

Seager's Roethke: An Introduction

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The Glass House is a writer's book—work of a novelist, devoted to literature and its craft, writing about a dead friend who was a poet. Theodore Roethke and Allan Seager graduated from the University of Michigan a year apart. At that time, they scarcely knew each other, but their coincidence allows Seager to sketch out of memory the ambience of Roethke's Michigan. A decade later, when they had both started to publish, they met again at a writers' conference and became friends. Roethke suggested that Seager join him at Bennington College in Vermont, where they spent one year teaching together. They remained close until Roethke died at fifty-five in 1963. Allan Seager died five years later, at sixty-two, and this biography of his friend was his last work.

It was my luck to know both men. I knew Roethke only slightly, but for ten years I taught at the University of Michigan with Allan Seager. He was my senior by twenty years, and I had begun to read him in adolescence, saving my allowance when I was fourteen to buy his first novel, *Equinox*. Probably Seager's best novels were *Amos Berry* and *Hilda Manning*; there was also a fine book of short stories called *The Old Man of the Mountain*. (Eight of the stories had turned up in annual *Best* collections.) Seager's fiction was

highly praised by Hugh Kenner, James Dickey, Robert Penn Warren . . . and it never won general recognition. Today one novel remains in print.

Allan considered us an embattled pair, as faculty members at the University of Michigan. We were Practitioners of the Word, islanded in a sea of Ph.D.'s who could not write an office-hours schedule without stylistic infelicity. Allan exaggerated; Allan enjoyed exaggerating. An erect, handsome, ironic figure, he strode the corridors of Haven Hall, where the English Department pastured itself, and popped his head into my office to tell a story; to quote a colleague's latest gaffe; to pass on writerly gossip. He told me stories about his friend Ted Roethke—whose work I had long admired—as cautionary tales or exemplary anecdotes for the edification of an apprentice. He spoke with affection about Ted's eccentricities, ambitions, habits of work—especially about Ted's professionalism, as we might have called it if Roethke had not been a poet.

When I was an undergraduate, I ran across Theodore Roethke's *The Lost Son*, and was immediately enthralled. After graduation, doing some time at Oxford in 1951, I lectured at the Poetry Society on "New American Poets"; I dwelt upon Lowell, Wilbur, and Roethke. Later I wrote a two-part piece for a magazine in London, telling about "American Poets Since the War," and praised Roethke again. During a brief stint at Stanford a year later, when I published a poem in a quarterly, Roethke telephoned from Seattle to congratulate me. (He knew I admired his work; he wanted to like mine.) He telephoned in December of 1953 while I was out Christmas shopping, and talked to my wife, telling her that he wanted to bring me to Seattle for a poetry reading—which was an absurd notion: I had published only two poems in American magazines, and no books. What else he said, I don't know, but he talked for an hour with enthusiasm and high excitement; much later, I learned that Roethke called from a hospital—and I understood the blood chemistry of his enthusiasm. Ignorant in 1953, I wrote him a note about the putative poetry reading, and a month later he answered that the university was out of funds; as for his own, "the Aga Khan phase is over for this year. . . ." In the spring of 1954 I heard him read at San Francisco State's Poetry Center—an ingratiating powerhouse of a reading, heavy on comic routines—and

talked with him at a reception the next day. It was nine years before I saw him a second and last time.

Allan and his friend were men of their generation, courtly or flirtatious with women and cronyish with men, Prohibition-generation drinkers, funny, and decent; these two committed their lives to literature. Although Roethke was a poet, he aspired to the status of a professional writer—like Allan who had edited at *Vanity Fair* when he was a young man, who wrote serious novels and supported them by stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Not all poets want to be *writers*—not Shelley, not Blake, not Rilke—but a few poets have been professional workers in literature, not above supporting themselves by the pen: among others, Jonson, Dryden, Johnson, Hardy, Lawrence, Graves, Plath. Suffering from the delusion that fiction paid, Roethke collected books of advice on how to write it. Doubtless, like Sylvia Plath, he looked into the *Writers' Digest* from time to time; one cannot imagine Rilke reading *WD's* list of poetry markets.

But of course poetry for Roethke was more than a profession; it was reason for living and breathing. He not only wanted to make poems; he wanted to make the best poems, and he worked at his art with utter diligence. Seager mentions the notebooks filled with sketch-writing—drafts, observations, notes, tryouts. Every afternoon outside his Washington house, Roethke sat with a notebook on his lap, trying out lines and phrases, sentences, prose notes about poetry, *generating language*—everything toward the goal of great poetry.

Seager loves to speak of Roethke's notebooks, for *The Glass House* is a book that takes pleasure in the life of writing. Seager is continually intrigued by the creative process, although psychology was not one of his obsessions. Doggedly he explores the relationship between Roethke's mental illness and his genius. I find his speculations suggestive and relevant still—on a subject under continual debate: bipolarity and literary achievement.

If *The Glass House* is not the ultimate exploration of Roethke's mind or soul, it is appropriate to notice: For Theodore Roethke, his mind and soul existed to provide material for poetry, like Yeats's voices which spoke not to discover truth but to provide metaphors for poetry. Even if we disapprove of Roethke's devotion

to art, his aestheticism, we must acknowledge that Roethke did not work at language in order to express himself; neither did he devote himself to Blake, Smart, Davies, and Yeats in order to promulgate doctrines or inculcate philosophies. Willy-nilly, his material was his own experience (which included his reading; which included a greenhouse and a father; which included madness) and the ideas or notions he had arrived at—but: *He wrote not in order to embody ideas; he wrote to make poems.* Out of love for the poetic art, he wrote to make objects of that art.

For Allan it was not poems; it was stories and sentences—maybe sentences more than stories. Although *The Glass House* is full of good writing, Allan was dying as he finished the book. If there are lapses, never mind: *The Glass House* is an exemplary biography accomplished under difficult conditions. Allan was not permitted to quote from Roethke's poems, a damning prohibition for a poet's biographer, yet *The Glass House* not only survives this prohibition, it profits from it. A descriptive writer's prose becomes better when he understands that his essay will not be illustrated. Seager relies on his own writing, not his subject's. Some of the handsomest language here describes natural history and establishes historical background, as Allan looks to the traditions of Parkman and de Tocqueville. In his narrative summary of Roethke's life, Seager finds a tone which is affectionate yet ironic where irony is appropriate. Compare his style to the language of the biographers of Roethke's contemporaries: bad or devious prose deployed to indicate that the biographer is superior to the subject.

Over my years at Michigan I visited Allan often at his big solid gloomy house on Michigan Avenue in Tecumseh—the Michigan house of a Michigan man. Allan derived from the small town of Adrian, not far from Tecumseh; he returned nearly to his place of starting, but in the meantime: At the University of Michigan he was a champion swimmer, and a Rhodes Scholarship took him to Oriel College at Oxford University. After some editing in New York he took to teaching (he taught part-time) while he worked at his fiction. He married Barbara and fathered two daughters, but then Barbara was crippled by multiple sclerosis, which finally took her life in 1966. After Barbara's death, and shortly before his own, he married a second time, his wife Joan. His last years were given

over to *The Glass House*, for which he received a Guggenheim. This final work was his elegy for the friend he admired and his eulogy for the life of writing. The last time I saw Allan, at the hospital in Tecumseh with tubes up his nostrils, he had just proof-read *The Glass House*.

As it happened, I last saw Theodore Roethke not long before he died. I read my poems at the University of Washington in April of 1963—a decade after the manic invitation—and Roethke died in July without warning. When I began the reading, Roethke wasn't there—as I noted without pleasure. I had not seen him since San Francisco State. Frequently he sent me offprints with little notes, as he sent offprints to many admirers and critics under the impression that he was managing his career. Because his self-promotion was obvious, it was not shrewd—Robert Lowell was shrewder, with his strategic postcards—and I think no one took offense. Once he suggested to his publisher, in so many words, that they put the fix in, for the Nobel. Robert Frost—of all people—once complained to me that Roethke was too competitive. If Frost, Roethke, and Lowell (not to mention Yeats, not to mention Pope), were all operators, it seems that operating, albeit unattractive, suggests no inferior ability.

As I read my third poem—"Seattle, 1963"—Theodore Roethke bulked into the auditorium with his handsome wife, Beatrice. When I finished reading a poem Roethke would make a noise. Sometimes the noises sounded derisory, sometimes admiring; of course they were disconcerting but they were also funny. When I read a tiny poem about a Henry Moore sculpture, I heard Roethke's gangster-accent curl out of the corner of his mouth: "Read that one again. Read it slower this time." I did; and at a hundred poetry readings since, I have read the poem, told the story, and read the poem over again as "The Theodore Roethke Memorial Re-Reading." All in all, it was a crazy afternoon. When I was done Roethke came up to the podium, and David Wagoner showed us the graffito chalked on the classroom blackboard: "The teach blows horses."

Then we separated to go to the reception at George Bluestone's house. Roethke and I arrived early, and he led me by the arm to a corner where he sat me down. He sank his great hands into the

pockets of his suitcoat and pulled out sheets of galley proof which he slapped together and pushed at me. “I got a new book coming out,” he said. “Read it. It’s going to drive Wilbur and Lowell into the *shadows*.”

The Far Field is my favorite Roethke, even if it didn’t drive Wilbur and Lowell into the shadows. I sat in a corner reading galleys until the party’s noises took me over. Roethke was lively and funny, wholly charming—while Beatrice sat unsmiling, looking grim. (What a *prude*, I thought, not understanding that Beatrice was grim because she saw mania coming on. Only manics growl at poetry readings.)

Sitting in the corner, holding the long galley sheets, I read “The Rose” for the first time. A little later, I read it again as it appeared posthumously in the *New Yorker*. A month or two later still, at the American Embassy in London, I read it aloud during a memorial service for four American poets just dead: Cummings, Williams, Roethke, and Frost. I read:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,
 Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself,
 As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
 And I stood outside myself,
 Beyond becoming and perishing,
 A something wholly other,
 As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
 And yet was still.
 And I rejoiced in being what I was:
 In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,
 In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
 With all the air to greet him as he flies,
 The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;
 And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
 Gathering to itself sound and silence—
 Mine and the sea-wind’s.

This rose grew in the glass house. You who love the poetry—you do not hold this book unless you love the poetry—now enter *The Glass House*.