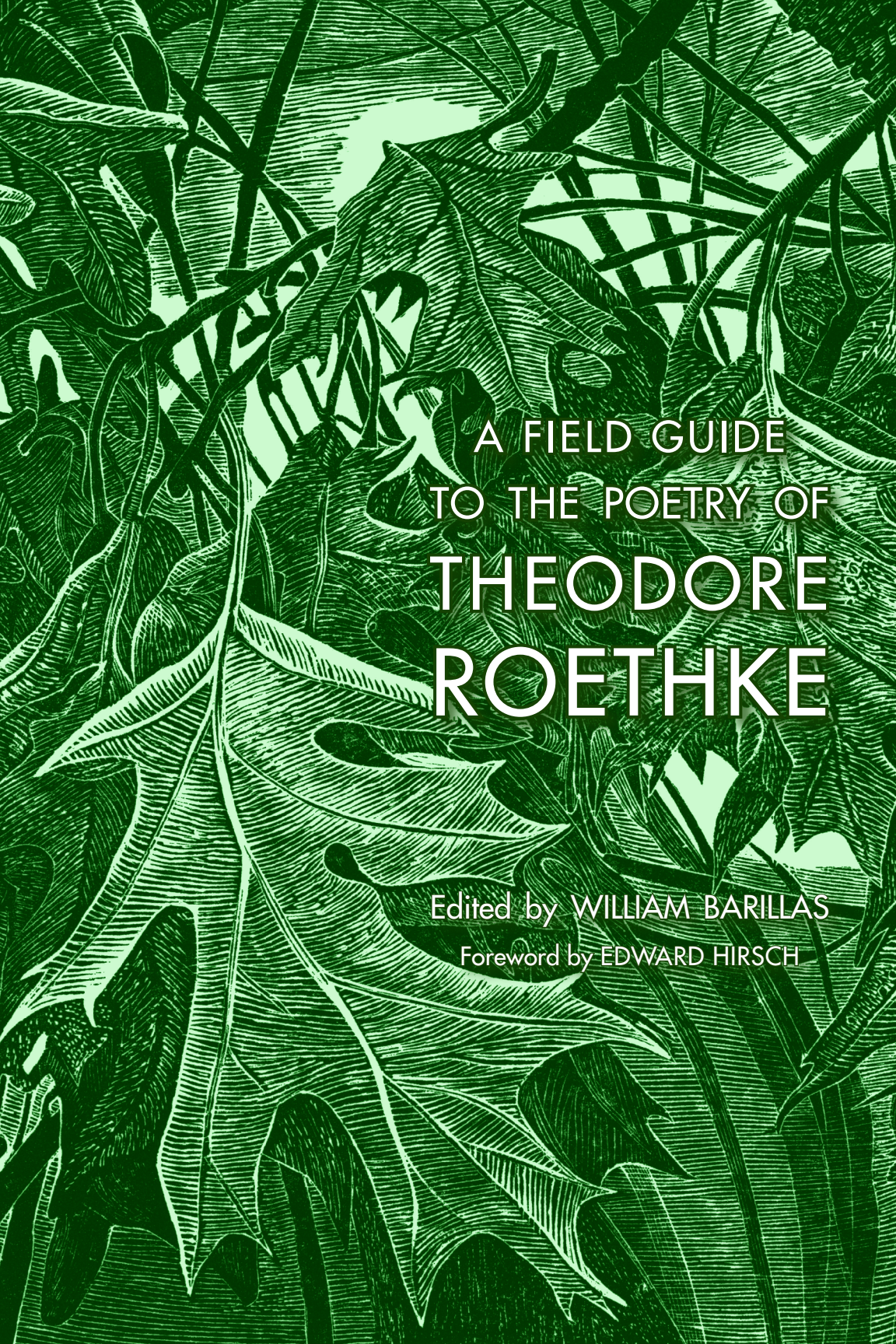
A FIELD GUIDE
TO THE POETRY OF
THEODORE
ROETHKE
Edited by WILLIAM BARILLAS
Foreword by EDWARD HIRSCH

House, Field, Stones, and Stars

An Introduction

WILLIAM BARILLAS

A house for wisdom; a field for revelation.
Speak to the stones, and the stars answer.

—Theodore Roethke, "Unfold! Unfold!"

THERE IS in American literature a tradition of wisdom writing: poetry that speaks to eternity in the present moment, and sacredness in our places on earth. It constitutes a secular scripture, with Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson as its chief prophets and a number of later poets as their apostles, or at least as occasional mystics contributing verses to the book of time. Some of this writing corresponds to what translator Stephen Mitchell calls "poems of fulfillment," created by men and women who seek to inhabit the center of things, "which is called God in Jewish, Christian, and Moslem cultures, and Tao, Self, or Buddha in the great Eastern traditions": "Sitting or dancing, all of these poets have found themselves inside the circle—some of them a step within the circumference, some far in, some at dead center. Looking out from the center, you can talk about the circumference. But really, there is no circumference. Everyone, everything, is joyfully included" (*Enlightened Heart,* v). This mystical, participatory spirit is strongly evident in poets who respond to the natural world. Robinson Jeffers, James Wright, Mary Oliver, Jim Harrison, Pattiann Rogers, and others follow Emerson in expressing "an original relation to the universe" in "poetry . . . of insight" that results from being "[e]mbosomed for a season in nature" (7). As ecocritic Bernard Quetchenbach says of Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry, such poets "communicate what is essentially a privately held

faith in the 'meaning' of the natural world . . . through contemporary poetry, a vehicle designed more for introspection and individual experience than for public and shared values" (xi).

Among mid-twentieth-century American poets, Theodore Roethke epitomizes this spiritual tradition. Jay Parini, one of Roethke's best readers, identifies him as "the central American Romantic poet of [his] generation . . . the celebrant of a uniquely American nature, a Romantic [in] the Emersonian tradition" (15) whose "poetry is secular religion" (36–37). Roethke's biographer Allan Seager elaborates: "He was a religious man, but he was not concerned with sin . . . nor was he much interested in being his brother's keeper. . . . Rather, he was troubled about the nature of God, not necessarily a Christian God, his own relation to Him, and his relationship to what he believed to be God's primary creation, nature" (225). For Roethke, all of nature is conscious and endowed with spirit or soul, particularly plants and animals, who figure in his poems as companions and spirit guides. He emphasizes this faith in his essay "On Identity": "If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity, so can the living—and I mean *all* living things. . . . This is not so much a naïve as a primitive attitude: animist, maybe. Why not? Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 40).

Roethke's totems include flowers grown by his florist father, memorably evoked in the famous "greenhouse poems" that begin his second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems.* Orchids, chrysanthemums, azaleas, carnations, tulips, roses, and many other flowers bloom there, remembered by Roethke as mysterious beings resembling small animals or children. His life force and theirs are one and same, reaching downward into the soil and upward to the sun. Thinking about being lifted by his father above the roses "in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouse," Roethke recalls an early experience of transcendence, "how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself" (*Collected Poems,* 197). That mystical fellow feeling also attends general references to birds, fish, and other animals, as well as appearances of particular species, in Roethke's poems. Roethke wrote many poems titled after their animal subjects, including "The Bat," "The Swan," "Snake," "Slug," "The Pike," and "The Meadow Mouse." He emphasizes the singular and the *small,* a word that Roethke employs more often than any other adjective.[1] Whereas nineteenth-century poets and painters found the sublime in mountains, storms, waterfalls, and other grand spectacles, Roethke "woo[s] the fearful small" (*Collected Poems,* 142), elements

of nature that he also calls "lovely diminutives" (60) and, in the title of one poem, "The Minimal." The fish most frequently appearing in Roethke's poetry is the minnow; other characteristic images include pebbles, sticks, moss, and invertebrates like the "lowly worm" that "climbs up a winding stair" in his great villanelle "The Waking" (104). The worm's ascent symbolizes the unification of body and spirit, space and time, the present moment and eternity. Likewise, Roethke confesses in "On Identity" that "in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 40).

As a way to frame the essays collected in this volume, this introduction centers on Roethke's poetry as spiritual expression, considering the circumstances of its inspiration, production, and legacy among readers, scholars, and subsequent poets. I first establish the autobiographical basis of Roethke's work in a brief biographical sketch. Then I turn to the nature and evolution of Roethke's poetry as seen in each of his books, summarizing themes and stylistic changes and noting key poems and poetic sequences. While providing an interpretive time line of Roethke's publishing history, I comment on certain poems covered in this volume, emphasizing their significance to the books in which they appear and to Roethke's career in general. In some cases I refer to contributors by name and touch on their critical perspectives. My next topic, Roethke's influence on later poets and his elevation into the canon of twentieth-century American literature, leads into a review of one of the main critical debates over Roethke's work: whether his late poetry continued to develop in quality and insight or weakened and became derivative. The discussion then shifts to the fortunes of scholarly production on Roethke—especially the publication of books, which began in the 1960s, accelerated in the 1970s, peaked in the 1980s, declined in the 1990s, and stopped entirely thereafter. After identifying signs of renewed interest in the new century, this introduction concludes by indicating possible directions for future Roethke studies.

Roethke's mysticism was rooted in his personal origins and experience, particularly the circumstances of his childhood, a central subject of the poems that established his place in literary history. He was born and grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, a former lumber town then becoming a center for light industry and agricultural processing. His German-born parents, Otto and Helen Roethke, operated a florist business, one of the largest in the Midwest, consisting of twenty-five acres, with about a quarter of that area under glass. "[I]t had its own ice-house," Roethke wrote, with more than a little pride,

> a small game preserve, and the last stand of virgin timber in the Saginaw Valley (mostly walnut and oak—not pine). . . .
>
> As a child I heard Europeans, Dutchmen and Belgians, say repeatedly it was the most beautiful greenhouse in America. My father specialized in roses and orchids particularly. (qtd. in Seager, 12–13)

While Otto directly appears in only seven poems ("Premonition," "Old Florist," "My Papa's Waltz," "The Lost Son," "Where Knock Is Open Wide," "The Rose," and "Otto"), his presence is felt in all of Roethke's work. Otto grew flowers; Theodore Roethke wrote about them, or more generally about the vital essence they represent. Capable of both delicacy and harshness, Otto modeled for his son an approach to art, one that accepts that "[h]e who loves the small can be both saint and boor," as Roethke wrote in his tribute poem "Otto":

> A florist does not woo the beautiful:
> He potted plants as if he hated them.
> What root of his ever denied its stem?
> When flowers grew, their bloom extended him.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* 216)

The Freudian cast of so much of Roethke's work is unmistakable here: the father is the root, and the son—the poet—is the stem. As much as the great Romantic and modernist poets, Otto Roethke figured as both competition and inspiration for his son. "One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa," Roethke wrote in his essay "How to Write Like Somebody Else" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 62). The immediate reference here is to major influences like Yeats, Hopkins, Eliot, and Auden, and to lesser-known figures who left a powerful impression on Roethke's early work, Elinor Wylie and Léonie Adams. Roethke imitated Adams in one poem, because, as he wrote, "I loved her so much, her poetry, that I just *had* to become, for a brief moment, a part of her world. For it *is* her world, and I had filled myself with it, and I *had* to create something that would honor her in her own terms" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 59). He could have said much the same of his poetry in regard to his father's work as a florist.

The relation between Roethke's work, his spirituality, and the figure of his father was shaped, tragically, by Otto's death of cancer when the future poet was fourteen. The family was already reeling from the recent suicide of Otto's brother Carl, who had lived next door and had kept the Roethke company books. Seager

tells us that on the day of Otto's funeral, Roethke "took his father's place at the head of the table and he sat there from that day on": "Once the numbness of shock had worn away, it must have seemed to Ted that the stays and props of his whole life were broken. In the space of three months, the greenhouse was gone, his uncle was gone, his father was gone. The stage where he had played out his childhood was no longer his. . . . [W]hat he lost when the dirt fell in in his father's grave was going to take him the rest of his life to learn" (43). Roethke lost what he perceived to be the unified selfhood of his childhood, which was inseparable from the greenhouses and his father's commanding presence. As the title poem of his second book has it, he felt himself to be "The Lost Son," forever separated from the boy he had been, peering out his bedroom window over "those fields of glass," as he calls the greenhouses in "Otto." He remained in some sense that

> sleepless child
> Watching the waking of my father's world.—
> O world so far away! O my lost world!
> (*Collected Poems,* 217)

By elegizing the greenhouse world, Roethke sought to transform his grief, reconstructing the greenhouses by means of the imagination.

Roethke discovered his calling in college and, like many later American poets, sustained it in an academic career. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Michigan, where he also briefly studied law. Subsequent legal studies at Harvard confirmed his unsuitability for the bar, so as the Great Depression worsened in 1931, he accepted a job teaching English at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where he taught for four years. He thereafter taught part of a semester (fall 1935) at Michigan State University, followed by seven years at Penn State (1936–1943), four years at Bennington College (1943–1947), and the remainder of his career—and his life—at the University of Washington (1947–1963). By all accounts an inspiring if unorthodox instructor, Roethke pioneered the teaching of creative writing, in his case poetry, in the college setting. His best-known students included poets Tess Gallagher, Richard Hugo, Carolyn Kizer, David Wagoner, James Wright, and Duane Niatum, and composer William Bolcom, who has set several of Roethke's poems to music. Despite the demands on his time and energy posed by his work as a professor, Roethke wrote continually, maintaining voluminous journals and crafting the

poetry that would earn him the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and many other honors.

As for Roethke's personal life, the crucial fact was his mental illness, knowledge of which bears significantly on the reading and analysis of his poetry. Roethke suffered from bipolar disorder complicated by alcoholism, with severe attacks of mania that required sedation and extended hospital stays. His working methods may have precipitated those episodes; Seager suggests that Roethke partly brought them on himself in a search for mystical insight and poetic expression. The attacks also related to unresolved grief and irrational guilt over his father's premature death, and a deep insecurity about his calling as a poet and his very self-worth:

> His father's death was the most important thing that ever happened to him. . . . The love and fear he felt for Otto Roethke were the deepest emotions he ever had and his complex feelings for nature were tied to his father, almost as if Otto working Ted in the greenhouse and taking him fishing and for long walks in the woods, had created the woods, the lakes, and the carnations. . . .
>
> . . . If, when Ted received praise or awards, he suffered privately because he did not think he deserved them, the suffering may have come from a fear that his father would have disapproved. . . .
>
> . . . If he were to justify himself before his father, he would have had to re-create the world of woods and greenhouse his father had made for him (if only to show he could do it, to make himself equal). (104–5)

In public—as a professor, as a writer meeting editors, readers, and other writers, seeking publication, book sales, prizes, speaking invitations, and critical acclaim—Roethke dealt with his anxieties by assuming the persona of a "tough guy," aficionado of professional boxing and purported friend to gangsters.[2] In his poetry, he portrayed himself as "the Lost Son," a troubled, grief-stricken seeker after identity, transcendence, and oneness with the natural world. Roethke's poetry, according to Karl Malkoff, "alternates between extreme joy at the miracle of his existence, and unendurable anxiety at the thought of its tenuousness." From first book to last, Roethke's poetry constitutes what Malkoff calls a "spiritual autobiography" (220), or, as Neal Bowers describes it, an "extraordinary unity . . . a journal, the record of a man's attempt to discover his identity and his place in existence" (2).

In 1955, fourteen years after the publication of his first book, *Open House,* Roethke wrote, "It took me ten years to complete one little book, and now some of the things in it seem to creak. Still, I like about ten pieces in it" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 29). His self-assessment is accurate. Most of the poems in the volume (many of which first appeared in prestigious publications like *Poetry, The Atlantic,* and *The New Yorker*) are apprentice pieces, metaphysical musings striving to evince a wisdom and wit beyond the poet's actual reach at the time. Even when virtuosic, they are derivative of the poets Roethke was reading. Walter Kalaidjian has listed them for us: "John Donne and William Blake . . . Léonie Adams, Louise Bogan, Emily Dickinson, Rolfe Humphries, Stanley Kunitz, and Elinor Wylie." (Humphries and Kunitz became friends and mentors to Roethke, and Bogan, briefly, his lover.) "Moreover," Kalaidjian continues, "the whole book is dominated by the kind of formal craft and metaphysical irony then prized by American New Criticism" (30). Such is the case with the book's title poem, adroitly explicated in the present volume by Brandon Rushton. "Open House," as Kalaidjian observes, "satisfied New Criticism's criterion of formal craft in the 1940s." At the same time, the poem "anticipates the unfolding drama of the self in quest of identity, a key theme that profoundly shapes the poet's entire career," clearly a departure "from modernist doctrines of impersonality" (33). Confessional poetry is anticipated here, the work of twentieth-century Americans who took as their main subject their own lives and emotional suffering, among them Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. "Open House," however, offers neither narrative nor imagery beyond metaphysical conceits: "I'm naked to the bone," Roethke declares, "With nakedness my shield" (*Collected Poems,* 3). That insistence on revelation and truth-telling would become a hallmark of Roethke's mature verse.

A few poems in *Open House* figure significantly in Roethke's oeuvre both for their own merits and for the ways in which they anticipate his mature work. Marked by vivid imagery, grounding in place, and use of sound devices and rhythm to convey bodily experience, a handful are treated here: the landscape poems "The Light Comes Brighter," "Interlude," "Highway: Michigan," and "Night Journey," the last a textbook favorite. Poet and anthologist William Heyen contributes a creative piece, addressed to Roethke, on "To My Sister," one of the autobiographical poems in *Open House.* Like "The Premonition" and "On the Road to Woodlawn," which allude to his father's life and death, "To My Sister" focuses on the poet's family and early life in Saginaw. Roethke's

Lost Son persona tentatively emerges in these poems, among the best in this initial collection.

By wide consensus, Roethke's second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), is his greatest work. One of the words most often used to describe *The Lost Son* is "breakthrough." Kenneth Burke, who befriended Roethke at Bennington College when he was working on the poems, and who wrote the first extended analysis of his work (1950's "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke"), later described the production of this book as a "sudden, exceptionally beautiful breakthrough" ("Cult of the Breakthrough," 25). More recently, Edward Hirsch has asserted that "the greatest single moment in [Roethke's] writing life was the breakthrough from the abstract strictures of his early manner into the textured free verse of his second collection" (xviii). *The Lost Son* is the volume around which the rest of Roethke's work must be read. Here his influences have been integrated and absorbed—the Romantic nature mysticism of Wordsworth and Whitman, the modernist precision and clarity of William Carlos Williams (another friend and mentor during Roethke's Bennington period), the rhythm and wordplay of Mother Goose, Freudian and Jungian psychological theory—in a surprising and original way. An archetypal exploration of the unconscious mind, expressed in striking, palpable language, *The Lost Son* is one of the most influential and critically acclaimed volumes of twentieth-century American poetry.

Roethke organized the book into four sections, the first of which presents what have become known as the "greenhouse poems." Peter Balakian aptly describes these as advancing "a creation myth" that follows "a torturous journey in which the poet moves from darkness to light, charting . . . the development of his consciousness . . . moving from the loamy, procreant earth to the light on top of the greenhouse" (49). Organic growth in these poems parallels the development of a child's mind and the creative process entailed in poetry, which Roethke later described as "shot through with appeals to the unconsciousness, to the fears and desires that go far back into our childhood, into the imagination of the race" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 70). Kalaidjian points to "Roethke's stylistic use of hyphenation, irregular strong-stress rhythms, and colloquial diction" as key to this effect, with many monosyllabic words of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic origin, and phrasing connoting sexuality and birth. The reader perceives Otto's greenhouses, the loamy soil, the roots and shoots, and the work that went into producing the luminous beauty of his father's flowers, through a child's eyes as

well as through the filter of memory and contemplation. In the fourteen greenhouse poems, nine of which are explicated here, Roethke presents nature not as sweetly pastoral but as strange, eerily conscious, and at times frightening. Beginning, as he put it in his essay "Open Letter," "in the mire; as if man is no more than a shape writing from the old rock," Roethke launches into the journey of all his subsequent poetry by means of regression and descent: "I believe to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is *some* 'progress'" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 51).

The second and third sections of *The Lost Son* feature a variety of short lyrics, with those in the former group largely set indoors, in the social world: at a cinema in "Double Feature," for example, and in the Heinz Company plant in Saginaw where he worked as a teenager in "Pickle Belt." The poem "Dolor," taken up in these pages by Luke Brekke, evokes the dehumanizing office spaces Roethke knew from his life in academia. He also recalls himself at about age five, roughhousing in the kitchen with his father, in "My Papa's Waltz." Familiar from anthologies and textbooks, this popular favorite suggests oedipal struggle as well as affection and joy shared by the Prussian perfectionist father and his young son. "My Papa's Waltz" is a marvel of narrative concision that employs connotatively rich word choice and, as I demonstrate in my essay on the poem, metrical subtleties to signal the physicality of the dance and the poet's complicated feelings about his father. The short lyrics in part 3 continue the archetypal approach introduced in the greenhouse poems, whereby Roethke simultaneously looks out to the natural world and into his own mind. In "Night Crow," explicated here by Sarah Kathryn Moore, he recalls how the sight of a "clumsy crow / Flap[ping] from a wasted tree" provoked a vision of a

> tremendous bird
> . . . . . .
> Deep in the brain, far back.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* 47)

The book's fourth and final sequence begins with the book's title poem, a symbolic narrative of a spiritual and psychological crisis taking place partly in Saginaw, past and present, but mainly in the poet's mind. The action in "The

Lost Son" recalls Roethke's first major manic episode, which occurred in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1935. The thrust of the poem, however, and that of the subsequent poems in the sequence, is mythological. As Jay Parini points out, the "images of the greenhouse, the father-florist, and the open field come directly from his personal experience. Yet these personal images take on greater meaning when framed by a mythic pattern," in particular, "the initiatory journey, a rite of passage" (85). The protagonist in "The Lost Son" endures an archetypal dark night of the soul, descending into a landscape of fear and disintegration in which the death of Roethke's father is unmentioned but inferred. The familiar spirit guides, small animals and other elements of nature, appear unable or unwilling to answer the speaker's supplication:

> Snail, snail, glister me forward,
> Bird, soft-sigh me home,
> Worm, be with me.
> This is my hard time.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* 50)

While detailed discussion of "The Lost Son" in this book will be left to Borja Aguiló Obrador, it should be noted that this important poem establishes the pattern for the entire Lost Son sequence, also represented here in Jeffrey Clapp's explication of "A Field of Light." The pattern is one of private references rather than a collective or traditional set of symbolic images: a descent into the unconscious mind and a psychic crisis, followed by movement upward to the light. Images of morning in the greenhouses indicate a return to consensual reality in the last two sections of "The Lost Son." In "A Field of Light," creatures and plants announce that return, "lovely diminutives" of nature offering at last a sense of hope and reciprocity:

> I could watch! I could watch!
> I saw the separateness of all things!
> My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
> The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
> . . . . . .
> The worms were delighted as wrens.
> And I walked, I walked through the light air;
> I moved with the morning.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* 60)

The Lost Son poems begin, as Roethke says in "Open Letter," in "the marsh, the mire, the Void," but achieve conciliation and reintegration with the world: "in spite of all the muck and welter, the dark, the *dreck* of these poems, I count myself among the happy poets" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 52).

Roethke's next book, *Praise to the End!* (1951), consists of an extended Lost Son sequence, beginning with six new poems in part 1, followed by the four poems from the last part of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and then three more new poems in part 2. The new poems continue Roethke's experimentation with "language that appeals more to the intuition than to the intellect . . . deliberately confounding our analytical minds with unanswerable questions" (Bowers, 104). They delve into the unconscious mind with startling, sometimes nonsensical passages, inspired according to Roethke by "German and English folk literature, particularly Mother Goose; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially the songs and rants; the Bible; Blake and Traherne; Dürer" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 52–53). Two poems in part 1, "Where Knock Is Open Wide" and "I Need, I Need," are partly spoken from Roethke's perspective as a child. The first, considered here by celebrated contemporary poet David Wojahn, touches on the suicide of Roethke's Uncle Carl as well as Otto's skills as a florist and as an outdoorsman. In his essay on "Give Way, Ye Gates," Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Peter Balakian discusses that poem's role in the Lost Son sequence, or as Balakian prefers to call it, the Praise to the End! sequence. Roethke concluded the sequence with a fourteenth poem, "O, Thou Opening, O" from *The Waking* (1953), which can be said to have completed the most radical, innovative period of Roethke's career.

The Waking, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, offered new poems that document Roethke's transition from experimentalism to a renewed focus on traditional meter and rhyme. The former impulse is expressed in poems like "The Visitant," the subject of an explication, reprinted here, from Camille Paglia's book *Break, Blow, Burn;* "A Light Breather," with its familiar representation of the "spirit" in images of a blossom, a minnow, and a snail; and "Elegy for Jane," one of Roethke's most famous poems, a lament for a student of his who died in a horse-riding accident. After that poem, discussed in these pages by David Radavich, and "Old Lady's Winter Words," two poems mark Roethke's turn to formalism: "Four for Sir John Davies" and "The Waking." The first is a group of four semi-independent love poems in iambic pentameter that speak to poetry, as Jenijoy La Belle puts it, as "a combination of the individual

creative choices of the artist and of the inherited traditions of linguistic and poetic forms" (108). Adam Putz here treats the first poem, "The Dance," with its signal line: "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats" (*Collected Poems,* 101). Finally, the title poem of *The Waking* articulates the essence of Roethke's vision of life as a quest for unity with the mysterious order of nature, knowable only through intuition and experience. In his essay for this volume, Frank J. Kearful provides new insights into "The Waking," probably the best-loved villanelle in American literature and a prime example of Roethke's mastery of traditional poetic form.

That mastery is on full display in the new poems in *Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke* (1958), especially the reverent, grateful, and sometimes humorous love poems. Written following his marriage in 1953 to former student Beatrice O'Connell, these verses treat consummate love as a transformation of self, both physical and spiritual. They place Roethke's prosodic skills on full display, as with the sensitive—and frequent—use of slant rhyme (tongue / song, for example, from "She") and consonance, assonance, and alliteration (from the same stanza, "She makes space lonely with a lovely song. / She lilts a low soft language, and I hear / Down long sea-chambers of the inner ear") (*Collected Poems,* 124). The love poems are represented here by "Words for the Wind," explicated by Andrew David King, and "I Knew a Woman," parsed by distinguished poet, novelist, biographer, and critic Jay Parini, author of the much-cited study *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (1979).

The free-verse poems in *Words for the Wind* provide thematic and formal continuity between Roethke's earlier and subsequent work, with their treatment of animals and landscapes both actual and symbolic. In his essay on "First Meditation," written for this book, Don Bogen demonstrates how this first of five "Meditations of an Old Woman" presages the "North American Sequence" in Roethke's next and final book, the posthumously published *The Far Field.* Based on Roethke's mother, the speaker in these poems tells of journeys across North America and "into the waste lonely places / Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities" (*Collected Poems,* 153). The greenhouses are remembered, and a new empathy emerges, a concern for people alienated from others, from themselves, and from nature in the modern industrial world. In the "Fourth Meditation," for example, the Old Woman cries,

> How I wish them awake!
> May the high flower of the hay climb into their hearts;
> May they lean into light and live.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* 163)

Roethke begins in these poems to relate the individual's spiritual quest to social (dis)order and the destruction of the natural environment.

During his last years, Roethke published *I Am! Says the Lamb* (1961), his book of children's poetry, discussed here by Joseph T. Thomas Jr. in his essay on "Myrtle" and two related poems. He also labored over his last poems and their arrangement in what would become *The Far Field.* Roethke seems to have had a presentiment of his impending death at age fifty-five. "As the fabric of his body begins to give way," Seager writes, "the best part of his mind, his poetry . . . strives toward a mystical union with his Father. . . . [T]he last poems seem prophetic; they read like last poems" (251). He continued to write love poems inspired by his wife Beatrice; transcendentalist nature poems about landscapes, plants, and animals; and poems about the journey through darkness, despair, and disintegration in search of reconciliation: "A fallen man, I climb out of my fear" (*Collected Poems,* 231). "[T]here is no real departure in subject matter," Parini notes; "the myth of the lost son, with its personal symbology, is once again rehearsed. It is also extended. The long journey out of the self is, Roethke would have us believe, accomplished" (161). Both in loose, confident free verse and in some of his best poems in rhyme and meter, Roethke glances back one last time at childhood and his psychological and spiritual struggles, and turns forward to "rehearse" himself for the "stand at the stretch in the face of death" like "a blind man, lifting a curtain, [who] knows it is morning" (*Collected Poems,* 189).

The first section of *The Far Field* (1964) consists of "North American Sequence," six long meditations in free verse in which Roethke both celebrates the physical world and tries "to transcend this sensual emptiness" (*Collected Poems,* 181). Influenced by Whitman and the T. S. Eliot of *Four Quartets,* these poems employ long, descriptive lines that catalogue images of the Michigan of his youth—the greenhouses, fields, the Tittabawasee River, highways to the north—as well as the American West, and the Pacific Northwest of his later years, with its rocky ocean coasts. This "Journey to the Interior," as the title of one of the poems has it, takes the poet to the heart of the continent and out of his fears and doubts. He sets forth on a "long journey out of the self" in which

there "are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places" (*Collected Poems,* 187), but also places where Roethke says he "learned not to fear infinity, / The far field, the windy cliffs of forever" (194). The continued power of this sequence and, in this time of global environmental crisis, its urgent relevance commend the inclusion in this volume of essays on all six poems: "The Longing," "Meditation at Oyster River," "Journey to the Interior," "The Long Waters," "The Far Field," and "The Rose."

Essays in this book on other poems from *The Far Field,* both formalist and free verse, bring new insights to bear on Roethke's subjects and themes. These include Roethke's father in "Otto"; kinship with animals in "The Meadow Mouse" and "The Pike"; spiritual crisis and mystical perception in "The Abyss" and "In a Dark Time," one of Roethke's most compelling, durable poems; physical ailment and acceptance of death in "Infirmity"; and the poet's arrival at closure, completeness, and joy in "The Tree, the Bird" and "Once More, the Round." These last poems nod to Taoism and Buddhism, as in "The Abyss" when the speaker's "thought flies to the place by the bo-tree," the site of Gautama Buddha's enlightenment (*Collected Poems,* 214), and the moment remembered in "The Tree, The Bird," when he felt himself to be "a finger pointing at the moon" (240). The image comes from the Shurangama Sutra, an ancient Buddhist text, in which the finger stands for religious teaching that may point the way to truth but must not be confused with the truth itself, the ineffable but constant reality represented by the moon shining in the night sky.

That lesson concurs with Roethke's fundamentally Romantic mysticism, his belief in the primacy of individual experience over religious doctrine. As Emerson urged the Harvard Divinity School class of 1838, "Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred to the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil" (88–89). At the end of "The Rose" from "North American Sequence," Roethke remembers his father's greenhouses and "how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself." He concludes by asking, "What need for heaven, then, / With that man, and those roses?" (*Collected Poems,* 197). The quest for a firsthand glimpse of eternity on Earth, whether in a greenhouse or a "far field," or facing "the windy cliffs of forever," remains a consistent motif in Roethke's poetry from *Open House* to *The Far Field.* In his last poem, "Once More, the Round," the quest reaches its apotheosis in a moment accordant with Buddhist teachings about interdependence. Accompanied by nature's small

beings, the speaker's "true self runs toward a Hill" where "everything comes to One, / As we dance on, dance on, dance on" (243).

When Roethke died in 1963 his reputation and influence were at a height. *The Far Field* received strong reviews and won the National Book Award. Many poets who emerged during the late 1950s and early 1960s found Roethke uniquely inspiring, including his friend and former student James Wright, who made a breakthrough of his own from formalism to free verse in his third book, *The Branch Will Not Break,* published the year Roethke died. Wright's new poems, like those of Robert Bly and other so-called Deep Image poets of the period, drew extensively from European and Latin American poets like Rilke, García Lorca, and Neruda. They also owe much to Roethke in their imagery, sense of place, and leaps of spiritual imagination—qualities highly valued by many young poets of the time.[3] Galway Kinnell spoke for many when describing himself as a young man in the early 1950s, looking for contemporary American poetry with which he could identify:

> I didn't find any living poets whose work I greatly admired until I ran across Theodore Roethke's poems. . . . [T]hey touched my own experience. I found it hard to understand the poems of John Berryman and John Crowe Ransom and R. P. Blackmur, people like that. Their poems seemed far fetched and ornate and intellectual and learned and polite, and not really like anything that I really wanted to do. Roethke's poetry seemed direct and forthright and full of real things. He was the only person I had encountered who seemed to relate to Whitman. (211–12)

Roethke has since been a poet's poet, praised in print by poets as different as Delmore Schwartz, William Stafford, Richard Wilbur, Richard Hugo, James Dickey, Gerald Stern, Donald Hall, Charles Wright, David Young, Jim Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Martha Collins, Robert Hass, David St. John, Edward Hirsch, Marianne Boruch, Joy Harjo, Mark Doty, and Sherman Alexie. Others have gone so far as to write poems about Roethke, including Stanley Kunitz, John Berryman, John Ciardi, Robert Lowell, Stanley Moss, Carolyn Kizer, David Wagoner, Richard Murphy, John Montague, Michael McClure, Keki Daruwalla, Duane Niatum, William Heyen, Charles Martin, Tess Gallagher, James Tate, Thomas Lynch, Laura Kasischke, and Elaine Feeney.[4] Peter Balakian, winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, calls Roethke "our first contemporary" (1), writing that Roethke "pioneered our first important postmodernist

poems," having developed "a relationship between an idea of the transcendent, a modern notion of the natural world, and a concept of the contemporary human self" by which he "forged our first contemporary confessional persona" (12–13). It is difficult to imagine Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and many other poets having developed as they did without the experimentalism, psychological daring, and fecund earthiness of Roethke's work. He was a pivotal figure in twentieth-century poetry, a member, along with Lorine Niedecker, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Hayden, Robert Lowell, and others, of what scholars call the Middle Generation. Their work, according to Eric Haralson, "constitutes *the* center of twentieth-century American poetry—the bull's-eye, pulsing heart, eye of the storm (choose your metaphor)" (1). Like that of Lowell and the others, Roethke's work represented a transition from the high modernist cult of "impersonality" fostered by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (and insisted upon by the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s) to the autobiographical, frequently place-centered and visionary free verse of the 1960s and 1970s.

Roethke is also a well-read, much-loved poet, and his work appears in most college anthologies of twentieth-century American literature and many high school textbooks. Generations of students have read his best-known poems, including "Night Journey," "Big Wind," "The Waking," "Elegy for Jane," "In a Dark Time," and especially "My Papa's Waltz." *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke,* first published in hardcover in 1965, remains in print in paperback and can be found in most well-stocked bookstores and libraries. Given the limited, if constant, readership for poetry, Roethke's enduring presence in American literature and acknowledgment as an important poet—his place in the literary canon—are notable. To put it simply, Roethke is here to stay.

The history of scholarship on Roethke's work is another matter, roughly describable as a rise followed by a fall and perhaps the beginning of another rise. The late 1960s saw the first books, starting with Arnold Stein's edited collection *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry* in 1965 and Karl Malkoff's monograph *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* in 1966, a refinement of his dissertation from the previous year, the first on the poet. While acknowledging Roethke as an innovative and "important poet, perhaps a major one" (225), Malkoff questions his tendency to write "almost exclusively about himself and his own personal concerns" (224), the aphoristic aspect of his style, and what he sees as the poetry's occasional "derivative qualities." He allows, however, that when Roethke "was at his best he could use anybody or anything and make them

peculiarly his own" (222–23), but the comments quoted above from Malkoff's last chapter introduce a persistent critical refrain: that Roethke's best poems had appeared in *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!* and that his later work owed too much to his predecessors, especially Yeats, Eliot, and Whitman.[5] Harold Bloom puts a subtler, donnish spin on the argument in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). In the last chapter he quotes lines from "The Dying Man," Roethke's poem about and after Yeats, and lines from "First Meditation," and describes them as unsuccessful attempts at *apophrades*.[6] Bloom defines the term as the "grand and final revisionary moment" of "triumph" when especially gifted late-career poets make a reader "believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*":

> Roethke hoped [the passage from "The Dying Man"] was late Roethke, but alas it is the Yeats of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair.* Roethke hoped [the passage from "First Meditation"] was late Roethke, but alas it is the Eliot of the *Quartets. . . .* There is late Roethke that is the Stevens of *Transport to Summer,* and late Roethke that is the Whitman of *Lilacs,* but sorrowfully there is very little late Roethke that is late Roethke, for in Roethke the *apophrades* came as devastation, and took away his strength, which nevertheless had been realized, which had become something of his own. Of *apophrades* in its positive, revisionary sense, he gives us no instance; there are no passages in Yeats or Eliot, in Stevens or Whitman, that can strike us as having been written by Roethke.

Among poets of the time, Bloom gives the nod to John Ashbery as having achieved *apophrades,* in his case by supposedly making "us," in at least one case, "return . . . to Stevens, somewhat uneasily to discover that at moments Stevens sounds rather too much like Ashbery, an accomplishment I might not have thought possible" (141–43).[7]

Bloom's preference for Ashbery exemplifies one persistent intellectual agenda in recent poetry criticism. The more theoretical, aestheticist critics tend to champion abstruse, "difficult" free verse like Ashbery's that focuses on the nature of language and its relation to reality. In a 1976 profile in *The New York Times,* Richard Kostelanetz describes Ashbery's poetry as "subtle, allusive, indefinite, perhaps obscure . . . not familiar, not declarative, not rhymed, not sentimental, not accessible," all adjectives describing the kind of poetry favored by the theoretical crowd. By contrast, Roethke's work is subtle in a different way,

more referential than allusive, tangible, more multivalent than obscure, deeply familiar with person and place, declarative, sometimes rhymed and sometimes not but always musical, willing to risk sentimentality but never mawkish, rarely "easy" to understand but seeking to *be* understood. Roethke appeals to a wider readership than Ashbery and to poets and critics who prize poetry attuned to rhythms of the body, the natural world, and life as lived in particular places.[8]

Some critics have challenged the views advanced by Bloom and others on the quality of Roethke's late work and its relation to literary tradition. Jenijoy La Belle is of particular importance in this regard. In her book *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (1976), La Belle argues that Roethke's "sense of tradition encompassed not only a conscious historical attitude, but a psychological state, and his act of imitation was not a mechanical process, but a basic component" of his poetics (166). As a *man* Roethke was jealous of and competitive toward other poets, living and dead, but as a *poet* he engaged his influences in conversation, both assenting to and dissenting from their forms and philosophies. He was speaking with, rather than over, poets such as Whitman, Yeats, and Eliot, his primary antecedents. His dialogue with Whitman comes in seeming response to the ending of "Song of Myself":

> If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.
>
> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless.
>
> (88)

Roethke's direct reply comes in "The Abyss," where he says, "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / For the world invades me again" (*Collected Poems,* 212). Such invocations of other poets express Roethke's sense of "his literary tradition not as a series of periods but as a community of selected individual talents, somehow in touch with one another even as he was in touch with them" (La Belle, 165).

His conversation with Eliot in the late poems is more pointed. Although he echoes Eliot's *Four Quartets* in "North American Sequence," Roethke espouses a very different metaphysics. La Belle contrasts the two poets by describing Eliot as "pervasively religious, even theological, in interests, and thus he must move from the physical world and the imagery of that world to a spiritual world in which abstract concepts replace images from nature. . . . Roethke is never so willing to desert the natural world: these same questions are answered not by leaving the woods and the waters but by penetrating more deeply into their interiors"

(156–57). He directly asserts as much in the final stanza of "The Longing," where he replies to Eliot's statement in *Four Quartets* that

> Home is where one starts from. . . .
> . . . . . .
>
> Old men ought to be explorers
> Here and there does not matter.
>
> (189)

After evoking the near-extinction wreaked upon the American bison by Anglo-Americans as a synecdoche for the environmental and, by implication, the cultural destructiveness of conquest, Roethke asks, "Old men should be explorers? / I'll be an Indian" (*Collected Poems,* 183). As I have elaborated upon elsewhere, Roethke here rejects Eliot's Eurocentric, Christian vision for "an autochthonous spirituality of place" in the Emersonian tradition (*Midwestern Pastoral,* 133). He finds himself most at home in landscapes both real and symbolic, in the company of fellow beings, as in "Once More, the Round," which finds him

> ador[ing his] life
> With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
> With the Fish, the questing Snail.

That poem also finds him "danc[ing] with William Blake" (*Collected Poems,* 243), a motif recalling "The Dance" from "Four for Sir John Davies," in which he exclaims "I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears" before confessing "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats; / I take it and I give it back again" (101). Roethke ultimately displays less of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" than an artistic desire to join the living and the dead in reciprocal dance and song. As Kalaidjian stresses in his succinct retort to the critical dismissal of Roethke as "a derivative talent," the emphasis placed by Bloom and his followers on "Roethke's failure to displace the aesthetics of High Modernism ignores both the powerful transformations his work accomplished within that tradition and the influential directions he pioneered for a later generation of Postmodern poets" (64).[9]

The heyday of Roethke scholarship was the 1970s and 1980s, when production of scholarly articles peaked and most of the books on his work were published. Including essay collections, bibliographies, and a concordance, ten

books on Roethke appeared in the 1970s. Distinguished monographs ranged from Richard Allen Blessing's *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision* (1974) to Jay Parini's *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (1979). Eleven books found their way to bookshelves in the 1980s, from the decade's first monograph, Norman Chaney's *Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wonder* (1981), to the last, Peter Balakian's *Theodore Roethke's Far Fields: The Evolution of His Poetry* (1989). Thereafter, scholarship on Roethke fell into a precipitous decline. The 1990s saw only four books on Roethke, two of them published in India and not widely available in North America or Europe.[10] The most recent full-length study published in the Western world, Don Bogen's *Theodore Roethke and the Writing Process,* came out in 1991; Robert Kusch's *My Toughest Mentor: Theodore Roethke and William Carlos Williams (1940–1948*), from 1999, is the last book published about Roethke, until now. Dissertations on Roethke similarly declined, with fifty being accepted between 1965 and 1990, but only four since 1991.

Scholarly articles in journals and edited volumes also started to appear much less frequently after 1990, with the MLA database indicating that the number of articles fell from 242 between 1965 and 1990 to 74 between 1991 and 2015. The numbers represent a 70 percent drop, a steeper decline than occurred with any other major mid-twentieth-century American poet, in a period when the amount of writing on Lowell, Berryman, and Sexton remained relatively consistent and that on Plath and Bishop proliferated. During the nineties and the first years of the new millennium, Roethke became a "lost son" in literary scholarship.

This situation did not go unnoticed. Poet David Young lamented in 1995 that "[o]ne hears Roethke's name very seldom these days. He seems to be undergoing the kind of innocuous neglect that follows writers who have, in their lifetime and immediately after, been recognized as major figures. The trough that seems to follow such fame may be inevitable, but we think it is time to begin rescuing Roethke from his gradual obliteration in the fitful memory of American letters" (7). In her 2008 keynote address at the Roethke centennial event at the University of Michigan, Camille Paglia declared herself "horrified to discover a dribbling out of scholarly books about Roethke over the last twenty years. . . . An American literary criticism that neglects Theodore Roethke has sunk into irrelevance and folly" ("Dance of the Senses" 245).

Scholarly production surely dropped, in part, because the first generation of Roethke scholars had created such a robust secondary bibliography; so much had been said, and perhaps it was time for a breather. Besides, young academics

had other interests. Much of the focus had shifted to poets of color—African American, Latinx, Native American, and Asian American—poets with working-class backgrounds and identities, and women poets. The new attention to previously neglected or oppressed voices has been both just and justified. But more interest in some poets does not necessitate less in others, and new generations of readers read the same poetry with new eyes and ears. They may rediscover writing from the past, rehabilitating it and identifying heretofore unnoticed beauty and new meanings.[11]

Recent signs of reappraisal and reappreciation of Roethke's life and work suggest that rediscovery may be underway. Copper Canyon Press published an expanded edition of Roethke's selected prose in 2001, changing the title from *On the Poet and His Craft* to *On Poetry and Craft* for gender inclusivity. In 2004, the American Library Association designated his childhood home in Saginaw a National Literary Landmark. The property is maintained as a museum by the Friends of Theodore Roethke foundation, which sponsors cultural events on the site. The year 2005 saw the publication of Roethke's *Selected Poems,* edited by Edward Hirsch, whose marvelous introduction provides an important reassessment of Roethke's life and work. The 2008 centennial of Roethke's birth was marked by observations in Saginaw, Ann Arbor, State College, and Seattle. In 2012, the U.S. Post Office issued a Roethke stamp, part of a commemorative series featuring ten twentieth-century American poets. All along, prizes and events named after Roethke have kept his name in circulation: the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize, awarded by Saginaw Valley State University and running concurrently with their triennial Roethke Arts and Poetry Festival; the annual Theodore Roethke Poetry Prize, from the journal *Poetry Northwest;* and the annual Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Reading at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Roethke scholarship has not increased dramatically, but critics are treating the poetry in novel ways that bode well for the future.[12] Scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism have been especially engaged. Emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of the human relationship to nature in Roethke's poetry have always been obvious to readers and critics. "There is no poetry anywhere," James Dickey once wrote, "that is so valuably conscious of the human body as Roethke's; no poetry that can place the body in an environment—wind, seascape, greenhouse, forest, desert, mountainside, among animals or insects or stones—so vividly and evocatively, waking unheard exchanges between the place and human responsiveness at its most

creative" ("Greatest," 220). Ecocritics, however, go further into the social, historical, geographical, biological, and ethical implications of Roethke's work. In his foundational 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," in which the word "ecocriticism" first appeared, William Rueckert employs scientific terminology to rephrase Roethke's journey through darkness and light, suffering and joy, earth and air, starting a section of his essay with the heading "Entropy and Negentropy in Theodore Roethke's 'Greenhouse,' 'Lost Son,' and 'North American Sequence.'" His comments place Roethke at the center of the ecocritical project: "Was there ever a greater ecological, evolutionary poet of the self than Roethke . . . one so close to his evolutionary predecessors that he experiences an interchange of being with them and never demeans them with personification and seldom with metaphor[?] Kenneth Burke's brilliant phrase—vegetal radicalism—still takes us to the ecological centers of Roethke, self-absorbed, self-obsessed as he was" (119).

Three contributors to this book—Bernard Quetchenbach, Trenton Hickman, and me—published signal works in the ecocritical turn in writing about Roethke that occurred during the first decade of this century. Quetchenbach devotes a chapter of *Back from the Far Field: American Nature Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century* (2000) to Roethke and Jeffers, contrasting the two while making a case for each as the most significant nature poets of their respective generations. In his 2006 essay "Theodore Roethke and the Poetics of Place," Hickman demonstrates how Roethke "elaborat[ed] a mode of American poetry that makes human experience accountable to natural and physical landscape, and that externalizes such experience as one node of the biological 'web' to which it belongs" (183). My 2006 book *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* features a chapter on Roethke as a bioregional poet who "draws significantly from midwestern landscape and cultural archetypes" in ways that challenge narrowly utilitarian views of nature (106).[13]

Ecocritical analysis of Roethke's work has been more recently advanced by Christian Knoeller, author of *Reimagining Environmental History: Ecological Memory in the Wake of Landscape Change* (2017), in a chapter that emphasizes the "North American Sequence" as the "consummation" of "Roethke's vision of environmental history and a spiritual relation to the natural world" (130). Knoeller argues that in "the twenty-first century, we read Roethke at a time when environmental decline has been greatly exacerbated by climate change. . . . We need more than ever to recognize what must be seen as sacrosanct, inviolable, and fundamentally

a part of us. This vision underlies the enduring significance of Roethke's work" (11). Quite in opposition to the mistaken view of Roethke's poetry as private and insular, ecocritics like Knoeller demonstrate its relevance to the environmental crises of our time, from habitat loss and mass extinction to pollution and global warming, suggesting how a poet so affected by a greenhouse may inspire us as our planet faces a very different sort of greenhouse effect.

A Roethke renaissance, however, will require the publication of books, especially monographs, devoted to his life and work. A full-length ecocritical study is overdue, as is a book on Roethke and philosophy, with interpretations of his work in light of existentialism, phenomenology, and other philosophical perspectives. A survey of his affinity with and influence on Native American poets is indicated,[14] as is a reading of Roethke from a feminist perspective, which could illuminate his close study of poetry by women, the figure of woman in his love poems, and the appearance of female speakers in his later poetry. Roethke's Irish connections merit extended treatment, considering his deep engagement with the work of Yeats and his influence on Richard Murphy, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Elaine Feeney, and other poets. There has long been a need for a critical biography, one that directly quotes Roethke's work and draws on the Roethke archives at the University of Washington, Allan Seager's unpublished interviews and other materials held by the Bancroft Library, and sources published after Seager's *The Glass House* appeared in 1968. Such a volume ought to feature photographs spanning Roethke's life and perhaps a selection of manuscript pages. An updated review of scholarship, building on Randall Stiffler's 1986 study *Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Critics,* would benefit both critics and students, as would a searchable, online concordance and an updated bibliography of primary and secondary sources. As for Roethke's writing, a newly typeset edition of his collected poems would be very welcome, preferably with the same pagination as the current paperback. A volume of collected works might feature previously uncollected poetry and prose, in addition to *The Collected Poems* and *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke* in their entirety.

The present collection will hopefully spur such scholarly efforts, the "true criticism" anticipated by James Wright in the epigraph to this book, a quotation from a letter Wright wrote shortly after Roethke's death.[15] In that letter Wright calls for a criticism predicated less upon intellectual pride than mindfulness and care: "To cherish [Roethke's] work, his art, by demanding that it respond to our most severe and attentive questionings by revealing suddenly, as it were, the

precious stones that vein it . . . is to love the art as the poet himself loved it" (295). Contributors to this volume clearly love the art, as demonstrated by their close reading and contextualization of Roethke's writing. Like the many poets who have attested to Roethke's influence, these critics have looked for Roethke under their bootsoles, to invoke Whitman once again. Also invited along that path are students and general readers, who may take with them Roethke's *Collected Poems* and the poet's own hopes for his work: "I think of myself as a poet of love, a poet of praise. And I wish to be read aloud" (*On Poetry and Craft,* 33).

NOTES

1. Lane, 460. In his "Table of Word Frequency," Lane notes 92 uses of the word "small." The word "light" has 150 appearances, but that includes uses of the word as a noun as well as an adjective. The next substantial words after "small" in the table are "love" with 85 uses, "long" (both adjective and verb) with 84, "water" with 80, "bird" with 74, and "dark" with 70. A great degree of Roethke's thematic content is contained in these words ("light," "small," "love," "long," "water," "bird," and "dark").

2. According to Seager, Roethke's "tough guy" persona was rooted in adolescence, when he needed to thwart bullies. It solidified during college in Prohibition-era Ann Arbor, when gangsters like Capone were iconic figures in popular culture:

> As big as he was, broad, thick, unhandsome, he looked tough. He began to wear what became his permanent costume, the double-breasted suit. . . . His talk became profane, full of coarse[,] vigorous, idiomatic phrases, often dirty, often very funny. . . .
>
> . . . [He began] to suspect that poetry, having no voice in the community where he lived, was antisocial. . . . Poetry was akin to crime. Strange and unwelcome in middle-class America, the poet was a criminal. And since he was, he had better act like one. . . .
>
> . . . Hints, suspicions, inklings, his father's death, all these persuaded him to assume his tough mask. And from this time on, it is hard to penetrate, to catch any glimpse of the essential tenderness behind it. (Seager, 56, 60)

During mental crises, Roethke's "tough guy" persona and thoughts about gangsters became full-on paranoiac delusions. In ordinary moments, they manifested simply in untoward behavior and speech. James Dickey portrays this side of Roethke in his essay "The Greatest American Poet: Roethke," originally published in *The Atlantic* in 1968 and reprinted in the collection *Sorties* (1971). Since Dickey was even more of a fabulist than his subject, one should view with skepticism his portrait of Roethke and his assumptions about the production of Seager's biography. His account of time spent with Roethke, however, has the ring of truth, corroborated as it is by Seager and other sources, and he makes a number of insightful comments.

3. On Roethke's influence on Bly, Wright, and other poets of the 1960s identified as "Deep Image poets," see Harry Williams.

4. See, for example, "A Garland for Theodore Roethke," a collection of tribute poems in *The Michigan Quarterly Review* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 252–75, available free online.

5. Essays in Stein's collection by poets Stephen Spender, William Meredith, and W. D. Snodgrass express much the same reservations as Malkoff. Their criticism of the poetry seems to reflect mixed feelings about Roethke as a person as well as their readings of the work.

6. *Apophrades* is the last of Bloom's six "revisionary ratios," techniques used by poets, according to Bloom, as they struggle with the accomplishments of their great predecessors, seeking to achieve poetic originality and immortality.

7. Randall Stiffler provides a wry riposte to Bloom's assessment of Roethke, stating that "[n]o one has yet refuted Harold Bloom's conclusion by locating 'passages' of Theodore Roethke in the works of the poets he mentions" (184).

8. Ashbery has garnered much more critical attention than Roethke since 1976: Google Scholar provides over thirteen thousand results on Ashbery in that period of time, but fewer than six thousand on Roethke.

Oddly enough, Ashbery shared a major influence with Roethke: W. H. Auden, Roethke's friend and mentor and best man at his wedding. As Patrick Gill points out in his essay for this volume on the poem "Lull," Roethke, early in his career, admired Auden to the point of occasional emulation and abject jealousy. Ashbery, for his part, always considered Auden the first and most enduring influence on his own poetry. Auden awarded Ashbery's first book the Yale Younger Poets Prize for 1956, though he later said he never understood the poems.

9. Literary critics publishing in prestigious mass market venues continue to parrot Bloom's dismissal of Roethke's later work. One such critic is Clive James, in a review of *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-three of the World's Best Poems* (2005) appearing in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* for March 27, 2005. "[M]ost of [Roethke's] longer poems," James asserts, "prove to be helpless echoes of bigger names. Ambition undid him, as it has undone many another American poet infected by the national delusion that the arts can have a major league." A fellow traveler of James is Adam Kirsch. Conflating Roethke and James Wright as men and poets, Kirsch claims that they "paid a high aesthetic price for their belief that earnestness could make a poem live. . . . To justify their calling they had to insist that poetry had more to do with authenticity than with artistry" (89). Nothing in their articles suggests that either James or Kirsch have read any Roethke scholarship, but they seem quite familiar with Bloom's elevation of *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!* and disparagement of *The Waking, Words for the Wind,* and *The Far Field.* Kirsch exactly reiterates Bloom's opinion in *The Anxiety of Influence.* Although "Roethke manage[d] to invent an entirely new kind of nature poetry, in which the earth is not reassuringly earthy but teeming and alien," Kirsch writes, "[w]hat is most disappointing in Roethke's late work is the way he fell back into emulation of the established modernist idols, especially Yeats and the Eliot of 'Four Quartets'" (90, 91).

10. Singh; Padma.

11. Roethke's German American ethnicity offers another opportunity for critical inquiry. His poetry may be studied as that of a second-generation immigrant, one who grew up in a family and community steeped in German language and folkways. That

fact is evident in Roethke's portrayal of his family and their employees, his preference for Anglo-Saxon rather than Latinate diction, and the appearance of German words in his poetry and prose.

It should also be noted that Roethke was eight when the United States entered World War I, old enough to have lasting memories of the anti-German hysteria of the period. Harassment was acute in the upper Midwest, including Roethke's home state of Michigan, with its large German immigrant population. There were physical assaults on individuals and mob attacks against German American businesses and institutions. German-language schools and newspapers, like Saginaw's *Post-Zeitung,* shut down, and people stopped speaking German in public. Local zealots removed German books from libraries, burning them in some cases, as in Spring Lake and Zeeland, two Michigan towns. Place names were changed. Berlin, Michigan, for example, became Marne, after the 1914 battle in France. In Saginaw, Germania Avenue was renamed Federal Avenue, and the Germania Society became the Lincoln Club, switched to English, and closed their German library. See James Cooke Mills, 2:440.

Roethke's parents would have noted these developments with alarm. They likely heard about the six professors summarily fired from the German Department at the University of Michigan, and worse, the lynching of Robert Prager, a German immigrant miner, in Illinois. The xenophobia and assimilationism attending World War I likely played a role in Roethke's inability as an adult to speak or read German, even though he "studied German for an hour every school day from the age of five to the age of fourteen" (Seager, 20).

12. Important twenty-first-century Roethke scholarship includes the chapter "Hello, Thingy Spirit" in Sharpe; and Bearss and Primeau, eds., "Being a Collection of Essays on Theodore Roethke," special issue, *Midwestern Miscellany* 36 (Spring/Fall 2008), from the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. The issue, which features a wide range of essays, and a few poems, about Roethke, is freely accessible online at the Society's website. Sharpe's chapter and four essays from the special issue also appear in the large selection of secondary material, old and new, collected in the Gale series *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 205 (2018), pp. 69–209.

Another important essay is Camille Paglia's "Dance of the Senses: Natural Vision and Psychotic Mysticism in Theodore Roethke's Poetry," delivered as the keynote address of the Roethke centennial celebrations held at the University of Michigan in October 2008. It appeared in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and was reprinted in her book *Provocations*. Paglia also included explications of Roethke's "Cuttings," "Root Cellar," and "The Visitant" in *Break, Blow, Burn,* mentioned above in note 9.

13. The decade's ecocritical reframing of Roethke was capped by an entry on Roethke in *Modern American Environmentalists: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, edited by George A. Cevasco and Richard P. Harmon. Entry author Rebecca Onion asserts that although "Roethke would not have identified himself as an environmentalist . . . his sympathies and structures of thought were always environmentalist, in the purest of senses" (421). She identifies Roethke's concern for vulnerable, small organisms, "his intense sympathy for the members of the biotic community that are the least spectacular," as "the most indelible aspect of [his] poetic environmentalism" (424). Roethke's poetry, Onion

concludes, "with its fine-tuned sensitivity toward the natural world, has no doubt influenced the environmental ethic of countless readers" (426).

14. Kenneth Lincoln parallels Roethke with Native traditions and trends in *Sing with the Heart of a Bear*. Sherman Alexie, Duane Niatum, and Joy Harjo, Native poets mentioned earlier in this introduction, have all testified to Roethke's compatibility with Native perspectives or their own individual experiences.

15. In his journals, James Dickey defined the opposite of Wright's "true criticism": "Contemporary criticism of poetry: far too much is made of far too little. The critic is attempting to be more ingenious and talented than the poem, and stands on his head to be original: that is, to *invent* an originality for the poems that can come to them only through him" (*Sorties,* 6).