

ROETHKE AND RIMBAUD: A CASE OF IDENTITY

The essence of Theodore Roethke's poetry is contained in a pun found in the opening poem of *Words for the Wind*:

An epic of the eyes
My love, with no disguise¹.

His poetry is certainly « an epic of the eyes »: it is about the very process of seeing and the poems are peopled by a myriad of objects whose most intimate core the poet has seized through a keen act of vision. The importance of seeing is confirmed in his diaries: « I wish I could find an event that meant as much as single seeing »². But it is also very much a poetry of the I, the self, which is the main object of his vision. For Roethke identifies with the things he sees: he is the flower, the snake, the lamb; their becoming is more than an emblem for his life; it is his own becoming. What he sees is really what he is and if he cannot see, if he cannot grasp the life principle of things, he is menaced with non-being. So, indeed, his poetry is just as much « an epic of the I » as « an epic of the eyes ».

The recognition of Roethke's emphasis on seeing has prompted many critics to interpret his epic of vision from a religious or philosophical perspective. Karl Malkoff believes that, with the help of Jung, Roethke is trying to synthesize the poetry of vision with the poetry of analysis and he is de-

1. THEODORE ROETHKE, *Words for the Wind*, Indiana University Press, 1961, p. 17. All successive page references to this volume will be made in the text.

2. *Straw for the Fire, from the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-63*, edited by DAVID WAGONER, Doubleday, Garden City, 1972.

scribing the journey of man from a guilt-laden sexuality to mystical experiences³. Hyatt Waggoner is more explicit about the transcendental qualities of Roethke's poetry. He affirms that Roethke « was a poet dedicated to anew or "high" kind of seeing, ultimately to illumination or mystic vision, a realization in experience, not in theory, of what Emerson referred to as the secret "becoming what he sees" »⁴. Both approaches are not completely alien from what Roethke himself tried to do in his poetry. His familiarity with nervous breakdown and, as a consequence, with modern psychiatry, could not escape becoming part of his poetry. Freudian themes are recognizable, but this is not enough to warrant a reading of his poems in a Freudian or Jungian key, as Malkoff does when he suggests that « I Need, I Need » is about a child in the oral phase, « Sensibility! O Lo! » about a protagonist in the Oedipal phase and so on.

As for his being a transcendental poet there are even more grounds for justifying such a reading. He was formed in a literary climate which is best characterized by a widespread admiration for T.S. Eliot and a renewed interest in the metaphysical poets. This, combined with the Protestant tradition of his family, inevitably led him to consider himself as a metaphysical poet first and later as a religious poet striving for mystical visions. He himself wrote that the central experience in his poetry was « to break from the bondage of the self, from the barriers of the "real world", to come as close to God as possible »⁵.

Yet a careful reading of Roethke's poetry leaves us with a different impression. He comes out as a mystic seeking « oneness » and achieving the loss of the I. If there is oneness, it

3. KARL MALKOFF, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry*, New York 1966.

4. HYATT WAGGONER, *American Poets*, Houghton, 1968, p. 564.

5. *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic*, edited by ANTHONY OSTROFF, Boston, 1964, p. 232.

is with a natural world into which he has projected himself. Agostino Lombardo, in his introduction to a translation of Roethke's poems in Italian, justly stresses the poet's identification with natural objects: « Liriche, tutte, che son basate su un sentimento di partecipazione o addirittura di identificazione con la vita naturale che si fa, in molti casi, del tutto esplicito »⁶.

Roethke's visions are of himself outside himself, in animals, flowers, water, other objects. In the best of his poetry the self never dies. The protagonist doesn't find himself as part of the oversoul; his visionary experiences are concerned with the self, with its birth, with its search for an identity, objectified in the natural world. The dominating mood is that of self-communion and when there is ecstasy it is not for other-world visions, but for an intensified vision of himself. If this does not apply to the whole body of Roethke's poetry, especially to his late poems where we can hear strong Yeatsian strains, it is certainly true of those poems where he is singing in his own, quite distinctive voice, of a characteristic Roethkian landscape whose origins are to be found far back in Roethke's childhood.

Now this interest for the natural world, combined with this engrossing concentration on the self, reminds us not so much of Emerson as of a group of poets whose best known representative is Rimbaud. I am not speaking of a school of poetry, but of a number of poets who are loosely connected by an interest for nature which they see as animated by human qualities, by an obsession with their own selves, by a strong reliance on the dreamlike and the subconscious. Often those poets seem to be composing in a trance-like state, as if the outward world were dictating their utterances and they were but instruments. Literature for them is not a finished product but a process, the process of finding themselves, and therefore has a vi-

6. THEODORE ROETHKE, *Sequenza Nordamericana e altre poesie*, a cura di AGOSTINO LOMBARDO, note e traduzione di M. MELIADÒ, Milano, Mondadori, 1966.

tal importance in their lives. Northrop Frye, who has studied the age of sensibility from such an angle, calls them « oracular poets »⁷ and we could lump together in this group poets as disparate as Smart, Cowper, Burns, Rimbaud, Trakl, Campana, Lawrence, Thomas and Roethke.

Roethke knew and admired Rimbaud, as we can obliquely deduct from some letters and observations of his, but I do not think that his familiarity with the French poet was such as to warrant conscious imitation. The striking similarities, then, are due to an identity of vision and conception of poetry. Stephen Spender has clearly conceived this: « Roethke in his concentration on his own experience, his complete identification of the "I" with the surrounding objects seems nearer than any other poet but Rimbaud himself to what Rimbaud called "objective poetry" »⁸.

My analysis is going to focus on a group of poems which seem to me the most representative of Roethke's individual style and subject-matter: poems about a « nature-absorbed childhood », to use again Spender's words, which employ the exploration of the subconscious as a structural device and abound in imagery drawn from the underground and the close-to-the-ground. This is Roethke's landscape *par excellence*; he liked to define himself « The leading under-the-stone poet of our time »⁹. I am talking of the so called « Greenhouse poems » contained in *The Lost Son* and of the poems in *Praise to the End*. In those poems, where each word becomes part of the thing, Roethke, in Spender's words, really « opens up new frontiers of consciousness in language ».

Roethke himself showed his partiality for the Greenhouse Poems by reprinting them in the last volume of poetry published in his lifetime: *I AM: Says the Lamb*. In this collection

7. NORTHROP FRYE, « Toward Defining an Age of Sensibility », *Fables of Identity, Studies in Poetic Mythology*, New York, Harbinger Books, 1963.

8. STEPHEN SPENDER, « The Objective Ego », in *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to His Poetry*, Seattle, Washington, 1965, p. 8.

9. *Straw for the Fire*, p. 151.

some new poems concerned with the recognition and acceptance of identity are coupled to those focused on the matrix of his imagination. The poetry of the eyes and of the I are combined and, by this symbolic publication, indicated as the poetic core to which Roethke's imagination kept returning.

These are also the poems through which we are most reminded of Rimbaud, not only by the kind of imagery Roethke has selected but also by the method of organization of the poems, the structural devices, the overall purpose of the compositions.

The fascination with things of the earth and under the earth, which both poets share, is essentially a fascination with the process of birth in a loose sense, that is the moment when « je » becomes « un autre ». When Roethke says « I am in love with being born »¹⁰ he does not only mean the moment of coming to life, but also the moment in which the self emerges from the confusion of non-being and asserts its identity. « The human problem », says Roethke, « is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. » A clue to the mystery of existence is offered to Roethke by the contemplation of otherness:

It is paradoxical that 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 self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe... Both feelings... can be induced. The first simply by intensity in the seeing... If you can effect this then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to otherwise, or maybe even to Thee¹¹.

The words are strikingly reminiscent of Rimbaud's famous phrase « je est un autre » and the reason of his interest in the

10. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

11. *On the Poet and His Craft*, ed. RALPH MILLS, Seattle, Washington, 1965, pp. 20, 25.

« otherwise » is akin to what the eminent critic of Rimbaud, Jean-Pierre Richard, wrote about the French poet: « Le mystère qu'interroge Rimbaud c'est précisément celui du passage du *même* à l'*autre*. C'est le mystère de la création »¹². In fact the poetic worlds of both are in a state of perpetual genesis.

Roethke himself indicated the importance of birth when he wrote that a poet is faced with the following themes:

- (1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The way, the means of establishing a personal identity, a self in the face of that chaos; (3) The nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) The Nature of God Himself¹³.

These poems deal particularly with themes two and three, in a way that bears striking similarities with Rimbaud's.

One of the best examples of the two poets' similar conception of birth as transformation from one being into another is that the natural reigns are confused in their boundaries; geology partakes of botany and viceversa and both partake of the animal reign. Roethke's « A toad folds into a stone./These flowers are all fangs. » (« The Shape of the Fire », p. 93) recalls Rimbaud's « ...d'incroyables Florides/Mêlant aux fleurs des yeux de panthères à peaux/D'hommes »¹⁴. The section of « A Field of Light » analyzed below offers another striking analogy between the two poets. Not even stones, in Roethke, are inanimate, inert objects, as is suggested by their transformation into clams in « A Field of Light » and, even more, by the words « the skin of a stone ». They are like Rimbaud's stones, living fruits of the earth, with a core of wetness, suggestive of their origin, capable of giving therefore a clue: « Des galets, fils des déluges,/Pains couchés aux vallées grises ». (« Fêtes de la faim », p. 160)

12. JEAN-PIERRE RICHARD, *Poésie et Profondeur*, Paris, 1955, p. 193.

13. MILLS, p. 19.

14. ARTHUR RIMBAUD, *Oeuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard, Editions Garnier, 1960, p. 129. All successive page references will be made in the text.

The theme of birth seen as an establishment of identity in the midst of chaos is particularly evident in the Greenhouse Poems, which focus on a confused and dark world, equated by Roethke to the womb, where flowers and plants are struggling to be, though in a minimal form. The following excerpts clearly exemplify the urge of creation:

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
 Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark.
 (« Root Cellar », p. 39)

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.
 (« Cuttings, (Later) », p. 38)

or an even more elemental birth in « Cuttings »:

One nub of growth
 Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
 Pokes through a musty sheath
 Its pale tendrilous horn.
 (p. 37)

In order to grasp the mystery of creation both poets feel they have to go back even further, to the moment in which decomposition becomes life, birth and death are one. Rimbaud in the *Illuminations* particularly favours the moment of suspension between two states, what Richard calls « l'heure rimbaldienne par excellence » (p. 189). The same suspension is singled out by Kenneth Burke as the theme of Roethke's poems: « Severedness, dying that is at the same time a fana-

tic tenacity: submergence...; envagination as a home-coming »¹⁵.

So both poets, looking for the moment when death becomes life, favour images of decomposition, of rottenness, of earthiness and they concentrate on a microcosm in which the process of the underground coming to life is evident. Such is, for instance, the pond in « Comédie de la soif »;

J'aime autant, mieux, même,
Pourrir dans l'étang,
Sous l'affreuse crème,
Près des bois flottants,

a landscape quite reminiscent of the dead nature at the opening of « A Field of Light » and of the womb and grave imagery of « The Lost Son ».

The primeval sense of being, the emergence of it from underneath, is explored by both poets through the imagery of water. « Le Paradis rimbaldien — says Richard — c'est... le monde humecté, la terre éponge. Rimbaud [est] sensible à toutes les formes d'affleurement liquide... il aime particulièrement les substances — boues, mousses, gazon, — qui puissent s'imbiber de l'eau profonde et la transporter à travers elles jusqu'au jour » (p.212). The same words could apply to Roethke. Again and again his imagination reverts to the lakes, ponds, marshes of his native Michigan. Both poets expect water to offer a clue of the underground and of its becoming life. So Rimbaud sees himself as « un pêcheur d'or ou de coquillage » (« Larme », p. 149), Roethke as a hunter « hunting along the river », like a fisherman « fishing in an old wound/The soft pond of repose ». (« The Lost Son », pp. 79 and 80).

15. KENNETH BURKE, « The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke », *Sewanee Review*, LVIII, p. 69.

Conversely, their moments of desperation, their hell, is expressed as a negation of the above. Wetness is opposed by dryness, sand, dust, the desert (as in the significant passage from « A Field of Light » analyzed below); movement, transformation, are opposed by immobility, silence, cold, frost; togetherness, continuity with nature, by absence, separateness. « Une Saison en Enfer » is, to use Richard's words, « le tragique poème de l'absence: *absence des autres, absence des choses, absence de soi* » (p. 212). Roethke's hard time is also absence, separation. We feel the absence of the Father in « The Lost Son », as well as the absence of nature: « The sun was against me,/The moon would not have me. » (p.82) The self is also conspicuously absent in « The Long Alley »: « The soul resides in the horse-barn » or « My love's locked in/The old silo./She cries to the hen,/She waves to the goose,/But they don't come/To let her loose » (p. 88).

Whenever Rimbaud and Roethke look at nature in the process of becoming or not becoming, they are not mere spectators, they are involved in the change, in the birth, or in the absence of those. They have to grasp the identity, the *inscape* of each object, in order to have their own existence, their own identity confirmed. *They* are the objects. Their poetry is permeated by the sense of a double identity. The poet is himself and at the same time the spectator of himself, *un autre*. Roethke had jotted down this meaningful observation in his diaries: « Poetry: a sense of the doubleness in life » (p. 170). This splitting of the I makes their poetry « objective », at the same time an epic of the eyes and of the self. But the road leading to it is for both a road of infinite suffering. It is more voluntary in Rimbaud: the famous *dérèglement de tous le sens*, « Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit, — et le Suprême Savant » (p. 346). In

Roethke the *dérèglement* is more accidental, a fruit of his mental illness, but for the American poet, too, anxiety, dissociation of personality, become more intense perceptions of the human condition, a heightened awareness of reality. « What's madness but nobility of soul/At odds with circumstances? » asks Roethke in *The Far Field*¹⁶.

Obviously poetry such as this has a tremendous importance for the poet: it is not a finished product, emotion recollected in tranquillity, something that follows the fact, « jeux, délassements » of poets who are « fonctionnaires, » as Rimbaud scathingly says. It is part of the experience itself. Writing a poem is part of the search for the self, as « le poète... cherche lui-même »; it is, as Rimbaud said in his famous letter, the rhythm of action. The identity of Roethke's poetry with his life is well expressed by Lombardo: « la totale identificazione ...di vita e di poesia non nel senso di una contaminazione estetizzante ma in quello, invece, di una comune tensione conoscitiva ». This is why every poem is a new beginning, a new search for an answer, for a vision of the unknown, and often when the poet embarks on writing it he does not know what the outcome will be. The important thing is the process of the search, the writing. The poems of Roethke and Rimbaud are a good example of what Northrop Frye calls literature as process, « as created on the spot out of the events it describes »¹⁷.

The red-hot origin of his poems and their high cost is indicated by Roethke in what he jotted down in his diaries:

I can't go on flying apart just for those who want the benefit of a few verbal kicks. My God, do you know what poems like that *cost*? They are not written vicariously: they come out of actual suffering, *real* madness. (p. 87)
... stop reading *my* longer poems as if they were something to

16. THEODORE ROETHKE, *The Far Field*, p. 79.

17. FRYE, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

emulate technically. They came out of a special and terrifying experience: I took chances on my life to write them, and I was a fool for doing so. (p. 255)

As for Rimbaud, he gives us an accurate description of the terrors of his *dérèglement* in « Alchimie du Verbe » and his abandoning poetry is a proof that this kind of creation could not be sustained for long.

Another feature which singles out this group of Roethke's poems from those preceding and following it, is the refusal of reason.

Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby
schoolboys!

The hedgewren's song says something else.

(« I cry Love! Love! », p. 104)

We are a long way from the terse metaphysical mode of his early poems (*The Open House*) and the Yeatsian intellectual control of the later poems. The poet, here, seems not to be in control: he becomes an instrument of his imagination, of the objects of his vision. Roethke said about « The Lost Son » and « The Shape of the Fire »: « these particular poems are not... mine at all... I am an instrument ». Rimbaud too, in his famous statement refusing both the romantic kind of subjective effusion and the rational explanation of the origins of poetry, sees the poet as an instrument. This is what he means by objective poetry:

Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s'éveille clairon, il n'y a rien de sa faute. Cela m'est évident: j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l'écoute: je lance un coup d'archet: la symphonie fait son rémucement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d'un bond sur la scène. (p. 345)

The attitude is quite typical of oracular poetry in general, as Frye points out:

The poetry of process is oracular, and the medium of the oracle is often in an ecstatic or trance-like state: autonomous voices seem to speak through him, and as he is concerned to utter rather than to address, he is turned away from his listeners, so to speak, in a state of rapt self-communion¹⁸.

An analysis in some detail of one of Roethke's poems, « A Field of Light », a typical composition on the birth and the identity of things, will show even more clearly the resemblance of the two poets precisely in those elements which I consider central to the Roethkian world.

The poem opens with the speaker, an I without identity, much like the *je's* of Rimbaud's poetry, being carried « in a watery drowse » by the dead waters, like moss or leaves and dead planks and logs, similar to the *Bateau Ivre* descending unconsciously down the river, a « carcasse ivre d'eau », a « planche folle ». Interestingly, neither author uses the word « like »: they both identify with their symbol. Rimbaud is the boat, Roethke is not merely describing or probing into a landscape, he actually is the plank, the log, the weed, even the tilted eye, presumably of a corpse. Again, we are reminded of « Le Bateau Ivre » where « ... flottaison blême/Et ravié, un noyé pensif parfois descend. »

The anxiety of the exploration in the indefinite realm of birth and death, of the hunting « for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the subhuman, » to use Ralph Mills' words¹⁹, is well conveyed by the surrealist atmosphere of the next three stanzas.

Small winds made / A chilly noise;
The softest cove / Cried for sound.

Silence and a cold wind are the concrete manifestations of the poet's fear that he will not be offered a clue, that he will

18. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

19. MILLS, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

be unable to see in the objects a reason for their existence which may become a reason for his own existence. The symbol of a frozen womb (i; c; cave, cove, pond), incapable of giving birth, is used by both poets time and again to convey the same feeling. The preceding passage or « Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow is here./I'm cold. I'm cold all over » of « The Lost Son », for instance, recall Rimbaud's anguish in « Larme »:

L'eau des bois se perdait sur des sables vierges,
Le vent du ciel jetait des glaçons aux mares ...

The next stanza in *A Field of Light*

Reached for a grape / And the leaves changed;
A stone's shape / Became a clam.

expresses the frustration of a mystery seen but not comprehended. Transformations from one reign to the other, as I have already mentioned above, convey the sense of chaos, of uncertainty and also underline the theme of birth. The I tries to make himself another, that is, to be born, by contemplating one form being broken and culminating into another identity. The grape turning, presumably, into a stone which becomes a clam and escapes him, like the « sweetness I cannot touch » of « The Long Alley », reminds the reader of Rimbaud's similar metamorphoses:

Des fleurs presque pierres, — fameuses!
Qui vers leurs durs ovaires blonds
Aient des amygdales gommeuses!
(« Ce qu'on dit au poète... », p. 119)

In the last stanza of the first section the pronoun I is used for the first time in the poem: « A fine rain fell/On fat leaves;/I was there alone/In a watery drowse ». The protagonist is beginning to emerge with a sense of his own identity, but he is still in a state of drowsiness, in the middle of all those clues of creation he cannot read. « There's

no clue in the silt » he had exclaimed in « *The Long Alley* ». His condition is akin to Rimbaud's « *sommeil bien ivre, sur la grève* » in « *Mauvais Sang* ».

Section two focuses on the anguish of the search as we see the protagonist delving under the emblems of life, the rotting organic matter, the mother substances which dominate the imagination of the two poets:

Under, under the sheaves,
Under the blackened leaves,
Behind the green viscid trellis,
In the deep grass at the edge of the field.

But the descent only leads him to a singular dryness: « the low ground dry only in August, » the dust, the sand. Nature has turned sterile, no nativity seems possible, as is fearfully implied in the anguished interrogation « *Angel within me, I asked, / Did I ever curse the sun?* » The « emissary of the "other" », to use Roethke's own clarification, is invoked to explain the sterility, the inability « to break from self-involvement », to become another. The poet wonders if he has denied creation by cursing the Sun, the father principle of the earth. But the word is also suggestive of Son, the fruit of birth.

Admittedly the dark hour of the soul, his « hard time » conjures up keener expressions of anguish in other poems of his, but here we go to the root of the problem. The hard time is when creation, the realization of the self, seem impossible, and it is here conveyed by the same kind of imagery — dust, sand, — as in Rimbaud's *enfer*, a desert of aridity.

« *A Field of Light* » and the poems in this group all follow the same consistent pattern we have witnessed: there is an initial situation of confusion and fear; then a regression in time or memory, and a search; and then a sense of revival — the real birth, for which Roethke struggles through the poem. So in « *A Field of Light* » the I emerges from his hell of dryness and absence, and is able to dance in the

sand, « marrow-soft, » i.e. having recovered the source of animal vigour, his inmost essence. One is reminded of the savage, elemental dance which Rimbaud imagines for himself in the saving « royaume des enfants de Cham »: « Cris, tambour, danse, danse, danse, danse » (p. 217).

Freeing himself from the sterile dust, the poet is at last capable of establishing contacts with the others: « I could feel the mare's nose. » It is interesting to note that the first contact is with something living and wet, like Rimbaud's real source of poetry in « Ce qu'on dit au poète... »: « Les fleurs pareilles à des mufles, / D'où bavent des pommades d'or » (p. 119).

Once a sensible continuity has been re-established, a new reality is possible. The possession of otherness is expressed by the same kind of grammatical device used by Rimbaud in his well-known phrases « Je est un autre », « on me pense ». The subject loses his identity and merges with the complement. It is not « I went walking on a path » but the path itself, which is me, went walking.

So far in the poem the elation has been consistent with Roethke's poetic universe: the newly acquired sense of himself stems from the objects whose essence he has been trying to penetrate all along, the I has broken into « otherwise », or vice versa: it is really a unified world. But at this point in the poem I perceive a break: we are presented with an ecstatic landscape, the scene of the final illumination, which is the last stage in the pattern of the poems we have been examining, the moment when the poet breaks not only from I to otherwise, but also to « Thee ».

In describing his ecstasy, the language of Roethke in this poem loses its originality. We hear echoes of Thomas, delight in « Fern Hill », the images themselves are alien to Roethke's universe: glittering sun, singing birds, moving clouds, light are the conventional symbols of joy but they don't belong to Roethke's poetic landscape as intimately as slime, growing roots, vegetal life, decaying organic matter. So, lovely as it is, the picture sounds conventional and artificial, borrow-

ed in spirit as well as in images. Statements such as: « The weeds believed me » and « I could watch! I could watch! / I saw the separateness of all things! » contradict the central point of his poetry: nowhere in this group of poems is he separate from his objects, he is them, their becoming is his becoming. This is not, as Malkoff says, an example of the « unity in separateness of the mystic's perception of reality, »²⁰ but an attempt at recovering his sanity, at standing outside his world and dominating it.

This is even more evident in « The Lost Son » where we have two different final section. The first, « The Return », is a release stemming directly from his anguish. The world of roots and seeds had produced anguish and fear, but it is also capable of offering humble certainties, it gives clues that remove anxiety, assists to the rebirth of the protagonist. There is a movement from darkness to light, but the whole process takes place in Roethke's greenhouse world.

The way to the boiler was dark,
Dark all the way,
Over slippery cinders
Through the long greenhouse

There was always a single light
Swinging by the fire-pit

.....

Once I stayed all night
The light in the morning came slowly

.....

Then came steam.

Pipe-knock.

Scurry of warm over small plants.

Ordnung! ordnung!

Papa is coming!

Papa is coming!

20. MALKOFF, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

A fine haze moved off the leaves;
 Frost melted on far panes;
 The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.
 Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds
 Moved in a slow up-sway.

(pp. 83-84)

Here the poet tactfully refrains from commenting and pointing out, as he does in the line « My hearth lifted up with the great grasses » of « A Field of Light. » When the coming of Papa brings a sense of relief and of rebirth to the flowers and the yellowy, dying weeds, we feel that the poet is part of the general up-sway, that the greenhouse has delivered an answer to his quest. Yet Roethke must have felt that regeneration from within his own world was not good enough as he added another ending to convey the blaze of the mystic's illumination.

Was it light?
 Was it light within?
 Was it light within light?
 Stillness becoming alive,
 Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
 Once entertained you.
 It will come again.
 Be still.
 Wait.

This passage is unrelated to the rest of the poem, it does not so much convey the impression of a sudden vision as of an afterthought. The poet attempts to contemplate his illumination with intellectual detachment. The experience, which so far has been relived with immediacy all through the poem, is relegated to the past, to a position of memory and *exemplum*. The poet has stepped outside his universe to contemplate and interpret it. We have moved from the world of the greenhouse and the close-to-the-ground and of a perfect

communion with nature to an abstract toying with metaphysical conceits such as « light within » and « light within light », which jar with the concrete tone of his poetry. Even the language is not Roethke's but Eliot's.

Time and again, in the poems of this group we witness an attempt at distancing the past, at translating the concrete into the abstract, at superimposing metaphysical conceits to the immediacy of the quest he narrates.

This is due to the fact that in those final sections Roethke is making his poetry conform to a preconceived scheme: out of the dark night, of the search for a clue to existence, there comes the illumination, the revelation of God, of Light, of oneself. Roethke illustrated his plan in the essay « An American Poet introduces Himself »:

The mind under great stress, roves far back into the subconscious, later emerging into the light of more serene or euphoric passages at the end of each phase of experience. Sometimes of course, there is regression. I believe that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward. The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned to²¹.

In his middle period Roethke is trying to recapture the mood of *Open House*, the metaphysical kind of subjectivity of a poem such as « The Adamant », where he can really watch « the separateness of all things », or, to use Stephen Spender's words he is trying « to transform himself into a more or less typical university poet of our time » and to reflect his growth as a man in his poetry. « There is no reason — says Spender — why the struggle for maturity in life should not have been identical with that for maturity in art. But unfortunately this does not seem to have been so in his case. »²²

21. MILLS, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

22. SPENDER, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

In other words, when Roethke contemplates the growth of the human mind, when he traces the story of his dark night and his emergence into light, he is doing an act of will, resolving a crisis that was never quite resolved; he is, to borrow once more Frye's definitions, writing poetry of product.

But Roethke is essentially a poet of process: his poems are in the making, each of them is an anguished quest, « a kind of struggle out of the slime, an effort to be born and later to become something else », as Mills correctly observes²³. His is a dramatic process of exploration, where nothing ever happens, nothing is resolved. The dramatic action of the protagonist groping through darkness, fighting against non-being, coincides with the poetic process: the poem is the seeking. So his climactic revelations are extraneous to the spirit, the language, even the rhythms that characterize the rest of the poem. The only illuminations consistent with his poetic universe are his simple affirmations of existence, his discoveries of order in chaos: the mare's nose, papa coming into the greenhouse, the roses and chrysantemums turning toward the morning light — an immanent light, not the transcendent, abstract « light within light ».

For Rimbaud too, the final illumination is not transcendent, but a simple truth: « Moi, moi qui me suis dit mage au ange... je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, la réalité rugueuse à êtreindre! Paysan! » In other words he has found and accepted « la vérité dans une âme et un corps. »

These revelations are also offered in the domain of language. At his best, like Rimbaud, Roethke achieves the real triumph of creation when he finds an instinctive rhythm, a balance between immediacy and form, subconscious truths and order. This is achieved in the penultimate sections of « The Lost Son » and « A Field of Light », making the rapt visions of transcendence quite redundant. There is transcendence, but simply of the personal, egotistic level. The poet overcomes

23. MILLS, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

the subjective by becoming dissolved in the objects (« I lost my identity to a pebble » sings Roethke).

So words are all important because they name the things and therefore have the power of bridging the gap between the I and the other. And if sometimes words seem to be associated in a nonsensical way, it is because Roethke, like Rimbaud, is trying to free things from their conventional meanings, to confuse sensations, to defy reason and beauty. He is using the *dérèglement* in order to achieve real freedom. So words are separated from a semantic meaning in order only to communicate through rhythm and sound. Or they are separated from a syntactical meaning, and have only their primitive and childish function of naming, so that the poets, by naming the objects almost exorcise them. This explains the presence of so many nominal clauses both in Rimbaud and Roethke. Words being all-important, there are few qualifications and subordinations.

Speech is considered, especially by Roethke, almost an involuntary phenomenon, an animal cry. There are exclamations, nonsense associations. The rhythm is that of the simplest forms of human communication: children's linguistic inventions, (jingles), questions and answers: in this Roethke experiments even more than Rimbaud, although the French poet is by far the more original in the conception of the poem, for he is free even of the tradition that Roethke retains of following a progressive scheme, a plot-line.

In both, the poems seem dictated by an intense evocation of the objects in an attempt to capture their reality, while the conscious level of the speaker is disintegrated. « He seems — says William Meredith of Roethke — to have trusted his poetic voice to speak for itself, to have given control of the poems to his subconscious the way a ouija-board player gives his mind to the never-mind »²⁴.

24. WILLIAM MEREDITH, « A Storm of Correspondences », in *On the Poet and his Craft*, cit., p. 44.

It must be obvious by now that, although the product of burning experience, the poems of Rimbaud and Roethke are not examples of formless raving. On the contrary they are highly sophisticated specimens of a new language, a new form that had to be discovered in order to communicate the visions, formless and chaotic at times, they brought back from their explorations.

Donc le poète est vraiment voleur de feu:

Il est chargé de l'humanité, des *animaux* même; il devra faire sentir, palper, écouter ses inventions: si ce qu'il rapporte de *là-bas* a forme, il donne forme; si c'est informe, il donne de l'informe. Trouver une langue. (p. 347)

Both poets have striven to find the new language « de l'âme pour l'âme » and have succeeded through a similar process.

What keeps Roethke from consistently attaining greatness is the uncertainty about his aims, the conflict between the tendency to follow his genius back into his childhood and the urge to rationalize, to grow up, to follow a progressive path towards « the light ». In other words, the confusion, in his poems, between poetry of process and poetry of product. While Rimbaud follows his *dérèglement* all the way until he reaches the perfect freedom of the unknown, Roethke holds back, falsifies the rules of the game by giving his search a foreknown object: I can sympathize with his struggle to triumph over the slime, but believe that it is only when we have uncontrolled emotion, unresolved drama, an acceptance of the regression, that Roethke can produce lines that rank among the best poetry of modern America.

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