

ROETHKE: VOICE OF BALDER
THROUGH MOUTH OF GROUCHO.

When Theodore Roethke made one of his rare Seattle appearances at the Playhouse last Sunday, he served up an odd dish of 90% Showman and 10% Bard. Joe Gandy, who was given the honor of introducing Roethke on the curious grounds that they were college chums at Michigan, proved that he understood awards and prizes better than any poem.

Then Roethke appeared on the stage waving and grinning, straining out of his tux like a precocious panda. For the next two hours he regaled a capacity audience with gags and asides, a juggler tossing up a dazzling repartee of balls and bellows and baubles.

Occasionally, in case anyone should forget, he would read one of the poems which have won him a reputation as perhaps the finest lyricist in the English language. But why the voice of Balder through the mouth of Groucho Marx? One sensed a secret, cunning dialogue between the Poet and the Clown.

The Clown, for example, spent a good deal of time buttering up his bosses. He went so far as to write a special little poem, far below his form, punning with the names of assorted University personnel—whom he repeatedly referred to as "the boys up ahead"—forgetting Marianne Moore's admonishment: "A poet should *always* work at the top of his form."

He kidded his mother-in-law, "A woman about two and a half years older than I am who spends her time between Episcopal retreats and national bridge tournaments."

He drank water right from a yellow pitcher when his glass disappeared. He burst into song with one of his Irish shebeen chanties. He liberally sprinkled his reading with commercials for books, friends, students, presses, colleagues, and the heavy population of the Roethke alliance.

He attacked Eliot's bloodless pedantry and Kazin's ivy opportunism. At one point Roethke burst out, "You see, what I really want is power!" proving once again that poets should stay out of politics.

Like Crazy Jane, Roethke can be guilty of "tremendous spiritual arrogance," but like Yeats's "other self," Roethke, too, redeems himself by attacking with love. All this is done in the style of a tough but lovable Detroit mobster running booze during Prohibition:

"If you find an old copy of *The Waking*, latch on to it. It's worth a hundred skins if it's worth a quarter." To what end?

Roethke seemed to be saying this, "Love me, love me. I worked in a pickle factory. I labored in greenhouses, I know business deals and 'scratch.' I've been there, I'm great, but I'm helpless and afraid."

Any man who exposes himself that way *must* be all right. After all the Bard's first duty is to entertain. Roethke's balding dome gleams in the single yellow spot. His audience knows he is working, sweating, by God, doing all this for *them*. At least they can see why Roethke is one of America's great teachers, why he can whip a class into a frenzy of creative adoration. But how many could hear the voice behind the act?

Could they hear Roethke saying, "My poems were written in blood and sweat and anguish. How many of you can understand that? I have spent the torments of a life working free of the libidinous muck of worm and bat and lust to a ringing vision of God. How can anyone who has lived safely, suffered less, know this terror or this joy? It's too hard, too much to ask. So all right. If you can't love my poems, love me."

Roethke baits us on laughter and books us on pain. Love or no love, that is the meaning of the silent dialogue between the Showman and the Poet.

The trouble is, this is only part of the story. For about ten minutes last Sunday, something else happened. The mask of the Showman-Clown-Politician dropped and we saw the suffering face of the Poet. Then the great lines would ring out from "The Adamant," "The Bat," "Elegy for Jane," "My Papa's Waltz," "Once More the Round."

The voice would grow quiet, controlled, reverent, and poetry would happen. "I knew a woman lovely in her bones . . ." "I swear she cast a shadow white as stone . . ." "I measure time by how a body sways . . ." "Madness is nobility at odds with circumstance . . ." "The right thing happens to the happy man . . ." And suddenly one knew why Roethke was up there and what it had cost.

For ten minutes the audience became the poet. To use one of his own phrases, these poems are "in the language," singing out as clearly, painfully, inevitably as an infant's first cry.

Then one knew that those ten minutes alone were worth the price of admission. That's what it was all about.