THE EXISTENTIAL CHARACTER OF THEODORE ROETHKE'S NATURAL IMAGERY: KIERKEGAARD, VITALISM, AND GENERATIVE PARADOX

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an original analysis of the writings of American poet Theodore Roethke (1908-1963). Specifically, this thesis argues that in order to be more fully understood Roethke's writings ought to be examined within an existential philosophical context, and not merely within literary, psychoanalytic, or ecocritical contexts. Towards this end, this thesis provides an abundance of original research that exposes the existential influences that impressed themselves upon Theodore Roethke and that shaped his identity as a poet. It argues that Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) exerted a particularly strong influence on Roethke, and thus an extensive amount of time is spent connecting Kierkegaard and Roethke and showing how Roethke's writing reflects elements of Kierkegaard's philosophy, especially on the issues of anxiety, despair, and paradox. Additionally, this thesis also demonstrates how Roethke's writing, especially in his poetry of death, struggle, and natural growth, contains a sense of resurgent dynamism akin to that which is found in the tradition of vitalism, and it shows that understanding Roethke within this tradition helps us to understanding him more broadly as an existential poet. Ultimately this thesis provides an original analysis of Roethke as an existential poet, and it shows how Roethke's readings of philosophy, and especially of Kierkegaard's philosophy, directly influenced the existential character of his poetry. Drawing this connection – which is done in more detail in this thesis than in any previous work of Roethke scholarship – allows for many of Roethke's recurring poetic themes, such as growth, death, paradox, and pedagogy to be understood in a more complete, more philosophically contextualized way.

DEDICATION

To those who continue to live and think existentially, even in the present age. To my friends that I've spent the last several years laughing with. It has invigorated me. And to my parents, brother, and Amberly who have each supported me in my academic pursuits.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter-century there has not been much academic work that focuses on creating a sustained reading of the work of American poet Theodore Roethke (1908-1963). Most major studies concerning Roethke and his work appeared from the last few years preceding his death to the mid-1980s. To risk sounding dramatic, his larger body of work – apart from a few canonical pieces such as "My Papa's Waltz" and "In a Dark Time" – seems to have been left out of influential reappraisals of modernist poetry in the last few decades, particularly as the dominance of transnational approaches has foregrounded well-traveled poets whose work engages with imperialism, the hegemony (or not) of the nation-state, and the global political landscape.

However, of the extant recent scholarship on Roethke, some important trends can be identified. The secondary literature surrounding Roethke's poetry can broadly be classified into five different categories: psychoanalytic interpretations, ecocritical interpretations, mystical interpretations, inheritance/influence interpretations, and formalist interpretations (all of which are represented in the appended bibliography). Of course, any attempt at this kind of classification will fail in some way, and there will be works that do not fit in any category or are squarely between two categories.[1] The point of this attempt at classification is to reveal a noteworthy gap in Roethke scholarship: a serious engagement with the existential dimensions of Roethke's poetry (Specifically in the tradition of Søren Kierkegaard). The need for such a study is, as will be demonstrate in this project, overwhelming, and until such a project has been undertaken there will be a significant gap in Roethke studies.

[1] *The Glass House* by Allan Seager, for example, alternates between at least three of these modalities.

This lapse in the scholarship may be attributable to multiple causes. Firstly, most of these authors were focused on pursuing ends other than those of existential philosophical concern, and thus must not have been motivated to pursue this connection.[2] Secondly, those who did recognize the connection may have taken the obvious and explicit connection between Roethke and Kierkegaard to constitute a comprehensive understanding of this connection. Their reticence on this topic suggests that they think understanding the Kierkegaardian existential character of Roethke's only discloses information about Roethke's work to a very limited extent, whereas I think the influence and similarity in style extends beyond the mere explicit statements of influence made by Roethke. Throughout this thesis I will contend that there is a generally existential, and particularly Kierkegaardian vision of existence at the core of Roethke's oeuvre.

Extant studies of Roethke's poetry have accomplished a great deal in analyzing the many dimensions of his life and work. However, these studies have failed adequately to examine the existential vision of life that undergirds and infuses the broad body of his work. I will justify this claim by extensively examining his poetic writings, his journal entries, and his prose writings. In the first half of this thesis – apart from my analysis of "Duet" - I will primarily focus on notes, letters, and prose writings by Roethke; in the second half of it I will focus primarily on his poetry.

No fewer than seven scholars have made cursory mention of Kierkegaardian elements and influences on Roethke's oeuvre, but only as a peripheral concern.[3] Instead of as a peripheral

[2] Blessing's book is an exception. He explicitly deals with themes which would be helped by an existential analysis, but does not pursue it. I can only speculatively attribute this to a different way of thinking about similar things, or that he did not have a background in existential analysis.
[3] The seven scholars I am referring to here are Neal Bowers, Richard Blessing, Karl Malkoff, Rosemary Sullivan, Ladislava Khailova, George Wendt, and Leigh-Anne Duke. Citations of their work may be found in the bibliography.

concern, I will make the examination of the existential and Kierkegaardian character of Roethke's poetry the primary concern of this project. Studying Roethke in this way should help illuminate certain elements of Roethke's work that have been previously unexamined or understudied. First I will make some admittedly speculative attempts at tracing the lines of existential philosophical influence on Roethke – especially as they appear as clues in the poem "Duet." Then I will examine some general existential themes that appears in Roethke – such as death-in-life, self-identity, and mortality – before drawing a connection between Roethke's vitalistic language and the existential process of self-discovery and self-examination. Finally I will discuss the specific relationship between Kierkegaard's thoughts on paradox and pedagogy and relate them to Roethke's thinking on the same topic.

1.1 Kierkegaard and Roethke on Time and Understanding: A Methodological Justification

In my endeavor to demonstrate the Kierkegaardian character of Roethke's poetry I will initially take a backwards-facing perspective. This perspective assumes that something meaningful can be understood about Roethke's work by beginning at the end of his poetic career and moving backwards through his work. This methodological position has the potential to disclose much of the essential character of Roethke's thought; it assumes that Roethke's life and work existed on an intelligible trajectory of thought, and it demonstrates that Roethke's existential thought became more explicitly disclosed near the end of his life, but that even Roethke's early work contained many existential elements. There is much to be found in his notebooks, poetry, and prose to support this claim regarding the trajectory of his thought. Moreover, while this backwards-facing methodology may seem unwarranted, the justification for this mode of analysis itself – as well as the inspiration for it – will disclose a significant amount about Kierkegaard's influence on Roethke's thinking about temporality and self-understanding.

One major idea that Roethke took up from Kierkegaard is the idea that we are fundamentally riven between past and future; that there is a temporal tension that is an essential constituent of what it means to be human. According to this idea, the ephemeral is also clashing with the eternal. The ephemeral (the successive series of day-to-day experiences) clashes with the eternal (detached, absolute ideality) in what Kierkegaard calls "the moment."[4] We are always pulled towards the past and thrown into the future. We reflect on all that has happened – how we have gotten to be how we are – while always being thrust forward into the indefinite future. There is a dramatic synthesis between these two oppositional temporal forces, and thus we are always in the process of navigating this conflicting tension between past and future. The self is not a stable being that simply moves through time, but the self *is itself the activity* of negotiating this irreconcilable temporal tension. Kierkegaard's ideas about time, identity, and self-understanding are succinctly captured in well-regarded quote from one Kierkegaard's notebooks: "It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards."[5] This quote has become perhaps one of the most famous quotes associated with Kierkegaard. It is also quite clear that this Kierkegaardian quote had a significant effect on Roethke's thinking about temporality and self-understanding. In tracing back Roethke's allusions to this Kierkegaardian idea we can find

[4] The majority of this I take from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (1844) which he wrote under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. The text will also be referred to in the next section. The following quote is emblematic Kierkegaard's thinking about time: "The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of temporality is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time. As a result, the above-mentioned division acquires its significance: the present time, the past time, the future time…. The pivotal concept in Christianity, that which made all things new, is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is the moment as the eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and the past." (CA 89-90)

[5] *Journals* [IV.A.164 (1843)]

him make mention of it as early as 1946 – almost two full decades before Kierkegaard's name ever explicitly appeared in Roethke's poetry. A reference to this Kierkegaardian idea by Roethke can be first found in a letter he wrote to the critic Kenneth Burke in 1946. In this letter Roethke writes: "One belief: 'One must go back to go forwards.'"[6] While this is a bit of a corruption of Kierkegaard's original quote, and even though Roethke did not take the time to directly attribute Kierkegaard as an inspiration for this line of thinking, the essential spirit of the quote remains: looking backwards is a good way to understand how things ended up the way that they did, but inevitably you must always continue projecting yourself and your thought into anticipations of the future and into the future itself.

Later in his personal notebooks Roethke again references this Kierkegaardian idea. In this case his reference to this idea is much closer to the original line by Kierkegaard. While in the following passage Roethke still does not mention Kierkegaard by name, the quote is clearly a reference to a Kierkegaardian idea. Roethke's notebook entry almost perfectly duplicates Kierkegaard's journal entry from 1843. Roethke writes: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."[7] Kierkegaard's thought clearly shaped Roethke's, and this section has shown just one instance of this influence among the many that exist. Many more instances of influence will be shown as this thesis proceeds. This section has also demonstrated that Roethke did not always directly give Kierkegaard attributional credit for lines and ideas that he derived from the philosopher. Only later in his life did Roethke begin frequently to make explicit reference to Kierkegaard, but existential and Kierkegaardian themes interpenetrate

[6] This information about this letter was found in an article written in 2017 by Adam Kirsch of *The New Yorker*. The article's title is "Primal Ear," and I refer to it later on page 15 as well.
[7] Blessing 23

Roethke's work – from his first book of poetry, *Open House,* written in 1942, until his death twenty-one years later in 1963.

1.2 Clues About Roethke's Existential Background Found in "Duet"

We should – as readers of Roethke and Kierkegaard – take this idea about understanding backwards but living forwards seriously. So seriously, in fact, as to shape how to go about this examination of Roethke's existential influences. I will start by "looking backwards" at Roethke's poetic and prosaic career so as to gain perspective and understanding on the question of how much Roethke was influenced by Kierkegaard and other existentialists. Then, with whatever understanding we have gleaned from this task in mind, we will move backwards into an examination of Roethke's earlier poetry and prose.

The task that I will pursue in the rest of this chapter will be to give concreteness to my claim Roethke had a deep awareness of the existential tradition, and specifically of Kierkegaard. I will mine Roethke's late-life poem "Duet" for backward-facing clues about Roethke's existential influences. Only after this, and in the following chapters, will I actually interpret Roethke's earlier poems in terms of the existential themes, modalities, and concepts that they display. With "Duet" I will primarily interpret it by looking for the clues pertaining to existential thinkers that it might make reference to.

"Duet" is comprised of a dialogue between a couple regarding their thoughts and feelings regarding Kierkegaard. The poem displays a deep familiarity with Kierkegaard's major ideas and literary style, but it also displays an awareness of the existential tradition more generally. To my knowledge there has been no academic investigation of this poem from a philosophical historical perspective, but it most certainly warrants one. I will copy the poem in full below and then begin examining its references. The poem certainly has a unique tone and

funny musical quality about it which is worth remarking on, but I will not address this quality here and will instead focus on what it shows us about Roethke's philosophical background.

She: Oh when you were little, you were really big:
Now you run to the money, it's jig, jig, jig;
You're becoming that horror, a two-legged pig
Both: - In spite of Soren Kierkegaard.

He: I'll face all that, and the Divine Absurd:
You be an adverb, I'll be a verb,
I'll spit over my chin and beyond the curb,
Both: - And close up that chapter of Kierkegaard.

She: We'll sail away from the frightful shore
Of multiple choice and Either/or
To the land where the innocent stretch and snore
Both: -With never a thought for Kierkegaard.

She: I'm shanty Irish
He: --And *pissoir* French?
She: I'm a roaring girl, an expensive wench,
Both: But at least we know one needn't blench
-In fear and trembling, dear Kierkegaard.

She: A mistress of Zen, I'll bite your thumb,
I'll jump on your belly, I'll kick your bum
Till you come to the land of Kingdom Come

Both: -Far beyond, O Beyond! Dear Kierkegaard.
He: My jug, my honey, my can of beer,
She: My ex-existentialist darling dear,
Both: Should Dame Anxiety ever come near
We'll give each other a box on the ear,
-In honor of Father Kierkegaard[8]

First I will make note of some of the more general existential appearances in this poem before moving towards the specifically Kierkegaardian elements of it.

The last stanza of this poem seems to wink and nod at both Heidegger and Unamuno. The line "My jug, my honey, my can of beer/ My ex-existentialist darling dear" appears to be

[8] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 264

making a playful reference to Heidegger's essay titled "The Thing." In "The Thing" Heidegger provides an intensive examination of the phenomenology of thingness (what we might call human-object relationality) by exhaustively examining a certain kind of thing: a jug. Heidegger's jug – which contains alcohol in the form of wine - is a site of world-disclosure for him. In "The Thing" Heidegger speaks exhaustively of the "jug," mentioning this word (*Krug*) over a hundred times in the essay. Heidegger speaks of the difference between a vessel, container, and jug, the difference between an object and a thing, and what the thingness of the thing consists in. In this essay – which is both well-regarded and often satirized – Heidegger, in his fashion, delivers bizarre lines which are sometimes considered esoteric or inscrutable, such as "But from the objectness of the object, and from the product's self-support, there is no way that leads to the thingness of the thing. What in the thing is thingly?"[9] Regarding the discussion of the jug, which dominates the essay, Heidegger records ideas about things such as:

> The jug's jugness resides in its being *qua* vessel. We become aware of the vessel's holding nature when we fill the jug. The jug's bottom and sides obviously take on the task of holding. But not so fast! When we fill the jug with wine, do we pour the wine into the sides and bottom? At most, we pour the wine between the sides and over the bottom. Sides and bottom are, to be sure, what is impermeable in the vessel.[10]

It's unclear exactly what the meaning of this reference is for Roethke, but it does seem that he is faintly mocking it while simultaneously expressing a familiarity with Heidegger.[11] Roethke was

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[9] "The Thing" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* 165

[10] Ibid. 166/167

[11] More speculatively the mention of "my honey" in Roethke's poem could be a reference to the relationship between the bee and honey that Heidegger discusses late in his *Fundamental Concepts.* I think this is less likely simply because this text by Heidegger is less well-known than "The Thing." However, just in case, here is an example of Heidegger's discussion of bees and honey. Note that he writes "honey" where he should write "nectar": "A bee [is] placed before a little bowl filled with so much honey that the bee [is] unable to suck up the honey all at once. It begins to suck and then after a while breaks off this driven activity of sucking and flies off, leaving the rest of the honey still present in the bowl…. Yet … if its abdomen is carefully cut away while it is sucking, [the] bee [simply carries] on regardless even while the honey runs out

a well-known beer drinker – who brewed his own beer[12] and had delirium tremens in the hospital from drinking so much of it[13] – so it would make sense why he would jestingly replace Heidegger's jug of wine with his own can of beer. This would keep in line with the identity he cultivated for himself, as he was known to say "I may look like a beer salesman, but I'm a poet."[14] Roethke was also known to dislike dense academic prose of the sort that characterizes Heidegger's writing, so it would make sense why Roethke might suggest that Heidegger's writing could turn someone into an "ex-existentialist." In any case, it certainly seems that Roethke makes a sly reference to Heidegger in this poem, and this would make all the more sense given that there is a strong connection of influence between Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

My claim that Roethke is making a reference to Miguel de Unamuno in this poem might be considered more interesting than the claim about Heidegger for a number of reasons. Firstly, because Unamuno is a somewhat less well-known existential philosophical figure than Heidegger, and also because Unamuno is a figure more uniquely aligned with Kierkegaard. In *The Tragic Sense of Life* – which is Unamuno's most existential philosophical work – Unamuno repeatedly refers to Kierkegaard in familial terms, and most often as "brother Kierkegaard."[15] Unamuno thought of Kierkegaard as a "spiritual Brother" insofar as Unamuno recognized that Kierkegaard thought of the activity of the inner life in a way similar to the way that he himself

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of the bee from behind. This shows conclusively that the bee by no means recognizes the presence of too much honey. It recognizes neither this nor even — though this would be expected to touch it more closely — the absence of its abdomen. There is no question of it recognizing any of this; it continues with its driven activity regardless precisely because it does not recognize that plenty of honey is still present." (242)

[12] *The Glass House* 63

[13] Ibid. 90

[14] Ibid. 54

[15] *Unamuno and Kierkegaard: Paths to Selfhood in Fiction* by Jan E. Evans is a great resource for tracking the relationship between these two thinkers, and she documents Unamuno's thinking of Kierkegaard in familial terms (pages 8 and 31, for example).

did: as a dynamic tension between warring aspects of the self. Unamuno also thought of Kierkegaard (along with Pascal and St. Augustine) as sharers in his "tragic sense of life." Roethke appears to carry on in the tradition of Unamuno by referring to Kierkegaard in "Duet" in familial terms: "Father Kierkegaard." To my knowledge no Roethke scholars have made mention of a relationship of influence between Unamuno and Roethke. However, this does not mean that one does not exist. In fact, if we dig into Roethke's letters and notebooks we can find concrete evidence to prove that Roethke knew of Unamuno. Proving this makes it more likely that Roethke was indeed cleverly making reference to Unamuno in "Duet."

In the spring of 1940 Roethke (who was at that point spending time in his hometown of Saginaw, Michigan) sent an eccentric letter to his then-girlfriend Kitty Stokes, who was at the time employed at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.[16] The letter is noteworthy for a number of reasons, least of all because he expressed a curious interest in the olfactory character of bear caves. But most important for the purpose of this investigation is the fact that Roethke explicitly expressed an interest in "that Spanish philosopher" Unamuno, and if one has found Unamuno, then one is almost certainly familiar with Kierkegaard. Here follows a passage from that letter:

> 1) Can you get any dope on how bears' caves look and smell after hibernation? 2) Is that book *Culture and Christianity* in the library or ever ordered, Oxford Press, can't think of author? 3) Are there any books by Unamuno, that Spanish philosopher? 4) Make a double set of *Phoenix* if you have time.[17]

The question that Roethke asks in this passage does not reveal too much about Roethke's knowledge of Unamuno; if anything it reveals that Roethke, at least at the time, did not know very much about Unamuno. But this also raises the question of time and biography, especially if we are trying to trace the history of Roethke's interest in the existentialists.

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[16] *The Glass House* 121
[17] *Ibid.* 121

Curiously, there is some reason to think that the above quote – which is thought to have been written in 1940 – may have actually been written at least a decade later than 1940. There are two reasons why this claim, if true, would be relevant to this examination. Firstly, it would move the time of Roethke's exposure to Unamuno closer to the time that he wrote "Duet." If this were true, this would make it seem more likely – at least prima facie – that Roethke was making reference to Unamuno in his mention of "Father Kierkegaard." This is because Unamuno would be more fresh on his mind, so to speak. Given that this putatively 1940 reference is the only explicit reference I was able to find that Roethke makes to Unamuno, this would make it seem unlikely that a full two decades later a clever Unamuno reference appeared in Roethke's poetry. But if this gap of time were actually shorter, then the plausibility of the reference would consequently become more believable. Secondly, if this quote were misdated, this would fit in with what seems to be the case in Roethke's exposure and references to the existentialists: that he read and talked about them later in his life, and that they did not much influence him earlier in his life. In an atypical chronology, existentialism seemed to attract Roethke's attention more in his latter life than in his formative and youthful years. While some may think that the core messages of existentialism are more attractive to anxious youth, this is simply just not the case for Roethke. The first Kierkegaard reference that I have documented in this paper comes from 1946, when he was 37 or 38, and they then appear sporadically after that, before finally appearing frequently in his last few years of life and death at the age of 55. As a final point, it would be a bit surprising if Roethke were exposed to Unamuno before he was exposed to Kierkegaard, given that Kierkegaard is generally regarded as the significantly more influential figure in intellectual (and perhaps literary) history. Thus one would expect an individual to be exposed to a larger literary figure before being exposed to a smaller one, in the

same way that one might expect a randomly selected American student to be familiar with Robert Frost but maybe not with Theodore Roethke.

Given these two considerations outlined above, we should at least investigate whether or not there is good reason to believe that the above quote is *not actually* from 1940. As mentioned earlier, it turns out that there are a few reasons to be suspicious of the claim that this letter is from 1940.[18]

The first reason for being suspicious of the claim that this latter is from 1940 is based on one of the other lines in the above-cited letter. Roethke makes mention of a book titled *Culture and Christianity* right before he mentions Unamuno's name. However, no book of the title *Culture and Christianity* can be found. But, upon further research, one can find that T.S. Eliot wrote a book titled *Christianity and Culture* in 1949.[19] The simple difference in the title – the words "Christianity" and "Culture" in reverse order, is not enough to prove that Roethke could not possibly have been referencing this book, especially as his saying "can't think of author?" suggests that his memory was a bit fuzzy at the time of composing the letter. Moreover, to give context, in 1949, only 4 years after Eliot's book was published, Roethke was himself in correspondence with T.S. Eliot. On August 5, 1953 Roethke sent Eliot a letter requesting Eliot to consider publishing Roethke's children's book. Eliot kindly declined, but also expressed an interest in publishing some of Roethke's poems.[20] This establishes that around this time, between 1949 and 1953, Eliot was on Roethke's mind. Obviously, if Roethke was making

[18] I should clarify that the claim I am questioning originates in *The Glass House,* which is the sole extant comprehensive written about Theodore Roethke.
[19] C.S. Lewis also wrote a short article titled "Christianity and Culture" in 1940, but this 14 page article could hardly be confused for a book.
[20] *The Glass House* 215.

reference to Eliot's book – which was first published in 1949 - his reference to Unamuno in the same letter could not have been from 1940.

There are other, perhaps even stronger reasons to think that this letter is not from 1940. Earlier in the same year Roethke writes some interesting things that we can use to question whether or not this letter was even written to Kitty Stokes in the first place. It seems that a reasonable case can be made – although by no means definitive – that this letter was actually written to Katherine Anne Porter, someone that we know that Roethke corresponded with well after he ended his relationship with Kitty Stokes. Roethke corresponded with Porter into 1949, but seems to have cut off contact with Kitty Stokes around 1940.[21]

An earlier part of the letter in which Roethke mentions Unamuno reads as follows:

> I made some pretty good butterscotch sauce, 1 ½ cups of light brown sugar, ¼ cup thin cream, ¼ cup corn syrup. Cook until a drop of it makes a soft ball in cold water. Don't overcook. My mother isn't much impressed by my cooking stories. She thinks it's sort of sissy, I guess. Well, Katherine, if I were a model person, I would be polite and cheerful but everything seems empty and futile, it really does. Call this adolescent if you like.[22]

There are two reasons to think this may indicate that the letter was written to Katherine Anne Porter. First, he explicitly addresses the person that he is writing to as "Katherine." Kitty Stokes' real name was Katherine, but he usually referred to her as Kitty. Of course there is some attributional ambiguity that could result when one is corresponding with two people of the same name; they could easily get mixed up when trying to identify which Katherine he was actually writing to. Because of this it could easily be the case that a letter thought to be written to Kitty Stokes could actually have been written to Katherine Anne Porter. It would seem odd to formally

[21] The Roethke Archives shows indications of correspondence between Roethke and Porter into 1949, the year in which the Eliot book came out, but no evidence of Roethke and Stokes communicating any time after 1940.
[22] *Glass House* 121

refer to his girlfriend as "Katherine" in the informal context of this letter. Moreover, in this letter he talks at length about cooking, and it is known that Roethke enjoyed cooking for Katherine Anne Porter.[23]

Given all of this, it at least seems possible that this letter was written later than 1940, and that Roethke's first mention of Unamuno came later in his life. However, even if this suspicion is ungrounded, and the letter was actually written to Kitty Stokes in 1940, then this process of inquiry has not been useless. Firstly, if it was written in 1940 it would demonstrate that Roethke was quite familiar with existential philosophers even as a younger man, thus adding support to my claim that the entire body of Roethke's work is deeply infused with existential themes and references.

Moreover, the attempt to trace Roethke's correspondences reveals that he lived a very energetic social life – an existential energy that is heralded throughout his work. His life was punctuated by periods spent in psychiatric institutions – episodes that he connected with his hyper-energetic mode of living. He wrote that his major issues with mental health occurred during "high" periods of psychological activity, and these episodes corresponded with periods of prolific poetic production. Of these prolific periods within institutions he even said "I'm at my best when I'm slightly depressed."[24]

He corresponded and spent time with scores of noteworthy authors and poets of his time – from Dylan Thomas to Robert Lowell to Louise Bogan to Stanley Kunitz – and it is in this lively intellectual milieu that we find the next possible juncture that Roethke could be possibly

[23] *Glass House* 118. This passage mentions Roethke cooking for Katherine Anne Porter. It also mentions that he cooked for William Carlos Williams, but that the two never "hit it off" as friends.
[24] Ibid. 106

connected to Unamuno. It will probably never be known if in fact the letter Seager cited was written to Kitty Stokes in 1940 or if it was written in 1949 or later; not all of the resources that Seager made use of in the 1960s seem to be in the archive today, and Roethke was not always in the habit of dating his letters. The mystery can remain, but what we can know for certain is that Roethke was aware of Unamuno, and that there is a possible reference to Unamuno in Roethke's "Duet."

I will present a final note on the connection between Unamuno and Roethke that also lends concreteness to the examination of the intellectual-philosophical milieu that Roethke participated in. Jonathan Blunk's recent biography of the American poet James Wright gives some new information on what Roethke did during his life, and it also gives new clues as to a period in which Roethke may have been being exposed to Unamuno. In the section of the biography that chronicles Wright's life between January and June of 1959 it is revealed that during this period Wright was undertaking an intensive study of the philosophy of Miguel de Unamuno, as well as Meister Eckhart[25], Ortega y Gassett, and Nicolas Berdyaev.[26] By this time Wright and Roethke had already developed an intense, public friendship. On August 22, 1957 Roethke and Wright went to a world heavyweight boxing championship match held in Seattle between Pete Rademacher and Floyd Patterson.[27] A letter written by Wright to Roethke almost a year later on August 5th, 1958 gives further evidence of the claim that Roethke and Wright were

[25] Wright definitely did not introduce Roethke to Meister Eckhart. In a passage from his notebooks in 1942 Roethke writes the names of these mystics without any context given: "Meister Eckhart St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi." Additionally, on page 199 of *The Glass House* Seager claims that Roethke had been studying the mystics since the 1930s.

[26] *James Wright: A Life in Poetry* 120

[27] This information was found in an article written in 2017 by Adam Kirsch in *The New Yorker* titled "Primal Ear." Full source information may be found in the appended references page.

close friends who shared intimate aspects of their lives. In this letter written to Roethke Wright candidly wrote "I have been depressed as hell. My stuff stinks, and you know it… What makes this so ironically depressing, as I say, is that I am trapped by the very thing—the traditional technique—which I labored so hard to attain…"[28] The letter goes on in this vein. We can assume from the contents of this letter and the familiarity of its tone that these two were close with one another. Indeed, James Wright was one of Roethke's students during Roethke's early teaching days, and it appears that they stayed in contact fairly continually until Roethke's death. While Roethke was staying in Halcyon House Sanitarium[29] during early 1959 Wright would regularly come to visit him. During these visits they would talk extensively. One particularly interesting account that Wright gives of visiting Roethke during this period is as follows:

> When Dave Wagoner took me to visit Ted Roethke at his rest home in Washington last January, lo and behold! Theodore the Bear, squatting among the other accursed Huns in the violent ward, surveyed my middle fingers – for both hands were stained with nicotine – and quite sanely predicted my collapse. And here I am.[30]

This letter was written to Donald Hall in June of 1959 while Wright himself was staying at Glenwood Hills Hospital for his own mental health issues. This letter testifies not only to a deep familiarity between these two – the student and the teacher learning from each other, a theme which we will explore later – but also to Roethke's sensitivity to the inner life of others; he was able to predict Wright's mental health struggles. Roethke was attuned to these possibilities – the vicissitudes of the inner life were his primary poetic concern. But, more to the point of tracing Unamuno's influence on Roethke, based on all that has just been covered, we can safely assume that during this period Wright and Roethke talked about Unamuno and – somewhat fittingly –

[28] *Memory and Landscape* 15
[29] *The Glass House* 252
[30] *James Wright: A Life in Poetry* 120

The Tragic Sense of Life. For during 1959 was when Wright was visiting Roethke frequently in the sanitarium, and 1959 is also when we know that Wright was in the middle of his close study of Unamuno.

Whether it was Wright teaching Roethke about Unamuno or the other way around is something that we cannot know, but, in the context of Roethke's Kierkegaardian-inflected pedagogy there is good reason to believe that either scenario is equally likely. As I will discuss in the last section of this paper, on at least two different occasions Roethke quoted Kierkegaard's claim that "Education begins when the teacher starts learning from the students." For Roethke education flowed both ways between teacher and student. More will be said about this idea later in the section on Roethke's existential pedagogy.

This initial foray through "Duet" – and my suspicion that Roethke's mention of "Father Kierkegaard" was an oblique reference to Unamuno's familial way of referring to Kierkegaard – has led to a confirmation that Roethke was aware of Unamuno, although it is still uncertain exactly when he began his study of Unamuno. My study of the line "my jug, my honey, my can of beer" also made the case that this line contained an oblique and comedic reference to Heidegger within it; Roethke switches Heidegger's more erudite jug of wine for a prosaic can of beer. The poem, in its implicit and explicit references, makes it clear that Roethke was generally aware of the existential tradition, and was comfortable enough with it to joke about it.

1.3 What "Duet" Reveals About Roethke's Reading of Kierkegaard

Given that my primary claim in this paper is that Roethke's poetry is deeply Kierkegaardian, and given that Kierkegaard is the only existential philosopher explicitly named in "Duet," we should now take care to examine what "Duet" displays (and does not display) about Roethke's knowledge of Kierkegaard.

Oddly enough, it seems that the only non-cursory commentary that considers this poem in a Kierkegaardian light can be found in Leigh-Ann Duke's M.A. thesis titled "Existential Elements in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke" written for Lakehead University in 1980.[31] While this thesis has been helpful in a number of ways, especially as it is the only resource that I know, other than the present thesis, that focuses specifically on Roethke and existentialism, her analysis of "Duet" seems to be missing the majority of the Kierkegaardian references that can be found embedded within this poem. I will make it my task to undertake the first comprehensive Kierkegaardian analysis of Roethke's poem "Duet," and I will seek to draw out as much information regarding Roethke's knowledge of Kierkegaard as this poem will give us. Duke's analysis of this poem consists entirely of the following three sentences:

> "In fact, in the poem "Duet" he pokes fun at the whole existential of despair and anxiety over death. The poem is a dialogue between a man and a woman who, in the course of their exchanges, decide to dismiss Soren Kierkegaard and his notions of the Divine Absurd in his book *Either/Or*. They decide to live in hope and 'give each other a box on the ear' 'Should Dame Anxiety ever come near.'"[32]

However, as I will demonstrate, the poem "Duet" demonstrates that Roethke had a deep familiarity with several Kierkegaardian texts in addition to *Either/Or*, and in fact that Kierkegaard's elaboration of the idea of the "Divine Absurd" does not really play a role in *Either/Or*. Rather, Kierkegaard's primary discussions of divinity and absurdity range across a number of other texts, primarily including *Philosophical Fragments*, to *Stages on Life's Way*, to

[31] Interestingly enough I have been able to get in contact with Leigh-Ann Duke, who now works as a language program administrator at Mount Royal University in Calgary. I let her now that I'm attempting a project similar to the one she undertook four decades ago, and she expressed strong interest in my project and a desire to see the final product. Ginevra Paparoni also briefly mentions "Duet" in a Kierkegaardian context in her 2016/2017 dissertation titled (in translation) "The Protestant Imagery in Theodore Roethke's Early Poetry" written for the Università degli Study di Milano. Reference on page 54. More information to be found in the appended bibliography.

[32] Duke 128

Fear and Trembling, to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The reference to the "Divine Absurd" could be linked to any of these texts. However, as just mentioned, within *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard does not really concern itself with the problem of absurdity. *Either/Or*, written under the pseudonym Victor Eremita, is concerned with two modes of living: aesthetically or ethically. The drama of this philosophical novel is acted out by different characters (such as A, the aesthete, and Judge William, who represents the ethical exemplar) making a series of arguments as to why their chosen way of living is superior to the other's. The title derives from the idea that one must take responsibility for one's own life and choose which of these ways to live. Choice-making, freedom, and a strong sense of individual responsibility undergird this philosophical project by Kierkegaard. In lines 9 and 10 of "Duet" when Roethke mentioned this book – "We'll sail away from the frightful shore/ Of multiple choice and Either/or" - he is clearly displaying a familiarity with *Either/Or* and Kierkegaard's concept of the ethical and the aesthetic. But Roethke's understanding of Kierkegaard is considerably more sophisticated than Duke gives him credit for, and "Duet" contains references to multiple Kierkegaardian texts, many of which are books with which only the serious reader of Kierkegaard would be familiar.

Instead of being a reference to *Either/*Or, as Duke suggested, it is far more likely that Roethke's reference to the "Divine Absurd" is derived from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*[33], although it is also possible that it could be derived from one of the

[33] For the sake of clarity it is important to note that *Concluding Scientific Postscript* was written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. At the end of *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* Kierkegaard makes clear the he does not want his own views confused with the views of his pseudonyms – this is the bedrock of his idea of "indirect communication." However, the hermeneutic problem of the pseudonyms within Kierkegaard scholarship is a massive project which we will not be able to take on here in this paper. However, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard identified most closely with his pseudonym Climacus, which he thought of as an ideal version of himself – an ideality that he could not attain due to his own sense of weakness.

other four books that I mentioned above. I find this latter possibility to be less likely. If it were to be a reference to one of the other four books I listed above, though, the most likely alternative would be *Fear and Trembling*. I will give more reasons for this claim later, but now I will discuss *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and why I suspect that Roethke's reference comes from this work.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript is the text in which Kierkegaard-Climacus[34] gives his most extensive discussion of the relationship among faith, reason, and the Divine. More importantly, it is the text in which Kierkegaard most extensively develops his idea of the absurd and divinity within that context. For this reason it seems likely that Roethke's reference is drawn from here. Kierkegaard-Climacus' primary concern in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is to polemically combat what he considers to be the existentially tranquilizing effects of Hegelianism. Within this text his indictments of Hegelianism are manifold, but his primary concerns are that he thinks Hegel's systematic philosophy promotes determinism and leveling. A deterministic culture is one in which the individuals within the society believe that they cannot enact control over their own lives, and thus live in hopeless despair over their perceived powerlessness. A leveled culture is one in which the dramatic distinctions between individuals are abnegated, and a homogenous, de-individuated society results. As an existentialist, Kierkegaard is obviously deeply opposed to de-individuation and any force that works in its favor. According to Kierkegaard-Climacus, Hegelianism's totalizing systematicity works against stoking and provoking the passionate inner lives of the individual; Kierkegaard takes it as his task to rebut this desultory line of thinking, and instead to valorize passionate subjectivity,

[34] Hyphenating Kierkegaard's name with the name of his pseudonym is one convention for dealing with the hermeneutic issue mentioned in the previous footnote.

especially as he believes that authentic passionate inwardness is a precondition of being an ethical self in the first place. This valorization of passion leads to his discussion of faith. For Kierkegaard, the state of possessing authentic faith is the state of being in which genuine subjective passion exists most clearly and intensely. And critically, especially for the discussion of the concept of the "Divine Absurd," the possession of such authentic faith depends on the existence of some element of absurdity. Indeed faith, in the Kierkegaardian view, comes about precisely by virtue of the absurd. In Kierkegaard's assessment of faith within the Christian context – which is the faith that he strived to possess - faith comes about by recognizing the paradox of God's embodiment in Christ, and the choice to embrace this paradox. Such faith is not the consequence of a reflective act of cognition; instead it is a complete and passionate existential commitment. Such faith is not measured by objective reliability, but is instead marked by that which repulses pure reason. In his characteristically difficult style Kierkegaard describes paradox and faith as follows:

> But since the paradox is not in itself the paradox, it does not thrust away intensely enough, for without risk, no faith; the more risk, the more faith; the more objective reliability, the less inwardness (since inwardness is subjectivity); the less objective reliability, the deeper is the possible inwardness. When the paradox itself is the paradox, it thrusts away by virtue of the absurd, and the corresponding passion of inwardness is faith.[35]

The now-popular concept of the "leap of faith" – which is often used in both secular and religious contexts to describe a passionate commitment to an uncertain outcome – originates in Kierkegaard's descriptions of the nature of faith. Even though Kierkegaard never actually used the exact term "leap of faith," the phrase is a fitting distillation of his essential thoughts on the topic. Other historical figures have described faith in this way, although Kierkegaard's fideistic

[35] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 211

descriptions of faith are probably the most well-known in the context of post-Kantian western philosophy.[36]

As mentioned, faith is the highest form of passion for Kierkegaard, and therefore represents the highest form of existential truth. As Kierkegaard-Climacus says in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript:*

> Here is such a definition of truth: An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person. At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended.[37]

This is where the concept of the "Divine Absurd" that Roethke mentions in "Duet" comes into play. While reflective society moves towards attempting to bring an element of certainty and knowledge to faith and the God-relationship, Kierkegaard does all that he can to resist this trend and to reclaim the requisite element of uncertainty in faith. Here is just one of many passages in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that comes very close to saying "Divine Absurd" verbatim, which is the term Roethke used in "Duet." It seems most likely that Roethke's reference to the "Divine Absurd" comes from passages such as this one in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* if not from this exact passage.

> "When Socrates believed that God is, he held fast the objective uncertainty with the entire passion of inwardness, and faith is precisely in this contradiction, in this risk. Now it is otherwise. Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here the certainty that, viewed objectively, it is the absurd and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith. Compared with the earnestness of the absurd, the Socratic ignorance is like a witty jest, and compared with the strenuousness of faith, the Socratic existential inwardness

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[36] Historical antecedents include Tertullian. Tertullian famously wrote "*Credo quia absurdum*" in *De Carne Christi* in the early 3rd century A.D. This phrase is most often translated as "I believe because it's absurd." Tertullian scholars have argued that this translation misrepresents Tertullian's true thoughts about the nature of faith. But, as just mentioned, Kierkegaard's fideistic arguments are among the most well-known today.

[37] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 207

> resembles Greek nonchalance. What, then, is the absurd? *The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being…"*[38]

This last italicized line gives a concrete example of the idea of the "divine absurd," although it need not be so concrete. The principle idea when thinking of the Kierkegaardian idea of divine absurdity is that there must be some element of absurdity for faith to be genuine, and that passionate commitment – instead of intellectual knowledge – ought to be the standard for evaluating and thinking about faith.

I will now describe two more Kierkegaardian texts that Roethke seems to have knowledge of based on what he wrote in "Duet": *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. After this description the thesis will turn towards an analysis of earlier Roethke poems, and will begin to analyze a broad array of existential themes as they appear in Roethke's poetry and prose.

Lines 15-17 of "Duet" read: "I'm a roaring girl, an expensive wench,/ But at least we know one needn't blench/ – In fear and trembling, dear Kierkegaard." Here we find an explicit reference to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a slim volume written in 1843 and published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. *Fear and Trembling* attempts to analyze the tumultuous psychological states that Abraham must have experienced after receiving his injunction by God to kill his son Isaac.[39] In this way it is a work of speculative psychology, but also digs deep into the existential philosophy of religion. Roethke was clearly familiar with this book, even as early as 1948 or 1949. In one of his notebook entries from this period of time

[38] Ibid. 211/212. Italics mine.
[39] This story can be found in Genesis 22.

Roethke wrote "We must have the courage, as Kierkegaard says, to think a thought whole."[40] I will discuss this quote in more detail in the third chapter of this paper when I will discuss "Paradox in the General Sense," but for now I will just mention that this quote finds its origin in the first half of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling.*[41]

In "Duet" Roethke plays on the serious-minded religious tone of *Fear and Trembling* by having the intensity of the book casually dismissed by an aesthetically minded character who describes herself as "a roaring girl" and an "expensive wench." The implication of the poem – at least as judged by its tone and superficial content – is that one need not worry about working out their faith in fear and trembling, especially if one is governed by the aesthetic drives and the pleasures of excess that come with being a roaring girl.[42] To be living aesthetically in a Kierkegaardian sense is to live a life primarily motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. If one is living aesthetically – motivated by money (line 2), beer, and so on – then one is less likely to spend time attending to their psychological health and spiritual wellbeing. This idea is dealt with extensively by Kierkegaard, especially in *Stages on Life's Way* in which he discusses three paradigmatic modes in which one can live one's life: aesthetically, ethically, or religiously. The aesthetically-minded individuals (like the "roaring girl") never concerns themselves with faith (the religious) or universal questions of right and wrong (the ethical) because they are totally bound up in that which is sensuous and immediate (the aesthetic).

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[40] *On Poetry and Craft* 89

[41] The original quote, in translation, reads "For my own part I don't lack the courage to think a thought whole." *Fear and Trembling* 34

[42] The book Fear and Trembling gets its title from Philippians 2:12, which in the KJV translation states "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."*

One wonders how much Roethke identified himself with the "roaring girl" of "Duet," for throughout his life Roethke repeatedly referred to himself as a "roarer." In 1952 Roethke even titled his book review of Dylan Thomas' *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* "One Ring-Tailed Roarer to Another."[43] Thomas and Roethke had a well-documented friendship that involved excessive drinking and general debauchery. In Kierkegaardian language this way of life would certainly be categorized as "aesthetic." Roethke documents the character of their friendship – the extremities of their lifestyles and the intensities of their shared love for poetry - in his elegy to Dylan Thomas.[44]

The above section demonstrates that Roethke certainly had a familiarity with *Fear and Trembling*, and it also suggests that Roethke may also have been familiar with *Stages on Life's Way*. Although this latter point is speculative, it seems reasonable given that it has already been demonstrated that Roethke was familiar with several other texts by Kierkegaard.

The last lines from "Duet" that I will consider in order to see what they can tell us about Roethke's knowledge of the works of Kierkegaard are lines 24 and 25. These lines read "Should Dame Anxiety ever come near/ We'll give each other a box on the ear." This final section of the poem continues the casually dismissive attitude that the prior passages displayed, but it also takes on an ironical attitude. The two aesthetes – "he" and "she" – in the poem appear to be anxious about the possibility of anxiety appearing in their lives. Thus, in the attempt to avoid anxiety, anxiety only presents itself more clearly to them. The line "We'll give each other a box on the ear" suggests the idea that violence might be a solution (however limited in it's success)

[43] *On Poetry and Craft* 154
[44] Ibid. 157

to the problem of anxiety insofar as it brings consciousness from contemplation of the infinite to acute awareness of that which is immediate and somatic.

For Kierkegaard anxiety is a precondition for the possibility of becoming a self in the first place. Phenomenologically speaking, for Kierkegaard anxiety presents itself to us as "the dizziness of freedom"; it moves us from a state of non-self-awareness towards a state of self-awareness in which we can recognize the possibilities for living that are before us. Ultimately, this dizziness contains the potential to motivate us to make a choice on how to live; an existential lifestyle choice that serves as a point of focus to combat the disorienting dizziness of freedom. Choosing to deny that one possesses the capacity to make choices regarding their own life – an idea similar to what Sartre will later call "bad faith" – leads to alienation and despair. As Kierkegaard says, "The self is freedom… The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self."[45] The two characters in "Duet" exemplify the despair of not choosing to be oneself; the despair of self-denial that Kierkegaard talks about in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*. Roethke seems to be using the two characters "he" and "she" to exemplify this particular form of Kierkegaardian despair. This despair that they exemplify – which was described a few sentences ago – is a form of despair that Kierkegaard, via the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, describes extensively in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Of this despair he says "This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self."[46]

[45] *The Sickness Unto Death* 29
[46] *The Sickness Unto Death* 49

Roethke's use of the term "Dame Anxiety" here could very well be a reference to the discussions of anxiety, despair, and sin in *The Sickness Unto Death*. However, the use of this specific term is more likely a reference to Kierkegaard's book *The Concept of Anxiety*, which was written under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. It could, of course, also be a more general reference to Kierkegaard's discussions of anxiety that cut across both books. *The Concept of Anxiety* was written as a companion piece to *The Sickness Unto Death. The Concept of Anxiety* intensively examples the psychological characteristics of anxiety, especially as it relates to the concepts of original sin and freedom. In general terms – and as I have just mentioned before – in these texts anxiety is treated as precondition for an individual's becoming an *authentic* self in the first place, and more significantly it is a precondition for one to be able to make an authentic, faith-filled commitment to God. Roethke demonstrates a competence with these Kierkegaardian ideas, especially as the two characters in the poem ironically exemplify it, to the form of self-denying despair that they are both consciously attempting to avoid.

The investigation of this poem has yielded an abundance of information about not only Roethke's knowledge of Kierkegaard, but of his familiarity with the existential tradition more generally. Both Heidegger and Unamuno have been identified as existential figures that Roethke likely makes oblique reference to in "Duet," and it has been demonstrated that Roethke also displays an awareness of at least three different Kierkegaardian texts within this same poem. Now this thesis will turn towards an analysis of how Roethke's poetry displays certain existential themes, and in particular themes that characterize Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, such as death-consciousness, the generativity of paradox, passion versus reflection, death-in-life, and the individuating power of anxiety.

2. THE EXISTENTIAL SPIRIT OF THEODORE ROETHKE'S POETRY AND PROSE

In this section I will provide a survey of certain key existential themes as they appear in Roethke's larger body of work; both found in his poetry and his non-poetic writings. This section, in keeping with the backwards-facing methodology, will examine writings composed well before "Duet." But before launching into this analysis, I will take a bit of time to challenge a mode of Roethke interpretation that has interfered with Roethke's being viewed as an existentially-minded poet.

As mentioned in the introductory section, there is a tendency in Roethke scholarship to interpret Roethke's work through one of a handful of theoretical models. I take issue primarily with the psychoanalytic interpretations' tendency to dissect and pathologize Roethke's poetry to the point that it loses its passion and distinctiveness. All too often, the literature treats the content of Roethke's poems as evidence to support a psychological evaluation and nothing more; a diagnosis, rather than literary interpretation, is the primary product of these investigations. Such psychoanalytic literature generally engages in a process of symbol-mining wherein Roethke scholars look for the term which represents "the father," "the mother," and so on. As I will soon show, Roethke was critical of this overly-simplistic mode of analysis. Notwithstanding, influential Roethke scholars such as Malkoff often make claims such as "The obvious sexual implications of such poems as 'Root Cellar' and 'Orchids' should alert the reader to the Freudian possibilities of the entire sequence. Roots, soil, and cellars in particular seem to provide a context for unconscious or prerational mental processes."[47] In these sorts of analyses, after identifying

[47] Malkoff 48. Maselli cites this passage favorably on page 54 of her dissertation.

the correct symbols, it is concluded that the task of understanding Roethke is complete.[48] But the task of understanding Roethke's poetry is far from complete here, and Roethke's extensive reading of the existentialists attests to his poetic elusiveness and complex philosophical commitments. In Roethke's work he not only grapples with his childhood and sexuality, but he also wrestles with fundamental existential problems relating the generation of meaning within the boundary-condition of human finitude, the relationship between growth and death, the fraught relationship between individuals and society, and the human-nature relationship. My task will not be to analyze what Roethke's poems disclose about him as a psychological case-study, but instead to analyze what his poetry says about existence in the world.

Roethke's poetry maintains – among other things - that close observation of the plant world can induce a sense of wonder, and this wonder can generate passions and modes of experiencing that make one more engaged with the task of living. But the generative wonder induced by Roethke's poetry was hard to come by in postwar America, and instead he saw society afflicted by a deep sense of existential languor.[49] In an introduction to *New World Writing* in 1953 Roethke wrote:

> He (the ordinary reader) will not be afraid of feeling – and this in spite of the deep-rooted fear of emotion existing today, particularly among the half-alive, for whom emotion, even when incorporated into form, becomes a danger, a madness. Poetry is written for the whole man….[50]

[48] "Mourning the Father-figure in Modern American Poetry" by Maria Regina Campbell, a dissertation written at the University of Ulster in 2010 is another example of this. So is *The Objective Ego* by Stephen Spender. Even the appendix of *The Glass House* attempts to analyze Roethke's work in terms of neurosis and psychosis.

[49] I believe that he thought that this was a result of the technologizing of society – a problem he mentions in his notebooks – and I think that this thought would be an interesting path to explore if there were enough space.

[50] *The Glass House* 216

While he found his contemporaries to be trepidatious in the face of strong emotion, and therefore only experiencing a partial image of life ("half-alive"), Roethke, like Kierkegaard, wanted to magnify his and others' engagement with the energy and intensity that strong emotions can bring about. This motivation to pursue the generation of strong emotions and passions in his poetry follows from his fundamental cosmological view of the world and his existential commitments to what it means to be human. Instead of believing humans to be passive perceivers of sense-data – mere *cogitos* in a static grid-like world – Roethke's cosmology held the world to be an active place characterized by and ongoing flux of energy and kinetic forces. When asked about why his poetry was characterized by an energetic rhythm, Roethke gave a response that described his fundamental vision of reality: "This may be because I see the world in motion."[51] Energy, as generated by sharp paradoxical lines or by intense imagery, is always driving Roethke's poetry along, and, as with figures like William Blake, Roethke's vision of the world and the form and content of his poetry are not unconnected.

In general, this tendency to critique those who are afraid of passion and vitality permeates Roethke's writing, both in his notebooks and in his poetry. The "half-alive" person seems to be the person who is overly concerned with self-diagnosis, or overly devoted to rationalistic understanding of existence, to the extent that they forget they have a choice in who they are and who they might become. Thus, in an odd paradox (one of many pedagogically useful paradoxes that I will examine in this thesis), the diagnosis Roethke pronounces upon his then-contemporary society is that those in it spent too much time in self-diagnoses and not enough time celebrating and affirming the energetic complexities of life. Roethke often lampooned the tendency of his contemporaries to interpret through this sort of diagnostic lens, which was at the time most often

[51] Blessing 2

a psychoanalytic lens. One particularly memorable moment of this lampooning can be found in his notebooks from approximately 1945 or 1946 (this particular entry was undated) when he says "Anything longer than it is wide is a male sexual symbol, say the Freudians."[52] It should not be surprising that Roethke was critical of the Freudians at this time, for there was a flood of Freudian literary criticism appearing at that time in postwar America. In 1945 Frederick J. Hoffman published *Freudianism and the Literary Mind,* an expansive book meant to demonstrate how Freud shaped the aesthetic taste of the 20th century. Frederick claims that a long list of a poets – including Dylan Thomas[53] and Henry Miller – took and implemented ideas directly from Freud, and Hoffman even goes so far as to identify Kierkegaard as a precursor to Freudian thought. Around this time, many other psychoanalytic thinkers were coming to the fore of intellectual consciousness, including Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan, and in many ways dominated American literary intellectual life. While Roethke was thoroughly versed in psychoanalytic language (it does not take long to find examples of him talking about the unconscious, repressions, transference, etc), he resisted the passive tone of much psychoanalytic work, and infused his writing with energy and life—a style more akin to Blake or Whitman than Jung or Freud. Resistance to this sort of intellectualist passivity permeates Roethke's work, and in his own description of his work as a poet he made his claim about existential energy clear. Instead of perpetuating psychoanalytic approaches that attempt to render Roethke as a "mentally ill," "manic," or "repressed," poet, I will focus on him as an existentialist poet of philosophical energy and dynamism. As Rita Felski might caution us against adopting a "hermeneutics of

[52] *The Glass House* 162
[53] *The Glass House* gives a detailed account of Roethke and Thomas' close, wild friendship.

suspicion,"[54] Roethke's poetry should not be understood as a reservoir of psychoanalytic symptoms lurking underneath the surfaces of his poems, but instead as a poet making a sincere attempt at expressing his interpretation of existence.

As mentioned above, for Roethke the paramount merit of poetry is not perfect clinical self-understanding or perfect formal qualities, but is instead the generation of existential energy. One example of this can be found in his notebooks where he writes "Energy is the soul of poetry."[55] He also says "a poem means an extra, a surplus of energy."[56] In his view energy – which seems to nicely parallel Kierkegaard's idea of passion – is the very bedrock of meaning for a poem. For Kierkegaard without inward passion there is no self in the first place; for Roethke without energy there is no poem. The poem must have some sort of force; a force that extends beyond mere formal perfection. Roethke makes this claim abundantly clear from an entry in one of his notebooks written somewhere between 1943 and 1947. He writes:

> Movement: one of the hardest things a beginner (an honest one) has to learn is how to sustain the energy of a poem: in other words, the basic rhythm. He may have a variety of fresh subject matter, slick imagery, sharp epithets, but if he can't make the words move, he has nothing.[57]

Energy is at the center of Roethke's life at work as poet. It is represented not only in his poems of growth and struggle, but it is even found in the formal qualities of his poems themselves. I will focus more on the former – on his ontological attitudes towards growth, struggle, and vitality – but it is worth mentioning that a very good complete book has already been written about how the formal qualities of Roethke's poems create and carry a sense of energy and

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[54] Felski, Rita. "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion." *M/C Journal* [Online], 15.1 (2012): Web. 15 March 2019.
[55] *Straw For the Fire* 259
[56] Blessing 3.
[57] *Straw For the Fire* 172

urgency: Richard Blessing's 1974 book *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision*. To give a quick sense of how he approaches Roethke's poetic energy here is a passage from his opening chapter:

> My intention here is to demonstrate that a sense of the terrible and beautiful dynamism of life is with Roethke from his earliest preserved writings and, beyond that, to trace his artistic evolution of strategies adequate to translate that sense into language, into poetry. Mine is a study of style: of rhythm, rhyme, diction, verb forms, the use of pun, paradox, compression, repetition, and yes, even alliteration of initial sounds and manipulation and variation of interior words.[58]

In this book Blessing deftly identifies some of the poetic techniques Roethke employs to give his poems a sense of energy and intensity. He even located an enumerated list of teaching notes that Roethke titled "Devices for Heightening Intensity."

1. Use of symbolism. Intense feeling is important, but it is not enough.
2. Use of simplicity: bald statement. *Monosyllables: movement and rush.*
3. Repetition.
4. Use of constant antithesis, word against word, phrase against phrase.
5. Paradox: sense transfer.
6. Deliberate use of ambiguity (pun).[59]

Many of these technical methods that Roethke employed to generate a sense of energy – especially his use of paradox – will turn out to be philosophically important. However, interesting though this is, I will now display how Roethke's pre-"Duet" poems exemplify a Kierkegaardian existential view of the self in the world.

2.1 Kierkegaard and Roethke on the Energy of the Self

In this section I will present an argument that claims that Kierkegaard and Roethke share similar visions of the self. Naturally, since I am arguing that both of these thinkers share a similar existential view of existence, it will be of paramount importance to display that they have similar understandings of selfhood. First I will present an outline of Kierkegaard's view of the

[58] Blessing 6
[59] Blessing 159

self, and then I will demonstrate how Roethke's writings mirror Kierkegaard's view of energetic selfhood.

For Kierkegaard the self is essentially kinetic. Instead of thinking of the self as a static entity, he views the self as the ongoing activity of self-relation. In *The Sickness Unto* Death, via his pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard makes clear that the self is not a simple synthesis, as Hegel would have it, but is an ongoing clash between differing fundamental forces.[60] The Kierkegaardian self should be thought of as a verb, not a noun. This problematizes language insofar as the tradition, and the temptation, is to say "it," "the self," and so on, and in no case do these terms fully capture the sense of activity that Kierkegaard describes. As we will see in the upcoming passage, Kierkegaard describes "it" as the "relation's *relating*." Notwithstanding this issue of the limitations of language, self, in this Kierkegaardian context, ought to be thought in terms of energy, friction, and activity, and not as a stable or final entity. To give a well-known and infamous Kierkegaardian definition of self, here is the opening passage of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Notice how he strives, perhaps only somewhat successfully given that this passage is almost impenetrable, to describe how the self is a kinetic activity rather than some form of static entity:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way a human being is still not a self.... In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.[61]

[60] Pseudonymous author names such as "Anti-Climacus" also demonstrate how Kierkegaard and Roethke share a sense of the comedic.
[61] *The Sickness Unto Death* 13

As shown in the above quote, some examples of the polarities that are always clashing against one another in Kierkegaardian ontology are finitude/infinitude, the temporal and the eternal, and possibility/necessity.[62] If there is a misrelation in the activity between any of these polarities, then some form of despair will inevitably result. The details of these forms of despair need not be combed over in detail; this idea has already been discussed in some detail on page 20 in the discussion of the characters in "Duet." What is essential is that for Kierkegaard the self is constituted by some form of active energy, and in the absence of this activity then existential dangers appear.

Roethke's poetry is also characterized by a similar idea of the self being constituted by energy and activity. To demonstrate that Roethke recognized the importance of energy in self-constitution we should – in keeping with the backwards-facing methodology that Kierkegaard promoted and Roethke praised – return to the beginnings of his poetic career and find an example of Roethke's poetry that is characterized by yearning for or recognition of existential energy.

In the introduction to her book *The Garden Master* Rosemary Sullivan says of Roethke "Those who knew him felt most his devouring energy, his over-need."[63] Roethke what aware of the sense of intensity that characterized his poetry and his person, and he infused his poetry with his emblematic intensity.[64] This intense sense of energy is manifest even in his early poetry.

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[62] See *The Sickness Unto Death* pages 29-42.
[63] See *The Garden Master* 3-21
[64] In *On Poetry and Craft* p. 32 Roethke discusses the importance of using "intensity" as a way to render the poetic narrator's quest for spiritual identity more urgent and authentic seeming.

"Interlude" is the seventh poem in *Open House* (1941), Roethke's first book. This poem already suggests a need for activity, and in the absence of it a form of despair in the loss of hope results.

> The element of air was out of hand.
> The rush of wind ripped off the tender leaves
> And flung them in confusion on the land.
> We waited for the first rain in the eaves.
>
> The chaos grew as hour by hour the light
> Decreased beneath an undivided sky.
> Our pupils widened with unnatural night,
> But still the road and dusty field kept dry.
>
> The rain stayed in its cloud; full dark came near;
> The wind lay motionless in the long grass.
> The veins within our hands betrayed our fear.
> What we had hoped for had not come to pass.[65]

This is a poem of anticipation and disappointment. The narrator yearns for the storm to begin, for the clouds to open up and to release, for the concealed energy of the clouds to reveal itself. In that event the elemental unity between sky and earth would be achieved, and there would be an active relation between the two oppositional fields – earth and sky – that constrain, characterize, and give shape to our experience.[66] But the narrator has no control over the elemental, or seems not to think that they do. Because of this lack of agency the narrator assume a passive posture – an existential stasis – and waits. And in waiting ends up in disappointment and despair; the energy needed to overcome the existential stillness was not realized. The narrator yearned for the energy that the storm-eruption would provide. However, since the poem's narrator cannot bring about this energy for themselves, the implication is that they should lay claim to that which they can provide for themselves: inner energy. This laying claim to inner energy is what Kierkegaard would call passion, and, as discussed, is the foundation for the

[65] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 6
[66] No doubt this evokes thoughts of Heidegger's "fourfold."

possibility of meaningful existence in the first place. In "Interlude" Roethke uses a storm as a thought-image for visualizing passion and despair, activity and despair, and for conveying the loss of existential meaning that occurs in the absence of the former.

Sharon Ann Maselli, in her 1978 dissertation titled "'The Possibles We Dare': Art and Identity in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke," astutely points out that Roethke's self is characterized by active becoming rather than stillness and finality. She says of Roethke "There are intervals of intense illumination and knowing, but the self is a perpetual beginner, ever emerging, always at the edge of discovery. In Roethke's poetry, the final self is a supreme fiction."[67] And this is certainly true. The irreconcilable tensions and contraries that characterize Roethke's poetry mean that one is never "there," so to speak, but is always only in the process of self-discovery and self-exploration.

The generative tension of contraries that vitalizes the ontologies of Blake (who I will discuss soon), Kierkegaard, and Roethke is also not lost on Sullivan. In fact, she goes so far as to claim that this sense of self-constituting oppositionality became part of Roethke's "set cast of mind."[68] The following quote from Sullivan nicely captures this idea. "Ambiguity, the perception of both inner and outer reality as a series of opposites, seems to have become the set cast of his mind. 'In my veins contraries skip.' (Notebooks, reel 5, no. 69). The exacerbation of opposites, the swings in his poetry from ecstasy to despair, find their pattern here, as does his desire for reconciliation of opposites into some kind of unity."[69] Maselli also identifies that Roethke's work is characterized by a sense of tension that is both fierce and fecund. "He brings to the tension between Yes and No, creation and destruction, affirmation and denial, a

[67] Maselli 11
[68] Sullivan 12
[69] Ibid.

contemporary, post-wasteland urgency. Roethke's psychic and physical landscapes are not barren; they are fertile, dark, creative."[70]

This idea of identity as being constituted by opposing forces, yet still unified in some complex, paradoxical manner, is expressed by Roethke in a number of ways. Roethke's notebooks contain many instances in which he describes his identity as both a singular and as a multitude; as a complex, contradictory unity. For example in his notebooks he writes "The self, the anti-self in dire embrace."[71] This striking image visualizes a paradox both physical and metaphysical: the things that are us and the things that are not us are unified in tension as if in the physicality of an embrace. Paradoxical claims and statements like this are fundamental to Roethke's existential vision, which is a claim I will discuss extensively in the final chapter of this thesis. Soon after writing the paradoxical line about the self and the anti-self Roethke continues writing on this theme:

With many myselves I stole away,
Laden with leaves for money,
My hair full of sticks and ferns.[72]

To say "with many myselves" might strike many others as manifestly absurd, but in the context of Roethkean ontology such statements keep with his idea of the self being composed of various self-contradicting forces. Again, Roethke's self is not one thing, but is a plurality of forces, a matrix of energy that has multiple expressions.

In the 1948 volume *The Lost Son and Other Poems* "A Field of Light" displays yet another clear and detailed example of this fundamental existential and ontological attitude.[73] This

[70] Maselli 9
[71] *Straw For the Fire* 85
[72] *Straw For the Fire* 86
[73] There are dozens of such references in his poetry and prose, so I have merely selected a few for scrutiny.

poem – outside of the title and two brief mentions within the body of the poem – does not spend much of its time describing things that one might in a field; instead the poem relates a wide variety of entities that one might encounter out in nature more generally – clams, weeds, planks sunk in the sand – and then it crescendos towards a revelation and declaration about the nature of experience itself. In this revelation Roethke's narrator proclaims to have witnessed the "separateness of all things." The concept of the field, which we find in the title, serves a vital metaphysical function in this poem, for the "field" is that which allows for diverse, and even oppositional entities, to be united in a single "field" of experience. The narrator has an existential epiphany about all things being radically particular, but the narrator is always at the same time actively – kinetically – incorporating this radical ontological diversity into a singular (albeit fragmented) experience of reality. In a sort of reverse Parmenidean experience the narrator goes from experiencing the unification of the field of light to understanding the radical multiplicity of all things. Although we should refrain from accepting this pronouncement of multiplicity to be final, for the one and the many exists in a kinetic dialectic relationship in Roethke's poetry – at one moment all things are one, and at the next all things are separate. If anything provides a wholeness to experience it is only this fundamental opposition.

Here is the last section of "A Field of Light." I have italicized what I take to be the critical lines:

Listen, love,
The fat lark sang in the field;
I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants , still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.
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.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak
of cedars,
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

The concept of the titular "field" names this possibility of unity and diversity. The "field" is the possibility for all things to come together as difference, pushing and pulling against one in a state of unceasing tension in a dialectical manner.

I argue that this idea of the "field" corresponds to Kierkegaard's description of "self" described above in the passage from *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard's self is a series of oppositional forces struggling to be brought together through a dynamic existential synthesis. Roethke's self, as conveyed in "A Field of Light," is the force that has the possibility to unite radically separate, distinct entities through a kinetic process. Moreover, I argue that Roethke and Kierkegaard think that balancing the relationships of opposites is what is needed to overcome despair. Roethke's narrator exultantly explains "My heart lifted up with the great grasses" upon the narrator's realizing the fundamental separateness of all things. The self-conscious realization that life is constituted by a plethora of fundamentally disunited forces and things names the possibility for relating to this fundamental fact of our being in the right way. In his characteristically impenetrable way, in *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard describes how despair is overcome given the fact that humans are beings composed of oppositional drives and forces: "The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be oneself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."[74] And soon thereafter: "Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a

[74] *The Sickness Unto Death* 14

synthesis that relates itself to itself. But the synthesis is not the misrelation; it is merely the possibility, or in the synthesis lies the possibility of the misrelation."[75] Essentially what Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus is saying here is that to elude despair we must first recognize what kind of being that we are – beings characterized by both internal and external disunity – and then will to be the kind of being that we are. We must abide in a "transparent" relation to the force[76] that established us as beings characterized by opposition and separateness. As these selections display, it is clear that both Roethke and Kierkegaard recognize the "separateness" of all things, and that they recognize that recognizing this separateness – and possessing a willingness to live with it – is critical to the avoidance of despair. We must recognize and accept the oppositional forces within us, perhaps in a backwards-facing stance of self-understanding, and only then move forward.

"A Field of Light" also seems to very nicely align with Heidegger's concept of the "Clearing" which Heidegger outlines in "The Origin of the Work of Art." This alignment is especially clear given that Heidegger uses a language of illumination similar to the one that Roethke employs in this poem. The "field of light" in Roethke's poem could easily be confused with Heidegger's illuminated "clearing of being." For example, see this quote from "The Origin of the Work of Art" for comparative purposes: "In the midst of being as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know. That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in

[75] *The Sickness Unto Death* 15
[76] Kierkegaard is here talking about God.

this clearing. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are."[77] This last line by Heidegger especially parallels the way that Roethke describes the field of light. Roethke's field of light is that which allows the elusive particulars of life to reveal themselves as they are; Heidegger's clearing is the way in which the beings in Being reveal themselves as they are. Roethke almost certainly did not get this precise terminology directly from this particular Heideggerian essay, especially since this essay by Heidegger was published in 1950, a full two years after *The Lost Son and Other Poems* was published. However, especially in light of my earlier commentary on "Duet," it is certainly a possibility that Roethke was also influenced by the early Heidegger's conception of truth and being. In 1927 Heidegger published his magnum opus *Being and Time*, which Roethke was likely familiar with given this book's major impact and Roethke's expressed interest in philosophies of existence. In *Being and Time* Heidegger repeatedly and emphatically describes the truth of being in terms of "unconcealedness" or aletheia.[78] The disclosure of truth as aletheia requires some level of illumination, and Roethke's "Field" gives a poetic demonstration of the illumination of being in the experience of aletheia that the poetic narrator undergoes. The narrator's epiphantic exclamation "I could watch!" is the climactic exclamation of this realization; it is the announcement that that which had formerly been concealed is now unconcealed.

Much more could be said about this, but in consideration of time and length we should now turn to a consideration of how Roethke conveys a sense of vital existential energy in his

[77] *Basic Writings* 178

[78] The article "Truth as Unconcealment in Heidegger's *Being and Time*" by Jani Koskela is a helpful and recent publication on this subject, although scores of writings on this topic exist.

poems, and how he uses a specific form of natural imagery to convey his fundamental existential sensibility.

2.2 Nature, Kierkegaard, Blake, and Other Teachers of Vitality

In this section I will discuss how Roethke employs natural imagery as a method to convey his vitalistic existential commitments. Roethke, along with Kierkegaard, William Blake, and Friedrich Nietzsche, each possessed an acute sense of death-consciousness. However, for them, awareness of one's own mortality was not a desultory realization, but instead served as realization that was also a reminder; it was a reminder to intensify their engagement with the task of living. Such a realization is fecund, productive, but how can such an existential realization be conveyed poetically?

I argue – and this in contrast to most previous interpreters[79] – that Roethke's use of "nature" should be thought of as a pedagogical force that advances a particular mode of existential understanding. Roethke's nature is a teacher of vitality, as I have said, and by thinking about nature's obdurate insistence on its own growth and promulgation we can learn for ourselves how to grow and push ourselves through our own lives. Roethke's vitalism advances in the tradition of Nietzsche, Blake, and Kierkegaard, but I think that Roethke's vitalism can be more closely identified with the latter two figures. Each of these three figures see life as a process of reconciling and overcoming opposites. However, it is Blake and Kierkegaard who (and this is crucial for Roethke) identify the source of the possibility of this overcoming with a

[79] Most previous interpreters take Roethke's "Nature" to be a reservoir of symbols that need to be unlocked for their underlying meaning, whereas I take them to be forceful images meant to generate an existential affect.

supernatural Other.[80] Roethke, too, held to a similar vision of vitality, identifying life always as an energetic interaction of certain recurring opposites such as growth/decay, light/dark, and past/future. Indeed, as mentioned in the first section, Roethke approvingly cites Kierkegaard's well-known quote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards," which describes life as a clash of past and future. He also explicitly refers to Blake by name within his poetry, and he refers to him in a way that discloses some of his mystical, existential, and vitalistic commitments. In "Once More, The Round," which happens to be Roethke's last poem in his last published book of poetry *The Far Field*[81], which was also published around the same time that Roethke wrote his poem about Kierkegaard, Roethke writes about Blake, vitality, and the unity of contraries.[82] What follows is the poem in full:

> What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
> What can be known? The Unknown.
> My true self runs toward a hill
> More! O more! Visible.
>
> Now I adore my life
> With the Bird, the abiding Leaf
> With the Fish, the questing Snail,
> And the Eye altering all;
> *And I dance with William Blake*
> For love, For Love's sake;
>
> And everything comes to One,
> And we dance on, dance on, dance on.[83]

[80] Roethke's fascination with divinity is well known. He spent a great deal of his life studying mysticism and writing about it. See footnote 18 and page 199 of *The Glass House.* Also see "The Divine Abyss: Theodore Roethke's Mysticism" by William Heyen.
[81] Notice that he titles his last book *The Far Field,* as if he's moving towards that sense of existential unconcealedness earlier discussed. The image of the "field" recurs during this stage in his career, and carries this sense of meaning.
[82] The paradoxical second line is a line I will address in my next section, which is devoted to the concept of paradox and how Kierkegaard and Roethke employ paradox.
[83] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 243

In this poem Roethke identifies Blake as a force of reconciliation and overcoming. We see the narrator dancing about in a state of mystical *ekstasis*. The narrator has been energized and vitalized by a recognition and embrace ("Now I adore my life") of the contraries ("known"/"Unknown") that cut through the heart of existence, and that give existence its fundamentally tense character. Love, in this poem, is the force that embraces the contraries, and that chooses to affirm the unknown and the other. Instead of developing a hierarchy – "What's greater, Pebble or Pond?" – the narrator instead chooses to accept a paradoxical unity that is characterized by diversity, a sense of oneness that defies cognitive limitations and ontological difference. The existential embrace of total affirmation overcomes these otherwise discontinuous features of existence.

Related to this, and in order to clarify how Roethke fits into the vitalistic existential tradition, I argue that it is more accurate to understanding Roethke's vitalism as closer to Kierkegaard's "infinite passion" than in terms of Nietzsche's "will to power." Of many reasons, the primary reason that I argue this is because Kierkegaard identifies the passionate inward drive growth as being motivated, at least in its ideal form, by the existence of a divine force, whereas Nietzsche's secular eschatological vision is without such an external power. Moreover, and as a more simple proof, Roethke refers to Kierkegaard more frequently than he refers to Nietzsche, differentiating him from Nietzsche-inspired poets interested in nature and vitality, including Rainer Maria Rilke, Wallace Stevens, and W.B. Yeats.

Nature is used by Roethke as a thought-image for vitality, and nature is usually exemplified by Roethke in the form of a plant. The plants that frequently appear in his poems struggle for life through the decaying bodies of previous generations, always striving for life in the midst of death. The struggle of plants to live is always rendered in visceral, struggling,

humanizing language. Emblematic of this is the first four lines of "Cuttings (later)," the second poem of *The Lost Son:*

> This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
> Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
> What saint strained so much,
> Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

For Roethke, this fecundity in the midst of death is a model that human beings should strive to imitate and to internalize as an accurate, therapeutic, and perhaps even beatific ("What saint strained so much") model for human life. Indeed, a strong notion of life undergirds his poetry, and expressions of life in all forms (though primarily vegetal expressions of life) are continually heralded as sources of inspiration and motivation. These vegetal thought-images mirror how it is that humans experience growth and decay in their inner lives. A radically affirmative sensibility subtends much of his thinking on this, and this radical affirmative sensibility extends beyond his writing as mentioned in the Rosemary Sullivan quote above. Roethke's childhood growing up in his father's greenhouse provided him with the images of life-in-death and death-into-life that he displayed in his poetry. The plant-world's ability to surge through death and endure through adversity inspired his existential thinking about life-in-death. In remembering these formative years in the greenhouses of his youth Roethke writes "For death into life was the rhythm of the greenhouses."[84] Roethke's witnessed a vegetal realm in which death and decay were always related to growth and vigor. From composting and fertilization to pruning, winter dormancy, and grafting, there is a way in which plants turn that which seems like death into something which promotes life and growth.

[84] *Straw For the Fire* 97

Roethke's poetry continually expresses two themes that are consonant with his existential sense of life. First, life is always occurring in the midst of death. Second, this ineradicable death-presence should be an inspiration rather that a depressant. Emblematic of this latter point, in "The Dying Man" Roethke writes:

> Places great with their dead,
> The mire, the sodden wood,
> Remind me to stay alive.[85]

I take these lines to emblematic of his existentialist commitment to the affirmation of life-in-death. This poem – which is in the tradition of elegy poems, a genre associated in modernism with W.B. Yeats's elegies and with poems responding to Yeats's own death – stands in marked contrast to the desultory tone that other poems in this tradition maintained. This desultory tendency is clearly displayed in W.H. Auden's elegy to Yeats. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" by Auden baldly states Auden's feelings in relation to death, especially in the last two lines, both of which I have italicized. Here is the most telling passage from this elegy:

> But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
> When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the
> Bourse,
> And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly
> accustomed,
> And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his
> freedom,
> A few thousand will think of this day
> As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
>
> *What instruments we have agree*
> *The day of his death was a dark cold day.*

[85] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 138

Where Auden sees only death and bleakness, Roethke sees life anew. Roethke's disposition is to recognize the vital fecundity in things, and the tendency of nature to grow beautifully out of moribund conditions.

Roethke's tendency to find life as always appearing in a context of death and decay is critical to his existential sensibility, but is not the only way in which Roethke works within the existential tradition. Roethke employs nature both as a reminder of *why* one should live affirmatively and also as a teacher that explains descriptively *how* to do so. And further, I contend, Roethke's vegetal imagery embodies a particularly Kierkegaardian mode of existentialism.

2.3 The Conatus of the Plant

Before turning to Kierkegaard's thoughts on the death-life relation, and explaining how they relate to Roethke's, I will make a brief – but hopefully helpful – foray into the early modern philosophical concept of the conatus, especially as described by Spinoza. I will do this because throughout Roethke's vegetal poetry Roethke seems to existentially identify with the *conatus* exemplified by the plant.

The concept of conatus was extensively theorized by 17th century philosophers Gottfriend Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza. Essentially, conatus describes the innate nature of a thing's will to exist and improve itself. In *Ethics* part III Spinoza outlines what is commonly referred to as his "conatus doctrine," which he introduces in propositions 6, 7 and 8 of *Ethics* III. Each proposition by Spinoza is followed by a "Demonstration," but for the sake of brevity, I will not include the demonstrations here. What follows are propositions 6, 7 and 8 from Spinoza's *Ethics* III, which are often referred to collectively as the "conatus doctrine."

P6: Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.

> P7: The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.
> P8: The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.[86]

The conatus is each thing's striving for its perseverance in life. This idea of each thing possessing an inherent will to persevere in its own being seems to be at the heart of many of Roethke's poems, and the language of life's persistent striving permeates the larger body of Roethke's poetry. However, there is not much support to claim that Roethke was explicitly familiar with this doctrine. Nevertheless, this idea seems to have found its way into Roethke's life-affirming poetry, most likely through the tremendous influence that this doctrine has had on the subsequent writing of philosophy, and on the philosophers that specifically influenced Roethke. Kierkegaard himself discussed this doctrine of the conatus, and argued that it is "no doubt correct."[87]

In all things Roethke sees life and an attendant striving for existence, and not just in those kinds of things that are typically thought of as "living." In Roethke's poetry all manner of beings – from rocks and grass to hills and plants – sing and dance as if they are besouled beings in a Spinozistic panpsychical vision of existence.[88] But this idea that Roethke ascribed to such a panpsychical vision of existence is not mere speculation. In fact, Roethke makes a claim that world is panpsychical and universally vitalized in "On Identity" where he says "If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity so can the living—and I mean all living things, including

[86] *Spinoza's Collected Works* 498 and 499
[87] *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* 2, JJ:443
[88] "Panpsychism" is the term used to refer to the idea that all of reality – and all beings therein – is infused with a mind or soul-like quality. Muthanna Makki Muhammed very briefly makes the connection between Roethke's poetry and Spinoza's panpsychism in their article "Vacillation Between Identities in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke."

the sub-human .... Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life."[89] Roethke also expresses this view poetically. Just one of the multitudinous examples of this sensibility being expressed poetically can be found in Roethke's poem "Her Becoming." Typically in Roethke's poems it is some form of vegetation that is rendered in vitalistic language, but in this poem it is the earth and ground itself that is alive and singing along with the narrator.

> I see a shape, lighted with love,
> Light as a petal falling upon stone.
> From the folds of my skin, I sing,
> The air still, the ground alive,
> The earth itself a tune.[90]

This poem exhibits the typical vitalism of Roethke's poetry, and goes beyond his typical vegetal imagery to make the earth as such a living entity.

One could almost confuse this poem for one of Whitman's, and one would be well-justified in experiencing this confusion. Whitman was a poetic inspiration for Roethke, and, more importantly, his work taught Roethke about the importance of vitality in poetry. In fact, Roethke explicitly used the idea of "vitality" when describing his understanding of Whitman. One example of Roethke describing Whitman in terms of vitalism comes all the way from Roethke's early years as an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. During his undergraduate studies there he took a course in American Literature, during which time he studied Whitman. His notebooks from that time are still preserved, and they give great insight into his thoughts on vitality in general, and on Whitman's vitalism in particular. His comments on Whitman are almost exactly what should be expected, especially after my claims about Roethke and his tendency to find a vital energy permeating all things. In his notebooks

[89] *On Poetry and Craft* 40
[90] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 159

Roethke identifies Whitman as a poet who possesses the same sort of existential sensibility as himself, and his comments on Whitman give great insight into some of Roethke's poems, especially poems like the aforementioned "Her Becoming." What follows is a key passage from Roethke's undergraduate notebook in which he lists some key ideas that he derived from Whitman.

> What are we to say of Whitman as a poet? Selection? Defied rules. Can great art be formless NO!
> 1) An undying energy of life – a tang – vitalizing something.
> 2) A certain largeness – deals with deep things on a large scale.
> 3) Most great poetry is primal?[91]

There is much to be learned in this passage from Roethke's early notebooks, but most important of all is Roethke's explicit articulation of an "undying energy of life" and of a "vitalizing something" that he identified in Whitman. Whitman, along with the plant-world, served as teachers that instructed Roethke in his thinking about existential vitality, and their influence certainly shaped his poetic expressions and poetic imagery.

"Her Becoming," the poem most recently discussed, is a bit atypical for Roethke in that he uses the "earth itself" for his subject matter in this poem: "The air still, the ground alive/ The earth itself a tune." Roethke typically praises the plant in particular as the kind of being that can educate both him and us in the art of living and growing; living and growing even in the midst of the vicissitudes and limitations of our being. Existentialists generally argue that these limitations and struggles we find ourselves always surrounded by, as in the "fetor of weeds" that Roethke discusses in "Weed Puller," are fundamental to human life and the meaning of the existence. It is in Roethke's tendency to find life and vigor in these earthy depths and amid nature's immutable limitations that his existential thinking is most apparent, although of course there is

[91]*The Glass House* 54

more than just this tendency that aligns Roethke with this tradition. Two more poems that are essential to further support this claim about Roethke's existential tendency towards life-in-death are "Long Live the Weeds" and "Weed Puller." Both of these poems praise vegetal life's struggling ability to live and grow in the muck and the dirt, and both suggest that we ought to be inspired by the model of vitality that they display. Here is his early short poem "Long Live the Weeds" in full. I have italicized the two lines that I take to be most critical towards supporting my claim.

> Long live the weeds that overwhelm
> My narrow vegetable realm!
> The bitter rock, the barren soil
> That force the son of man to toil;
> All things unholy, marred by curse,
> The ugly of the universe.
> *The rough, the wicked, and the wild*
> *That keep the spirit undefiled.*
> With these I match my little wit
> And earn the right to stand or sit,
> Hope, love, create, or drink and die:
> These shape the creature that is I.[92]

In this poem "the ugly of the universe," as exemplified in the microcosm of the garden, is also that which at the same time allows for the "spirit" to be "undefiled." Instead of lamenting the "bitter rock" or the weeds in the garden he praises them as a precondition for spiritual purification. The muck and the dirt, barren by dint of the Adamic curse, is always still the source of life. We, like weeds, grow as if from the dirt, and inevitably return to it – but in focusing on this tension which characterizes our lives, this tension which is simultaneously fecund and moribund, we can gain a clearer image of who we are and gain an animated sense of how we ought to live.

[92] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 17 (emphasis added)

The narrator of "Weed Puller" discovers his own vitality while in the middle of a grave-like "fetor of weeds."

> With everything blooming above me,
> Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
> Whole fields lovely and inviolate, --
> *Me down in that fetor of weeds,*
> *Crawling on all fours,*
> *Alive, in a slippery grave.*[93]

Once again in this poem we find a narrator who comes alive – who comes to recognize his own vitality – only upon finding himself in the midst of the murky, struggling, striving world of the vegetal. In the midst of the weeds Roethke's narrators discover a sense of inspiration and vitalization, and this because the struggling conatus exemplified by plant-life serves as a pedagogical tool that teaches us how to take an existential grip on our own life even in the midst of our own mortality. For, as the plants demonstrate, life and death are inexorably entwined.

2.4 Kierkegaard on Life-in-Death

Now I will turn to a discussion of how Kierkegaard thought of life-in-death, and how Kierkegaard – like Roethke – recognized that it is by recognizing our own finitude and mortality that we can gain a new sense of inspiration and vitality. I will take most of my inspiration for this claim from Kierkegaard's discourse titled "At a Graveside."[94]

"At a Graveside" is an understudied work. It is a text that was written in Kierkegaard's own voice[95] as one within a collection of three "upbuilding" discourses. This particular discourse most clearly captures Kierkegaard's thoughts about the relationship between death and life, and

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[93] *Ibid.* 37 (emphasis added)

[94] It is worth noting that Heidegger likely got many of his now-famous ideas about Dasein as "Being-Towards-Death" from this particular Kierkegaardian discourse.

[95] Kierkegaard often used pseudonyms as a form of indirect communication; as a way to achieve the maieutic ideal. This reasoning behind this is a massive project in its own right, and cannot be undertaken here.

it demonstrates that Kierkegaard's view of life-in-death anticipates Roethke's own view. Kierkegaard, along with a wide range of other, later existential thinkers, thought that the recognition of death in general and of one's own mortality in particular should not be a desultory recognition, but instead that this recognition should serve as a reminder to stay alive and to intensify our engagement with the task of living. This line of thinking has already been discussed extensively, but its importance cannot be overstated, and accordingly we will tarry along these lines a bit longer.

Contemplating the importance that thinking about death can serve to those who are still living is a central undertaking in existential thought, and given that Kierkegaard is often called the "father of existentialism" it is unsurprising that he thought about life-in-death intensely and regularly, and perhaps most intensely in "At a Graveside." In "At a Graveside" Kierkegaard discussed the phenomenon of being at a cemetery, along with the internal psychological processes that one experiences when thinking and talking about death. In this particular discourse Kierkegaard writes extensively about God, despair, and the contradiction of finitude and infinitude. But, for the sake of this inquiry, the most important aspect of this discourse is that he describes the earnest recognition of death as a precondition for the possibility of earnest, engaged living in the world. I will select a few passages from this discourse that clearly convey this idea. It should be noted that when Kierkegaard uses the word "earnest" – which he does regularly in "At a Graveside" – his use of this word can be thought of as roughly synonymous with the words "intense" or "sincere." "Earnest" is meant to evoke a sense of active, participatory engagement. The first instance in which we see Kierkegaard claim that the presence and awareness of one's own imminent death can lead to an intensified engagement with life can be found early in the text. Kierkegaard notes: "Death itself certainly has its own

earnestness… Death can expressly teach that truth lies in the inner being."[96] Here Kierkegaard unites death with education; he speaks of death as if it is the kind of thing that can motivate us to live. Moreover, the earnest thought of death forces us to recognize that we must live out own lives independently, not vicariously. This aptly parallels Roethke's earlier passages in which his poetic narrators describe discovering life and vitality from struggling subterreanean, mortal world of vegetation. Recognizing this mortal world invigorates the living world. Later, and in a similar but more detailed line of thought – and one that more directly describes death as a teacher – Kierkegaard states:

> Death is the schoolmaster of earnestness, but in turn its earnest instruction is recognized precisely by its leaving to the single individual the task of searching himself so it can then teach him earnestness as it can be learned only by the person himself.[97]

This is a very rich passage, and in a profound sense it gets to the heart of Kierkegaard's existentialism. Most importantly for us, though, is that it demonstrates that Kierkegaard thought that the earnest recognition of death is the kind of recognition that teaches us to live with greater intensity, individual engagement, and existential energy. When we think of death, when we experience it indirectly through the deaths of others, this thinking reminds us that we ourselves still have to live and find our own way. This thinking delivers a reminder that is rarely given to the living, but when it is given it is transformative. We see this sort of existential transformation acted out in life by people who decide to work on "checking off their bucket list" after the death of a close friend or loved one. Or we see it acted out by those who choose to go "all in" with their remaining time after they have received some form of terminal diagnosis. Reminders of death can paradoxically invigorate.

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[96] *At a Graveside* 73
[97] Ibid 75-76

As discussed, Kierkegaard connected the presence of death with vitalization of life, and this way of thinking worked its way into the foundation of existential thought. This viewpoint was later most famously rearticulated by Heidegger in his discussion of Being-towards-death. I think there is a very strong case for believing that this way of thinking about death-in-life eventually found its way into Roethke's writing through a path of thought that Kierkegaard initiated and promulgated in his writings.

This section has demonstrated that Roethke held similar views to Kierkegaard and other existentially and vitalistically-minded thinkers, that Roethke's vision of life is one of striving and overcoming, and that he thinks that the plant serves a good model for this invigorated vision of life. Now I will turn to the final section of this thesis in which I will give a more detailed account of the role of paradox and pedagogy in Roethke and Kierkegaard's writing.

3. KIERKEGAARD AND ROETHKE ON PARADOX AND PEDAGOGY: A SUMMARY

In this section I will make the connection between Roethke and Kierkegaard on a topic that is of critical importance to both of them: paradox. The idea that paradox is a force of existential individuation and education is a critical idea shared by both thinkers, and one that is at the center of both of their existential thought. In Roethke and Kierkegaard's writings we can find paradox discussed in at least two different contexts. In the first context paradox serves the general purpose of helping individuals come to an understanding of who they are; it is an existential intensifier and force of individuation. In the second context paradox serves as a model for pedagogical relations in the classroom. This latter use of paradox overturns the traditional binary of the teacher as the active dispenser of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver of knowledge. Both uses of the concept of paradox are closely related, however I think that there is a subtle – and hopefully informative – distinction to be made between these two uses of paradox.

3.1 The First Sense: Paradox as a Force of Existential Individuation

Roethke's thought regarding the existential value of paradox was inspired by Kierkegaard's thoughts on paradox. Concrete proof of this can be traced to Roethke's notebooks, and Roethke's employment of paradox as an existentially relevant poetic tool also appears throughout his poetry. Initially I will give some evidence that can be found in Roethke's notebooks and aphoristic essays to prove that Roethke appropriated Kierkegaard ideas about paradox, and then I will show examples of Roethke's poetic use of paradox.

In a notebook entry from sometime between 1954 and 1958 Roethke directly declares a Kierkegaardian aphorism. He writes "All knowledge lives in paradox."[9899] This aphorism, which is essentially a distillation of a key Kierkegaardian concept, is echoed in a more direct way in Roethke's collection of aphorisms titled "Words For Young Writers." In this second aphorism Roethke mentions Kierkegaard directly when he says "We must have the courage, as Kierkegaard says, to think a thought whole."[100] The first aphorism seems to be a reference to Kierkegaard's discussion of paradox in his *Philosophical Fragments,* which I will discuss momentarily. The second quotation is taken from a line in *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard (via his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio) discusses the paradox of Abraham being commanded by the all-perfect God to perform an ostensibly unethical act. More specifically, this line references when God commanded Abraham to take his son, Isaac, and kill him atop Mt. Moriah.

Philosophical Fragments contains a significant portion of Kierkegaard's thoughts (via the pseudonym Johannes Climacus) on the nature and function of paradox. The discussion circles primarily around the topic of faith, and it contains multiple chapters devoted to the role that paradox plays in faith, and describes faith as clashing with reason. In Kierkegaard's thinking the ultimate truth – the highest stage of being – is authentic Christian faith. Paradoxically, however,

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[98] *Straw For the Fire* 225

[99] Leigh-Ann Duke helpfully points out this aphorism on page 28 of her 1991 M.A. thesis. This is what directed my attention to this particular aphorism in the first place. In this discussion she refers to it as "Kierkegaard's memorable aphorism." However this claim seems a bit off-base, as this line with *these exact words* was never written by Kierkegaard. However, the main message of this aphorism of this Roethkean aphorism does accurately convey a fundamental Kierkegaardian idea. Thus, what Duke refers to as an aphorism originally written by Kierkegaard instead seems to be Roethke's attempt compressing a Kierkegaardian idea. So, this is really Roethke's aphorism, not Kierkegaard's.

[100] *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose* 89

Kierkegaard claims that this truth – the actuality of this kind of ultimate faith – comes about by virtue of the absurd. This idea of faith "by virtue of the absurd" appears over and again in Kierkegaard's body of works, such as in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Fear and Trembling,* and *Philosophical Fragments,* and is why Kierkegaard is often described as a fideistic thinker, or as someone who thinks that faith and reason are fundamentally opposed to one another. Kierkegaard repeats the idea that in order to have the truth of faith there must necessarily exist some uncertainty. Reason, which we often confuse for being the only kind of knowledge, often disrupts our ability to experience other forms of truth, such as existential or religious truth.[101] For Kierkegaard, the existence of paradoxes – such as God requiring evil to be done or knowledge of God requiring imperfect knowledge about him – require us to leap out as singular beings and to existentially commit to some life-path. We must make this leap or commitment even if we do not have an epistemically verifiable reason for doing so, for we are not given a pre-set path in life; we must always choose for ourselves how live. Here are some representative quotes from Kierkegaard on this topic of paradox that come very close to Roethke's first line "All knowledge lives in paradox."

> However, one should not think slightly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity… The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think.[102]

Here Kierkegaard describes a thinker's passion as resulting from the existence of paradox, and he paradoxically portrays uncertainty as a facet of the human condition that is at once limiting but also upbuilding. As Kierkegaard says in the last line, attempting to think the unthinkable and

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[101] Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* delivers a strong polemical account of how the forces of reason have brought about a state of societal leveling, a condition in which in which individuals are unwilling to passionately leap out into life as qualitatively unique beings.

[102] *Philosophical Fragments* 46

to know the unknowable is described as a supremely invigorating activity. The unthinkable *reveals* much about our condition and limitations; the thinking of the unthinkable corresponds to the ultimate passion and the authentic experience of faith. Both are intrinsically related. In attempting to know the unknowable the poignant existential necessity of faith reveals itself.

As mentioned earlier in my section on *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard thinks of truth as roughly equivalent to subjectivity and passion. Therefore that which produces a great deal of subjective passion (in this case paradox) is that which is existentially invigorating and truth-making. Kierkegaard describes unknowability as fundamental to human experience, but also considers reason to be a fundamental force that moves us through life, too. Because of this there is also a paradoxical double-movement in life in which we attempt to know the unknowable. Reason asks the impossible of us, yet we persist in the impossible attempt, and believing the impossible can be supremely invigorating.

In this next passage from *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard describes the nature and dynamics of a particular experience of paradox.

> How should the Reason be able to understand what is absolutely different from itself? If this is not immediately evident, it will become clearer in the light of the consequences; for if the God is absolutely unlike man, then man is absolutely unlike the God; but how could the Reason be expected to understand this? Here we seem to be confronted with a paradox. Merely to obtain the knowledge that the God is unlike him, man needs the help of the God; and now he learns that the God is absolutely different from himself. But if the God and man are absolutely different, this cannot be accounted for on the basis of what man derives from the God, for in so far they are akin. Their unlikeness must therefore be explained by what man derives from himself, or by what he has brought upon his own head.[103]

This passage describes the nature of the "absolute paradox," which Roethke equates with the Christian idea of the incarnation. This is the doctrine that God became fully man in the person of

[103] Ibid. 34

Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard contends that this idea is impossible to think since God and man are fundamentally unlike one another, and it would imply a contradiction for two fundamentally dissimilar entities to be reconciled into the same being – Jesus Christ. However, Kierkegaard also contends that this paradox is necessary and fundamental to what he considers to be the existential truth of Christian faith. The impossibility of the claim – metaphysically, rationally, and otherwise – is that which infuses it with existential significance in the first place.

The second aphorism in which Roethke quotes Kierkegaard comes from a passage in *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard discusses a different paradox. Roethke states "We must have the courage, as Kierkegaard says, to think a thought whole."[104] The original text that this passage refers to is a section of *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard, as alluded to earlier, is struggling with the story of Abraham and Isaac. To provide some context, I will include a bit of the passage in *Fear and Trembling* that appears before the Kierkegaardian line that Roethke explicitly quotes in his aphorism.

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread… *For my part I do not lack the courage to think a thought whole*. Hitherto there has been no thought that I have been afraid of; If I should run across such a thought, I hope that I have at least the sincerity to say, "I am afraid of this thought, it stirs up something else in me, and therefore I will not think it. If in this I do wrong, the punishment will not fail to follow."[105]

In this passage Kierkegaard describes his idea that it is important, that it is even courageous, to be willing think the fullness of a thought, even if the fullness of that thought implies some form of "contradiction" or leads to some unsettling conclusion. The contradiction, of course, being the possibility that a supposedly all-good being could command that something evil be done. It

[104] *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose* 89
[105] *Fear and Trembling,* 34. Italics mine.

is impossible for a perfect being to do something imperfect, or to request that someone do something imperfect, yet Kierkegaard thinks that if one is to be honest in thinking about faith then one must be willing to think the impossible. Thinking these kinds of impossible thoughts does not lead to comfort and tranquility, it leads to sleeplessness, but at the same time it intensifies the relation of the single individual to their life and their faith.

The main point of all of this is clear: Kierkegaard thought that paradox serves an important function in the intensification and vitalization of the inner life. Paradox, for Kierkegaard, can be described of as a *generative tension.* Paradoxes are cognitively uncomfortable and hard – if not impossible – for us to think about, but always at the same time they force us to choose for ourselves how to live in relation to them, and what kind of life is best lived in a world characterized by paradox.

The important question for this inquiry is, of course, how does Roethke implement the ideas about the importance of paradox that Kierkegaard seems to have inspired him to consider? The answer appears readily; one need look no further than his poetry. His poetry and prose are both packed with instances of paradox, and these paradoxes seem to work in alignment with Kierkegaard's general attitudes about paradox that were just outlined.

I will start my brief investigation into Roethke's attitudes towards paradox by referring to a puzzling passage on paradox that can be found in his essay titled "On Identity." This passage states in a very Kierkegaardian way that the existence of paradox leads to a heightened experience of self-identity. Roethke does not try to deconstruct the paradox that he presents logically, but instead, like Kierkegaard, he embraces paradox as existentially invigorating, and as the kind of thing that enhances one's engagement with the task of living. Also, as in Kierkegaard's passages above, this passage by Roethke identifies paradox as appearing in the

relationship between oneself and other beings. While Kierkegaard usually describes this kind of paradox as occurring between humans and God, Roethke – in this instance – secularizes it and describes it as occurring between oneself and otherness in general. Roethke does retain the mysterious, semi-mystical tone of Kierkegaard's thinking on this topic, but he also broadens the ontological conditions within which this kind of experience of paradox can occur. This makes sense, especially since Roethke's poetry often describes the relationship between humans and the non-human plant-world in consecrated language.[106] In this passage that follows Roethke even explicitly states that "an inanimate thing" can be one of the beings that facilitates this sort of experience of paradoxical self-encountering. Roethke describes the paradoxical relationship between other and self-understanding as follows:

> It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being— and in some instances, even an inanimate thing— brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. Both feelings are not always present, I'm aware, but either can be an occasion for gratitude.[107]

In this passage Roethke describes the experience of paradox as an existentially generative experience. He says that it leads to a "heightening and awareness of one's own self," but does not attempt to provide a rational explanation for this phenomenon. He does describe it as paradoxical, and this description can give us a basis from which to speculate about the sort of experience that he is trying to describe, especially if we read his thoughts on paradox as being informed by Kierkegaard's thoughts on paradox. If we do this, we can understand that Roethke is saying that the "sharp," irreconcilable clash between self and other throws the self back against

[106] See footnote 89 and my earlier discussion of panpsychism in Roethke's poetry.
[107] *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose* 90

itself in a way that facilitates self-examination.[108] In so doing it forces the self to analyze who and what kind of being it is. This way of thinking is consistent with Roethke's poetic tendency in which his narrators find themselves vitalized when in the presence of the radically other things of nature – clams, weeds, and assorted vegetation. The presence of alterity paradoxically leads to an experience of self-identity. I have presented other examples of this occurring during earlier during discussion of Roethke's poems such as "Weed Puller," "A Field of Light," and "Long Live the Weeds." In each case the paradoxical experience of the sharp, irreconcilability of alterity leads to the narrator falling back on themselves and gaining a greater appreciation and existential sense of who they are.

Within Roethke's actual poetry there are many directly paradoxical statements made, and most of them align well with the way in which the existential purpose of paradox has been being described in this section. I will provide just a few examples of Roethke's poetic use of paradox to demonstrate that Roethke uses paradox to serve existential ends that can easily be interpreted in an existential, Kierkegaardian register.

In "Once More, The Round" Roethke delivers one of his most directly paradoxical statements. This poem, which we previously discussed in the context of its Blake, concerns itself with knowledge and a sense of belonging within the context of a diverse world. The second line in the first stanza is where we can find this paradox.

> What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
> *What can be known? The Unknown.*
> My true self runs towards a Hill
> More! O More! Visible.[109]

[108] This idea of the self relating itself to itself is meant to evoke the description of the self that Kierkegaard gives in the previously discussed opening passage of *The Sickness Unto Death.*
[109] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke,* p. 243. Italics mine.

This poem describes an active clash between the knowable and the unknowable. The intelligible and the unintelligible clash against one another in a paradoxical relationship of dependency. Moreover, this paradoxical clash is described as a precondition for visibility; for the true appearance of things to appear in the first place. "More! O More! visible." Only after the experience of the clash between knowability and unknowability can the self appear to itself in the paradoxical way that it truly is.[110] The paradoxical claim that defines Socratic ignorance remains as the condition for possibility for self-understanding even in Roethke.[111] The experience of paradox initiates that process of generative tension that was previously described.

Roethke's well-regarded poem "The Waking" from his 1953 book of poems *The Waking* also plays off a similar experience of paradox. The hypnotic, incantatory rhythms of the poems describes someone who finds themself in a middle state between knowledge and ignorance, a middle state that recalls the hypnopompic state that one experiences when transitioning from sleep to wakefulness. Consider the first two stanzas of this poem:

> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
> I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
> I learn by going where I have to go.
>
> *We think by feeling. What is there to know?*
> I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.[112]

The critical line in this poem, which I have italicized, is "We think by feeling. What is there to know?" Traditionally thinking (reason) and feeling (emotion) are described as opposed to one

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[110] See footnote 92.

[111] Unsurprisingly Kierkegaard was deeply enamored with Socrates. Kierkegaard made constant reference to Socrates in his writing, and considered him perhaps the greatest of all thinkers. Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis was even written on Socrates. Written in 1841, it was titled "On the Concept of Irony With Continual Reference to Socrates."

[112] *The Collected Poem of Theodore Roethke,* p. 104

another, but Roethke complicates this relationship. He suggests that these two distinct faculties of experiences are deeply united, and that they even imply one another. Reason is that which paradoxically allows us to grasp our fundamental irrationality and emotional facticity, but in this grasping it is only grasping that which is fundamentally other than it. Instead of being separable, thought informs feeling and feeling informs thought. "What is there is there to know?" questions whether there is some sort of external, objective knowledge that we can access through reason, or whether knowledge is something otherwise – perhaps an existential praxis rather than a cognitive apprehension of a coherent external reality.

There are several other examples of paradox that Roethke uses to generate a similar existential experience.[113] "In a Dark Time" is the first poem in the metaphysical sequence of Roethke's 1964 book *The Far Field.* This poem starts out with a bold and directly paradoxical claim, and this claim is what holds this poem together.[114] The poem – as is the case with so many other poems by Roethke – is focused on the difficult journey towards self-understanding. The protagonist, once again, finds themself in the middle of a situation characterized by stark and abrupt contrasts. But, as has been displayed in previous discussions of Roethke's poems, it is during these limit situations that the narrator comes closer to knowing who they are.[115] What follows is the entirety of "In a Dark Time." The primary paradox is contained in the first line of the poem, but one can also be seen in the third line, too. However, each line is relevant to understanding the energetic existential character of Roethke's poetry. This poem captures the

[113] Consider, for example, the line "The self, the anti-self in dire embrace" which I discussed earlier in section 2b.
[114] Once again, I am in indebted to Leigh-Ann Duke's 1991 thesis for first pointing out the paradoxical nature of the first line in this poem.
[115] I attribute my use of the term of "limit situations" to Karl Jaspers, who was a 19th century German-Swiss psychiatrist and existential philosopher.

fraught journey of self-understanding very nicely, and stands out as a particularly clear example of Roethke pairing paradox with intense self-engagement.

> *In a dark time, the eye begins to see,*
> I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
> I hear my echo in the echoing wood –
> A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
> I live between the heron and the wren,
> Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.
>
> What's madness but nobility of soul
> At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
> I know the purity of pure despair,
> My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
> That place among the rocks – is it a cave,
> Or winding path? The edge is what I have.
>
> A steady storm of correspondences!
> A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
> And in broad day the midnight come again!
> A man goes far to find out what he is—
> Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
> All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.
>
> Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
> My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
> Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is *I?*
> A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
> The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
> And one is One, free in the tearing wind.[116]

Once again in this poem we see the paradox of the narrator gaining insight into their identity through the experience of paradox. It is within the darkness, within the removal of the possibility for vision, that one can begin to see who they are: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." This continues in line with the idea that the stark experience of otherness leads to the experience of self, and that the clash between irreconcilables (light/dark) leads to existential invigoration (sight). Along these lines, there is a sense of growth occurring in the midst of

[116] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* 231

inhospitable conditions. In the same way that the plant grown in the "barren soil," so too does the human gain the capacity for existential vision and self-understanding only upon encountering a situation of extreme darkness.[117] This is the same form of paradoxical growth that Kierkegaard described in the earlier passages. In this poem by Roethke he also describes "the purity of pure despair" and "the edge" being "what I have." In both cases a similar idea is conveyed: It is within the extreme conditions of despair and in the inhospitable conditions at the edges of experience that we might find the capacity to begin to live again.

The last line of the third stanza contains a third intensifying paradox: "All natural shapes blazing unnatural light." Here, as in Kierkegaard's discussion of the "absolute paradox," the heavenly (unnatural) clashes with the mundane (natural). A dramatic tension unravels when these two unlike kinds are brought together in paradoxical unity. We can see Roethke use paradox to generate the sense that all things are illumined by an active, mystical force; a mysterious penumbra sets things apart while also bringing them together. The one and the many unite in the dramatic dance of difference; they are distinct but inseparable. Even the narrator's identity itself is subject to the interplay of the one and the many. "Which I is *I*?" This question – and the other paradoxical questions – are never given final answers, but instead are treated as fundamental, vitalizing questions that disclose the paradoxical conditions of human experience.

Like Kierkegaard in his prose, Roethke's paradox as a device generates the sense of intensity and passion that he thought made his poetry existentially efficacious. In *On Poetry and Craft* Roethke discussed intensity in the context of stimulating spiritual self-examination. He wrote:

> This struggle for spiritual identity is, of course, one of the perpetual recurrences… He must be able to shift his rhythms rapidly, the tension**.** He works intuitively, and the final

[117] See "Long Live the Weeds" and my earlier discussion of this poem.

> form of his poem must be imaginatively right. If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language: the 'meaning' itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement.[118]

Paradox conveys Roethke's deep philosophical commitments to existential energy and self-examination; commitments which were discussed in the earlier aphorisms and in the earlier passage from "On Identity."[119] Paradox generates the intensity that stimulates self-examination and allows us to forge identity within the multifarious forms of chaos in modern life. When listing some issues that he takes to be core themes of his work he enumerates "1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; 2) The way, the means of establishing a personal identity; A self in the face of that chaos."[120] As I have been trying to demonstrate through various methods within this thesis, the issue of striving to forge a sense of identity within the confusing, contradictory context of existence is always at the forefront of Roethke's work, and Roethke asserts this claim clearly in this last quote.

But in what other ways does Roethke identify with Kierkegaard's thoughts on paradox? I will consider this question in the final brief section of this paper, and I contend that Roethke thought that paradox could also serve as a generally applicable model for thinking about the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student, and not merely just as a poetic device to awaken individuals from existential languor.

3.2 Paradoxical Pedagogy

In at least two different instances Roethke cited Kierkegaard as an inspiration for shaping his thoughts about the authentic experience of education. He quotes the same line by

[118] *On Poetry and Craft* 32
[119] See the passage on page 62.
[120] *On Poetry and Craft 35*

Kierkegaard both times. First, in "On Identity" in a section discussing one of his former students, Roethke writes: "Besides, his prose was better than mine. I felt that, in Kierkegaardian terms, we had reached the true state of education in one bound: the student was teaching the teacher."[121] Around this time, which was also near the end of Roethke's life, a short film was made about Roethke's poetry.[122] This film, fittingly titled *In A Dark Time,* contains scenes of Roethke talking and reading poems edited with other relevant scenes, such as ferns unfurling and pedestrian packed streets. In the opening sequence of this film, around the two minute and fifteen second mark, Roethke is captured on film saying the lines: "As Kierkegaard said, education begins when the teacher starts learning from the students."[123]

In both cases Roethke is clearly referring to the same Kierkegaardian idea. This quote can originally be found in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* where Kierkegaard in his own voice and not in the voice of pseudonym writes: "Instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner, place yourself in what he has understood and how he has understood it…"[124] This, among other things, demonstrates that Roethke was familiar with Kierkegaardian texts other than the ones I identified in the first section of this thesis. While the idea of a teacher and a student switching roles is not quite as a strong paradox as other paradoxes that Roethke presents – such as the unknown being all that is knowable – this Kierkegaardian idea still turns on a paradoxical idea.[125] Specifically, it turns on the idea of dissimilar things

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[121] *Ibid.* 36

[122] The Movie "In A Dark Time" was made in 1960. "On Identity," which was originally written as a speech given at a conference on "Identity" at Northwestern University, was written in February 1963. Roethke died suddenly on August 1, 1963 while swimming in a neighbor's pool in Bainbridge Island, Washington. The pool has allegedly since been filled in and turned into a zen garden.

[123] Need citation for this movie. Two minute and 15 second mark.

[124] *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* 46

[125] See footnote 92.

becoming similar and even potentially reversing and overtaking one another. Oppositional forces are brought together in a complex pedagogical tension. As I have shown, this paradoxical theme is repeated over and again throughout Roethke's work in which he often places oppositional figures and forces in a tense, paradoxical relationship with one another.

The fact that Roethke repeated this quotation in two different major contexts – in a public speech and in a film about his life and work – suggests that Roethke must have recognized something very important in this Kierkegaardian idea about paradoxical pedagogy. The spirit of Kierkegaard's paradoxical statement about pedagogy seems to be in alignment with the kind of thinking that Roethke finds generative and that has been discussed throughout the course of this paper. In attempting to reconcile opposites and in attempting to think the unthinkable new possibilities for existential growth and expansion appear. With regards to a topic as difficult as instruction in writing poetry – which is a task that consumed much of Roethke's attention while he worked in academia – alternative methods of pedagogy must be experimented with, and this is precisely what Kierkegaard's idea provides. The static model of an instructor lecturing unidirectionally to passive pupils was inadequate for Roethke's pedagogical pursposes, especially given that he thought of good poetry as being characterized by energy and intensity.[126] One can scarcely learn energy by being lectured to in a static relation; instruction in "energy" must necessarily be a dynamic and co-active process. The fixed roles of teacher and student – with the former being the sole dispenser of knowledge and the latter being the sole receiver of knowledge – must be undermined in order for this pedagogy of creative energy to occur in the first place.

[126] See footnote 57.

In his collection of aphorisms titled "The Teaching of Poetry" Roethke states "The professor is supposed to know. I am not of that breed."[127] Later in "First Class," another collection of aphorism, Roethke bluntly states: "Look, I'm the greatest dumb teacher alive."[128] The instructor must recognize the vast array of distinctive personas within the classroom, and must cultivate an atmosphere or energy and cooperation. The teacher and the student must struggle with language together.[129] In "The Teaching Poet" Roethke describes this sort of energetic, cooperative pedagogical atmosphere:

> The class in writing poetry is a collective, cooperative act – most of the time. But to bring diverse people, including the neurotic, the pigheaded, the badly trained, is a task that must be assumed, at first, by the teacher… Discussions have to be free and easy, otherwise the whole method breaks down. And often, during the first weeks, the instructor has to bring all his energy, tact, teaching wisdom into play in order to get a genuine rapport, a sense of mutual respect.[130]

Notice here he describes the class itself as an "act." It is a necessarily active process rather than a static thing – as is the case with Kierkegaard's concept of the self, it is verbal rather than nounal. This idea of an "act" that Roethke describes also shares the element of performativity that Kierkegaard displayed in his adoption of pseudonyms. After the teacher has initiated the cooperative, dynamic task, then the roles may be blurred together. Mutually exclusive categories of understanding must be forced to include and overlap with one another; the teacher must learn from the learner, and the learner must teach the teacher. Roles must shift and interrelate in order for energetic, existential poetry to occur and appear. The static stillness of traditional pedagogy is non-conducive to this unique pedagogical task, so the alternative Kierkegaardian model must

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[127] *On Poetry and Craft* 134
[128] *Ibid.* 138
[129] In *On Poetry and Craft* in "First Class" directly after the previously cited aphorism Roethke also states "How wonderful the struggle with language is." Page 138.
[130] *On Poetry and Craft* 102

overtake and replace it.[131] This is a paradoxical model of pedagogy that Roethke presents us with, especially given that the teacher is not the student, and the student is not the teacher – they are categorically opposed to one another. But for Roethke they must be both at the same time. The paradox must be embraced, and the tension that this paradox produces should be pedagogically, existentially, and poetically generative.

This idea that paradox can be existentially, poetically, and even pedagogically meaningful is only one of many of the unique, existentially relevant ideas that Roethke offers to us within his complex body of work, and only one of the many that I have presented in this paper. Surely there are many more similar ideas and themes that bind Roethke and Kierkegaard together, and that reveal the generally existential character of Roethke's poetry, but this is the last of which I will discuss in this thesis. With this final idea, I will know turn to a few final remarks which will summarize the major ideas that have been herein discussed.

3.3 Concluding Comments

In this thesis I have demonstrated that there has been a lack of scholarship that attempts to place Roethke's poetry within the existential traditional. Thus, I have set it as my task to fill this void by tracing the existential influence on Roethke's life and work. In so doing I have contended not only that Roethke's writing has a distinctly Kierkegaardian existential character, but also that he also had an understanding and appreciation of existential philosophy more generally. I have also tracked certain existential themes – such as the relationship between death and life, between vitality and growth, between paradox and self-identity, and between paradox and pedagogy – as they appear in both Roethke's poetry and prose. In all this it has been my

[131] By "traditional pedagogy" I am referring to the passive instructional style that you will likely find in most modern classrooms and not the Socratic style, although the Socratic dialogue is arguably the *most* traditional pedagogy.

hope to explore an as-yet undertheorized dimension of Roethke's poetry, and to simultaneously generate new possibilities for understanding Roethke as an existential poet.

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