Love and Influence:
Louise Bogan, Rolfe Humphries, and Theodore Roethke

By Michael Paul Novak

I owe much less, I believe, to the work of contemporaries than to their qualities as men and women.

THEODORE ROETHKE, *On the Poet and His Craft*

AMONG the many reasons given for people becoming artists, ranging from the psychological to the spiritual, the matter of ambition is often ignored. The drive for success, for recognition, for applause, seems to play a significant part, particularly in the lives of American artists. Theodore Roethke had this drive, and to leave it out of this account would cause one to miss a great deal about his life and work. He said that as a boy he knew he wanted to be a "great something," but he wasn't certain what it was he was going to be great at. At one of his final poetry readings, he burst out,"You see, what I really want is power!" When he went into the manic phases that became the signals for the approaching mental breakdowns that plagued him throughout his life, he began spending money in extravagant ways and planning some celebrity recognition for himself—a smash Broadway musical with a little help from Lillian Hellman, a new United States government with his friends in high positions and himself, modestly, as ambassador to Ireland. In his more stable moods, he was constantly publicizing his own work—asking for a plug, a review, an introduction, something that would help further his career.[1]

So in late 1933 or early 1934 when Roethke, teaching in his first position at Lafayette College, asked a student of his, Si Greenburg, to introduce him to the older poet and classicist Rolfe Humphries, who had a summer home not far from Roethke's college, his barely beginning career as a poet was probably uppermost in his mind. Yet this meeting and a later meeting with the poet and *New Yorker* poetry critic Louise Bogan (again at Roethke's request for an introduction, this time made to Humphries) created two of the most important relationships in Roethke's young life and had a profound effect on him as a person and as a poet.

[1]The major biographical source for this essay is Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), but I also used the published letters of Theodore Roethke and Louise Bogan and the unpublished letters of Rolfe Humphries.

Humphries, forty years old at this time (fourteen years older than Roethke), was a prep school teacher of Latin at Woodmere Academy on Long Island, who had some reputation as a lyric poet whose work often appeared in *The New Yorker* and a wider one as a very difficult to please reviewer for *The New Republic* and *Poetry*. His reputation would grow considerably in the forties and fifties, not only for his poetry and reviews but also for his English translations of Lorca (the first) and for his verse translations from the Latin, particularly of *The Aeneid* and *The Metamorphoses*.

In 1934 Humphries was beginning his obsession with left-wing politics that dominated his life during the decade, with the later and more particular focus on the Spanish Civil War. He was not able to pass on this obsession to the apolitical Roethke, just as his knowledge of languages and the classics was beyond Roethke's grasp or interest. His appeal to Roethke was, first of all, as a writer of the highest standards whose poetry showed superior technical flair with a subtle sense of verse form and verse music and whose reviews attacked all work except that of the highest talent and integrity.

The most traumatic experience in Roethke's life was the death of his father when Roethke was fifteen. His relationship with his father was a difficult one, composed equally of love and fear (as his poems clearly show), and the early death forced him into the unnatural and burdensome position of being the man of the family. Surely, in some ways, Rolfe Humphries was the lost father—a kinder, gentler version of the dead Teutonic authority figure. In the first letter Humphries wrote to Roethke, he assured the younger, guilt-ridden man of his worth:

> Thanks for sending the poems. It wasn't fatuous at all but an appreciated act of friendliness. I don't think you have any call to worry about being an academic hack—(that's only how you make your living) nor to be self-contemptuous. You are a poet—a rather delicate and sensitive one: pour your contempt on this lousy world.[2]

The fact that Humphries was a tall, athletic (he played sports in college and was a football coach at his prep school), tough-talking fellow whose favorite pastimes were attending baseball games and horse races must have appealed to the big, boisterous Roethke. He seemed to have convinced the unsure young man that it was an acceptable, even a manly, desire to be a lyric poet.

Humphries's relationship with Louise Bogan began (ten years before he met Roethke) in 1924 when he had moved from a teaching job in San Francisco to a new one in New York City. There seems to have been some romantic attraction between them, but at this time Humphries was engaged to a medical student, Helen Spencer, whom he married in 1925 and remained married to until his death in 1969, while Bogan was living with the writer Raymond

[2]Rolfe Humphries's letters and papers are the property of Amherst College Trustees, and most of them are available at the college library, but his letters to Theodore Roethke are at the University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, Wash.

Holden whom she later married, a marriage that was in the final stage of breakup when she met Roethke in 1934.

Humphries and Bogan had a close literary friendship throughout the twenties and thirties, often exchanging and criticizing each other's poems through the mails but also meeting frequently in the city. They also had a mutual friend, the critic Edmund Wilson, with whom they shared many literary values. Bogan, who was three years younger than Humphries, had a much more sophisticated grasp of modern literature than he did in 1924, and she taught him a great deal about the modern poets, particularly Pound and Eliot. They had a series of furious arguments in the thirties over Humphries's politics and his feeling that literature should incorporate some of the Left's political attitudes, yet they remained friends throughout the furor. She shared with him—besides an occasionally similar-sounding lyric gift—a great sense of integrity. They were anything but careerists: Bogan always went to great lengths not to take advantage of her position as the poetry critic of *The New Yorker* to further her own career, and Humphries made numerous enemies and almost no friends through his often sardonic reviews. A good illustration of what they were like in this regard occurred in 1948 when they both decided, separately, to refuse a *Life* magazine invitation to honor the Sitwells' arrival in the United States because they both thought Edith Sitwell's poetry was being vastly overrated at this time. They thereby missed appearing in one of the most famous literary photographs: the Sitwells surrounded by Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden (cleverly perched on a ladder high above everyone else), Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, and about a dozen other writers in New York's Gotham BookMart.

This incorruptibility offered an example and, often, a reproof to their young, success-driven friend Theodore Roethke, and it is my contention in this essay that Humphries and Bogan had a much greater influence on him than past commentators have realized. The influence can be seen most particularly in the advice they gave him about individual poems, in certain attitudes of theirs about poetry that he accepted, and, finally, in Bogan's example of revealing to him the importance of the unconscious for poetry. The latter revelation played an important part in Roethke's breakthrough volume, *The Lost Son*, published by Doubleday in 1948.

In one of the best pieces ever written about creativity and influence, "Poetry's Debt to Poetry," the poet Richard Wilbur describes a dinner party where artists of various kinds were asked to relate how they were inspired to become artists. They did not answer with tales of traumatic experiences or tragic love affairs; instead, they responded with stories that concerned encounters with works of art: "Astonished by a poem, a painting, a fugue, they had wanted to make something like that."[3]

[3]Richard Wilbur, *Responses, Prose Pieces: 1953-1976* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 161.

But even Wilbur, who goes on in this essay to give many examples of how poets imitate other poetry, is bothered somewhat by the influence-laden Roethke, "the most precarious of the fine poets of our century,"[4] in regard to influence. After all, Roethke is the poet who said, in one poem ("The Dance"), "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats," and, in a later one ("The Abyss"),[5] "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues." To make a list of the poets Roethke explicitly imitates at one time or another would take up a page of print: Adams (Leonie) to Yeats, Auden to Wylie, Blake to Wordsworth, Bogan to Williams, for openers. Roethke was quite aware of his magpie borrowings as the lines about Yeats and Whitman acknowledge, and in his essay, "How to Write Like Somebody Else," he explains it, in part, as a kind of tribute to some admired writer but also as a challenge to place oneself against the work of a great writer. "In a time when the romantic notion of the inspired poet still has considerable credence, true 'imitation' takes a certain courage. One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa."[6]

The noncompetitive sounding Humphries offered Roethke numerous assurances of his worth, and in his second letter to him he went into ample and particular detail about the poems Roethke had sent him, offering a number of possible changes. Roethke followed a variety of the suggestions and continued to follow Humphries's later suggestions into the 1950s. On a human level, too, Humphries provided much support, responding to Roethke's first breakdown in November, 1935. On Christmas Eve of that year Humphries wrote to his troubled young friend, now confined to a mental hospital in Michigan, a long and lively letter ending with this paragraph:

> Well sir no more I can think of just now but trust you can read this or the orderly or night nurse or head psychiatric interne or whatever it is that has the rank around there and you can find time to send a postcard if not too busy on occupational therapy and will let you know if they ship Captain Gilbert to Agua Caliente will send you my one horse wire when he is [.....] and now we'll close with best wishes to Mickey Cochrane and the Detroit Bears Joe Louis Senator Vandenberg and all other habitues and sons of habitues of your great state.[7]

Yet all this kindness and encouragement was tempered at times with some sharp criticism of Roethke's work. In 1935 Humphries was asked by Ann Winslow, an editor who was putting together a book of new poets called *Trial Balances* with critical comments by more established poets, to write such an in-

[4]Wilbur, p. 167.

[5]"The Dance," "The Abyss," and other poems quoted in this essay are from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), unless otherwise indicated.

[6]Theodore Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose*, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 69-70.

[7]Humphries to Roethke, 24 December 1935, University of Washington Libraries.

troduction for Roethke. Humphries agreed, but in an irritable letter to the cloying Ann Winslow he said this about Roethke:

As to Roethke, in particular, I think what he writes is usually sensitive, delicate, tentative, rather shy stuff. I could not, at this point, utter 300-500 profitable words about his writing unless I were to criticize his poems in the item rather than in the mass, and I am not sure that is legitimate here. I should think it obvious from his verse that Roethke is nobody's damn fool; what is less obvious is his capacity for more full-toned and robust expression. That metaphysical-personal-Elizabethan vein can not yield ore inexhaustibly. Technically, Roethke has a good deal to learn, and I suppose he knows it. If I am allowed to take down his pants in public, I might say, for one thing, that he should try to get along without adjectives for a while; for another—this only seems to contradict the first—that it wouldn't hurt, for practice, to play up the sensuous at the expense of the intellectual, and to show more concern with sound and less with image. And there is a trick in sustaining the energy of a poem; he hasn't quite got this, always; sometimes condensation is needed, sometimes expansion. Of course this kind of laying down the law implies that a fellow has the time and leisure to improve each shining hour. One does not have to have something personally on any given individual of Roethke's age to surmise that he is probably worried about his livelihood, and by turns desperate and indifferent concerning his art.[8]

Humphries sent Roethke a copy of this and said he would withdraw it if it were too tough, but what is interesting about it is that he does have his finger on the major weaknesses of Roethke's early poetry and that his suggestions for changes are the very ones Roethke will follow, although not until the 1940s. When Humphries was asked to review Roethke's first book, *Open House*, published by Knopf in 1941, he was quite a bit more generous, but he did hope *The New Republic* would publish this unusually honest opening paragraph:

Ted Roethke has been a friend of mine for a good many years. I cannot say I "discovered" him, whatever that would mean; but I was, I believe, one of the first outside his own personal circle, or his associates at Lafayette College, to whom he showed his work; and I hope I have given him some encouragement and assistance. I have followed his progress with interest and affection, and I am glad to see his book at last published by the house of Knopf. So much by the way of prefatory candor on the reviewer's part.[9]

This kind of candor might have set the ethics of reviewing ahead a century, but it wasn't wanted; however, again it shows Humphries's regard for Roethke and the honesty he brought to their relationship.

To return to 1935, Louise Bogan stepped into the pugnacious Humphries's shoes and wrote the introduction for Roethke's poems for *Trial Balances*. By this time she was having an affair with Roethke. But before going on to describe their relationship, I'd like to remind the reader of Roethke's

[8]Humphries to Ann Winslow, n.d. [ca. March 1935], Amherst College Library, Amherst, Mass.

[9]Carbon copy of manuscript of review at Amherst College Library. The review, without this paragraph, appeared in *The New Republic* (July 14, 1941).

poetry, the enormous changes that took place between his first and second book, changes that I feel his relationship with Bogan had a great deal to do with.

The poems Roethke was writing during the early years of this relationship are collected, in part, in *Open House*, a volume of tightly formed, constricted, modern-metaphysical poems that belie the title. These poems were sent to Bogan and Humphries for their extensive comments and show some of their influences, particularly on a strictly technical level. The title poem is probably as good a poem as any in the book and shows the typical style of the volume as well. It begins:

> My secrets cry aloud.
> I have no need for tongue.
> My heart keeps open house,
> My doors are widely swung.
> An epic of the eyes
> My love, with no disguise.
>
> (p. 3)

Its insistent rhymes and end-stopping begin to suggest the Roethke method, but the very tightness of the form and the shortness of the lines seem in conflict with the poem's declarations. Bogan contributed to the final stanza of the poem when she wrote Roethke the following advice:

Now, to tackle your last lines:

> In language fit and pure
> I stop the lying mouth

is perfect, really fine. But I don't like *lyric cry*; it's a cliché, as old Malcolm [Cowley] would say. And it seems to me what you need in the last line is a synonym for *open* or *apparent*, as opposed to the tongueless ideal. A fine sounding word meaning *apparent* would, to my mind, bring the intensity of the last stanza to a practically unbearable point of crisis, and that, my dear, is as you know, the great triumph of a short lyric, that it can be brought up, at the end, into a sound that tears the heart in twain. Of course, you could have it, as you suggested: This is my something cry, and then, My rage, my agony. That is what you were working toward, I think. Or you could delete the colon after mouth, and say I stop the lying mouth, *With* something or other, something or other. I like the colon after that swell line, however. I leave the job of writing the penultimate line to you—nice of me, isn't it—and I go back to a word meaning *apparent* that could be clapped in front of *agony*, to make the last line. And here are all the words the thesaurus gives: conspicuous, manifest, definite, explicit, apparent, notable, notorious, stark-staring, literal, plain-spoken, producible, and above board. (I don't *really* think above board would do, but some of the others might!) Now go ahead, my dove. It's your poem, after all.[10]

When I look at a passage like this—and there are very similar ones in Humphries's letters as well—I wonder if I'm looking at love of poetry, or love of

[10]Louise Bogan, *What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan*, ed. Ruth Limmer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 102-103.

person: probably both. Roethke accepted her advice to a considerable degree, dropping "lyric cry," but working out a slightly different solution. After all, it was his poem. The final stanza reads this way:

> The anger will endure,
> The deed will speak the truth
> In language strict and pure.
> I stop the lying mouth:
> Rage warps my clearest cry
> To witless agony.

The important question becomes how Roethke moved from the clever but restricted style of the first book to the expansive, risk-taking poems of *The Lost Son*. The opening group of poems in this volume of 1948—the greenhouse sequence—is the first true sign of Roethke's genius, and these poems are tied into his ability to see and capture the greenhouse world of his childhood. In a way it's an Eden being depicted, but an Eden filled with energy and buried sexuality that is, at times, violent in quality. Take the second poem in the collection, "Cuttings (*later*)":

> 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?
>
> I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
> In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
> The small waters seeping upward,
> The tight grains parting at last.
> When sprouts break out,
> Slippery as fish,
> I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

The last line makes clear what we might suspect—that there is a human-plant analogy here, having to do with sex, struggle, pain, birth; but the poem first of all *is* the cuttings themselves observed with a fierce seeing. Similarly, in a later poem, "Orchids," ghostly orchids are observed: "Adder-mouthed, / Swaying close to the face, / Coming out, soft and deceptive, / Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird's tongue." The abstractions of the early poetry are gone, and Roethke has learned to see.

This capturing of the thing, as is, by abandoning abstract language and, secondly, giving movement to his poetry through sound, are the characteristics of these greenhouse poems, and I believe they owe something to the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In early 1935, Humphries and Bogan were trading their attitudes about this newly discovered poet and trading translations as well. In one letter Humphries wondered what Roethke might think of these poems. When Bogan heard of Roethke's breakdown in December, 1935, she ended her stoic advice with these words from Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus*:

"Und wenn dich Irdische vergass, / zu der stillen Erde sag: Ich rinne. / Zu dem reaschen Wasser sprich: Ich bin."[11] These lines can be translated: "When the worldly forget you, / to the silent earth say: I flow. / To the swift water speak: I am." And again to Roethke, she recommends a close analysis of Rilke's "Blue Hortensia," a poem that—according to Bogan—"plumbs blue Hortensia to their depths."

> Here all sorts of comparisons are brought in, to aid the plumbing process. The color of the flowers is the color of old writing paper, faded into yellow and violet and gray, and it is like a child's many-times-washed apron—and by the time the reader gets to that, he is in the state of collapse, for Rilke has re-created the color in such a moving way that it's as though something new has been created in the universe. You see all that, I'm sure. Now, my duck, go and look at some of the flora, or even fauna of the electrical area, and do it likewise.[12]

Two years later—in a letter of July 12, 1937—she wrote to him: "I'm glad you are at last getting Rilke."[13] Although it wasn't until the early 1940s, Roethke did do likewise in the greenhouse sequence, and Bogan's description reads almost like a formula that Roethke followed.

The other, and much more often analyzed, group of remarkable poems from the 1948 volume is represented by the title poem, "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape of Fire." (Then Roethke continued the sequence [mistakenly, I think] with nine similar poems in the 1951 volume, *Praise to the End!*) As in these lines from the "The Lost Son," these poems often begin in a period of dread and darkness:

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

The hero is driven in a series of regressive steps back to the memories and language of childhood: Later in the poem, he says, "I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother. / Fear was my father, Father Fear. / His look drained the stones." And again, "Scurry of warm over small plants. / Ordnung! ordnung! / Papa is coming!" Roethke had the examples of

[11]Bogan, p. 122.

[12]Bogan, p. 97.

[13]Bogan, p. 157.

Humphries's and Bogan's poetry transforming the personal into the impersonal, and in these poems he had taken the fragments of his unstable life and turned them into a mythic journey, a journey that is moving toward light and stillness, as in the ending of "The Lost Son":

> Light traveled over the wide field;
> Stayed.
> The weeds stopped swinging.
> The mind moved, not alone,
> Through the clear air, in the silence.
> . . . . . .
>
> A lively understandable spirit
> Once entertained you.
> It will come again.
> Be still.
> Wait.

Bogan, in reviewing these poems, described their movement: "the journey from the child's primordial subconscious world, through the regions of adult terror, guilt, and despair, toward a final release into the freedom of conscious being."[14] And in a later review she makes it clear how Roethke differs from the confessional poets. Even though he also explores his life, he does so on a different level, beyond—or below—anecdote:

> Theodore Roethke . . . combines a close recording of the actual with a kind of lyrical incantation that Robert Lowell, more intent on the lyric as dramatic narrative, does not concern himself with. Roethke's childhood memories . . . are as exact, in their way, as Lowell's, but Roethke often chooses to deal directly with subconscious images and to boldly penetrate the subliminal regions where the beginnings of instinct and impulse lie hidden.[15]

I feel that Bogan had something important to do with these poems, although here it possibly has more to do with her life than with her work. To go back to their first meeting, Roethke kept asking Humphries for an introduction that finally took place in November 1934. Roethke must have behaved insecurely because Humphries had to assure him, once again: "Don't be a goof. Louise thought you were an intelligent guy," and he proceeded to give Roethke her New York address. In a letter to Edmund Wilson she gave an amusing account of her relationship with Roethke and her attitude toward him:

> I, myself, have been made to bloom like a Persian rosebush, by the enormous lovemaking of a cross between a Brandenburger and a Pomeranian, one Theodore Roethke by

[14]Bogan, *A Poet's Alphabet*, ed. Robert Phelps and Ruth Limmer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 302.

[15]Bogan, *A Poet's Alphabet*, p. 365.

name. He is very, very large (6 ft. 2 and weighing 218 lbs.) and he writes very, very small lyrics. 28 years old, and a frightful tank. We have poured rivers of liquor down our throats, these last three days, and, in between, have indulged in such bearish and St. Bernardish antics as I have never before experienced. . . . Well! Such goings on! A woman of my age! . . . He is just a ripple on time's stream, really, because he is soon going to Michigan. . . . I hope that one or two immortal lyrics will come out of all this tumbling about.[16]

The affair was the kind of ripple Bogan predicted, lasting less than a year, but they remained friends for many years afterwards. Early in their relationship she often countered Roethke's self-pity with the same kind of stoicism that Humphries often preached and practiced, but most likely Bogan's own example was more important to Roethke. In 1931 and again in 1933—going through the breakup of her marriage with Raymond Holden—she was twice institutionalized for severe depression and went through the beginnings of Freudian analysis. It was a very painful period for her, but she felt that she learned something important from it, believing that a look into the abyss might have its salutary outcome. "It's just as well to know that the ninth circle has an icy floor by experience: By having laid the living hand upon it."[17] In poems like "Medusa," "The Sleeping Fury," and "The Dream," she confronts the unconscious. These are poems of hallucination where she turns to look at the other self, as in the opening of "The Sleeping Fury."

> You are here now,
> Who were so loud and feared, in a symbol before me,
> Alone and asleep, and I at last look long upon you.
>
> Your hair fallen on your cheek, no longer in the semblance of serpents,
> Lifted in the gale; my sister, lie asleep, like a child,
> Who, after rage, for an hour quiet, sleeps out its tears.

Admittedly the language of this poem is much more controlled than Roethke's in "The Lost Son," but her interest in capturing nightmare points the way toward the buried life of Roethke's poetry. Again in the poem, "The Dream," Bogan explores complicated feelings of guilt and retribution in recounting the recurring dream of the "terrible horse" before whom the speaker cowers in fear. But a woman (another version of the self?) tells her to throw a glove as a charm to the horse. She does and then "The terrible beast, that no one may understand, / Came to my side, and put down his head in love." Stanley

[16]Bogan, *What the Woman Lived*, pp. 84-85.

[17]Bogan, *What the Woman Lived*, p. 99. The poet Beth Bentley, whom I met in the summer of 1966 at The University of Colorado as we sat together in the last classes Rolfe Humphries taught at a writing conference, suggested in a letter to me that Bogan was a predecessor for Roethke's exploration of the unconscious.

Kunitz said of these poems of Bogan's: "Persephone might have written them."[18]

The entire relationship between Roethke and Bogan needs a deeper reader of human personality than myself, although thinking about the letters makes me believe that the strongest feelings here are filial-maternal ones. What is one to make of the fact that when Roethke finally married, Louise Bogan was the matron of honor? (W. H. Auden was the best man; possibly Roethke simply wanted his marriage blessed by poetry.) Also, Roethke's biographer, Allan Seager, speculates that Roethke's first breakdown was caused, in part, by Bogan's favorable notice in the *Trail Balances* volume. Seager wonders whether Roethke's

> pervasive sense of guilt made him feel unworthy within himself and this went simultaneously with a public show of pride and pleasure. It is just possible, therefore, that this first bout of illness may have arisen from the conditions set by Miss Bogan's praise.[19]

Near the end of his life, in an interview by some students who had just made a film of him, *In a Dark Time*, Roethke claimed that he caused his first breakdown himself by purposely driving himself into a kind of frenzy to get at his inner, more animal, self. "There was one time I played the Rimbaud business, seeing . . . if you could really derange the senses."[20] Roethke's second breakdown occurred at the very time he was working on "The Lost Son" sequence and seems to have been the most severe of his life. In the interview, Roethke said, "I think maybe this business about being able to tap the unconscious is a polite kind of way of saying you speak completely nutty, I mean, or potty, as it were."[21]

When Roethke went on to the successes of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and the beginnings of an international reputation, Bogan and Humphries occasionally spoke skeptically about him and his many self-promotions—"old five quintets Roethke," Humphries called him—but both

[18]Stanley Kunitz, *Kinds of Order, Kinds of Folly: Essays and Conversations* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), p. 197. A complete recording of Roethke's most important influence must include a reference to Kunitz although I left him out of the body of this essay because he was not closely connected with Bogan or Humphries. Roethke appeared on Kunitz's doorstep about the same period he was meeting Humphries and Bogan, expressing great admiration for Kunitz's work. There are some echoes of Kunitz in some of Roethke's early work, and Kunitz suggested the title *Open House* to Roethke (Roethke then wrote the poem of that name) and helped Roethke arrange the order of the poems in that volume. Kunitz was also reading Rilke in the mid-1930s, as the essay "Lesson from Rilke" in his book shows, and possibly was also trying to pass on his enthusiasm to Roethke. It seems to me that Bogan, Humphries, and Kunitz formed a kind of family of poets for Roethke, Kunitz's role being that of the ideal brother.

[19]Seager, p. 103.

[20]"Theodore Roethke Speaks," an interview edited by Noel Bowers, *New Letters*, 49, no. 1 (Fall 1982), p. 17.

[21]"Theodore Roethke Speaks," p. 21.

were deeply saddened by his early death in 1963 at the age of 55. Humphries —past 70—went to the University of Washington and gave a lecture on Roethke and their relationship.

Throughout his life, Roethke knew he had learned a great deal from them and acknowledged his debts. He wrote an article, "Verse in Rehearsal," explaining how much Humphries had contributed to an early poem of his, "Genesis," and called him "one of the best technicians among modern poets."[22] In one of the last letters Roethke wrote, he recommended to a former student of his, who was publishing, that she consider Humphries's collected poems, then out of print. The one extensive essay that Roethke ever wrote was about the poetry of Louise Bogan. "Such a poet will never be popular, but can and should be a true model for the young. And the best work will stay in the language as long as the language survives."[23] He said, again in a letter late in his life, that his relationship with her was the most important one of his life.

The progress of this poet was a complicated and tortuous one—from the big, energetic young man who wrote the very, very small lyrics to the dying man who wrote the expansive poems of *The Far Field*—and along the way Theodore Roethke came to realize what a complex fate it was to be an American poet. His friends Rolfe Humphries and Louise Bogan gave him tempered encouragement and tough advice, and they served as models for the lives of true poets. Bogan's work, in particular, shone a light on the path to the unconscious for her lover and friend. Through her, he discovered that the way to the self was down, to the place where the personal became the universal. Roethke surpassed his mentors Humphries and Bogan in many ways. He took his talent, his ambition, and his madness and pushed off to shores they never reached. Yet they gave him much that he needed for that journey on which he achieved the subtle balance between order and energy, between clarity of knowledge and the dark desires of the self.

[22]Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft,* p. 32.

[23]Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft,* p. 148.