Seattle's "Surrealist"

Theodore Roethke, Recognized By Leading Poets and Critics as One of the Outstanding Younger Figures in the World of Poetry, Is a Big Reason the University Of Washington Has One of the Most Productive and Successful Poetry Workshops in the Country.

By MARGARET B. CALLAHAN

The difference between the poet and the ordinary guy, we always have thought, was summed up rather neatly by A. A. Milne in this little scene from "Hogge at Pooh Corner," sequel to "Winnie the Pooh":

"Hallo, Pooh," said Rabbit (who just come upon Pooh Bear singing a spring song).

"Hallo, Rabbit," said Pooh dreamily.

"Did you make that song up?"

"Well, I sort of made it up," said Pooh. 'It isn't Brainy,' he went on humbly, 'because You Know Why, Rabbit; but it comes to me sometimes.'

"Ah," said Rabbit, who never let things come to him, but always went and fetched them...

But there's more to it than that, it seems. The modern poet doesn't just let it come to him. He goes and fetches it, and that is what we've been learning about.

We discovered in the February number of Poetry, America's best-known periodical devoted solely to the muse, that the University of Washington has one of the most productive and successful poetry workshops in the country. And to prove it, half the issue is given over to verse by Washington students.

Introducing the students' work is a six-page essay called "The Teaching Poet," by Theodore Roethke, who for the past six years has been in that role in the English department of the university.

Roethke is recognized by leading poets and critics as one of the outstanding younger figures in the world of poetry. He has three volumes of poetry on the bestseller list: "Open House," "The Lost Son and Other Poems" and "Prayer to the Blvd.

He has been reviewed ecstatically in most leading critical publications of this country and England.

The nature of Roethke's poetry is intensely personal and subjective, yet there is coherent meaning. Some modern poetry, like a certain segment of modern art, makes a cult of obscurantism, but this is not one of Roethke's approach. In each of his lines he is attempting to convey by recognizable terms or symbols an emotion or experience deeply felt, much of it welling from childhood impressions.

At the world of childhood takes on in retrospect surreal qualities amounting to fantasy, there is throughout Roethke's poetry: a good deal of what might be called surrealism, although the term, used ordinarily, about a school of painting, may not be applicable to verse.

This, for instance, from "The Lost Son:" "The way to the valley was dark.

Darker all the way.

Over slippery cinders.

Through the long greenhouse.

The roses kept breathing in the dark.

They had many mouths to breathe with. My knees made little winds underneath

Where the weeds slept.

A BIG MAN, Prof. Theodore Roethke looks up before his class, an open book of poetry in his hand. Students come from all over the nation to attend his classes.

RUMINATING on how much more conducive to a poet's mood the campus was as we knew it in the '20s, we walked on a warm end-of-winter afternoon through the newly leveled parking space near 45th Street, which was in our day native woods replete with dogwood, flowering currant and bird-song, to an interview appointment with Prof. Theodore Roethke, the teaching poet.

Something warmly for Things That Hadn't Changed, we were glad to note the released sounds in Parcinn Hall as students changed classes, a mixture of shuffling feet, coughs, greetings, and the scratching of old wooden stairways and the indelible smell of college classrooms.

A few students lingered in the poetry workshop, which in a physical sense is no different than any classroom, while we waited for Roethke. They varied in years from extreme youth to middle age, and in sex from masculine to feminine—which is quite a range when you come right down to it.

A fireheated crowd, gathering together her books, said warmly to an older woman: "I like that business about hope. I don't care what they say.

"It started coming when I was driving home," said the older woman, husking her, "I had to dash over and get it typed. Three long pages."

"Oh, a Pooh Bear, we thought, in praise that something about hope should come to anyone in the act of coping with University District traffic, and also that a younger poet should defend hope as a theme in this day when three generations as much reason for youthful despair.

"And now they're really kicking you all out," said a tall, heavily built man, who hesitantly described in one journal as "a rugged pillar of poetic individualism," his friendly face excessed his blueness, and the students left, still talking over each other's work.

It turned out that nearly all the questions we were in mind to ask Roethke he already had dealt with in various published writings. We concluded with most of our notes in the form of books and clippings from publications.

Roethke, who has the rank of a full professor, came to the university in 1947. He was born in Sturgeon, Mich., in 1898, was educated at the Universities of Michigan and Harvard. His work has included such dissimilar activities as work in a pickle factory and serving as a tennis coach. He received a distinguished fellowship for creative writing in 1948 and again in 1949.

Both Harvard Library and the Library of Congress have on file for perpetuity recordings of Roethke reading his own verse.

STUDENTS come from all over the nation to attend Roethke's classes, the present group including individuals from Idaho, Montana, Maine and Washington, D. C.

Ten students have verses in the February issue of Poetry. They are L. D. Huddins, H. Ering, Kathy McLaughlin, Antoinette Stanton, Patricia November, Edward Winstone, Robert W. Wealby, Pauline Hulgren and Thomas Fraizer.

"All classrooms make poets," Roethke concedes, "but a good deal can be taught about the craft of verse." He says in his introduction to the student work:

"To write a verse, or even a piece of verse, however awkward and crude, that bears some mark, something characteristic of the author's true nature—that is, I insist, a considerable human achievement.

"There's no point in being grandiose about reform. If the work should be listened to with many, many, many, I'm sure. Isn't that the disdain many professionals have for the serious amateur...a departure, verse writing is from the ordinary run of things in a college—for almost all thinking has been directed toward analysis, a breaking down of the metaphor is a synthesis, a building up, a creation of a new world...

"The one thing that seems to me is that, whenever, whenever, when his own best, write the poems he wants to write—and also at least some set exercises as a discipline."

THE LONDON TIMES literary supplement, commenting on American universities' trend of employing poets on their faculties, remarks:

"It should not be assumed, though, that this rise of poets to academic stools means that poets have been absorbed into the dulness of senior common-room life. No one, for example, who has met with Theodore Roethke at the university of Washington can envisage him for a moment as anything less than a rugged pillar of poetic individualism in the extreme northern corner of the States."

Judith Shill, English poet and critic, says of Roethke's poems:

"To my mind they are among the most remarkable and original poems written by any young poet, American or English."

Peter Viereck in a recent issue of The Atlantic Monthly expresses further praise of Roethke's latest publication, writing:

"The Roethke is a poet of fine promise. At the moment I am making a disciple of his poems. They can be substantiated not by our proof but by his verse."

Then Viereck proceeds to quote these lines of Roethke's:

"I could watch. I could watch.

I saw the separations of all things.

My heart filled up with the great grasses.

They were looking for me, and I..."