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TESIS DOCTORAL

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SPEAKING SUBJECT

IN

THEODORE ROETHKE'S POETRY

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INTRODUCTION

The human problem is to find out what one really *is*: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how?¹

When considering whether one really *is* or *exists*, or whether existence is *possible*, Theodore Roethke is unconsciously pointing out at the main critical concerns that frame this study. The exploration of the ways in which Roethke presents the speaking subject of his poetry has clear ontological and epistemological implications. How do we set the limits between ourselves and others? Is there an identifiable “I” we can claim as our own? Is it possible to reimagine our identities and the relations that bind us to the world? These are the questions that I will try to answer in the context of Roethke’s most experimental poetry.

¹ Theodore Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001, 36.

I have divided my analysis into three distinct chapters that provide a slightly eccentric approach to cultural theory in their psychoanalytic examination of poetry. My critical argumentation is supported by a very detailed textual commentary of Roethke's first two books of poems and by a more general scrutiny of the rest of his work. This is explained by the fact that Roethke scarcely altered his speakers's psychological structure after the publication of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948).

In the first chapter, "General Background," I lay out the critical and methodological groundwork for my subsequent analysis of Roethke's speaking subject. By a general assessment of the scholarship written on Roethke throughout more than seven decades, I present the most important critical contributions that have been given to the debate concerning his poetry. I align myself with a line of critics who pretend to discover the architectural intricacies of Roethke's poetic vision. I also examine the position of Roethke's poetry among that of his contemporaries and specially, among the "confessional poets." Roethke was always treated as a problematic poet within the postwar generation of American poets because of the transitional nature of his writing. I try to discern the aesthetic peculiarities that situate his poetry within a much larger tradition that goes back to the American Transcendentalist movement. Roethke's particular

natural imagery and his ambivalent relation to the past are partially explained by the events of his early life in his father's greenhouse. I elaborate a short narration of his life paying special attention to the traumatic death of his father Otto, to his relation with his mother Helen, and to the manic-depressive attacks that plagued him throughout the years. Before analyzing the poems, I synthesize the basic psychoanalytical concepts that will help me discern the shape of Roethke's speaking subject.

Jacques Lacan and, mainly, Julia Kristeva, have illuminated my thoughts on identity formation. These two theorists have come up with an innovative reinterpretation of Freud within the French structuralist and post-structuralist tradition. Lacan claimed that the "unconscious" discovered by Freud configured itself as a language. This psychological entity was thus subjected to the same laws and patterns that linguists such as Austin had identified in human speech. The most obscure and irrational recesses of the mind were given an analytical articulation that led Lacan to theorize three orders of subjectivity: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. The individual's relation to language and his capacities for changing it were represented by the Symbolic and the Imaginary, while the Real corresponded to what inevitably escaped from human categorization. Kristeva took Lacan as the starting point on her discussion of the speaking

subject but she adopted a different view on the Imaginary and femininity. Unlike Lacan, she thought that the Imaginary was not only a source of self-deceit but a means for re-inventing our stuck Symbolic identities. In this way, she was rejecting Lacan's insistence on the influence of paternal law in the domains of subjectivity and culture. Kristeva's notion of abjection is very significant for my analysis of the limits of the Roethkean subject. She describes abjection as an archaic force of non-signification present at the very institution of the Symbolic and the Imaginary that troubles the individual to the point that he desperately rejects what is "other" to him in order to avoid dissolution. In my view, Kristeva's later re-elaboration of Freudian melancholy and nostalgia is indispensable to understand our intimate relation to language and our faith in its regenerative possibilities.

In the second chapter, "The Forging of an Identity," I relate what traditionally has been judged as Roethke's early technical deficiencies in his first volume of poems, *Open House*, to his speaking subject's unconscious rejection to communicate with potential readers. I also claim that, in *Open House*, Roethke fails to give personal relevance to the world he is constructing. However, in that same volume other poems such as "The Premonition" already produce a less psychotic persona who explores an incipient ambivalence towards his past and the loss of the father. The

poems I have selected from the second and third sections of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* are considered to be transitional in the sense that they intensify their speaking subject's preoccupation with his fantasized origins. While a poem such as "My Father's Waltz" still bears the formal imprint of a more stable subject, in the examples of "The Return," "River Incident" or "The Minimal," Roethke experiments with the destabilizing effects of an ambiguous "otherness" in his subject's speech. The "Greenhouse" section gives organic form to the poet's phenomenological world of his childhood in a manner that remains unparalleled in the rest of his work. In these poems, Roethke articulates a somewhat nightmarish vision of subjectivity characterized by his speakers's affective fascination and fear of the feminine "other," with the exception of "Big Wind." The individual pieces are considered, for the most part, as unsuccessful rites of self-purification in which the lyric persona strives to achieve a distinct nostalgic voice. With the long poems of the "Lost Son" sequence, Roethke reformulates this search for a nostalgic subject with a narrative form that curiously undermines its characteristic continuity and symbolic stability. By following Roethke's own choice of temporal succession, I distinguish clear parallels between the chronologically posterior child / adolescent-narratives and the narratives belonging to the fourth section of *The Lost*

Son and Other Poems. The adding of “O Thou Opening, O” to the sequence does not constitute in my opinion a later stage in the lost son’s quest. Roethke keeps the early pattern of “The Lost Son” as a way of signaling the recurrent interminability of the process. The main objective of this chapter is to give the most comprehensive view of what I have named “the Roethkean subject” and to critically assess the different stages of his psychological development. The fact that this second chapter presents the most detailed textual analysis of the study is justified by the belief that Roethke accomplishes the most rich and complex characterization of his subject in the “Greenhouse” poems and in the “Lost Son” sequence.

In the third and last chapter of this study, “Otherness as Disguise,” I claim that Roethke barely changes the formal structure of his self-images in subsequent volumes and, for this reason, I adopt a more thematic approach to his “amatory” and “meditative” subjects. The interpretation of his “Love poems” from *Word from the Wind* and *The Far Field* shows the dynamics of fantasy at work within a masculine negotiation of the feminine “other.” Roethke’s amatory subject is torn between fascination and awe and only finds solace in the symbolic stability of marriage. This poetry only reproduces already fixed versions of femininity that attest to the gender politics of power within the dynamics of love. In regard to the “meditative

subject,” Roethke focuses on the deterioration of the body in “Meditations of an Old Woman.” He echoes his speakers’s previous attempts to cleanse the imaginary self’s impurities and to find some truth about its essence. The result is a satisfying account of the old woman’s metamorphic capacities. The “North American Sequence” takes the local landscape of America as a starting point for the meditative subject’s sublimation of mortality and loss. Although the “I” of these long poems also moves between different affective states, his new insistence on the symbolic naming of the world as a way to overcome its negativity lessens the regressive and violent nature of his transitions. My intention in this chapter is to study the subtle thematic variations that Roethke’s speakers underwent after *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the intentional obscurantism that has normally been thrown at such disparate thinkers as Lacan, Foucault or Kristeva, which they themselves sometimes contributed to,¹ I have been intellectually stimulated by their playfulness and unorthodox display of ideas. It is not so misbegotten to suggest that the literary critic parallels the psychoanalyst in his quest to find order and structure within a subjectivity that theatrically articulates itself by means of language. The poetic sign becomes the symptomatic² expression of a subject in a “communicative trial.” Notwithstanding the psychoanalytical overtones of the term

¹ Philosopher John Searle notes in an interview that Foucault once admitted to him that he consciously complicated his writings in an attempt to appease a certain French audience. For more information see:

John Searle, “John Searle on Foucault and the Obscurantism in French Philosophy,” *Open Culture*, 2013, web. 15 Aug 2013.

http://www.openculture.com/2013/07/jean_searle_on_foucault_and_the_obscurantism_in_french_philosophy.html

² For a more detailed exploration of the relationship between symptom and sign, see: Murray McArthur, “Symptom and the Sign: Janet, Freud, Eliot, and the Literary Mandate of Laughter,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 56:1, Spring 2010, 1-24.

“confessional,” poetry itself reflects an individual’s urgent desire to be heard and acquitted of his sins, both which require an empathetic third party to be effective. However, I also believe that my role as a reader should not be to “really mother”³ this virtual “lost son” projected out of Roethke’s self-mythologizing. In order to apprehend his artistic achievement as a poet, one needs go beyond such a fixed positioning and embrace the dynamic and often ambiguous nature of poetic language. For this reason, I have not limited my work to establishing a deterministic set of causes that ultimately unravel the mystery of a poem. I claim to have given a relative, not absolute, representation of an open subjective reality in need of continuous reformulation. The phenomenological value of my psychoanalytical interpretation makes me articulate a Roethkean subject who is “neither a true nor a false self, neither a self-cured patient nor a poetic persona,”⁴ but the result of an interminable process of generating, annihilating, contradicting and limiting identity.

Regarding the critical achievements of this thesis, I hope I have helped to clarify the myth of Roethke’s radical breakthrough from *Open House* to *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. Roethke’s early poems have

³ Wardi, 181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

received many different classifications that often challenge each other. In my opinion, this divergence is a product of the very inconsistency of *Open House* as a volume. As it is demonstrated by his letters, Roethke himself was incapable of organizing the poems into sections and left the task to another person.⁵ Thus, the poet's own doubts were transferred to some of his critics, who either engaged themselves in debates on the structure of the book or dismissed it as the work of an apprentice. Nevertheless, the irregularity of book as a whole turns *Open House* into much more than an experiment in style. It also contains poetic pieces of a very personal nature, such as "The Premonition," which clearly contribute to the consolidation of the myth of the orphaned child. The heterogeneity of the volume foreshadows both the radical experimentation of "Where Knock is Open Wide" and the formal concision of "Four for Sir John Davies." Furthermore, although *The Lost Son and Other Poems* introduces some of the most groundbreaking pieces that Roethke ever wrote, sections II and III from still articulate slightly conventionalized affects that lack in the subversive originality and personal relevance of the rest of the book.

⁵ Roethke, *Selected Letters*, 68.

I believe that my interpretation of the “Greenhouse” poems and the “Lost Son” narratives produces a very detailed textual scrutiny of their psychological complexity. Both sequences stand as the proper “legend” of Roethke’s youth. The “Greenhouse” poems have been shown to symbolize particular identity crises caused for the most part by their speakers’s confrontation with a feminine other. In these poems, the almost paranoid impulse to cleanse the familiar body from impurities and invading agencies brings about a suspension of meaning characteristic of melancholy. The “Lost Son” sequence contains some of the most radical poetry that Roethke ever wrote. The poet’s purpose to explore the “shape of the psyche itself, in times of great stress”⁶ is materialized in a magical language in which the dullness of adult symbolic speech is subverted by the malleability of a child’s perception. These long poems dramatize a fluid succession of affective states that ultimately point out the interminable nature of self-analysis.

The examination of Roethke’s “Love poems” has shown how Burke’s canonical reading in terms of “personalization” or “personification” does not resolve the imaginary tensions produced in their

⁶ Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 84.

representation of the amatory relationship. The Roethkean “love poem” is predominantly the province of male fantasy and thus should be interpreted in its own terms. The woman in these poems is a further manifestation of the feminine in Roethke’s world and inevitably lacks the complexity of a more or less independent subject. It is in “Meditations of an Old Woman” that Roethke performs his most chameleonic gesture. Although the old woman may resemble his lost son persona, she embodies a sovereign individual in full control of her imaginary dispositions. In my view, Roethke follows in the steps of T. S. Eliot in his re-imagination of subjectivity in his “North American Sequence.” Roethke was involved in the same struggle to transcend the impenetrable materiality of the Real by means of a nostalgic regenerative vision. These long poems constitute the last manifestation of an often contradictory desire to be reconciled with the past that repeats itself through Roethke’s oeuvre. In this case, the poet invokes the atemporal dimension of nature, history and language so as to transcend the negativity of loss and oblivion.

This study constitutes a new reevaluation of Roethke’s work and I acknowledge my debt to the relentless criticism that has showed the merits of his poetry. It is necessary for me to stress that I situate my critical project within a much larger quest for knowledge that has made us constantly

rethink our notions of what subjectivity is and how it functions within the world that we inevitably perceive. A deeper investigation of our affective response to poetry has already been undertaken by scholars such as Charles Altieri in his *Subjective Agency: A Theory of First-Person Expressivity and its Social Implications*⁷ or *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*.⁸ This study has ontological and epistemological implications that transcend the abstract notion of poetry as only relevant to itself and to its own historical development. My intention was not to give definitive solutions to the enigma of human subjectivity but to show how poetry and specially, Roethke's, is capable of challenging as well as enabling our images of selfhood so that we may be more aware of the inevitable limitations and possibilities that configure our existence as human beings.

⁷ Charles Altieri, *Subjective Agency: A Theory of First-Person Expressivity and its Social Implications*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1994.

⁸ *Ibid.*, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

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