

# 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 "House at Pooh Corner," sequel to "Winnie the Pooh":

"'Hallo, Pooh,' said Rabbit (who has 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 Brain,' 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, too, 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 cast 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 bookshelves—"Open House," "The Lost Son and Other Poems" and "Praise to the End!" He has been reviewed glowingly 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 true of Roethke's approach. In each of his lines he is attempting to convey by recognizable terms or symbols an experience or emotion deeply felt, much of it welling from childhood impressions.

As 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 boiler was dark,  
Dark 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 looms 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 moods the campus was as we knew it in the '20's, 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.

Searching hungrily for Things That Hadn't Changed, we were glad to note the released sounds in Parrington Hall as students changed classes, a mixture of shuffling feet, coughs, greetings, and the squeaking of old wooden stairways and the indefinable smell of college classrooms.

A few student poets 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 fresh-cheeked co-ed, 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, thanking her. "I had to dash over and get it typed. Three long pages."

AH, a Pooh Bear, we thought, pleased that something about hope should come to anyone in the act of coping with University District traffic, and

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also that a younger poet should defend hope as a theme in this day when there seems so much reason for youthful despair.

"And now may I—er—kick you all out?" said a tall, heavily built man, who has been described in one journal as "a rugged pillar of poetic individualism." His friendly tone excused his bluntness, and the students left, still talking over each other's work.

It turned out that nearly all the questions we had 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 Saginaw, Mich., in 1908, was educated at the University of Michigan and Harvard. His early jobs included such dissimilar activities as work in a pickle factory and serving as a tennis coach. He received a Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing in 1945 and again in 1946.

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. Hudgins, H. Enrico, Kathy McLaughlin, Antoinette Stanton, Patricia Coombs, Edward Weinstein, Robert W. Parker, Wesley Wehr, Paulette Italgren and Thomas Frazier.

Can classrooms make poets? No, Roethke concedes, but "a good deal can be taught about the craft of verse." He says in his introduction to the students' 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 results . . . It (the work) should be listened to and, in many instances, honored. I can't share the disdain many professionals have for the serious amateur. . . ."

"It's 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, whereas the metaphor is a synthesis, a building up, a creation of a new world. . . ."

"The scene is that every student pursue his own bent, write the poems he wants to write—and also do 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 rush of poets to academic shelters means that poets have been absorbed into the dullness of senior common-room life. No one, for example, who has met Mr. 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 northwest corner of the States."

Edith Sitwell, 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, in our age."

Peter Viereck in a recent issue of The Atlantic Monthly, after fervent praise of Roethke's latest publication, writes:

"He (Roethke) is a poet of 'fine phrenzie.' Admittedly I am making grandiose claims for him. They can be substantiated not by my prose but by his verse."

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

"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 . . .  
And I walked, I walked through the light air;  
I moved with the morning."