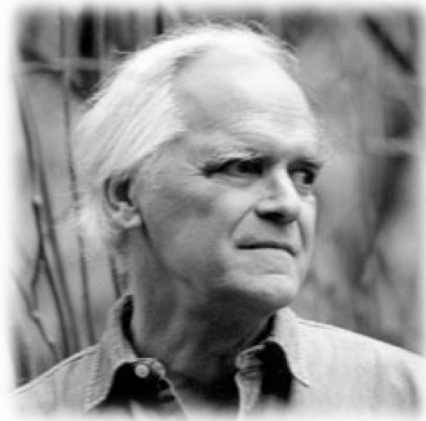


Theodore Roethke; the Poet as a Teacher

An Interview with David Wagoner

Poet Richard Hugo wrote an essay entitled, *Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching*, in which he declared, “Roethke was probably the best poetry-writing teacher ever. That’s impossible to prove, and silly but I had to say it just once in print.”

As Hugo suggests, it’s impossible to quantify the ultimate impact of Roethke teaching, but the list of writers who studied under the poet during his teaching career reads like a *Who’s Who* of late 20th Century American poets.



In this edition of *Roethke Recollections*, one the poet's most accomplished students -- and also a colleague and close confidante -- David Wagoner agreed to share his thoughts on Roethke’s influence in the classroom and beyond.

Wagoner’s *Collected Poems, 1956-1976*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 1977. His most recent book of poems is, *A Map of the Night*. He is the author of eighteen other collections and has written ten novels. He edited *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-63* (1972) and recently wrote the critically acclaimed, biographic drama, *First Class*, focusing on Roethke.

Wagoner first encountered Roethke when he was studying for an M.A. in English at Pennsylvania State University in the late 1940s. Roethke was teaching in the school’s English Department at that time.

FRIENDS OF THEODORE ROETHKE (FOTR): In the *Georgia Review* you note that after taking Roethke’s workshop at Penn State your senior year you said to yourself, “If he’s right, everything I’ve written is terrible. And fortunately I decided he **was** right.” What change in direction did his teaching engender in your approach and work? What was the main course correction?

DAVID WAGONER: Till I entered Roethke's workshop, I hadn't given much thought to revising. I was only interested in what I might write next. He urged his classes to demand more of themselves, to keep improving their work and to read, read, read the bulk of poetry written in English, and I've been doing both since.

FOTR: Roethke said he believed in the “Kierkegaardian notion” that true education begins when the teacher starts to learn from the students? Did this manifest itself practically in a productive back-and-forth between Roethke and his students, or do you think his comment was more philosophical in nature?

WAGONER: He always valued the opinions and suggestions of the better students about his own work. And as soon as his best students --James Wright, Richard Hugo, Carolyn Kizer, and I will add myself-- began publishing their own efforts, he regularly showed them some of his newest work and asked for criticism.

FOTR: Back to another interesting comment you made in the *Georgia Review*, "*The most charismatic man I've ever met was not Adlai Stevenson, Prince Philip, Billy Graham, Dylan Thomas, or Ted Bundy (all of whom I encountered as a reporter, a fan, or a teacher), but Theodore Roethke, and if I've been able to recapture some of that charisma here (in the play First Class, I'll be satisfied.*" How did that charisma manifest itself in the classroom?



WAGONER: Charisma is extremely difficult to define or even describe. In my experience with Roethke, it was something like what acolytes have felt around holy men and women who are not quite of this world, but are in touch with mysterious, invisible, dangerous forces. It was often more than a little scary. I felt important events might occur at any moment.

FOTR: Did his teaching style impact your classroom approach with students? If so, how?

WAGONER: In my play "First Class" many of the things I have Roethke do and say were my words and actions and were attributed to him because he inspired them.

FOTR: Hugo, James Wright, Carolyn Kizer and you are the most frequently mentioned Roethke students who went on to great accomplishment as poets. That's a very impressive list. When you look at the work of these writers, and knowing Roethke as well as do, is there something of his philosophy and approach that you all share in outlook or approach to the craft?

WAGONER: Yes. The four poets you mention went on to work as hard as he did at writing poems and helping students to write them, and all four continued to believe and teach that sound, rhythm, and meaning were of nearly equal importance in a poem.

FOTR: You once told Richard Hugo that that you had a "*long and painful time breaking Roethke's hold.*" What do you mean by that specifically?

WAGONER: Roethke was, till late in his life, more influenced by English poets than by American poets and novelists and American speech. My own models were British for too long.

FOTR: This year (2013) marks the 50th Anniversary of Roethke's death. We've established that he had a strong impact on a generation of poets he touched directly. But has that Roethke legacy managed to translate into the next generation and if so, how has it taken shape?

WAGONER: I have no good answer to that. Beatrice Roethke told me a few years ago that her royalties for reprints of Roethke's work have been increasing every year, and the manuscript collection at the University of Washington.

Wagoner has received an American Academy of Arts and Letters award, the Sherwood Anderson Award, the Fels Prize, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Eunice Tjetjens Memorial and English-Speaking Union prizes from Poetry magazine, and fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Wagoner is the former Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets and is an emeritus professor at the University of Washington. He has also been a great supporter of the Theodore Roethke Home Museum.
