

## ***Roethke Recollections: On the Poet as Writer for Children***

### ***An Interview with poet William Jay Smith***

William Jay Smith has been a major force in American Literature for over half a century. He is the author of more than sixty books of poetry, children's verse, memoirs, and criticism. From 1968 to 1970 he served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a post now called Poet Laureate of the United States). Two of his thirteen poetry collections were finalists for the National Book Award, and his translations have won awards from the French Academy, the Swedish Academy, and the Hungarian government.



Smith was born in Louisiana in 1918 and brought up at Jefferson Barracks, just south of St. Louis, Missouri. His memoir, ***Army Brat***, (1980), which recounts his unusual boyhood as the son of a professional soldier, a clarinetist in the Sixth Infantry Band, was acclaimed by Eudora Welty and Ralph Ellison. Artur Lundkvist of the Swedish Academy said of it: "One would have to go back to the books of Kipling portraying military life seen through a child's eyes in order to find anything comparable."

Smith was a close friend of Theodore Roethke and continues to be among the poet's most ardent supporters. Roethke turned to Smith for counsel as he wrote his "nonsense" verse for children that culminated in the publication of, *I Am! Says the Lamb* in 1961. Smith is an honorary Board member of the Friends of Theodore Roethke. In an August 2013 interview he took the time to share his recollections of the poet and his work.

**Friends of Theodore Roethke (FOTR):** Thank you for taking the time to speak to us today. When did you first encounter Roethke's work and when did you first meet him?

**William Jay Smith (SMITH):** I knew Ted's work long before I met him. He was just ten years older than I and I had carefully followed his poems when they appeared in magazines, and I snapped up his first book, ***Open House***, in 1941. I had heard much about him from Louise Bogan, who was the permanent critic of poetry for the *New Yorker* and had reviewed him favorably. When my first book of poetry was published in 1947, I had married Barbara Howes who had attended Bennington College (Beatrice's alma mater), I met Ted when he came to New York and he and Beatrice got in touch with Barbara and me. Which brings us to the arrival of a huge bouquet on a Saturday afternoon in January 1954 from Ted when they came together to our third-floor apartment in Greenwich Village.

**FOTR:** It seems you spent time together while he was on a Fulbright in Europe. Can you describe the circumstances that brought you together during that period?

**SMITH:** I went to Oxford in 1947 as a Rhodes Scholar, one of the first group elected after World War II. Members were allowed to be married, and so Barbara accompanied me there. The following year we went to Florence and back to the States in 1953, returning to Florence in 1954 shortly after meeting Theodore Roethke in New York.

Ted and Beatrice took an apartment in a new building on the edge of the Ponte Vecchio, one of the few places that had been bombed during the war.

I went to see them there one morning with my five-year old son David. Ted was not a morning person – he usually did not show himself until almost noon. Before that, he would appear clad in his dressing gown, and would utter a series of snarls and grunts that put most people off. But David spoke up and said, “Uncle Ted, please say some other funny things, will you?” Ted, who had not said anything that he considered remotely funny collapsed with laughter.

Ted was asked to speak at the Teacher’s College - Magistero, and the students there were thoroughly unprepared for his lectures, which consisted of reading and discussing his poems. When few of them appeared, many American writers, residents of Florence gathered around to support him – Elizabeth Mann Borghese, the daughter of Thomas Mann, Teckla Bianchini, the wife of an Italian composer, Peter Vierck, a German American and his Russian wife, and Barbara Howes and I.

It was amazing to have two great German American personalities in the same place at the same time. Peter Vierck never stopped talking, and most of time he was talking about his place among the world’s greatest writers. One of Peter’s claims to fame was that he was descended from the royal German family, and he expected to be treated as such. Ted and Peter got along fairly well but I remember a scene from a party one evening where we had all gathered. Ted picked up a huge pineapple that he found on the table and dropped it down on Peter’s head when the latter had said something ridiculous.

Ted liked to have a great time. Often I would walk with him across the city and we always ended up somewhere at a party. Ted was a tall heavy-set man who moved slowly. After we had covered several blocks without his turning his head once to examine anything around him, he would stop suddenly and say, pontifically, “Will you please tell people I am not Richard Wilbur.” Ted was the last person in the world that I would think of comparing physically with Richard Wilbur. Tall and slim, Wilbur looked as if he had come from some other planet. He was a fine writer, just as Ted was, but they both were totally different in style and subject matter.

**FOTR:** It seems you maintained a friendship with Ted despite working on opposite Coasts of the United States. How often did you see and interact with him through the years?

**SMITH:** I didn't see him very often but we stayed in touch regularly over the years. The months in Florence and later on the Island of Ischia for W.H. Auden's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party were the times that I really got to know him best. We also saw him at other events – when he came to read in Connecticut with Stanley Kunitz, whom he had admired for many years. Ted was introduced by Richard Wilbur and the platform on which he was to speak was covered with furniture. There were two grand pianos and any number of small tables. Ted worked his way through the objects and ended up with giving us a great performance.

**FOTR:** Your career, probably more than any other great 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet, shows a successful commitment to what we call serious poetry and poetry for children. Do you remember discussing children's poetry with Roethke? There's always a sense that your work in this area inspired him.

**SMITH:** Yes, we spoke about it at length. Ted wanted very badly to succeed in both areas. Actually I thought Ted was a great master but I didn't think his writing for children had particular strength. At one point in London Ted sent a long letter to T.S. Eliot and with it two books, one of his serious poetry and one that contained poetry for children. Eliot sent the children's poetry right back without any comment. I think that Ted was upset about that because he had hoped that the book would end up in the hands of Walter de la Mare, whom we both admired. When Faber published two of my books for children Ted, I believe, was rather envious.

Ted had a great feeling for childhood, when he writes about the greenhouse he communicates very well the feeling of what it was like to be a child. When he goes outside of that, in my opinion, he is less successful. Many people who write successfully for children write for a specific child. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, wrote for a stepchild whom he saw every day. I think having a child to write for is a tremendous advantage that Ted just didn't have.

Disney recently used one of my poems ("Things") for a children's poetry series called *A Poem Is*. The poem was read by the actress Laura Linney. That's the kind of thing Ted would have liked, he wanted his work to be as widely read as possible. He was certain writing for children would earn him a lot of money, but that just didn't happen.

**FOTR:** August 2013 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Roethke's death. It often takes decades for writers and critics to accurately assess the impact of a writer. How do you see Roethke's legacy today and going forward?

**SMITH:** When you look at the thirty years that Ted was active, the 1930s though the 1960s, it's an amazing body of work and is easily among the greatest of any poet of that time.

When I was invited by the State Department to tour Japan all the way up and down the islands they asked me to speak of a few contemporary poets that I admired, one that I chose was Ted and the other was Elizabeth Bishop whom I also knew well at the time. One of the poems of Roethke's that I chose to read and discuss was *My Papa's Waltz*, it's the poem of his that most people are familiar with.

### **My Papa's Waltz**

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

Beatrice has told me that the worksheets that Ted kept of his poem show that he had originally planned to depict his mother as taking the boy to bed and, in any case, the kitchen that is described in the poem was actually tiny and no place for very much waltzing. All the senses are brought to bear to describe the poet's clinging "to his father's shirt" and clearly this was completely the result of the poet's imagination.

The reputations of poets rise and fall. Ted's reputation is one of the very few that will continue to rise and surpass that of others over time. He will certainly remain one of the great American poets.

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*On the tenth anniversary (1990) of its original publication the popular classic **Laughing Time: Nonsense Poems** has been revised and updated to include many new poems by the celebrated William Jay Smith and more fun-loving imaginative illustrations by Fernando Krahn.*

*Mayhill Arbuthnot, Margaret Clark, and Harriet Long, editors of "Children's Books Too Good To Miss", say: "This poet will keep children laughing to the last page."*