

## Theodore Roethke as a Literary Influence

### *Roethke Museum's interview with poet Mark Jarman*

Roethke is often cited as among the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's greatest teachers of poetry. His passionate and often-theatrical classroom style inspired some of the finest American poets of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His work continues to inspire and embolden poets today. Among those who continue to draw inspiration from his work is Mark Jarman, a key figure in both New Narrative and New Formalism movements and major influence on contemporary American poetry.

Jarman's most recent collection is *Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems*. He has also published two books of essays about poetry, *The Secret of Poetry* and *Body and Soul: Essays on Poetry*. His honors include the Lenore Marshall Prize, the Poets' Prize, the Balcones Poetry Prize, and a Guggenheim fellowship in poetry. He is currently the Centennial Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Vanderbilt University.

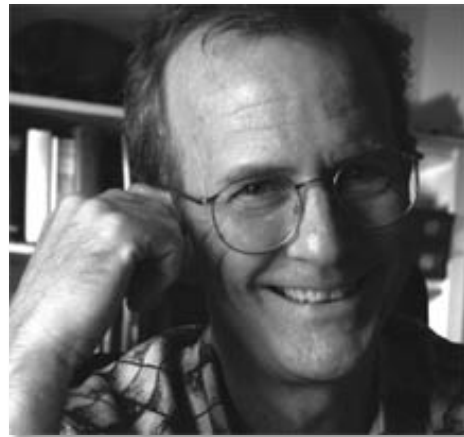
Jarman recorded a video recounting the impact of Roethke on his development, a link to which is found at the end of this interview. He kindly offered to go into a more depth for the Theodore Roethke Home Museum in this Autumn 2013 interview.

#### **FRIENDS OF THEODORE ROETHKE (FOTR)**

You have cited Roethke as your first – and perhaps strongest early influence. What was it about his work that captured you as a young poet, poetically and thematically?

**JARMAN:** What captured me first when I began writing was Roethke's eye for natural detail, his love of sound, and especially the way what are sometimes called The Greenhouse Poems, collected in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, showed that a poet's subject matter could be as close as the ground underfoot, the world not only of his childhood but his beginning.

**FOTR:** Roethke gave a piece of advice regarding influence "*Advice to the young: don't fret too much about being "influenced" but make sure you chew up your old boy with a vengeance, blood, guts and all.*" What is your response to that statement?



**JARMAN:** It makes a kind of sense to me, and it sounds like something from his collection of essays *The Poet and His Craft*, though it may not be. My copy of the collection was worn to disintegrating pieces years ago, so I have to rely on my memory. I do recall an essay in the book called "How to Write like Somebody Else" in which he discusses the influences on his early work – those small perfect lyrics of *Open House* with their debt to Louise Bogan and Léonie Adams and others, women poets principally, none of them an "old boy" he claimed to have made a meal of. But I do think he's right for the most part. I'm just not sure that the process of digesting your

influences is as deliberate as he makes it sound.

**FOTR:** All poets have influences. Roethke's early work is sometimes cited – fairly or unfairly as Audenesque. Sylvia's Plath's publisher once said her early poems "*owed too strong a debt to Roethke.*" What does a poet do to break from that gravitational influence to find his her own voice.

**JARMAN:** Though I know Auden was of enormous importance to Roethke (I think he was even best man at Roethke's wedding), I have never heard Auden in Roethke's work. The work which I think of as most identifiably Roethke's is so much his own that the only influence I can occasionally hear is Mother Goose – an influence he would gladly acknowledge I think – and William Carlos Williams, another he embraced. I think Anne Sexton teased Sylvia Plath for the presence of Roethke in *The Colossus*, but I think you can find him everywhere in American poetry of the 1950's and 1960's, just as you could find Dylan Thomas in English poetry in the 1940's and 1950's. As for breaking that "gravitational influence" to find one's own voice, I think everyone breaks away differently. I don't think Plath, for example, ever fully shook the Roethke influence (or her husband's): she simply persisted until she mastered it.

**FOTR:** Are you conscious of any particular vestiges of Roethke's influence present in your work – generally or specifically -- today.

**JARMAN:** Whenever I recognize that I am returning or need to return to the novel perceptions of childhood, I feel his influence.

**FOTR:** Do you teach Roethke today in your university courses, and if so are there aspects of his work that you find particularly resonate with young poets?

**JARMAN:** I do teach Roethke when I can and I think that young poets respond to the same things in Roethke that I did. He nudges them to recognize that even their own unpromising beginning – the soil or asphalt they spring from – is the place to start.

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To view the view the video of Jarman discussing Roethke visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7FyatQTZys>