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Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching

Richard Hugo

SOME OF this is from memory, twenty-five years of it, and some of it may be wrong. But I'm sure of one thing, on the first day of class in the fall quarter of 1947 he shambled into the classroom, and the awkward, almost self-degrading way he moved made me think he was dressed in "rags and rotting clothes," when actually he was probably in an expensive tailor-made suit. His addiction to bourgeois values, his compulsive need to be loved by all, but most of all the rich, was of course the obverse of the way he felt about himself. In his mind I believe he was always poor and unwashed, and he showed it when he walked.

So I'm certain he wasn't poorly dressed, though I still see him that way. Then I didn't but now I do know he was frightened. "Look," in W. C. Fields-as-gangster voice, "there's too many people in here. If I had my way, I'd have nothing but young chicks, the innocent ones you can teach something." We had to submit poems and he judged. He had to weed. One girl asked if he couldn't be more definite. "You want a quick answer? Get out now." But he laughed. His tenderness toward students often showed through.

He was probably the best poetry-writing teacher ever. That's impossible to prove and silly, but I had to say it just once in print. He was not intellectual in his approach in those days, though I think he changed later. Sometimes he read poems aloud and then couldn't explicate them clearly when he tried. I think he often didn't understand much of what he read. I mean he didn't understand it the way a critic or good literature teacher would understand it. I believe he so loved the music of language that his complicated emotional responses to poems interfered with his attempts to verbalize meaning.

When he read his favorites aloud, Yeats, Hopkins, Auden, Thomas, Kunitz, Bogan, poets with "good

ears," something happened that happens all too infrequently in a classroom. If a student wasn't a complete auditory clod, he could feel himself falling in love with the sounds of words. To Roethke, that was the heart and soul of poetry. And that was his strength as a teacher: he gave students a love of the sound of language. His classes were clinics. He performed therapy on the ear.

It was important to some of us in Seattle that he came when he did. It was just great luck. The English Department at the University of Washington in 1947 was in a rut. Vernon Louis Parrington was dead but his influence was not. The approach to literature was Parrington's and little else. Many of the teachers had taken their Ph.D.s right there years before. They had been friends of Parrington, and while many were able teachers, they taught literature as a reflection of historical and sociological patterns of its time. Writers who didn't fit the method were usually ignored—Poe, Henry James.

I lacked anything near an academic imagination, so I just assumed that literature could not be approached any other way. Worse, I simply didn't know who had written what. I'd never heard of Auden, Hopkins, Thomas, or even Yeats. Just the exposure to such poets was worth any tuition fee. But to be exposed to them by a man so passionately committed to their rhythms and tonalities was to be born.

One sad thing about university reputations is that they lag behind the fact. By the time you hear how good an English department is, it is usually too late to go there. But by all accounts Roethke got even better as a teacher as the years went on, though it's hard to imagine his being any better than he was in '47 and '48.

He was a dangerous teacher too. And the danger is a natural one for good poetry-writing teachers who are also good poets. Good poets have obsessive ears. They love certain sounds and not others. So they read aloud what they love, responding to their own obsessive needs in the poetry of others. If he is worth a damn, any poet teaching poetry writing constantly and often without knowing it is saying to the student, "Write the way I do. That's the best sound you can make." The student who shakes this, who goes on to *his* auditory obsessions and who writes the way the teacher never told him, may become a poet. Roethke, through his fierce love of kinds of verbal music, could be overly influential. David Wagoner, who was quite young when he studied under Roethke at Penn State, told me once of the long painful time he had breaking Roethke's hold on him.

For many this hold had enormous psychic proportions because for all his playfulness in poems, it was in poems and poetry that Roethke was playing a profound and dangerous game. Many of Roethke's poems suffer from triviality of spirit for just this reason. When he played and the play didn't unlock the man, only the game remains on the page. Some things are just not meant. But that was the risk he took. A lot of poets don't have the nerve to risk failure.

He was also playful in class, arrogant, hostile, tender, aggressive, receptive—anything that might work to bring the best out of a student. A young man might turn in a poem, read it aloud, and then wait, his heart on the block, and Roethke would say quietly, and ever so slightly sarcastically, "Gee." It was withering. Yet for all of Roethke's capacity for cruelty, it was not a cruel act. Roethke knew that poetry is an art

form and a difficult one and that the enthusiasm and hope of the young poet are not enough. You have to work, and you had better get used to facing disappointments and failures, a lifetime of them. Other times he would roar laughter at a funny poem, no matter how inexpertly written. Most students respected his authority not because what he said was intellectually defensible—what an absurd consideration—but because the man was so emotionally honest. Emotional honesty is a rare thing in the academic world or anywhere else for that matter, and nothing is more prized by good students.

He pushed as models the seventeenth-century lyricists—Herbert, Marvell, Herrick. Whoever he pushed, whatever poems he purred or boomed aloud in class, he was always demonstrating that this, *your* language, is capable of power and beauty. Those of us who had always loved it found out we loved it. Some who hadn't loved it, but had the capacity to, came to love it. The others?

When our poems were coming in void of rhythm he gave demanding exercises, and his finals were evidence of the cruelty in him. I don't have a copy of one of his exams, but here's an exercise I give beginning students once in a while to take home and return in a week or so, and it is very close to what he would give you an hour to do on the final.

<i>Nouns</i>	<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Adjectives</i>
tamarack	to kiss	blue
throat	to curve	hot
belief	to swing	soft
rock	to ruin	tough
frog	to bite	important
dog	to cut	wavering
slag	to surprise	sharp
eye	to bruise	cool
cloud	to hug	red
mud	to say	leather

Use five nouns, verbs, and adjectives from the above lists and write a poem as follows:

1. Four beats to the line (can vary)
2. Six lines to the stanza
3. Three stanzas
4. At least two internal and one external slant rhyme per stanza (full rhymes acceptable but not encouraged)
5. Maximum of two end stops per stanza
6. Clear English grammatical sentences (no tricks). All sentences must make sense.
7. The poem must be meaningless.

Item 7 is a sadistic innovation of my own.

The point of this exercise will probably be clear to poets. Too many beginners have the idea that they know what they have to say—now if they can just find the words. Here, you give them the words, some of them anyway, and some technical problems to solve. Many of them will write their best poem of the term. It works, and I've seen it work again and again. While the student is concentrating on the problems of the exercise, the real problems go away for a moment simply because they are ignored, and with the real problems gone the poet is free to say what he never expected and always wanted to say. Euphonics and slant rhymes are built into the vocabulary of course, and as for item 7, it simply takes the exercise one step further into the world of the imagination. Without it, the exercise is saying: give up what you think you have to say, and you'll find something better. With item 7, it says: say nothing and just make music and you'll find plenty to say. Item 7 is an impossibility of course, but when the student finds out it is, one hopes he will have increased faith in sound and the accidents of the imagination.

Some traditionalists seem to think that forms exist to be solved for their own sake, as if the poet is an engineer. That's just foolish. If a poet finds himself solving the problems of a form simply for the sake of challenge, he has the wrong form. After you've written for a long time, to do it in the forms at all is a little like cheating because you are getting help. But the forms can be important, and when Roethke felt himself going dry he always returned to them. For some students, the exercise will not work because the form is not theirs. They need another or, in some cases, none. Though I can't defend it, I believe that when the poem is coming on with imaginative honesty, there is some correspondence of the form to psychic rhythms in the poet.

The second half of the Roethke final usually consisted of one question, a lulu like, "What should the modern poet do about his ancestors?" "Do you mean his blood ancestors or the poets who proceeded him?" I asked. "Just answer the question," Roethke growled.

Roethke could read so effectively that he could set a student's mind rigidly in favor of a poem for years. I came to realize that "The Golden Echo" is not good Hopkins, or even much good for that matter, despite Roethke's fine reading of it. On the other hand, "Easter 1916" still remains a favorite of mine. I think of it as possibly as good as we have in the language, and it was Roethke's reading of it that first prejudiced me.

Just calling attention to what the student is hearing but doesn't know he's hearing can be a revelation. A student may love the sound of Yeats' "Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more" and not know that the single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that's one reason "blood dark track" goes off like rifle shots. He's hearing a lot of other things too that I won't go into here. O.K. Simple stuff. Easily observed. But how few people notice it. The young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can't be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that are what make and break poems, and if a teacher can make a poet aware of it, he has given him a

generous shove in the only direction. In poetry, the big things tend to take care of themselves.

When I started teaching at the age of forty I was terrified. It was bad enough to hold Roethke up as an ideal and to hope to imitate his methods and techniques rather than my own, but to be told my first day on campus that I was Leslie Fielder's replacement was a bit too much. I hope I've found my own way of doing things in the classroom, but if I have I didn't find it easily. I found it much easier to shake Roethke's influence as a poet than as a teacher. Only in the last few years have I dropped a phony, blustery way of teaching that was never mine but that I assume was his, though twenty-five years of memory can kink a lot of cable.

Roethke's life would have been easier today in the classroom. Students are far better now than we were then. Jim Wright was one of the few students who was writing well in Roethke's classes. I have at least six who are excellent and another dozen good enough to appear in most literary magazines. For one thing, they've had much more exposure to good poems than we ever did. They work hard and have no illusions about writing being easy. I don't think poems come easier for them either, just sooner. They seem to absorb methods of execution faster and to assimilate technique faster than most of us could then.

Mark Strand remarked recently in Montana that American poetry could not help but get better and better, and I'm inclined to agree. I doubt that we'll have one big figure or the century the way other nations do, Yeats, Valéry. Giants are not the style of the society, though the wind knows there are enough people who want to create them, and not just a few who want to be them. I think we'll end up with a lot of fine poets, each doing his thing. There are a lot of bright and substantial young people writing and a lot of good poetry-writing teachers available to help them, poets who earned the title the hard way and who are generous enough to pass on all that they learned for themselves. Donald Justice and Marvin Bell at Iowa, A. R. Ammons at Cornell, John Logan at Buffalo, David Wagoner at the University of Washington are just a few who come to mind.

Then there's that banal, tiresome question: can writing be taught? Yes it can and no it can't. Ultimately the most important things a poet will learn about writing are from himself in the process. A good teacher can save a young poet years by simply telling him things he need not waste time on, like trying to will originality or trying to share an experience in language or trying to remain true to the facts (but that's the way it really happened). Roethke used to mumble: "Jesus, you don't want to say *that*." And you didn't but you hadn't yet become ruthless enough to create. You still felt some deep moral obligation to "reality" and "truth," and of course it wasn't moral obligation at all but the fear of yourself and your inner life.

Despite Roethke's love of verbal play, he could generate little enthusiasm for what passes as experimentation and should more properly be called fucking around. Real experimentation is involved in every good poem because the poet searched for ways to unlock his imagination through trial and error. Quest for a self is fundamental to poetry. What passes for experimentation is often an elaborate method of avoiding one's feelings at all costs. The process prohibits any chance the poet has to create surrogate

feelings, a secondary kind of creativity but in most poems all the poet can settle for. The good poems say: "This is how I feel." With luck that's true, but usually it's not. More often the poem is the way the poet says he feels when he can't find out what his real feelings are. It makes little difference to the reader, since a good poem sounds meant enough to be believed.

"Each newcomer feels obliged to do something else, forgetting that if he himself is somebody he will necessarily do that something else," said Valéry. And Roethke told students to "write like somebody else." There are those usual people who try desperately to appear unusual and there are unusual people who try desperately to appear usual. Most poets I've met are from the latter and much smaller group. William Stafford, at his best as good as we have, is a near-perfect example. It doesn't surprise me at all when the arrogant wild man in class turns in predictable, unimaginative poems and the straight one is doing nutty and promising work. If you are really strange you are always in enemy territory, and your constant concern is survival.

Roethke would probably take issue with that. He had all sorts of odd notions about what makes a poet. Once he told me seriously that we, he and I, being physically large, presented a kind of presence to others, and the pressure we felt from this role dictated by our physical proportions was fundamental to creating poems. He didn't put it that way but that's what he was saying.

Other ideas deserved more serious consideration. Roethke was fond of quoting Rimbaud's idea of the "systematic derangement of the senses," but he always left off the "systematic." When I was in grad school in '49 and '50, the smartest faculty member I knew at the time told me he believed that omission to be important. He felt that Roethke might actually cultivate madness because he believed it essential to writing. That may or may not be true. I suppose it could be argued that all madness is self-created. But what a great compliment to Roethke that people could believe it of him. How many great artists, including Yeats, could be credited with risking their very being for their work? Some poets do burn themselves for their work, like Dylan Thomas, but most prepare themselves for the long haul.

I vaguely recall a class in '48 when Roethke defended madness as important to creativity. I disagree plenty. Madness is crippling anywhere but in art where it belongs and can always find a home. It is obvious that all art is screwy and it is equally obvious that most men who create it are not. They are often "silly like us." Some of them—William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens—aren't even particularly silly. What is remarkable is that men handicapped by periods of mental aberration can still fight through and create, while others are simply incapacitated, sometimes forever.

But then we know almost nothing about creativity, where it comes from, what causes it. People who profess to be astounded that Wallace Stevens could be a corporate executive and still write are really saying, "How could he be a poet when he's not like me?" There are a lot of poets who aren't like you, even if you're a poet.

Most creative writing teachers in Roethke's day worth mentioning were formalists, and formality was an end in itself. Obligation to play "by the rules" remained paramount. As a teacher Roethke stood virtually

alone at the time. For Roethke the rules were simply one way to help a poet get to the gold. Certain areas he wisely left alone. I think he instinctively knew that fool's gold is what fools end up with, and a teacher can do nothing about that.

In one area Roethke lacked sophistication at moments. He was far too competitive for his own good, and while I'm far more competitive than I admit, I believe that it is only in periods when you can transcend your competitive instincts you can write. A sound analogy could be made with hitting a baseball. If you concentrate on beating a particular pitcher, your chances of hitting him are not as good as they are if you concentrate on the ball. And your chances of writing a poem are greatly reduced if you are trying to beat Robert Lowell or T. S. Eliot or anybody else. Roethke's love of prizes, rave reviews, and applause would sometimes prevent him from emphasizing to the student the real reward of writing—that special private way you feel about your poems, the way you feel when you are finishing a poem you like.

Yet he knew it, and in rare moments it showed. Once he said to me, that nervous undergrad who wanted the love of the world to roar out every time he put a word down, "Don't worry about publishing. That's not important." He might have added, only the act of writing is. It's flattering to be told you are better than someone else, but victories like that do not endure. What endures are your feelings about your work. You wouldn't trade your poems for anybody's. To do that you would also have to trade your life for his, which means living a whole new complex of pain and joy. One of those per lifetime is enough.

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