

THEODORE ROETHKE AND THE ART OF MADNESS

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If any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to naught by the poetry of madness.

(Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245)

It is just possible that the first literary criticism ever uttered – in the depths of prehistory, perhaps as a stolid hunter’s half-grunted resistance to a tale-teller’s trance – went

something like, “He’s crazy.”

To which the hunter sitting next to him at the fire grunted, “Yes, but in a good way.”

To which the next grunted, “Shut up, I’m trying to listen.”

The case is easily overstated. A streak of madness is not a prerequisite for powerful writing. Most great writing, most of the time, blazes with divine sanity; William Shakespeare never did time in Bedlam, and I can’t imagine the likes of Saul Bellow or John Updike in there either. Still, the relentlessly ordered mind throws off no solar gales of imagination, either; it is more likely to produce great CPAs than great writers. In this paper, I will show specifically that Theodore Roethke’s severe manic-depression was a crucial part of his greatness, and argue more generally that “madness” and the artistic techniques derived from it are closely entangled with literary genius.

I'll note that my interest in the subject is personal: My mother suffered from Roethke's disease, now called Bipolar I. The disease is marked by depressions and mania, a pathologically elevated mood; in her case, manic episodes frequently led to commitment to psychiatric hospitals. I have witnessed firsthand – many times – the expansive delusions, hallucinations, racing thoughts, and incoherent speech of the illness. When Roethke speaks of losing himself in oneness with a blade or a lion, I get that. As it happens, I inherited – from either my father or mother, or both – the closely related condition known as Bipolar II, a well-controlled condition in my own case. Bipolar II, untreated, is characterized by long spells of depression interrupted by spurts of hypomania, a mentally excited mood that can be elated and immensely productive, yet stops shy of full-blown mania.

Bizarre modes of expression associated with mania and depression are common in great literature – to some extent, they define it. When Blake speaks of “the invisible worm that flies in the night in the howling storm”; when, in Hopkins, “hoarse leaves crawl on hissing ground”; when Eliot likens the evening sky to “a patient etherized upon a table,” we are yanked off the straight sunny path into caverns where the imagination knits the roots of unconnected things, often with startling effects.

In modern psychiatric discourse, Plato's madness of the Muses would not be schizophrenia, which disables the brain. Rather, it would be parsed and pieced out among the various mood disorders: mania, depression, hypomania, and anxiety, and their many dozens of mixtures, patterns and variations. These have been the dark and usually secret companions of countless writers, composers, and other artists. Unlike the ancient Muses, they aren't genius itself – they don't whisper the brilliant lines verbatim – but they share

a disreputable and close familial tie with the creative imagination, like rowdy cousins who show up in a jeep with two cases of beer and plans for a wild all-nighter.

Psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison, co-author, with Frederick K. Goodwin, of *Manic Depressive Illness*, the standard psychiatric textbook on bipolar disorders, and an enthusiastic student of literature, explored the nexus of madness and art in *Touched With Fire*. After studying the lives of noted artists for signs of mood disorders (a study that extended to their immediate relatives, since these are heritable diseases), Jamison came up with a very long list of affected masters.

Eliot, for example, was hospitalized for psychiatric treatment, as were Roethke, Robert Lowell, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, and William Faulkner. John Berryman committed suicide – nearly always an act of depression – as did Hart Crane, Vachel Lindsay, Anne Sexton, Ernest Hemingway, and Sylvia Plath. Jamison's summary in Appendix B of *Touched with Fire* also includes Blake, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Dickens, Tennyson, Whitman, Melville, Samuel Clemens, Ibsen, Strindberg, Tolstoy, Henry and William James, Zola, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound, among others. Some who lived in the twentieth century had – like Roethke – been formally diagnosed as suffering from a specific affective disorder.

Like Plato – a melancholic himself, according to Aristotle – many biographers and psychologists have noted the overlap of artistic temperament and moody instability. One psychiatrist's study at the Iowa Writer's Workshop concluded, based on personal interviews, that 43% of the faculty had suffered some kind of bipolar disorder over the course of their lives. When Dr. Nancy Andreasen folded in severe depression, alcoholism, and drug abuse, the percentage of possible affective disorder reached 80%.

Literary works are commonly analyzed in terms of tone, shape, movement, character, diction, setting, and theme, which all inform each other. Let's not overlook mood, which likewise informs them all.

Depression is the flip side of mania; in terms of artistic vision, the two can't be untangled. Like mania, it comes to art bearing rich gifts: empathy, black humor, introspection, awareness of the fallen sparrow and the bag lady sorting through the dumpster, knowledge purchased with pain and isolation. A sense of desolation is frequently tinged with thoughts of hopeless struggle and suicide. Depression wells up regularly in Roethke's poetry ("Dolor," discussed below, is a good example).

A contemporary example of the power of a bleak vision is Mary Clearman Blew, who writes through her recurrent depressions. Her native country in Montana's Judith Basin isn't a majestic tableau in which men and women heroically conquer the soil and sagebrush; her five-generation memoir, *All But the Waltz*, depicts it as an implacably hostile place that impoverishes or starves out ranchers with drought and plunging commodity prices.

Ultimately, life itself – not just the Judith Basin – is unforgiving. Blew's *Balsamroot* – which depicts a beloved aunt's slide into dementia – must be one of the most unsparing and harrowing accounts of old age ever written: "Tears roll down her cheeks and course through her wrinkles," Blew writes. "I have never seen her cry before, I have to force myself to look. I hate this altered face, like bleached wax, flaccid and sprouted with white whiskers, and I hate the traces of the real Auntie under the ruins, the stubborn jut of her head, her big brown eyes swimming with her claims on me" (61).

There's no healing, deliverance or redemption for proud Aunt Imogene, no dignity of age or final, heartwarmingly lucid moment. Her fate is the locked-down wing of a nursing home, "a place battened down for a last stand, where pale cadavers gaze from their beds or hung over aluminum walkers in the halls" (83), whose residents include "the woman with the iron-gray bobbed hair who often tries to take her clothes off, the shriveled little woman who wants my purse, the robust old fellow who crawls around behind furniture and eavesdrops" (86) and a deeply wrinkled woman whose social skills consist of shouting, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!" (87).

To mine poetry like this out of the darkest veins of human experience, one must descend to the underworld and come back alive, as Roethke, Styron, Dante, and so many others have. Blew belongs to the faculty of the Rainier Writing Workshop; I interviewed her in August 2010 during a residency at Pacific Lutheran University. She spoke of primal connections among mood, vision, creation – and survival. "It's a matter of writing for your life," she said. She told of listening to one of Bach's darker compositions, written shortly after the death of his first wife. "We expect Bach to be so measured and precise and formal, and this piece is measured and precise and formal and yet is straining against something much, much larger. The image I came up with is, it's as though he's spinning a cobweb over an abyss. That's often how I've felt about writing."

Blew recalled being in Reno for a conference when "the depression hit" and brought thoughts of suicide. "I was alone in a hotel room, and it was pretty bad to the point where I was looking at the high windows and imagining my way out. And I just started writing, writing compulsively, about nothing in particular. And I wrote and I wrote and I wrote . . . What I was writing is nothing I'd want to keep or care about, it was

just that spider web of words that was keeping me away from the windows, from thinking about the windows.”

In “Elegy” (*The Far Field*), Roethke wrote of his own tough, brave aunt, Tillie, who had a face “like a rain-beaten stone” and who “asked no quarter and gave none . . .”:

Who sat with the death when the relatives left,
 Who fed and tended the infirm, the mad, the epileptic,
 And, with a rash rasp of a laugh at herself,
 Faced up to the worst.
 I recall how she harried the children away all the late summer
 From the one beautiful thing in her yard, the peachtree;
 How she kept the wizened, the fallen, the misshapen for herself,
 And picked and pickled the best, to be left on rickety doorsteps. (lines 8-15)

And for all her courage and compassion, Roethke’s Tillie, like Blew’s Imogene, comes to a cruel end:

And yet she died in agony,
 Her tongue, at the last, thick, black as an ox’s. (16-17)

Roethke’s poetry is more manic than depressive – manic in terms of expansiveness, dynamism, extravagant wordplay, astonishing metaphors and other leaps of association. This high end of the mood spectrum is intensely expressive and energetic. The phrase psychiatry probably uses most often to describe mania is “flight of ideas.”

Manic ideas are startled sparrows – flocks and flocks of them, whirling and breaking – and the cranium cannot begin to hold them. A man or woman experiencing a full-blown manic episode is often a volcano erupting with words and sounds, compulsively talking, scribbling, mumbling, penning loose verse or long, cockeyed ramblings. *Manic-Depressive Illness* notes that manic thought and expression is characterized by “combinatory thinking” in which percepts, ideas, and images are merged incongruously, often with “humor, flippancy and playfulness” (397). The disease is sometimes horrifying and hilarious at the same time. In America’s first psychiatric treatise, published in 1812, author Benjamin Rush includes a manic patient’s monologue. Excerpts:

Money commands sublunary things, and makes the mare go; it will buy salt mackerel, made of ten-penny nails. Enjoyment is the happiness of virtue. Yesterday cannot be recalled. I can only walk in the night-time, when I can eat pudding enough. I shall be eight years old tomorrow. They say R.W. is in partnership with J.W. I believe they are about as good as people in common – not better, only on certain occasions, when, for instance, a man wants to buy chincopins and to import salt to feed pigs.

(33)

This is not pure babbling, if you look at it closely. In fact, it might be possible to pass off the first sentence as something right out of Roethke’s working notebooks. It’s a wildly inventive and verbally stunning way to describe the power of money, with a

griffin's tail of a phrase – “made of ten-penny nails” – that sounds like pure lunacy until you connect “penny” with money.

The rest of the excerpt slips quickly into the padded room, but the associations are strangely fascinating: pudding and nocturnal walks; the virtue of R.W., J.W., and the purchase of chincopins, and the importation of salt to feed pigs, but only “on certain occasions.” This isn't a random assemblage of nonsense; these connections are somehow making sense to the patient, and I feel something compelling in them – if only the odd certainty behind them. Roethke's wilder leaps – such as “an eye comes out of the wave” in “The Shape of the Fire,” or “lewd monkey tails” in “The Weed Puller” – have something of the same quality. They sound as authoritative as they seem daft.

Such combinatory thinking often displays what philosophy calls “category error,” a blunder of predication that fuses fundamentally incompatible words and ideas. You can say “A citizen can vote.” Stretching things, you can even say “A dog can vote.” (Maybe with its paws.) You cannot say “a theorem can vote,” “the French Enlightenment can vote,” or “constitutional checks and balances can vote” and still remain within the bounds of rational thought. That kind of thinking can land you in the psych ward, but it can also be imported into writing, as a conscious technique, to create startling and powerful poetry and prose. An example is May Swenson's “Question,” (*Nature: Poems Old and New*), which employs manic techniques to explore the paradox and whimsical possibilities of incorporeal life.

Body my house

my horse my hound

what will I do
when you are fallen
Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt
Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead
How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye
With cloud for shift
how will I hide? (1-21)

On the face of it, some of this is nonsensical. Wind can't be an eye. A dog can't be bright. But the poem works, and the strange juxtapositions make it unforgettable. There's far more to the human mind than rationality, and elusive truths can be

illuminated through seemingly impossible combinations. The nineteenth century German chemist Friedrich Kekule famously discovered the mysterious structure of the benzene molecule while day-dreaming about a snake eating its own tail. Eureka! Benzene turned out to be a ring of carbon and hydrogen. The ringed snake – an ancient, archetypal symbol – had no logical connection to benzene’s observed chemical properties, but Kekule’s mind mysteriously connected them to tease out a deeply hidden scientific truth.

Mania turns the psyche into a cauldron. From *Manic Depressive Illness*:

During hypomanic and manic states, thinking becomes very fluid and productive – to the point of loosening of normal patterns of association, as well as racing thoughts and flights of ideas. The dendritic, branching-out quality of manic thinking was described by nineteenth century art critic and writer John Ruskin:

“I roll on like a ball, with this exception, that contrary to the usual laws of motion, I have no friction to contend with in my mind ... I am almost sick and giddy with the quantity of things in my head – trains of thought beginning and branching to infinity, crossing each other, and all tempting and wanting to be worked out.” (37)

To give some sense of what this looks like from the inside, I’ll recount something of my own experience. I began to write creatively shortly after I turned fourteen, in the fall of my ninth grade. This was not the result of years of cultivating my talent, special classes in writing or a study of literature. A few months earlier, while still thirteen, I

began developing an interest in odd words (“phlegm,” for example) and wordplay. The imaginative writing struck me suddenly; by “struck,” I mean that I didn’t plan it, seek it or even want it; it just happened to me. I began writing bad juvenile science fiction – the kind of stories my friends and I read – in an eerily authoritative voice. I’d sit down at an old manual typewriter and spend hours in that rapture known to any creative writer – that condition of being entirely consumed with the story and its language, thinking on the page, seeing the very process of writing opening unexpected possibilities that could not have been seen from outside the story. While the plots were awful, the sentences pressed forward on their own steam, and my friends would eagerly read my productions when I brought them to school. This was a payoff, but I was writing because I *had* to, not because I wanted to. It was more symptom than choice.

As it happened, my first impulse to write creatively coincided precisely with the first onset of my Bipolar II and my first episodes of hypomania. By and large, the hypomania was a misery. At school, it often made me goofy, over-excited, and a compulsive talker. At night it would take the form of severe insomnia. My brain would kick into overdrive about the time I wanted to be falling to sleep. I would lie on my back, staring at the back of my eyelids, and watch the workings of my mind become a fireworks display. It was almost as if I were a spectator helplessly thinking, “Where’s the off switch on this thing?” Some part of my mind always remained detached from the pyrotechnics and able to observe the flight of ideas from the ground. I might compare it to what happens when a tooth chips: The tongue acts as if it has a brain of its own; you can’t make it stop probing the anomaly until it finally loses interest. It’s part of you;

you're aware of it; it's supposed to be under your command – nevertheless, it does what it damn well wants to do.

In psychiatric terms, my thoughts were dendritic – they branched out from each other furiously, branches giving birth to new branches almost randomly. In a typical night, I might be grieving my unrequited love for my Crush-of-the-Month, then thinking about the color blue (maybe she'd worn a blue dress that day), then about dogfights over Britain, then back to Crush-of-Month, then to composing the long heartfelt speech that would win her love, then interstellar travel, then Saturday's skiing plans, then the prospect of going to Hell, then my troubled parents, then what college I'd go to, then the upcoming wrestling season; on and on and on. The ideas would crowd together and start to overlap, the partitions among them dissolving, the category errors multiplying, long into the night, sometimes leaving me with four or five hours of sleep. Every few weeks would come a juxtaposition of ideas that made me leap from the bed and scribble it down furiously.

I remember the first time this happened. My mind was toying with the oddity of light switches, then the concept of absolute darkness, then reptiles, then – shazam! – those ideas latched onto each other and gelled into the premise of a story: a man trapped by large, purple, alien lizards, forced into absolute sensory deprivation until he lost his sanity, then transformed into a perfectly submissive slave and eventual meal for the scaly monsters. Awful, yes, but no worse than the plots of sci-fi found in the junior high library. The resulting story had a curious energy and authority that made it readable, if only to other fourteen-year-old boys. I had no choice but to write the story; the

juxtapositions almost exploded from the electricity of my brain; they *demand*ed to be put on paper.

On an imagination like Theodore Roethke's, a rush of florid, entangled ideas is not wasted. Here is his account of the onset of a manic episode, as recorded in *The Glass House* by close friend and biographer Allan Seager:

For no reason I started to feel very good. Suddenly I knew how to enter into the life of everything around me. I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, even a rabbit. I didn't sleep much. I just walked around with this wonderful feeling. One day I was passing a diner and all of a sudden I knew what it felt like to be a lion. I went into the diner and said to the counter-man, "Bring me a steak. Don't cook it. Just bring it." So he brought me this raw steak and I started eating it. The other customers made like they were revolted, watching me. And I began to see that maybe it was a little strange. (101)

That kind of latitude in seeing the world can come in handy. But mania itself does not confer artistic greatness; if it did, psychiatric hospitals would be crowded with accomplished writers, composers, painters, sculptors. Bipolarity is emphatically a *disease*, often excruciating, crippling, life-devastating, and lethal. A brain in the grip of mania is not a font of inspiration so much as a pest house of pathological, tangled, and overheated ideas, images, and feelings. Yet mania's profusion of thought and melting of

boundaries seems to leave the gifted and the disciplined with a residue of associational fluency they put to good use.

Manic-Depressive Illness excerpts a study Andreasen published in 1975:

Both writers and manics tend to sort in large groups, change dimensions while in the process of sorting, arbitrarily change starting points, or use vague distantly related concepts as categorizing principles ...

What distinguished the two groups was control:

The writers were capable of controlled flights of fancy during the process of sorting, while the manics tend to sort many objects for bizarre or personalized reasons ... (398)

Here's a crucial distinction: effective writer vs. mentally disordered manic. So far, I've come close to conflating the two classes, but it's time to explore the complex frontiers between them – frontiers that, in Roethke's case, met inside the same brain.

According to Seager, Roethke kept at his poetry through his psychotic episodes: "He did not stop writing. He worked continually and many of his poems were written in hospitals" (106).

Yet the final products are the clearly the work of a methodical, careful writer, even when their manic quotient is high. His student and later colleague David Wagoner, a highly accomplished poet in his own right, distilled thousands of pages of Roethke's

notes into a 282-page compilation, *Straw for the Fire*. In his introduction, Wagoner describes Roethke's controlled (if idiosyncratic) creative process:

As datings in his own hand prove, he returned to completed notebooks, often after an interval of several years, and hunted for what he could use, recombining old and new images, lines, or whole passages on related themes; these fragments in their turn would apparently suggest new rhythms, associations, and ideas, out of which a new poem would usually evolve. (10)

Roethke came into his own artistically in the middle 1940s as – with sometimes psychotic language and technique – he turned up rocks and uprooted chthonic truths in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, including “Dolor,” the greenhouse poems, and “The Lost Son.” He wasn't much for describing his own creative process, but there is a fair record of what he was doing at the time. In *The Glass House*, Seager quotes James Turner Jackson, another close friend of Roethke's who was present at the creation:

“*Lost Son* was written in huge swatches. With run-on chants, dirges coming forth pell-mell. Sense of continuity uppermost at all times – even though particular poems in *Lost Son* were later detached and presented as individual poems.” (146)

Seager follows with his own observation:

It was at this fruitful time that Ted entered a phase of manic excitement that was a prelude to his second mental episode. He had gone ten years without any but the ups and downs of cheerfulness and dejection that were normal for him. To have recognized the onset of a second attack – and he did recognize it, for he relished the immense manic vitality of the beginning, tried to preserve it and keep it under his control – certainly frightened him with the realization that his balance was so precarious that he could lose it without trying. (146)

Let's look more closely at my favorite of these poems, "Dolor." It merges the depressive and the manic, yet the lines remain exquisitely controlled:

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,
Desolation in immaculate public places,
Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
Endless duplication of lives and objects.
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,

Silt, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
 Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
 Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces. (1-13)

This is the product of a deeply careful mind. Yet it's also a madcap dance: pencils are inexorably sad; "misery" attaches to folders and glue; "desolation" overlaps "immaculate"; basin and pitcher possess "unalterable pathos." The concepts are depressive, the language tortured maniacally, the results beautiful. In fact, the weakest point in the poem is its single lucid moment: "endless duplication of lives and objects," a flat, prosaic phrase that doesn't inhabit the poem's language or share its psychotic vision.

"Dolor" illustrates how mania crumples the rational borders of thought, and scrambles eggs with elephants and elegance and eleven. Along the opposite axis of mood, the poem imposes despair on the inanimate, precisely as depression paints everything in sight – stop signs, windows, football games – with unutterable bleakness. The double-barreled insanity somehow *makes sense*. Who can't glimpse the dreary, regimented souls tiger-caged behind those sad pencils?

Mania is a matter of degree; normal people feel happy much of the time, but mania pushes euphoria past the point of balance. The parallel in writing is not complicated: the modifiers and metaphors of manic style, prose and verse, are more extreme, even bizarre, than those of equally competent "sane" writing. Mania finds more likeness in unlike things and often produces effects with a pathological edge.

As a contrast, consider Karl Shapiro's "Auto Wreck," from *Karl Shapiro:*

Selected Poems:

Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating,
 And down the dark one ruby flare
 Pulsing out red light like an artery,
 The ambulance at top speed floating down
 Past beacons and illuminated clocks
 Wings in a heavy curve, dips down,
 And brakes speed, entering the crowd. (1-7)

The inspired metaphor here is “pulsing out red light like an artery.” But this isn’t a mad ear hearing an echo from another planet; it is sanity paying microscopic attention to what’s immediately at hand. The leap from red to red, from flashing to pulsing, from there to ambulance-light/arterial-spurting, is acrobatic but not galactic: it makes the reader *see* – not just look at – what’s already in front of his face. Like manic metaphor, it is vividly expressionistic, but the cow dances gracefully without jumping over the moon.

In contrast, Roethke’s leap from “unalterable pathos” to “basin and pitcher” pulls us through a trapdoor into mysterious, nether parts of the mind; it pries our own sanity open a bit in the bargain. The manic style is not artistically superior to the sane, but it’s probably a better nutcracker for certain hard-shelled psychic truths.

Again, the mania and the writer must be distinguished. Manic techniques found in the art must be separated from the health or illness of the artist. A very ill writer may produce sober, non-scary work – might have to, in fact, for the sake of survival. A perfectly sane writer may produce phrases whispered from the dark side of the moon. Some manic symptoms, such as compulsive joking, combinatory thoughts, and identity-

shifting delusions, make for grand literary techniques; they may have been among the first storytelling techniques of the human race.

As Seager observed, Roethke consciously exploited his illness to create art. In one notebook, in *Straw for the Fire*, Roethke said so himself: “Make the language take really desperate jumps” (171). “The Lost Son” opens with “The Flight,” which conveys the desperation of a man fighting his way out of a grave or some other underworld:

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
 I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
 A slow drip over stones,
 Toads brooding in wells.
 All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
 I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
 Saying,
 Snail, snail, glister me forward,
 Bird, soft-sigh me home.
 Worm, be with me.
 This is my hard time. (1.1-11)

Roethke didn't think poems should be reduced to mere explanation, and his certainly can't be. “The essence of prose is to perish – that is to say, to be ‘understood’” (*Straw for the Fire*, 195). But in “Open Letter,” an article published in 1950, he did write about the composition of “The Lost Son”:

“‘The Flight’ is just what it says it is: a terrified running away – with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting (the voices, etc.); the protagonist so geared-up, so over-alive that he is hunting, like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the subhuman. These he sees and yet does not see; they are almost tail-flicks, from another world, seen out of the corner of the eye. In a sense he goes in and out of rationality; he hangs in the balance between the human and the animal.”
(On Poetry and Craft 50)

This paragraph comes near to articulating my thesis in Roethke’s own words. It points to a precise nexus of creative irrationality, discipline, semi-psychotic vision, and manic technique that produced the breakthrough poems of a literary giant. As Seager observed, Roethke *used* his illness – exploiting its “immense manic vitality” – before it sent him to the hospital. Roethke describes the process of composition explicitly in terms of mania. First, the psychic condition: “hallucinatory,” “voices,” “geared-up,” “over-alive.” Then the creative but deliberate “hunting, like a primitive, for ... some clue to existence” Then the seeing-but-not-seeing of “tail-flicks, from another world, seen out of the corner of the eye” while passing “in and out of rationality”

Tail-flicks, desperate leaps: “The moon said, back of an eel ...” (“The Lost Son,” 1.29) “Who stunned the dirt into noise?” (2.5) “The weeds whined, / the snakes cried, / The cows and briars / Said to me: Die ...” (3.9-12) We can psychoanalyze the lines of “The Lost Son,” but that would miss the point; they are about cries, hauntings,

movements sensed but not seen, dissolvings of self, buddings, stirrings, orgasms, escapes, exhaustions. The poem is a carefully honed document of the raw primitive, a vision of the world as a toddler might see it: jumbled, inexplicable, and teeming with pure phenomena. “Live in a perpetual great astonishment,” Roethke admonished himself (*Straw for the Fire* 179). He explicitly draws on the child by reverting to nursery rhyme and nonsense:

The shape of a rat?
 It's bigger than that,
 It's less than a leg
 And more than a nose,
 Just under the water
 It usually goes. (“The Lost Son” 1.44-49)

Roethke, either on the cusp of psychosis or drawing from its scramble, is deliberately occupying – and writing from – the no-man’s-land between the rational and irrational, “the human and the animal.”

Much of Roethke’s language is characteristic of mania. “Rhymes, punning, and sound associations increase during mania ... many patients spontaneously start writing poetry while manic,” according to studies cited by *Manic-Depressive Illness* (398). Frank Richarz, a nineteenth-century psychologist, observed that “in mania thoughts tend to form strings of ideas ... that link together by their content, alliteration or assonance. In racing thoughts, the ideas come and go rapidly as if they were hunting each other or

continuously overlapping without any link between them.” Or as Roethke might say, tail flicks.

Writers – the kind who’d be doing fifteen-to-twenty if writing were a felony – are in love with the language and always on the prowl for fresh ways to use it. They’re much like the manic patients who compulsively pun, rhyme, alliterate, assonate, pour out words torrentially with wild associative leaps. This doesn’t mean they suffer from mania – most don’t – but those who do not can often enter modes of thought similar to the manic’s and employ similar but more effective verbal inventiveness.

In prose, one of the purest distillations of word play for its own sake is Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Open a page at random, you find something like:

Ah, but she was the queer old skeowsha anyhow, Anna Livia, trinkettoes!
 And sure he was the quare old butz too, Dear Dirty Dumpling,
 foosterfather of fingalls and dotthergills. Gammer and gaffer we’re all
 their gangsters. Hadn’t he seven dams to wive him? And every dam had
 her seven crutches. And every crutch had its seven hues. And each hue
 had a differing cry. (215)

James Joyce, though a heavy drinker at times, had no known mental illness. Yet Carl Jung, after reading *Ulysses*, concluded that he was schizophrenic.

Compare Joyce to the undeniably certifiable Roethke. A passage from “O, Thou Opening, O” (*The Waking*):

You fat unnecessary hags,
 You enemies of skin, –
 A dolphin's at my door!
 I'm twinkling like a twig!
 The lark's my heart!
 I'm wild with news!
 My fancy's white! I am my faces,
 Love. (3.20-28)

As in mania, there's no explicit deduction, induction, or syllogism; the logic is "irrational" – wildly associative, sensual and mad; it is driven by the properties of language and abounds in alliteration and assonance.

A passage from "The Shape of the Fire" (*The Lost Son and Other Poems*):

Have you come to unhinge my shadow?
 Last night I slept in the pits of a tongue.
 The silver fish ran in and out of my special bindings;
 I grew tired of the ritual of names and the assistant keeper of the mollusks:
 Up over a viaduct I came, to the snakes and sticks of another winter,
 A two-legged dog hunting a new horizon of howls. (2.14-19)

The lines are full of category error. Rationally, shadows can neither be hinged nor unhinged. "The pits of a tongue" are not places to sleep. "Snakes and sticks" are characteristic of winter only by some unfathomable quirk of Roethke's thinking.

Elsewhere in his poetry: “What bleeds when metal breaks?” “Can feathers eat me?” “The wind gives me scales.” (“The Long Alley,” *The Lost Son and Other Poems.*); “I’ve been asleep in a bower of dead skin.” “I wore the sun worn with ease.” (“Praise to the End!” *Praise to the End!*); “Who cares about the dance of dead underwear, or the sad waltz of paper bags?” (“O, Thou Opening, O,” *The Waking*); “a song tied to a tree,” “The oyster’s weeping foot” (“Words for the Wind,” *Words for the Wind*). This is confusion in the literal sense of fusing together what doesn’t belong together; Roethke does it deliberately to midwife new meanings into the English language.

Let me simply list some of the aphorisms and fragments Wagoner collected in *Straw for the Fire*. They point to his love of both disorder and discipline, his appreciation of his illness, and the ways it enriched his art:

Reason, keep away from my door. (156)

My manias walking in their blaze. (157)

God robbed poets of their minds that they might be made expressions of his own. (158)

Give me the madman’s sudden insight and the child’s spiritual dignity.

(183)

The artist (not the would-be): you may have deep insights – but you also need the sense of form. Sometimes the possession of the first without the second may be tragic. (207)

It is well to keep in touch with chaos. (196)

Poem: one more triumph over chaos. (172)

A man who knows what his hallucinations mean and acts upon them; who
in his most desperate time snatches some wisdom from the fire ... (214)

I always wanted to step in and out of reality; and after a while God let me.
(219)

Perspective: Roethke, though at times seriously ill, was as capable of divine sanity as he was of inspired madness. A defining difference between manic and sane brilliance is the latter's surgical observation of the here and now, the exacting depiction of the concrete.

For example, in "A Field of Light" (*The Lost Son and Other Poems*):

There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of cedars,
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle. (3.18-19)

In "I Cry, Love! Love!" (*Praise to the End!*), an image of unforgettable loveliness and precision:

A fish jumps, shaking out flakes of moonlight.
A single wave starts lightly and easily shoreward,
Wrinkling between weeds in shallower water,
Lifting a few twigs and broken leaves,
Then washing up over small stones. (3.6-10)

That leaping fish and ripple could not have been more exquisitely observed.

These lines help illustrate another defining difference between manic and sane genius: The manic trades in radical difference, the sane in radical likeness. In the lines above, the fish shaking out “flakes of moonlight” is a shockingly clear glimpse of the ordinary, an image so original and vividly rendered that it becomes magical, the first leaping trout we ever saw as toddlers standing by the banks of a river. The flakes belong; they are not portents of something eerily out of place; they are literal reflections of literal moon above literal water. Similitude governs, like the “ruby flare” on Shapiro’s ambulance “pulsing out red light like an artery.” In the world this fish swims in, there are no carnivorous feathers, no sleeping in the pits of tongues.

Yet a few lines later in the same poem, we’re back in a manic dreamscape:

Who untied the tree? I remember now.

We met in a nest. Before I lived.

The dark hair sighed.

We never enter

Alone. (3.15-19)

This combining of the manic and radically sane visions in a single poem demonstrates Roethke’s deliberate use of both to dramatize each. One side benefit is that the reader is alternatively grounded in clarity, then led through the streams of psychotic associations. The reader is rarely completely adrift, and the shifts from one mode to the other make for a dynamic impossible in a work that sticks resolutely to either.

When not crippled outright by his illness, Roethke appears to have been able to freely draw on his manic tendencies, or the memory of them, or the odd grooves they cut in his mind. A single poem might contain nursery rhyme, somber meditation, hard crystalline imagery, and hallucinogenic warps. The reader is thrown off balance, then grounded and steadied; the language is taken places it has never been before.

Mania accounted for much of the vision and power in Roethke's poetry, though that mania could never have been translated into great art without intelligence, judgment, method, discipline and painstakingly developed technique. It seems safe to extrapolate the same psychic dynamics into the writing of many other artists who were, in Stephen Spender's words, "touched with fire" – blessed with the curse of fruitful madness.

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