

## Vacillation between Identities in The Poetry of Theodore Roethke

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the ideas of the American poet Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) on identity and the mystical concept of identification in his poetry.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section one is an introduction that starts with a brief account of the poet's life and thought. This is followed by brief notes on the influences on Roethke's thought and poetry.

Section two contains the main body of the paper; in which the researcher reveals Roethke's vision of the cosmos in relation to its constituent parts. The discussion sheds light onto two aspects: the human self and the material world, and the human self and Divinity. The poems chosen for the study show the poet's attempt to reveal the bonds that tie the inner self with the physical world on one hand, and with divinity on the other; they also exhibit the fluctuation of the speaker's identity and his assuming different identities during his spiritual communion with the outside world.

Finally, the paper ends with a conclusion that sums up the findings of the study.

**Key words:** Theodore Roethke, Vacillation between Identities, identification, mysticism.

### الملخص

يعنى هذا البحث بدراسة افكار الشاعر الامريكي (ثيودور روثكي) (1908-1963) فيما يخص تذبذب الهوية وفكرة الاتحاد الصوفية في شعره.

يقع البحث في ثلاثة أقسام رئيسية؛ الاول منها هو مقدمة عن حياة الشاعر و فكره. يتبع ذلك ملاحظات عامة تلخص ابرز من أثر على فكر وشعر (روثكي) بهذا الخصوص.

أما القسم الثاني فيضم متن البحث. اذ يكشف فيه الباحث عن نظرة الشاعر الى الكون والوجود ككل وعلاقة هذا الكل باجزائه المكونة. ويسلط النقاش الضوء على جانبين هما: النفس البشرية و العالم المادي، والنفس البشرية و الالهوية. وتكشف القصائد المختارة للدراسة عن العلاقة الوثيقة التي تربط ما بين النفس و العالم المادي من جهة وبين الالهوية من جهة اخرى. كما تظهر القصائد تذبذب هوية المتكلم في القصائد وتقمصه هويات مختلفة خلال تواصله الروحي مع العالم الخارجي. وينتهي البحث بخاتمة تلخص أهم النتائج التي خلصت إليها الدراسة.

الكلمات الدلالية: ثيودور رويثكي، تذبذب الهوية، الاتحاد، التصوف.

### Theodore Roethke's life and thought:

Theodor Roethke (1908-1963) was an American poet born in Michigan. Roethke drew inspiration from his childhood experiences of working in the family greenhouse which he considered his "symbol for the whole of life". He demonstrated a promising skill in speech while he was still a student at high school. His father's death of cancer while the son was fourteen and his uncle's suicide and the psychological pain associated with these tragedies powerfully influenced Roethke's mind and creativity. Driven by the insecurity he felt during his youth and his desire to be integrated with his peers he drank, developed a fascination with gangs, and became a rebel.<sup>1</sup>

Roethke studied at the University of Michigan. And at the Harvard Graduate School he studied literature under the poet [Robert Hillyer](#) becoming, afterword,

professor of English in Washington University. He was hospitalized during his career for suffering from manic depression; a mental illness that is characterized by severe mood fluctuations. Illness fueled Roethke's creativity giving it an introspective turn though it endangered his teaching and poetic careers.<sup>2</sup>

In 1953, the poet married Beatrice O'Connell. Throughout 1955 and 1956 the Roethke's traveled in Europe on a grant during which he studied philosophy and metaphysics. He received a Pulitzer Prize for poetry and two [National Book Awards](#) and the Bollingen Prize.<sup>3</sup> He is usually considered as one of ten great 20<sup>th</sup> century American poets.

His most important works include Open House (1941), The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), Praise to the End! (1951), The Waking (1953), Words For The Wind (1958), I Am! Says The Lamb (1961) and The Far Field (1964).<sup>4</sup>

#### **Roethke and the concept of identification:**

With its introspective turn, Roethke's poetry is highlighted by a genuine commitment to philosophical exploration. His poetry expresses the impulse to achieve wholeness, unity and reconciliation. The idea to minimize differences between heterogeneous elements in order to achieve integration can be found in varied forms in numerous cultures and philosophies.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of identification fascinated Theodore Roethke that he devoted the academic grant he received to the study of existential theologians and mystics. Indeed many of his poems echo beliefs and attitudes found in the writings of authors like Evelyn Underhill, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, Martin Buber and Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>6</sup>

In his essay "On Identity" Roethke explains his view of bringing on a feeling of oneness of the universe. For him, it is necessary to become aware of the existence of another being and of the self's separateness from that "other" in order to break from "self-involvement, from I to otherwise". He admits that "sometimes I may be one, sometimes another: to this extent I vacillate between identities."<sup>7</sup>

If we take the poet's poems of women and identification with the beloved we see him establishing a distance between himself and the woman presenting her either as subhuman or superhuman; either as a non-personified creature or an elevated goddess as a step of achieving union with her and consequently with the universe because all things: the rose, the star, the oyster, and the leaf are parts of her being. In "I Knew a Woman" the poet depicts the woman as a "bright container"; in "Meditations of an Old Woman" the woman asks if being a woman means "To be contained, to be a vessel?" the vessel or container metaphor here is representative of being a sexual recipient or a bearer of children. Woman may refer to nature, since nature is the overall container of life. However, she rejects this belittling asserting her humanity as having a "flame" and a spirit that go beyond the pragmatic and materialistic suggestions of a container. All things in the universe have kinship to each other; in "The Pure Fury" the speaker says "I touched the stones, and they had my own skin". Yet, a very close interconnection terrifies him for it threatens the individuality that is necessary to achieve unity. In his poem entitled "The Other" he wonders in terror "Is she what I become? / Is this my final face?". Moreover, the woman for him is not more than an agent in the process of universal union; love, rather than woman, is the focus of his attention: in "Memory" the speaker says the woman "knows all I am", but that "[l]ove's all. Love's all I know" for it is a universal bond; so when you understand love, you understand God, and the universe.<sup>8</sup>

In his poem "Her Dream", Roethke describes male-female identification in sensuous terms:

I had a dream- would you believe?-

.....  
I took myself inside,  
And there I saw, straight up an aisle,  
A bridegroom and a bride.

.....  
The burly bridegroom had a look  
Of dour perplexity;  
The bride, poor naked shivering shape –  
I swear she looked like me.

.....  
And the bridegroom sighed  
As my lips began to yield.

The bridegroom's initial unfriendliness "dour perplexity" represents the distance necessary to be maintained between the man and woman so that their passions are unified.

Male-female love or biological attraction is not the only occasion on which we find the tendency for oneness with other human beings. The totemic drive to identify the self with other human beings can be on wider, more general level. In "The Longing" Roethke adopts the Indian belief that souls search for a resting place: "Old men should be explorers? \ I'll be an Indian.\ Oglala? \Iroquois".<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in another poem, the stage of being separate from the "I" prepares the speaker to be transcended beyond the material to reach a state of spiritual dissolve:

Among the half-dead trees, I come upon the true ease of myself,  
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,  
And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other...

The experience described here is a reminiscent of the legend of the phoenix bird resurrected from ashes; it is a process of renewal and re-birth. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. suggests that it is under the influence of Jungian theory of individuation that the poet seeks first to free and then to integrate the self.<sup>10</sup>

Much of Roethke's poetry is concerned with investigating the stages of achieving sublime identification with the universe. The following lines from the final section of "The Long Waters" celebrate the harmonious unity of the I and the outside world:

I lose and find myself in the long waters;  
I am gathered together once more;  
I embrace the world.

The final purpose, which is achieving harmony with the outside world, requires first a regression "I lose [myself]" that is the realization of separateness, only then he is able to reach equilibrium and "embrace the world".

For Roethke, the world is often represented by his father's greenhouse; a flower company that his father ran successfully which functions as a significant symbol in his poetry. The greenhouse symbol joins the self with the cosmos by the power of meditation. This connection is far from being organic, as some critics claim, because the possibility of assimilation is always there during the regression-progression processes; the well being of the elements involved in the identification process is not endangered during the regression stage.

Through sympathy and sensibility the speaker in the poems feels affinity with the plants, animals and even creatures that often are considered repulsive like slugs, worms, snails, eels and crows: <sup>11</sup>

When I saw that clumsy crow  
Flap from a wasted tree,  
A shape in the mind rose up:  
Over the gulfs of dream  
Flew a tremendous bird  
Further and further away  
Into a moonless black,  
Deep in the brain, far back.

What we have here is an animistic, metaphoric fusion with the primitive and instinctive. The crow image is a symbol of the material organic world. Here the initiative of identification comes from the outside world; the mind engulfs the crow becoming one with it.<sup>12</sup> Living creatures for Roethke all have holiness "everything that lives is holy; therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling in a sense upon God"<sup>13</sup>, there is no gap between nature and the Creator as divinity pervades the universe. Here we have a clear influence of Emerson's transcendental philosophy. The voice we find in his poetry speaks in a primitive and animistic tone. This voice identifies itself even with the inanimate:

She held her body steady in the wind;  
Our shadows met, and slowly swung around;  
She turned the field into a glittering sea;  
I played in flame and water like a boy  
And I swayed out beyond the white sea foam;  
Like a wet log, I sang within a flame,  
In that last while, eternity's confine,  
I came to love, I came into my own.

Inanimate things are often personified; they commune with each other suggesting the similar essence of all beings and show an intrinsic tendency to cosmic affiliation:<sup>14</sup>

The truly beautiful,  
Their bodies cannot lie:  
The blossom stings the bee.  
The ground needs the abyss,  
Say the stones, say the fish.

Similarly, in another poem, the speaker mystically identifies and communes with light and the dark; two sides of the same coin:

Wherefore, O birds and small fish, surround me.  
Lave me, ultimate waters.  
The dark showed me a face.  
My ghosts are all gay.  
The light becomes me.

These lines express a process of mystic healing of the individual psyche, bringing it into a state of spiritual illumination that links Roethke to American transcendentalists like Whitman and Emerson.

The reader can also find poems in which cosmic sympathy between woman, nature, and the speaker's self is expressed:  
Love is not love until love's vulnerable.

She slowed to sigh, in that long interval.  
A small bird flew in circles where we stood;  
The deer came down out of the dappled wood.  
I tossed a stone, and listened to its plunge.  
She knew the grammar of least motion, she  
Lent me one virtue, and I live thereby.

This tendency to assimilation in Roethke's poetry is mutual between the self and the outside world:

Sweet Phoebe, she's my theme:  
She sways whenever I sway.

"O love me while I am,  
You green thing in my way!"

I cried, and the birds came down  
And made my song their own.

The self is in true communion with nature and, eventually, the speaker identifies himself with it; Roethke also says in "In a Dark Time":

I lose and find myself in the long water;

I am gathered together once more;

I embrace the world.

There is a complete harmony between the swimmer and water to the extent that they become extension to each other; the water starts the regression-progression process "I lose myself" then "I am gathered together once more".

In the same poem he expresses a sense of kinship and oneness with all things celebrating this mystical change:<sup>15</sup>

I saw all things through water, magnified,  
And shimmering. The sun burned through a haze,  
And I became all that I looked upon.

I dazzled in the dazzle of a stone.

In a Northwestern University talk, Roethke summarizes his mystical experience of identification:

A very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being – and in some instances, even an inanimate thing – brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe.... you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee.<sup>16</sup>

The talk on identity ends with an explicit religious declaration "There is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible".<sup>17</sup>

The poet's understanding of the relationship between the sublime self and God is different from that of the Sufi's of the east; he announces: "I cannot claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. No, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled" and that "God is all which is *not me*". Meditating the cosmos represented by its elements of nature, people, and God compels recognizing the identities of these heterogeneous elements, their separateness, and at the same time inclination to assimilation.<sup>18</sup> These ideas are contemplated in "What Can I Tell My Bones? "; a poem published in "Meditations of an Old Woman", a sequence of five poems in which an old woman at the end of her life time contemplates on the relationship between the self and the Divine:

To try to become like God

Is far from becoming God  
O, but I seek and care!  
I rock in my own dark,  
Thinking, God has need of me.  
The dead love the unborn.

Becoming God is equivalent to reaching a spiritual elevation beyond time and place. This search is important for the speaker and he is keen to do it. The line "I rock in my own dark" suggests that the old woman's search has not ended yet. Since she is still in her "own dark". The line "God has need of me" suggests that the quality of sacredness arises from man's longing for transcending his human limitations. The need is mutual thus they have something in common.<sup>19</sup>

This mystical exploration of the relationship between the self and the Other can also be found in "In a Dark Time":

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 is weeping to a tree.  
I live between the heron and the wren,  
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

The act of seeing happens initially; it represents spiritual perception since a real human eye cannot see in dark. Then follows a series of correspondences between the "I" and the shadow, echo, tree, heron, wren, beasts of the hill, and serpents of the den. The references to "shadow" and "echo" have the implication of his approaching death as a human being, the echo is his diminishing voice. The elements with which the speaker identifies are either inanimate or natural. Finally, the storm of correspondences climaxes when "The mind enters itself,\ and God the mind,\ And one is One, free in the tearing wind". The poem closes with a mystical identification of God with the mind. Roethke is describing here a spiritual experience in which the self transcends the human limitations of the physical world to be receptive of divinity. The phrase "and God the mind" is inspired by hymn books replacing the Heart with the mind making the speaker's consciousness one with the divine in a state of equilibrium.

#### **Conclusion:**

The universe, for Theodore Roethke, is a network of correspondences or analogies. It is like a mirror. According to the poet's vision, all the apparently heterogeneous elements have kinship and are in harmonious communion. Bearing this vision in mind, the metaphysical far-fetched metaphors of the poet become an accepted medium for conveying his spiritual revelations.

These mystic visions the poet communicates reflect the great role played by poetic imagination in harmonizing life experiences, the material world, and the non-finite bringing these varied elements into one whole so that "all finite things reveal infinitude" as Roethke says in "The Far Field". It is through the power of contemplation that the self in Roethke's poems achieves identification with the finite (the beloved, natural elements, and other creatures) as well as with the infinite or the divine. The most noticeable thing is that the poet's poems have almost nothing to say about Christian beliefs, as if he embraced a religion of his own.

The process of achieving identification with the Other in Roethke's works follows a certain movement that begins from contemplation, followed by the awareness of the separate identity of the Other, then a progress towards mystical oneness is evoked upon realizing that the essence of all things is the same. However, identification is always endangered since one of its requirements is to be aware of the

separateness of the identity of things. So the dichotomy arises once more, and again, under the soul's aspirations for beauty and perfection the same cyclic process repeats itself.

It seems that such movement puts Roethke in the context of American romantics. Roethke read William Blake, Wordsworth, W. B. Yeats, Walt Whitman and heavily underscored the Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature". The common aspect that links Roethke with all these writers is the view that art is a process of self-expression rather than imitation, deep bonds exist between the inner self and the outer world, the Romantic seeks first to gain pure representation of experience by means of a direct sensuous intuition of reality by moving inward toward self-discovery and then to escape outward beyond the individual mind and the prison of self-consciousness. It is an antithetical quest. However, Roethke's aims are psychological rather than aesthetic.

His poetry reflects the transcendental belief that divinity pervades nature and humanity. He sees the existence in highly dynamic terms: it changes, evolves, retreats and then progresses again making the persona feel affinity with the universe bringing peace to a mind torn by mental illness.

#### Notes

1. Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 44.
2. "Theodore Roethke", Microsoft Encarta Premium DVD. Microsoft Corporation. 2009.
3. Allan Seager, p. 47.
4. The incarnation creed, for example, is known in different religions. Roman and Greek gods sometimes assumed human bodies and even married mortals. In Buddhism, it is believed that man's soul returns to this life after death assuming another form either pleasant or repulsive depending on the individual's deeds. Zoroastrians believe that the heavenly body of Zoroaster fell down to earth passing through various transformations ending into his mother through cow milk. In Hinduism, Vishnu, the second member of the triple divinity, reincarnates through avatars. Christians believe that God the Father (which represents the divine nature) is united with God the Son that is Jesus Christ (which stands for the human nature). In Sufi metaphysics, the Persian mystic sufi Mansur Al-Hallaj (c. 858-922) preached mystical universalism believing in union with the Divine, and that he and God became one and the same; Al-Hallaj called this union between the "I" and the "Other" "Sublime Identification: عين الجمع":

Whom I adore is me

As He is I, and I He

When you see me, you see Him

When you see Him then both you see

In Western thought, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) with his philosophy of Pantheism identifies the universe with the Divine. God, claims Spinoza, and the material world are one, and that He pervades in everything. The anthropologist Sir Edward B. Taylor investigated Animism or Panpsychism; which is the philosophy that holds that all objects in the material world as well as consciousness have souls. According to Taylor, Primitive peoples of no written traditions believe that souls can transmigrate from one person, dead or alive, to another person, plant, animal and even inanimate objects. The Native American culture also knew a similar mystical idea demonstrated by the concept of Totemism which can be defined as a system of symbols and practices based on an assumed

relationship between one or more individuals and a natural object or phenomenon that functions as a companion or helper of supernatural powers, and consequently, it is venerated. Individuals here see themselves as partially identified or assimilated to the totem.

See Microsoft Encarta Premium DVD. Microsoft Corporation. 2009., "Incarnation", "From Spinoza", "Animism" and "Totemism".

5. Ladislava Khailova, "The Spiral Movement of the Old Woman's Rocking: Influence of Buber's Philosophy on Roethke's "Meditations of an Old Woman", ANQ, Heldref Publications. (Spring, 2004). Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 45.

6. James Dougherty, "Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence": Religious Awakening in the West", Literature and Belief, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 181.

7. Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke. (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), p. 73. All subsequent quotations of Theodore Roethke's poems are taken from this edition.

8. John Rohrkemper, "When the Mind Remembers All": Dream and Memory in Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence", The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Vol. 21, No. 1, (Spring, 1988), p. 33.

9. Camille Paglia, "Dance of the Senses: Natural Vision and Psychotic Mysticism in Theodore Roethke's Poetry", Ann Arbor, MI: MPublishing., Winter, (University of Michigan Library, 2009). Vol. XLVIII, no. 1.

10. James Dougherty, p. 181.

11. Ibid., p. 182.

12. Quoted in Norman Chaney, "Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wounder", (Washington, D. C.: The University Press of America.) 1982, p. 75.

13. Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke", The Sewanee Review, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1950). (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johnson Hopkins University Press), p. 97.

14. Richard A. Blessing, "Theodore Roethke's Sometimes Metaphysical Motion". Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 14, No. 4, (Winter, 1973), (Texas: University of Texas Press), p. 745.

15. James Dougherty. p.181.

16. Quoted in ibid. p. 182.

17. Quoted in Ibid. p. 183.

18. Peter Balakian, Theodore Roethke's Far Fields: The Evolution of His Poetry, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press). 1989, p. 97.

19. John Hobbs and Beatrice Roethke, "In a Dark Time", College English, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Oct., 1971), National Council of Teachers of English, pp. 55-56.

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