

TO COMMIT A DESECRATION: THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF UNCONSCIOUS LANDSCAPE IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S 'GREENHOUSE' POEMS

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Grown out of the tradition that begins with William Wordsworth and follows with Samuel Coleridge and R.W. Emerson, Theodore Roethke's 'Greenhouse Poems' present a particular perception of reality that transcends solipsistic modes of representation in an attempt to break the different levels of discourse that compose it. This recreation of the textual self though is characterized by a strong feeling of anxiety that does not point towards a rebirth of the self but towards its own disintegration. The purpose of this paper is show how this fear at the self's dissolution permeates and shapes Roethke's 'Greenhouse Section' so as to produce an ambiguous and hybrid language that resolves what the actual experience cannot. For this reason, I will analyze several poems from Roethke's second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948).

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The title of my paper makes specific reference to a group of poems, Theodore Roethke's 'Greenhouse' section in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), which radically challenge the idea of a realistic mode of representation as they try to reproduce the lyrical subject's own state of mind. The reader is presented with an integrative vision of the self that brings into the poem the different discursive levels of a historical and constructed psyche. However, this phenomenological apprehension of the individual's psychological reality does not lead to the articulation of a clear and continuous identity but to the anxious realization of its own instability and transience. The purpose of my analysis is, thus, to show how the fear at dissolution, which shape Roethke's 'Greenhouse' poems, produces an ambiguous and hybrid language that in a formal sense is able to resolve, although momentarily, the tensions that haunt the speaker throughout his particular quest for a distinct voice.

Theodore Roethke belongs to the Post-war Generation of American poets, which includes writers such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath, who wrote their major works mainly during the fifties and sixties. Roethke has been loosely considered a 'confessional' poet for various reasons, the biographical details he scattered throughout his poems being one of the most evident factors that is normally taken into account. Nevertheless, he definitively presents distinctive traits that align him not only with the romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Emerson but also with the modernism of Yeats, Eliot, Stevens and Williams. In one of his notebook entries, Roethke said that "a poem that is the shape of the psyche itself; in times of great stress, that's what I tried to write" (1974: 178), a quote one can easily relate to Wordsworth's *Prospectus* or *The Recluse* and to Stevens's lines from "Of Modern Poetry", in which he writes that "the poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (1-2).

Words such as psyche, mind, consciousness or self can be misleading for they describe vague and dynamic psychological categories that reject an easy examination and are always subject to controversy. According to psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung, with whose works Roethke was familiar, there seems to be an opposition within the individual psyche of two separate entities that maintain a constant interchange of information: consciousness and the unconscious. In a sense, the literary tradition I have traced back to Wordsworth could be interpreted as a permanent dialogue between two modes of discourse, that of the conscious and unconscious mind, which reflect the psychological manifestations of the self. Jung defined the self as “the psychic totality of the individual”(156), a category that incorporates the world of dreams, vision and mystical introspection into the ontological frame of experience. In keeping with this view, the poet’s transcendent categories of Nature or God might be considered as the subject’s psychic realities since “anything that a man postulates as being a greater totality than himself can become a symbol of the self” (156). From now on I will rely on this contextual frame when referring to the word ‘self’.

Theodore Roethke struggled to achieve an innovative language that would help him represent the individual’s unconscious realm as a complex of discrete elements that to a greater or a lesser extent threaten to shatter the conscious self. The ‘Greenhouse’ series manifests Roethke’s first attempt at achieving a unifying representation of his psychic life after the unsuccessful experience of his previous book of poems, *Open House* (1941). As Neal Bowers indicates in his study, *Theodore Roethke: The Journey From I to the Otherwise*, “Roethke no longer viewed ultimate reality as an external emanation, but as something immanent, within himself, and his altered viewpoint necessarily brought with it a change in the dominant symbolism” (1982: 77). The poet’s recollections and reinterpretations of his past experiences in his father’s greenhouse and the mystical will to escape from ego consciousness are rendered into a highly suggestive language of concentration that unfolds by means of a necessary form and not by any conventionalized structure. We can see an example of this procedure in the first poem of the section, “Cuttings”:

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumble loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn. (1-8)

A whole cosmic panorama of life and death struggles are dramatized in these two stanzas that blur the distance between the perceiver, the controlling eye of consciousness and the perceived, which in its most literal level would seem to correspond to the phenomenon of the individual cuttings in their trays. Nevertheless, the imaginative quality of the description goes beyond a traditional mimetic approach since it plays upon the hybridization of different discursive levels. The cuttings are presented as dormant and delicate entities bathing in a sensual and sexual bed where the opposites of life and death are fused. Literally, the cuttings in the tray are about to sprout into new and complete plants. However, Roethke is not only giving an account of the individual phenomenon but also touching upon collective patterns of

experience or archetypes. "The archetype", Jung says, could be understood as an "irrepresentable factor" which "starts functioning at a given moment in the development of the human mind and arranges the material of consciousness in definitive patterns" (1969: 149), which in the case of "Cuttings" would correspond to the organic rearrangement of Roethke's own memories from his childhood in a greenhouse.

The poem that follows, "Cuttings (later)", serves as a commentary of this first visionary plunge into the depths of the self. The poetic persona, with whom we presume to have witnessed the extraordinary phenomenon of these shoots in the first poem, does not wholly comprehend his previous experience and inquires into the nature of this numinous spirit that resurrects the dry sticks to a new life. In a way, this second poem could be interpreted as the reader's response to the first one, "Cuttings", where the enigmatic event is not understood but felt:

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 breaks out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet. (5-11)

The speaker in "Cuttings (later)" tries to incorporate the unconscious and dreamlike contents of "Cuttings" within a different narrative frame. There is a symbolic fall from the rational and fragmented consciousness of the human being to the instinctual impulses of a fish: "When sprouts break out,/ Slippery as fish, I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet" (9-11). If one considers that the human brain as a product of filogenetic evolution, these last lines could be interpreted as a literal flight to our origins as autonomous life organisms. However, this unstable moment of revelation where the ego surrenders to the deepest reality of being, making use of a mystical terminology, produces an anxious response in the speaker. A sort of existential *angst* filters through the language of the poem, an anxiety that threatens the ego with dissolution. In this sense, the reader does not get a conciliatory insight into the utter depths of the psyche but a feeling of distress that avoids resolution of any type.

In a different poem, "Weed Puller", the image of the poet-child experiencing a mystical self-stripping process operates in turn a parallel rupture of levels:

Under the concrete benches,
Hacking at black hairy roots, –
Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes, –
Digging into the soft rubble underneath,
Webs and weeds,
Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,
Or yanking tough fern-shapes,
Coiled green and thick, like dripping smilax,
Tugging all day at perverse life:
The indignity of it! –
With everything blooming above me,
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
Whose fields lovely and inviolate, –
Me down in that fetor of weeds,

Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave (1-16)

The speaker's perception of the plants is already imbued with a sexually charged language ("black hairy roots", "lewd monkey tails", "sharp sticks", "dripping smilax") that in the case of this poem also touches on the Freudian idea of the *unheimlich* or the uncanny.

On the literal level, the child is observing the weed puller as he carries out his dirty task. He administers the garbage and surplus of the greenhouse, that is, everything that must remain hidden from the client because of its unpleasant nature. However, according to the comprehensive vision of the mind Roethke is pursuing in this poem, the weed puller acquires the proportions of a mythical figure that tries to master the uncontrollable impulses of the individual's mind. As in the case of "Cuttings (later)", one could again propose the psychological hypothesis of a narrative frame that tries to dramatize the flow of information that is established between the unconscious and the ego consciousness of the lyrical persona.

According to my interpretation, the sudden revelation of the unconscious is related to an outburst of sexually repressed energies, as represented by the "perverse" life of weeds and insects. These disruptive elements cannot be held back from within the psyche and consequently break into the surface of consciousness. Although the textual projection of the poet is surrounded by the ideal and soothing reflections of the familiar nature that surround the lyric I ("lilies", "cyclamen", "roses"), he is more frightened that in "Cuttings (later)": the tremendous force of the unconscious is threatening to metaphorically rape him ("inviolate fields"). In line with the situation presented in this poem, we should interpret the individuation process of the self as a painful outgrowth that, as the three last lines suggest, brings the speaker to a point where any distinctions concerning time or space crumble and fall to pieces. In this sense, the poem ends with a contradiction: the attainment of a whole identity implies also the destruction of the very notion of identity.

In the last poem of the series, "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz", Roethke shows a less aggressive aspect of the unconscious although it is also true that its representation retains some of the potential dangers previously experienced in "Weed Puller":

Gone the three ancient ladies
Who creaked on the greenhouse ladders,
Reaching up white strings
To wind, to wind
The sweet-pea tendrils, the smilax,
Nasturtiums, the climbing
Roses, to straighten
Carnations, red
Chrysanthemums; the stiff
Stems, jointed like corn,
They tied and tucked,—
These nurses of nobody else. (1-12)

These three women were three actual workers in the old greenhouse that Roethke transfigures by means of the same poetic technique he has previously used in the section. The narrator remembers them as the ancient fates or *Moirae* who, in

accordance with poet's worldview, ruled the destiny of the vegetal life in the hothouse. As it happened with the figure of the weed puller, they seem to be represented as mythical figures that have a strong correspondence with the poet's psyche in the text. The great amount of verbal forms ("wind", "straighten" "tie", "tuck" "dip", "sift", etc.) that Roethke associates with these old hags emphasizes the fact that they are immersed in cosmic action: they are the greenhouse's keepers who function as celestial mediators between the world of phenomena and the realm of numinous experience. In this sense, the three women could be interpreted as threshold figures that may guide the lyrical consciousness of the poem in its particular quest for identity. However, the second stanza creates a certain ambivalence in relation to their role:

I remember how they picked me up, a spindly kid,
Pinching and poking my thin ribs
Till I lay in their laps, laughing,
Weak as a whiffet;
Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
They still hove over me,
These ancient leathery crones,
With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
And their thorn-bitten wrists,
And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me in my first sleep. (26-35)

While the three women are presented as benevolent entities that nurse and protect the organic life in the greenhouse, Roethke has related them to necromancy: "[l]ike witches they flew along rows" (19) and "[t]hese ancient leathery crones" (32). I would say that this ambivalent position that lies beyond good and evil relates them to the realm of the unconscious as well as to the notion of the uncanny. This is the reason why the poem presents an unsettling mixture of familiarity and strangeness that blurs the boundaries between what is internal or external to conscious thought. As a consequence, the unstable nature of the subject's own positioning produces a hybrid representation that tries to integrate the different worlds of plants, gods and men into a single poetic vision.

The unconscious forces of the psyche, as represented by the three fantastic figures in their bandannas, lead the speaker to the primordial cradle of "Cuttings (later)" and "Weed Puller", which in this case is symbolized by the old women's laps. This space could be interpreted as a 'mandala', which, according to Jung, "has the functional significance of a union of opposites, or of mediation" (1969: 90). It is at this point in which different spheres intersect that the young boy finds a possible recess from all his previous anxieties. In contrast with the 'slippery grave' of "Weed Puller", the speaker manages to retain his identity without losing himself into the undifferentiated. Nevertheless, the poem does not end at this moment. The adverbial "now" indicates that the speaker has left behind the self-enhancing experience of the mandala. He lies 'alone and cold' in his bed but even when reality seems to have lost its magic, there remains an influence to be taken into account. The old women "still hover" over the poet. They are as wraiths from the past that perhaps will help the subject to attain a differentiated identity within a larger self. Moreover, the fact that the narrator relegates the witches to his present dreams strengthens the psychological weight of their actions and relates them to the conscious self's numinous experience of the unknown.

I have tried to show how Theodore Roethke's 'Greenhouse' poems show a keen interest in an organic form of language that goes beyond a traditional mode of representation and incorporates irrational spheres of existence that are normally concealed from consciousness. On the one hand, Roethke's ambiguous relation to his own past and the textual ego's eventual incapacity to embrace higher levels of consciousness are reflected in the deadlocked conclusions of some of the poems. On the other hand, the last poem of the series, "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" opens a different path towards a future that nonetheless remains only a possibility. It is by means of the enigmatic language in the poems that some kind of integration is achieved, since it constitutes an organic discourse that manages to touch upon different levels.

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