

## NOTES

1. Useful material on Bryant at Roslyn, New York, appears in Bennett and Tarleton, and in Krieg.
2. The three Bryant letters to J. W. Barstow are in my possession.
3. Barstow's "The Trees of Flushing; an Address delivered before the Good Citizenship League, May 9, 1893" was published as a pamphlet *circa* 1914 in a text derived from the *Flushing Evening Journal* for June 8, 1893 (*New York Times* 17).

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### Roethke's Revisions and the Tone of "My Papa's Waltz"

Written in the early stages of his career and counted among the "Greenhouse" poems, Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" certainly lacks the length and complexity of the poems from "The Lost Son" and "The North American Sequence." Yet, this poem has an intriguing ambiguity that elicits startlingly different interpretations. Kennedy calls it a scene of "comedy" and "persistent love" (421), and Balakian, in part, labels it a "comic romp" (62). In contrast, Ciardi sees it as a "poem of terror" (369). Roethke's father, Otto, is commonly recognized as a model for the Papa figure in the poem (Seager 26). Galvin more recently echoes Ciardi: "In 'My Papa's Waltz,' . . . Otto Roethke . . . is a figure of terror to his young son" (103). Janssen agrees, suggesting that the "poem's energy" comes from "dual vectors" of feeling, that is, "light-hearted" and "grimmer" (43-44). He concludes that the poem ends with a primarily negative texture portraying a "drunken father, angry mother, and desperate child" who have a "desperate hope" for some fun in the face of "a real fear of violence and disruption" (44). Other critics see the poem as a mixture of positive and negative textures engendered by Roethke's ambivalent feelings toward his father, Otto Roethke, whose "strength was . . . a source of both admiration and

Synthesis

fear, of comfort and restriction" (Malkoff 3). Balakian agrees, adding that in "My Papa's Waltz," Roethke "feels an odd and ambivalent closeness to his drunken papa" (62). Clearly, the major differences of critics' opinions involve interpretations of the tone of the poem: whether it is positive, negative, or a clever balance of the two (Fong 79).

Evidence from the original, handwritten manuscripts adds support for allowing and validating contradictory interpretations of this poem. The holograph manuscripts of "My Papa's Waltz" confirm that Roethke himself tried to balance the negative and positive tones of the poem, resulting in its rich ambiguity. The archives at the University of Washington contain two holograph manuscripts of "My Papa's Waltz." Each of these manuscripts, "MS-A" and "MS-B," consists of two sheets of paper. Differences in the two manuscripts attest to an identifiable sequence of composition, including revisions. These changes throw valuable light on Roethke's attempts to achieve just the right tone for his poem.

An interesting change, especially in view of some readings that see the poem as a collusion between males (father and son) against a female (mother), involves the gender of the child in the poem. In "MS-A," the child was a girl. In its earliest version, line two read: "is enough to [?] make [?] dizzy." Roethke crossed this line out (except for the word "dizzy") and wrote above it: "Could make a small girl dizzy." Indeed, "MS-B," as it was first transcribed, retained "girl." In a final revision of "MS-B," Roethke crossed out "girl" and substituted "boy." Clearly, at least as he first conceived of the poem, this was not a boys-against-the-girls poem. Why did Roethke make the change from "girl" to "boy"? It seems plausible that he did recognize the rough-house nature of this working-class father's waltz. Certainly American society of 1941, the year of the poem's composition, would see this rough play as more appropriate for a boy than for a girl. By substituting "boy" for "girl," then, Roethke could keep the dual tone of this dance: a little rough and scary and a little dear and loving.

A second change from "MS-A" to "MS-B" involves line 4 of the second stanza. "MS-A" originally read: "Did not unscrew itself." Later, but still on "MS-A," Roethke crossed out "unscrew" and substituted "unfrown." Perhaps the word "unscrew" had sexual connotations that Roethke wanted to avoid as he tried to recapture his father's rough attempts at love. This change may be linked to the change in the speaker's gender. Whatever his motivations for this change, Roethke portrays the mother's view of events as sternly disapproving, highlighted by the change from "unscrew" to "unfrown."

At this moment in the dance, the speaker directs his focus toward the mother and away from the father, thus heightening the opposition between his parents. With a further revision, Roethke cleverly enhanced this focus on the mother's reaction to the father's romp. "MS-B" contains "Did" as the first word of this line. Roethke then wrote "Could" above "Did,"

Balance of (+) and (-)

Change #1

when he swapped girl for boy

unscrew → unfrown

focus mother - away from father

Did → Could  
"Did not unfrown itself"  
Could not unfrown itself

MS-A  
the child was a girl

Change #2  
line 4 of 2nd stanza

scratched out "Could" and let "Did" stand. The published version, however, reads "Could." By returning to "Could," Roethke picked up the consonance of "countenance" in the prior line, and with that bit of euphony further highlighted the mother's disapproval.

The third stanza also contains an important revision and clue to Roethke's search for just the right tone for his poem. The fourth line of stanza 3 in "MS-A" originally read: "My forehead scraped a buckle." Roethke scratched out "forehead" (with a single pen stroke) and wrote in "right ear" on "MS-A." Initially, "MS-B" repeated "forehead," but Roethke again scratched it out (with two pen strokes this time, as if he was then certain of the change) and again substituted "right ear." In the revised version, then, the speaker's head is turned to the side, more in the attitude of a child's embrace. In "MS-B," the child has turned away from the father. This change in posture, suggested by the change from "forehead" to "right ear," is a more apt description of a child dancing with an adult and less like a description of the more formal tête-à-tête dance of adults elegantly waltzing. Thus, the effect is positive on the tone because the dance becomes an informal, impromptu romp.

3<sup>rd</sup> Change  
3<sup>rd</sup> Stanza  
4<sup>th</sup> Line  
forehead  
↓  
right ear

The fourth stanza occasioned the greatest number of revisions. In "MS-A," the first two lines originally read: "The hand wrapped round my head / Was harsh from weeds and dirt." Significantly, these two lines describing the father's hand actually touching the son/daughter were greatly revised. Apparently, Roethke wanted to get just the right "feel" to the images and language in this particularly intimate part of the dance. On "MS-A," Roethke crossed out line 1 and replaced it with: "You kept time on my head." In the first draft of "MS-A," Roethke wrote this fourth stanza near the top of page 2 in "MS-A." During the revision of "MS-A," Roethke wrote out a revised version of the fourth stanza near the center of page 2 of "MS-A." It reads:

4<sup>th</sup> Stanza

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

The substitutions here are very significant. In line 1, Roethke replaced the rather benign "kept" with "beat," thus making the situation more ominous, more negative. Certainly, "beat" is a word nearly all respondents refer to when giving the texture of the poem a negative spin. Roethke almost completely revised the second line. "Palm" in place of "hand" (which appeared in the earliest version of "MS-A") is among the most important substitutions. "Hand" disappeared in the revision of line 1. Also, the focus changes from "weeds" to the father. The father's palm is indeed hard, albeit from honest work; he is a hard man as well as a hard worker. He even plays hard. The changes in these two lines personalize the dance between the speaker

Kept time  
↓  
beat time



and his father. At the same time, they add an undeniably negative tone with the words "beat" and "palm caked hard." In addition, the three stressed syllables in "palm caked hard" emphasize the insistent, invasive power of the father over the child.

Roethke's revisions of the title are the most interesting of all his changes, for they show his efforts to capture just the right texture for this emotionally complex vignette. There are no fewer than six versions of the title. Ironically, after all the changes, Roethke came around again to his first title. In the order of their creation, the revisions are as follows: "My Papa's Waltz" (MS-A); "Papa's Dance" (MS-A); "The Dance" (MS-A); "Dance with Papa" (MS-A); "Dance with Papa" (MS-B); "Dance with Father" (MS-B); "My Papa's Waltz" (MS-B).

In choosing a title, Roethke struggled with two choices: "Waltz/Dance" and "Papa/Father." After penning the first title, "My Papa's Waltz," Roethke substituted "Dance" which probably had a more egalitarian connotation for this son of a working man. He may have had a hard time imagining his father doing an elegant waltz but could see him dancing something less pretentious, like a polka. In fact, "Dance" appeared in all of the intervening variations, only disappearing when Roethke finally returned to the original version—"My Papa's Waltz." Nevertheless, return to "Waltz" he did, suggesting that the elegant, refined texture of a waltz was what he wanted. This allowed him to add a more genteel aspect to the depicted scene. The choice of "Waltz" is his attempt to elevate this experience for the boy above the mere rough-house lurchings of an inebriated working-class father.

Although "Papa" is the predominant choice in the "Papa/Father" duality, Roethke tried "Father" once. In the version simply titled "The Dance," he also experimented with excising all reference to his father in the title. Because all versions except this one include either "Papa" or "Father," Roethke reveals the central significance of Otto to the poem. Moreover, Roethke clearly preferred the more familiar "Papa" to the formal "Father." In a traditional German-American household like the Roethke's, "Papa" would be particularly appropriate for a young child's affectionate address for his father. Surely, this experience and his transformation of it into literature were, for him, a very personal moment filled with all the pride, affection, compulsion, and even fear that intimate family relationships so often engender.

Quite remarkably, then, Roethke tried, through careful revisions, to balance negative and positive tones in "My Papa's Waltz." The result is a poem rich in ambiguity that speaks eloquently to a wide audience. Readers of this poem often hold quite contradictory interpretations of it, depending on what personal experience they filter it through. The poet's revisions suggest that the poem need not be read exclusively as a positive or a negative portrait of this family moment. Surely this was a moment characterized by

title  
Revisions

- 1 - Mr Papa's Waltz
- 2 - Papa's Dance
- 3 - The Dance
- 4 - Dance with Papa
- 5 - Dance with Papa
- 6 - Mr Papa's Waltz

Waltz/Dance

Papa/Father

conflicting emotions for the speaker: love and fright; excitement and concern; a rough tenderness. Family relationships are seldom simple, seldom one-dimensional, and this is true also of "My Papa's Waltz."

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