's presence as an Instructor in English from 1931 to 1935. Lafayette had a student body of only eight hundred when Roethke joined its faculty, and he quickly became conspicuous for the eccentricity of his behavior and for the energy and enthusiasm of his teaching.[2] Since Martz provides no references for the following passage in an otherwise scrupulously annotated essay, it seems safe to take it as his personal recollection of Roethke's tastes and teaching in the early 1930s. Of the early Roethke, Martz recalls

> his efforts in the current "metaphysical" mode, his admiration for Donne and Marvell, for conceits such as this, from Marvell's "The Unfortunate Lover":
>
> > Till at the last the master-Wave
> > Upon the Rock his Mother drave;
> > And there she split against the Stone,
> > In a *Caesarian Section.*
>
> —a passage that he read gleefully to his classes in 1932. Along with these enthusiasms went, of course, an admiration for Tate and Ransom, for the Elinor Wylie of *Angels and Earthly Creatures*, for the taut lyrics of Louise Bogan's *Body of this Death*; for the young Kunitz of *Intellectual Things*; for authors in the metaphysical mode now almost forgotten, such as Alan Porter in *The Signature of Pain*; and indeed for all the sort of poetry represented in Genevieve

[2]Alan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 71.

> Taggard's superb anthology of metaphysical verse, *Circumference*, which he greatly admired (166).

It is startling to be reminded just how indiscriminately the term "metaphysical" was applied at the time of which Martz is writing. Martz and other scholars of his generation were to define the word more rigorously, but in the early Thirties, it appears, almost any poetry with a hint of intellectual content was susceptible to the label. Eliot's Clark Lectures of 1926 may have signalled a trend by discussing not only Donne but Dante and Laforgue as metaphysical poets. Following Eliot, the term appears to be used by some as a convenient antonym to "Romantic." Others were even more promiscuous in usage. *Circumference,* the anthology Martz cites, is an example of the Thirties conception of metaphysical poetry at its most freewheeling. I am not sure that I quite agree with Martz that it is superb, but it is certainly arresting in bringing together such a capacious range of poetry under the metaphysical banner. Donne and Herbert, Crashaw, Marvell, and Vaughan are here, but so also are Pope, Burns, Wordsworth, Whitman, and Tennyson. Emily Dickinson is not a surprise, but she is immediately followed by Swinburne. Besides the modern poets Martz mentions as among Roethke's favorites (Bogan, Wylie, Kunitz), Genevieve Taggard includes Cummings, Millay, and Sandburg. Clearly, her idea of metaphysical poetry was founded on something broader than verbal texture. In her preface to the anthology, she writes:

> Ideas being for this temperament as real as grass blades or locomotives, the poet's imagination is always riding the two horses in the circus, Idea and Fact; they gallop neck and neck in his work, he has a genius for both the concrete word and the dazzling concept.[3]

This notion of metaphysical poetry as verse in which a constant philosophical pressure shapes the language, in which intellectual striving embodies itself in expressions of sensory immediacy, was of

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[3]Genevieve Taggard (ed.), *Circumference: Varieties of Metaphysical Verse, 1456-1928* (New York: Covici Friede, 1930 [date on title page is 1929 but the book was copyrighted the following year]), p. 6.

course maintained by writers other than Taggard. One is reminded of Eliot's remark that "a thought to Donne was an experience," and that for poets like him it was possible to "feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose."[4] *Circumference,* published in 1930, is a fascinating record of critical conceptions that were in the air at the time, and a reminder of how stylistic currents which may seem quite distinct to later view may appear confluent to a writer in the midst of them.

Alan Porter's *The Signature of Pain* is a less rewarding relic.[5] Martz's description of Porter as "now almost forgotten" would certainly be an understatement today. The library copy I recently consulted was last borrowed in 1956, and not frequently for many years before that. Yet the book must once have had its champions: published in 1931, it went into a second printing. Porter's book is given a self-consciously seventeenth-century flavor at the outset by the inclusion of four "Commendatory Verses" by his friends, and the tone is sustained in his own pieces, which favor musty archaic diction and intricate stanza patterns. Sometimes he produces a pastiche of Vaughan or Herbert:

> Eyes, I could pluck you out;
> So gadabout;
> Emptily roving here and there
> To see bleak shadows in bleak air,
> And all so dull,
> The Word that made it was a fool.
> ("Vision")

Perusal of this volume, which Martz understandably does not dwell upon, provides a pallid example of the mode that Roethke was drawn to in the early Thirties. In doing so, however, it reinforces one's respect for Roethke's own early efforts. True, his attempts to write poems that Genevieve Taggard would have approved are not momentous. And yet, almost always, they avoid that hand-me-down literary quality that deadens Porter's lines. Like his friend Kunitz, the young Roethke labored strenuously to write lyrics which are certainly

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[4]T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 247.

[5]Alan Porter, *The Signature of Pain and Other Poems* (New York: John Day, 1931). Citations of individual poems are by title.

lapidary but which seize and hold attention with their tautness, purposeful diction, and carefully posed imagery. As a single example, here is the last stanza of "Death Piece":

> His thought is tied, the curving prow
> Of motion moored to rock;
> And minutes burst upon a brow
> Insentient to shock.[6]

Brief as it is, Martz's discussion of Roethke's early lyrics illustrates the sensitivity to historical context that distinguishes his criticism. In this case, as we have seen, it was a context that he lived through together with the poet. Verse of this sort is not what most readers nowadays connect with the early Thirties. The last poems of Yeats and the first poems of Auden are more likely to come to mind. "Metaphysical" verse in its 1930s context was a phase Roethke grew beyond, in fact found it necessary to abandon: so Martz argues in tracing the poet's development. To Martz, Roethke's progress is defined by the emergence of more expansive imaginative powers which express themselves in meditative poems written in free verse. As he has persuasively demonstrated elsewhere, the meditative mode and the metaphysical style, although they may coexist in the practice of some poets, are not essentially or invariably conjoined. Another essay in *The Poem of the Mind,* "Meditative Action and 'The Metaphysick Style'," sets out his view of the matter in full detail. In his Roethke piece he comments more briefly:

> Roethke's development shows that there is no necessary relation between the metaphysical style and the genre of meditative poetry. The two modes co-existed, happily, in the early part of the seventeenth century, but in Vaughan and Traherne we can see that co-existence fading: as with Roethke, the metaphysical style in these two writers is overlaid upon a hidden center (170).

For Roethke, as he goes on to show, that center was childhood experience in the greenhouse setting, with continual exposure to the

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[6]Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1966). Citations of individual poems are by title.

cycles of growth and decay. About one poem, "Moss-Gathering," he remarks:

> Those loose and open rhythms, the closely observed details of natural growth, the frank confession, the sense of a desecration—these things evoke the spirit of D. H. Lawrence, to whose works Roethke was deeply devoted in the early 1930's—another sign that his metaphysical mode of that time was superimposed upon a deeper allegiance (172-173).

Generally persuasive as it is, Martz's map of Roethke's development is in danger of being too neat. Poets are rarely cooperative in displaying to their critics a clean trajectory, and Roethke presents more false starts, digressions, and doublings-back than most. It was not to be expected that a brief essay could take account of all of these, although Martz gives a nod to some of them. He notes, without quoting, the wild free-verse "surrealist" poems of the volume following *The Lost Son, Praise to the End* (1951), and opines that these "too often destroy themselves by violent experiments in a Tom o' Bedlam style" (176). With similar concision he remarks upon the highly formal "Yeatsian" poems that followed in the 1950s:

> This long period of Yeatsian imitation no doubt performed an essential function for Roethke. After the intimate self-discoveries of *The Lost Son,* some sort of mask, like the earlier mask of the metaphysicals, was apparently needed for Roethke's development: to escape from the incoherencies of the new poems that appeared in *Praise to the End* (1951), to include a larger measure of intellectual content, and to achieve a broader symbolic dimension (175).

It is only in regard to Roethke's final phase that Martz's account seems marred by a significant omission. Although he bestows a good deal of attention to the "North American Sequence"—poems which open the posthumous volume *The Far Field* and which again exhibit the Lawrencian "hidden center"—he neglects to mention the sequence of formal lyrics that concludes the collection. The omission

is especially puzzling, given that the title of the group is "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical."[7]

Surely I am not alone in wishing that Martz had taken the measure of these *soi-disant* metaphysical poems of Roethke's final years. One can speculate as to the reasons for his silence. Did he rate these poems as an unsatisfactory retrogression to the "mask" that the younger poet had found imaginatively confining? Or did he see these rhyming pieces as further efforts in the "Yeatsian" mode of Roethke's middle period and, as such, distant from the "hidden center" his essay was designed to bring to light? Or did he simply run out of space? Unanswerable questions, of course: in the space that I myself have left I shall venture to set down some thoughts on this poetic sequence, with gratitude to Louis Martz for leaving another critic of Roethke something to do.

In calling his group of twelve poems "Sometimes Metaphysical," Roethke emphasizes its mingled heritage. The last five poems have stylistic qualities that suggest models later than the seventeenth century. Two of them, "I Waited" and "The Tree, the Bird," are written in blank verse (with occasional variations) and in their content as well as their meter put one in mind of Wordsworth. In their rapt contemplation of natural scenes, they seem like isolated, self-contained "spots of time." In contrast, the presiding spirits of the last three pieces are Blake, who is mentioned in one of them, and Yeats in his more gnomic lyrics. It is in the first seven poems that readers will detect overtones of Vaughan, Herbert, and Donne. These are written in finely modulated stanzas of six or eight lines. Except for the second poem, "In Evening Air," which uses a repeated pattern of long and short lines, the meter is iambic pentameter. While Roethke judiciously

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[7]Critical discussions of this sequence are not directly engaged in this essay. The reader may wish to consult the following: Peter Balakian, *Theodore Roethke's Far Fields* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989), pp. 151-165; Richard Allen Blessing, *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); Jenijoy La Belle, *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 159-163; Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems," *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry,* ed. Arnold Stein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 115-135; and Jay Parini, *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), pp. 178-184.

mixes rhyme with off-rhyme to bring a more contemporary sound to his lines, they resonate with their antecedents. In the sound of these poems one hears two poetic eras harmonized.

Before looking at individual passages, one may comment on the poet's pervasive concerns. The sequence may be only sometimes metaphysical in style, but it is always, even in its most Romantic or Yeatsian moments, metaphysical in its themes. Roethke ponders such matters as mortality and eternity, the body and the soul, the many and the one, the relation of man to the rest of creation, and the relation of carnal to spiritual love. Such topics are almost bound to summon echoes of seventeenth-century religious poetry; although Roethke is careful to avoid any clearly identifiable verbal reminiscences, his tone and dramatic stance frequently recall those of his precursors. Roethke's recourse to tradition is especially striking if one recalls what kind of poetry his contemporaries were writing at the time. This was the period of the emergence of Confessional Poetry, exemplified in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies.* Roethke, like Lowell, was a manic-depressive recurrently hospitalized, and his experience of psychological extremes surely informs these poems. Yet his depiction of himself in crisis is quite different from Lowell's circumstantial, even ruthlessly clinical realism. Roethke presents his interior *agon* not in psychological but in spiritual terms, and consequently avails himself of a heightened rhetoric, and of a voice more insistently musical than one finds in Lowell's pared-down, deliberately prosaic lines.

The first and perhaps best known poem of the sequence, "In a Dark Time," is an impressive instance of these qualities.[8] Biographical data suggests that the "dark time" is a euphemism for one of the clinical depressions the poet was plagued with. But the poem presents its speaker's experience in ways which derive more from mystical tradition and its earlier expressions in devotional poetry than they do from the assumptions of modem psychotherapy. The poem begins:

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[8]The poem "In a Dark Time" was the subject of a remarkable symposium, with commentaries contributed by John Crowe Ransom, Babatte Deutsch, Stanley Kunitz, and Theodore Roethke himself. This is included in Anthony Ostroff (ed.), *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), pp. 24-53.

> In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
> I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
> I hear my echo in the echoing wood—
> A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
> I live between the heron and the wren,
> Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

The vision initially described by the poet is that of a dark mirror-image, a glimpse of his divided and embattled consciousness. Any attempt to focus on the natural world only renews awareness of his dejected state and the psychic stresses that afflict his personality. His life is lived between phases of aggression (the heron) and of timidity (the wren), between higher and lower impulses ("Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den").

In the second stanza Roethke candidly defines his condition as "madness," but sees it as a stage on a journey toward enlightenment: "That place among the rocks—is it a cave, / Or winding path? The edge is what I have." What he has, apparently, is a renewed though still precarious grasp on reality. Having reached the bottom ("the purity of pure despair"), he is able to see beyond the mocking reflections of himself and perceive the greater world. His attempt to relate to it is daunting; as stanza 3 shows, there is a darkness, a volatile energy outside as well as within the self:

> A steady storm of correspondences!
> A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
> And in broad day the midnight come again!

The pervasiveness of darkness, though, is what continues to purify consciousness, as he experiences "Death of the self in a long, tearless night, / All natural shapes blazing unnatural light."

The final stanza sharpens the paradox and signals, at the end, a spiritual breakthrough:

> Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
> My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
> Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is *I?*
> A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
> The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
> And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

The poem is tactful, and surprisingly successful, in reconciling its modern consciousness with the earlier imaginative modes of its precursors. We may understand the release from stress at the end as the lifting of depression, the reintegration of the psyche—but the phrasing speaks of union with the Divine. Certainly St. John of the Cross is in the background here, as one source of symbolic darkness, but Roethke is in debt to Henry Vaughan as well in his presentation of darkness as an aid to vision.[9] The last stanza of Vaughan's "The Night" must have been in his mind:

> There is in God (some say)
> A deep, but dazling darkness; As men here
> Say it is late and dusky, because they
> See not all clear;
> O for that night! where I in him
> Might live invisible and dim.[10]

Speaking of Vaughan, it is possible to read the "tearing wind" surrounding Roethke's speaker at the end as an even more energetic version of the "rushing wind" that prompts Vaughan's cry at the end of "Regeneration": "Lord, then said I, *On me one breath, /And let me dye before my death!*" Roethke's other images in the poem, while they are not as directly reminiscent of Vaughan's, have the sort of symbolic aura with which Vaughan often invests natural objects. The heron and wren, almost heraldic, would be more at home in one of Vaughan's or Herbert's landscapes than in the naturalistic ones of Wordsworth or D. H. Lawrence. Roethke has here resuscitated a pre-Modern model of nature in which the human observer can track "correspondences" between himself and other creatures, seeing himself as but one of the links of the chain of being. It is this older way of seeing that denotes this as one of the more metaphysical poems of the sequence; somehow

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[9]Numerous indications of Roethke's enduring interest in Vaughan, Traherne, and seventeenth-century poetry in general are to be found in Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (ed.), *Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).

[10]Henry Vaughan, *Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. L. C. Martin (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). Citations of individual poems are by title.

Roethke sidesteps mere antiquarianism in his appropriation of the mode.

Of course, "correspondences" could reasonably suggest a source in French Symbolism as well; and it is possible to overstate the extent of seventeenth-century influence on Roethke in these pieces. It is a subtle matter. The most conspicuous stylistic device of metaphysical poetry, the conceit, is not to be found here. On the other hand, Roethke frequently displays a fondness for paradox that with him, as with his seventeenth-century forebears, allows for a highly concentrated expression of what those precursors would have called wit. We have already glanced at the paradoxical language of "In a Dark Time." Other poems in the sequence provide examples as well:

> Love begets love. This torment is my joy.
> ("The Motion")

> What shakes the eye but the invisible?

> Rising or falling's all one discipline!
> ("The Decision")

> Blessed the meek; they shall inherit wrath.

> The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal.
> ("Infirmity")

Because it transcends (or simply violates) logic, paradox moves expression into the realm of religious discourse. Just as Roethke's illuminating darkness harks back through Vaughan to the Pseudo-Dionysus, so the lines above have precedents in devotional poetry and its sources.

Sometimes a venerable devotional tone is evident simply in the dramatic posture Roethke assumes toward God. Herbert spoke of *The Temple* as "a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul," and it is not too fanciful to recall such a description when reading lines like these of Roethke's:

> Godhead above my God, are you there still?
> To sleep is all my life. In sleep's half-death,
> My body alters, altering the soul

That once could melt the dark with its small breath.
Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day:
From me to Thee's a long and terrible way.
("The Marrow")

Herbert would no doubt query the heterodox conceptions implied here of God and of the soul. But he would have had little difficulty in recognizing the sense of terrible distance from the Creator which the speaker feels, the fear of divine indifference. It is not hard to find lines of Herbert's that occupy the same emotional realm:

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To crie to thee,
And then not heare it crying!
("Deniall")

O rack me not to such a vast extent;
Those distances belong to thee:
The world's too little for thy Tent,
A grave too big for me.
("The Temper" (I))[11]

In a more tranquil piece, "In Evening Air," Roethke compares the cycles of his own creativity with those of nature and pleads for divine support for his vocation in terms that recall the Herbert of "Employment (I) and (II)" and of "The Flower." Roethke's aspiration and bitter-sweet retrospection in this piece have a Herbertian cast:

Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing
Time cannot overwhelm.
Once I transcended time:
A bud broke to a rose,
And I rose from a last diminishing.

Herbert, master of the sacred pun, would no doubt appreciate Roethke's play on "rose." Such parallels could be multiplied. What we encounter in the sequence, though, is more of a generalized

[11]George Herbert, *The Works*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (1964; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941). Citations of individual poems are by title.

metaphysical aura than a set of indisputable echoes. As in his best metaphysical lyrics of the Thirties, Roethke here has absorbed his influences so thoroughly that he has made their gestures his own—and this, again, saves his work from the cobwebs festooning the poems of Alan Porter.

For a final example of such stylistic control, I point to "Infirmity." Just as Vaughan's "The Night" lies behind "In a Dark Time," I believe Herbert's "Affliction (I)" or perhaps "The Forerunners" may have provided hints for this contemplation of mortality. Here Roethke surveys the deterioration of his body with the sort of zestful, macabre humor that Donne and his peers often brought to the subject:

> Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;
> There's little left I care to call my own.
> Today they drained the fluid from a knee
> And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone;
> Thus I conform to my divinity
> By dying inward, like an aging tree.

His tone shifts from this ferocious wit to something more tranquil and contemplative as he chronicles the spiritual quickening that keeps pace with bodily decay. As he discovers, "a pure extreme of light / Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down"—and, he declares, "The soul delights in that extremity." One might expect this mystical moment to draw the speaker apart from nature, and some lines suggest as much: "Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear, / I move beyond the reach of wind and fire." Interestingly, however, the poem takes another turn before it concludes. The penultimate stanza returns the poet to his beloved, Edenic surroundings with yet keener perceptions—"livelier then before," as Herbert would say.

> The great day balances upon the leaves;
> My ears still hear the bird when all is still;
> My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,
> And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

The final lines register a renewed awareness of mortality, but with a reconciled will, an understanding that the earlier mystical death of the self has fostered:

When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

Sometimes metaphysical? Certainly Roethke's sequence is that, in its pervading themes and in numerous turns of style. Just as certainly, it is sometimes meditative. Roethke's lines, "The mind enters itself, and God the mind, / And one is One, free in the tearing wind," are an audaciously compact summary of what Louis Martz defined as the meditative action of such poetry. And yet Roethke's diction, even when ceremoniously heightened, is that of his own time. Like Martz the critic, Roethke the poet was at home in both the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. As we move forward in the twenty-first century, both of these men have much to teach us.

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