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## The Spiritual Transformative Process in Roethke's "Cuttings (later)" and "Root Cellar"

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Theodore Roethke described his father's greenhouses, which became the groundwork of his sequence of thirteen breakthrough "greenhouse" poems, as "both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics...where austere German Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something beautiful" (Gioia 448). Roethke's contrasting desires for beauty and efficiency are evident in the animism and human vitality the poet infuses in this sequence, while simultaneously maintaining extraordinary precision and brevity of expression. The poet thus intimately connects the human and plant realms to create a powerful internal momentum of vigor within the plant world, conveying the essence of his childhood experience among the greenhouse, which he himself defined as his "symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth" (Boyd 409). Two poems within this sequence, "Cuttings (later)" and "Root Cellar," demonstrate this unrelenting internal life-force, springing from both the vegetation itself and projected by the speaker's memory and experience in a union of human and plant, subject and object. "Cuttings (later)" utilizes such metaphorical plant, birth, and saint imagery to explore the speaker's desire for spiritual transformation and transcendence; "Root Cellar" explores the darker internal psyche rooted in memory to reveal again a need for spiritual connection and experience. In both poems, Roethke ultimately focuses on the spiritual transformative process of the cycle of birth, decay, death, and rebirth—of movements in action, physically and spiritually. Thus, together, "Cuttings (later)" and "Root Cellar" can be seen as different stages of this growth process and internal spiritual life cycle, emulating Roethke's own cycles of spiritual awakening and darkness and his strong desire for spiritual enlightenment amidst the cycles of manic depression which he experienced throughout his life.

#### "CUTTINGS (LATER)": CONTRARIES OF BIRTH AND DEATH, PURITY AND SEXUALITY

In "Cuttings (later)," the speaker unites plant images with the process of human birth and death, and Biblical saint imagery to evoke a deep, personal desire for spiritual transformation and transcendence. The first line's sequential triad, "This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks" (1) breaks down the stages of the birth or resurrection process it denotes, aided by an increasing momentum conjured through the successive syllabic increase. The interlocking "r" and "u" sounds further unite the triad of words, the "ur-" of the first word joining with the "-res-" of the second to create the "resur-" of the third, accelerating the sense of progress and the speaker's movement forward. This infusion of life into nature John D. Boyd defines as an "ingenious metaphorical treatment" where still life is "made dynamic, even heroic" (Boyd 422). The speaker then creates a birth image of stems "struggling to put down feet" (2) and rising "on lopped limbs," (4)

conveying both a plant's struggle to take root and a baby's straining to stand on stable legs. Yet here lines 2-4 also create yet another trio of successive lines suggesting crucifixion, asking the question, "What saint strained so much./Rose on lopped limbs to a new life?" (3-4). Here the image is grueling and yet life-giving as the strain of suffering brings transformative new life. The speaker asks the question with a tone of awe, and desire to, like the saint, suffer nobly for the worthy cause of transformation or spiritual growth. Thus, the speaker connects an image of youth with an image of experience, an image of birth with an image of death, creating a tension of contraries that oppose and unify each other to contribute to the continual movement and energy of the poem.

The first line of the second stanza parallels the first line of the first stanza, with the triad line form separated by commas: "I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing" (5), also increasing syllabically. The words each modify and specify its precedent as if to narrow a lens in stages to an acute observation of sound; in this way the line again generates momentum and movement, the commas almost pushing the words left as if wading through streams. The "s" sounds throughout both stanzas moreover create a tangible sense of the movement of water, consistently throughout the poem bringing to life the "sucking" (5) and "seeping" (7) and the persistence of growth. The sexual tone of these words moreover create yet another opposing tension between purity and sexuality, sainthood and the reproductive process, which Boyd mentions here as between "the spiritual-ascetic and the spiritual-sensual, between pain and pleasure" (Boyd 422). Birth imagery continues in the lines "slippery as fish" (10), and "I quail, lean to new beginnings, sheath-wet" (11), suggestive of newborns coming out of the womb, recoiling from the brightness of daylight in birth. The childlike ambivalence of wonder and fear at a new, external life in this last image of both quailing and yet leaning produces once again the energy of movement vital to the poem's vigorous struggle towards growth. This final line once more unites the poem in echo of the triad form of the first lines of both stanzas, perhaps even evocative of the Biblical tripartite God; we thus return to the essential spiritual significance of this yearning for transformation.

#### "CUTTINGS (LATER)": MOVEMENT FROM OBSERVATION TO EXPERIENCE

Bogen reveals Roethke's insistence that the greenhouse poems went beyond description of nature to suggest "at least two levels of experience," beneath the observation of plants fashioning a presentation of the self, and its relationship with nature (415). Thus, in the second stanza, the speaker himself inhabits and embodies the growing shoots of vegetation, progressing from observing vicariously the struggle: "I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing" (5),

to experiencing it personally in the lines, “In my veins, in my bones I feel it” (6), and ultimately, “I quail, lean to new beginnings, sheath wet” (11). This “extension of consciousness,” as Bogen states, announces the relation between natural processes and the development of the self (417). Perhaps then, here by at first observing, then fully surrendering to, the plant-like identity, the speaker surrenders to the nature of process: one that moves towards greater and greater engagement and experience. Moreover, this movement serves to emulate and urge forth the continuation of the process of death, birth, decay and regeneration. Roethke’s inclusion of the dash after “in my bones I feel it,—” (6) serves both to simulate the momentum of this process and create a pause in which the speaker silently, tangibly feels the movement of the “small waters seeping upward” (7). Here, the speaker engages in the plant’s strenuous pull of water up its stem in his/her own veins; the speaker also feels the plant’s struggle for germination, to “break out” (9) and part the “tight grains...at last” (8). In this tension of push and release, in addition to the unification of observation and experience, Boyd sees yet another “reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” (422) through the use of contraries. The poem’s irregular line length can also be seen as illustrative of the straining stems “Cuttings (later)” describes, their shortness producing a high level of energy and vitality that infuses the poem with a sense of deep, almost desperate vitality rooted fundamentally in the desire for growth.

#### “ROOT CELLAR”: EXPLORATION OF THE DARK INTERNAL PSYCHE

In “Root Cellar,” Roethke explores the psyche in what Spanier defines as the “crude but tenacious life” of underground vegetation. The poem contrasts from the image of breaking out in daylight, as in “Cuttings,” to breaking out in darkness. “Root Cellar” also explores the opposing notions of captivity and freedom, fertility and decay, revulsion and fascination; furthermore, throughout there permeates a “constant sense of struggle against a threatening force” (Spanier 53), perhaps of impending death or the reality of the ugly, primitive nature of survival. The word “cellar” in the poem’s title immediately evokes threatening confinement and imprisonment—and yet also suggests the founding unit of life and the essence of growth. The word “cell” moreover suggests a place of preservation, which Wolff states derives from the Latin *hultia*, meaning “protective covering” (Wolff 47). He also contends that the Latin *cella*, “room,” has ancestors in Old English and Proto-Germanic meaning “to conceal” and “the underworld” (48), consistent with the speaker’s exploration of his/her concealed inner, darker dimension through the persisting plant metaphor. Likewise, the word “root” implies the foundation of life and growth, yet is buried and underground, evoking death. Gioia even contends that ‘roots’ are as much evocative of the

frightening cemetery where Roethke's father was buried when the poet was fourteen as they are of the source of sustenance (Gioia 449). Thus, the poem vacillates between "extremes of grave and nest" (Wolff 47), of threatening enclosure and preservation.

The first line, "Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch" (1) arouses a sense of covertness, conspiring, of criminals coming to life and opposing the natural cycle of day and night. The phrase "broke out" (2) and "hunting" advances such connotations, personifying the vegetation in its aggression and rebelliousness. The predatory qualities of the image conjure the understanding of sustenance and life as something precious and essential. The next image of heads "Lolling obscenely" (4) invokes the grotesque, and may even allude to martyrdom through St. John the Baptist's beheading. The "long yellow evil necks" and "tropical snakes" (5) also suggest Eden and the Fall in continuing Biblical imagery to suggest the fundamental experience of death and suffering in the process of spiritual progress and discovery, perhaps in fleshly death in exchange for spiritual life. This line extends over the poem's preceding and subsequent lines, stretching like a snake to mirror the line's denotative meaning: Boyd mentions the expansion and contraction of line length in "Root Cellar" as fluctuating "with unusual regularity, evoking the breathing vegetation so eerily described" (421). Roethke also uses assonance in the long vowel sounds in "down", "long", "yellow", "evil", "like", and "snakes" (5) to create a sense of reaching, and hanging downward. While in "Cuttings (later)," the shoots reach upward, in "Root Cellar" the plants strain downward, into darkness, and into the depths of the speaker's dark psyche. In the next line, the speaker exclaims, "What a congress of stinks!—", paralleling "Cuttings (later)" in the use of expressive punctuation and the use of a dash, but as opposed to posing a question, expressing fascination amidst revulsion in the rabid fecundity of the plant life. Harsh sounds of "ditch", and "chinks," with the scraping "ck" sounds of "dark", "snakes" "stinks," and "planks" reinforce this sense of repulsion and harshness. Images of decay abound, including "rank" (8), "leaf-mold" (9), and "mildew" (4); yet even amidst decay, life grows: "Nothing would give up life" (10). This fierce and desperate resistance to death Wolff connects with the speaker's own "gropings for a divine creator" and "questions about personal immortality" (Wolff 47). In the care and negligence of the plants, the speaker hence attempts to read and question his own fate.

Peter Balakian here argues for the poem as Roethke's discovery of the essential self in recovering the past, and the mythical world of his memory (55). In this confrontation of his origins, Roethke exposes a "cold paralyzing horror: a glimpse into the subhuman...the sickness of life beginnings again: the exhausting awareness of every ache" (56). The plants' animistic desire to cling to life thus emulates Roethke's own spiritual craving and longing for some sort of

transcendent discovery of an elemental self. This hunger gave force to his creative energy: Balakian states that to Roethke, “God embodied the creation’s ultimate illuminating force” (58). God “was ultimate experience: the terrible force that drove the poetic imagination and enabled him to discover the greenhouse, his personal and mythic past, and the loamy world of the psyche and the soul” (Balakian 58).

#### THE TRANSFORMATIVE SPIRITUAL PROCESS

“Cuttings (later)” and “Root Cellar” together illustrate the process of spiritual struggle and transformation. Progression of form occurs internally, growing out and from each other in an “organic form” (Boyd 418), where “Cuttings (later)” is shorter in length as a whole and in individual line length, while the lines of “Root Cellar” stretch across the page to depict the progression of growth. The unity of “Root Cellar” as a single-verse poem moreover builds on the momentum created by the two smaller stanzas of “Cuttings”—Boyd suggests Roethke’s form as suggestive of the octave and sestet, each “building its own crescendo” (423). In this way the two poems can be seen as different stages of the life cycle. Ultimately Roethke demonstrates throughout the two poems his focus on the movement, the progression and process in action, “A positive aspiration and a fierce resistance, a straining downward and a straining upward, a journey forward beyond the end of life, and backward beyond its beginning” (Boyd 422). Therefore, while “Cuttings (later)” may seem to come first in this process, the cyclical nature of life and death allows for “Root Cellar” and its search in the underground, internal psyche for spiritual awakening, to be the steppingstone towards breakthrough, above ground, with rebirth and transformation.

#### CONCLUSION

The spiritual growth process that Theodore Roethke explores in his greenhouse poems can be interpreted to mirror the personal spiritual cycle the poet himself experienced through moments of spiritual enlightenment in between his manic-depressive cycles. His investigation of the darker, internal psyche in “Root Cellar” thus conveys this struggle to grope amongst the depths of his own mind and memory for meaning, and liberation from or movement out of the confusing darkness of his own consciousness into the new light of “Cuttings (later)”. This desire lends significance then to the centrality of active process and progression in Roethke’s greenhouse poetry, projected off a deep-seated need to be growing and straining towards deeper spiritual transcendence. Balakian concludes that in this

way, “The greenhouse was redemptive and infinitely fertile; it joined self, imagination, and psyche with the organic world” (Balakian 59). The relentless vigor of the plant realm moreover reflected Roethke’s attempt to convey the energy that possessed him in pursuit of experiencing God transformatively (58). Hence, “Cuttings (later)” and “Root Cellar” can together be seen as stages within this transformational discovery process and internal spiritual life cycle, emulating Roethke’s own cycles of spiritual darkness and awakening in life.

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