

## Nature as the Sanctum for Introspection in Roethke's "Meditation at Oyster River"

La naturaleza como el santuario para la introspección en  
"Meditation at Oyster River", de Roethke

**JUAN CARLOS SARAVIA VARGAS**

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica

[juan.saravia@ucr.ac.cr](mailto:juan.saravia@ucr.ac.cr)

ORCID: [0000-0002-9729-2243](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9729-2243)

**JOSÉ ROBERTO SARAVIA VARGAS**

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica

[jose.saravia@ucr.ac.cr](mailto:jose.saravia@ucr.ac.cr)

ORCID: [0000-0002-0859-1808](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0859-1808)

**ADA SÁNCHEZ MORRAZ**

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica

[ada.sanchez@ucr.ac.cr](mailto:ada.sanchez@ucr.ac.cr)

ORCID: [0000-0003-0052-3453](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0052-3453)

### Abstract

The talent of Roethke is best seen in his poem "Meditation at Oyster River," where the poet merges nature and introspection. While some might believe that the natural elements in the poem are simply part of the setting, these vivid images are intertwined with the concept of eternity and manifest the speaker's rising understanding of a timeless existence. This can only be explained by observing in more detail Roethke's life and his connection to nature. Nature, to Roethke, establishes a meditative tone that helps the speaker grasp the Buddhist concept of impermanence and leads to self realization, a process that can be understood from Jungian psychology as regression and progression, the two energetic transformations of the soul.

**Keywords:** poetry, cultural environment, human nature, Buddhism

**Resumen**

El talento de Roethke se muestra con más claridad en su poema “Meditation at Oyster River,” en donde el poeta fusiona la naturaleza y la introspección. Si bien algunos podrían creer que los elementos naturales en el poema constituyen simplemente parte del ambiente, estas vívidas imágenes se entremezclan con el concepto de la eternidad y manifiestan el creciente entendimiento de la persona poética sobre una existencia eterna. Este fenómeno solo puede explicarse observando con detalle la vida de Roethke y su conexión con la naturaleza. Lo natural, para Roethke, establece un tono meditativo que ayuda a la persona poética a comprender el concepto budista de la impermanencia, lo cual conduce a la autorrealización, un proceso que, desde la psicología Jungiana, se entiende como la regresión y la progresión – las dos transformaciones energéticas del alma.

**Palabras clave:** poesía, medio cultural, naturaleza humana, budismo

## Introduction

Theodore Huebner Roethke was an extremely talented poet. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize of poetry in 1951, the Bollingen Prize in 1958, and the National Book Award for Poetry in 1959, among other literary awards. As an acknowledgment to his talent, the US novelist and poet James Dickey (1968) said of him in the *Atlantic Monthly*: “Roethke [...] is in my opinion the greatest poet this country has yet produced” (05:03). Roethke’s poetry is characterized by its abundant natural imagery and its rhythm. For example, “The Right Thing” relies on natural images that are easy to perceive: “The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;/ The hill becomes the valley, and is still;/ Let others delve that mystery if they can” (1975, lines 4-6). “My Papa’s Waltz”, on its part, exhibits an evident use of natural elements and a rhythmic pattern that imitates that of a waltz: “The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy; / But I hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy” (1975, lines 1-4). The poem “What can I Tell My Bones?”, conversely, serves as an example of Roethke’s poems with a more flexible verse pattern: “Beginner, / Perpetual beginner, / The soul knows not what to believe, / In its small folds, stirring sluggishly, / In the least place of its life, / A pulse beyond nothingness, / A fearful ignorance” (1975, lines 1-7). Still, these are not the only relevant features of Roethke’s works. Along with the previous characteristics, his poetry includes a profound sense of meditation. In his poems, nature and reflection manifest together; the former can be observed through the precise descriptions of the

natural elements in the lines of Roethke’s poems; the latter, by means of deep introspection in his works.

The poem “Meditation at Oyster River” serves as an example of Roethke’s conjunction of nature and introspection. Its title depicts both the act of meditating and a specific natural setting. At this point, some might believe that natural elements in the poem (and in the rest of the poet’s works) act as purely the setting to disclose his theme. In other words, they may think that nature serves as the background for the poem’s ideas and nothing else. This, however, is not the case as natural depictions become a much deeper and vital element of “Meditation at Oyster River.” They are intertwined with the concept of eternity and manifest the speaker’s rising understanding of a timeless existence that can only be explained by observing in more detail Roethke’s life and his connection to nature.

## Roethke and His Connection to Nature

Theodore Huebner Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan. He was the son of local farmers who owned the beautiful 25-acre greenhouse where his love for nature began. He experienced a difficult childhood that strongly influenced his adult life and, naturally, his writing. His early life was affected by low self-esteem and a strong sense of anxiety triggered by the constant fear of being abandoned, causing him to have sudden mood swings. Roethke was continuously looking for acceptance from his peers and a friend to trust. His constant internal struggle

increased when, at the age of fourteen, he lost his father to cancer. Within himself, he harbored a latent need to know his inner truth (Poetry Foundation, n.d., Theodore Roethke, para. 1), a need that influenced his work, which would later awaken the curiosity for the mysteries of the inner self in new generations.

After his brief and tortuous stint in law school at the University of Michigan, he decided to pursue a career in teaching and poetry. During his time as a student, along with his writing assignments, he began to write poetry. Roethke, influenced by T.S. Eliot's belief, claimed that the method of learning to write was through conscious imitation of existing poetry. As part of the main influences of his poetry, one can count the poetic production of Wordsworth, Blake, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, and Dante together with the vastness of notes, including conversations and personal reflections that he nurtured and preserved throughout his life. After graduating, he started working as a professor of poetry; he devoted himself, with great success, to promoting his enthusiasm for this literary genre among his students. He used to hold forth his lessons outside the classroom, meeting his students at a nearby bar (para. 2-5). Nonetheless, the demands of teaching work and the pressure he placed on himself began to affect his emotional balance, raising his introspection even more and causing him a mental breakdown that took him to the hospital.

These emotional crises led him to attend therapy six days a week, but they also turned into the source of a series of desperate poems where he navigated through the time and space of

himself and lands in the wholeness of his being (para. 9-13). His introspective compulsion was the root of inspiration that led him to translate the sorrows of life into sober verses, as precise and full of wisdom as the notes in his subconscious notebook. For many critics, his introspective sensibility comprised the essence of his work (para. 7-8). The truth is that his need for self-discovery prompted desires, fears, shame, vices, or attachments within his readers.

As stated before, his sensitivity towards nature was born in his parents' greenhouse. It was in that place that Roethke could behold the empathy of his authoritarian and demanding father. This tenderness remained hidden in any other scenario, affecting their father-son relationship and leaving Roethke burdened with resentment. This contradiction he witnessed led him to intertwine the diverse plentifulness of nature and its cycles of constant rebirth with those of the inner self (para. 14-15). Roethke found the depiction of human existence merged in nature: temporality, eternity, constant change, darkness and light, the cycle of life and death, and the duality of the spiritual and the carnal. In the dynamic energy of this world, he perceived the integration of all these elements of the human psyche into the self wholeness he had always pursued. Nature became the reflection of his own existence, of his own inner journey: from the depths of his darkness towards the light of his spirituality. In sum, more than a poetic motif, nature was for Roethke an essential part of his life, both in the outer and in the inner spheres.

## Nature as Part of the Setting in the Poem

Since Roethke uses very concrete and personal imagery of nature as part of the setting of his poems, the function of images in poetry must be recalled first to understand the vital role of "Meditation at Oyster River"'s setting. Singh (1964) highlights the link between the personal or apparently insignificant with the universal and infinite:

It is through a poetic image that the poet best can convey the sense of the vague and indefinite, of something that is at once finite and infinite, particular and universal. A poetic image enables him to transcend and transform the more or less definite significance one normally attaches to words as words. An image, however simple and unitary it might be, evokes not one, but several ideas in the reader's mind, precisely because it expresses, better than could have been done in any other way, the poet's perception and meaning of something, which is itself complex, multiple, and vague. (p.140)

The ideas that Singh outlines are concretized in Roethke's works. Roethke's poem "Meditation at Oyster River" serves as an example of this vivid imagery of nature. Natural elements in the poem, many essentially personal, are used with great precision to describe scenes. This precision, skillfully linked to commonly shared sensorial experiences, enables an enhanced perception of the different natural settings in the poem. Indeed, thanks to these

experiences that individuals share (regardless of their background differences), the scenes described acquire a sense of universality; they are not restricted to the individual perspective of the speaker or kept confined to the lines of the poem.

An example of this enhanced perception of the setting through the natural elements described through sensory experiences commonly shared is that of the bay: "No sound from the bay. No violence / Even the gulls quiet on the far rocks, / Silent, in the deepening light" (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 6-8). The use of silence is crucial in the depiction of the scene. Humans know silence and, in a natural environment, silence is easily noticeable. By pointing out to the absence of sound in the bay, the speaker depicts a natural scenario that becomes exceptional but also one that individuals can relate to. To intensify the image, the poem uses an opposite one in conjunction: violence. The lack of violence restates the idea of total quietness in the bay.

Along with the image of silence, the speaker produces an enhanced depiction of the setting by resorting to perpetuity. As perpetual states are not reachable for human beings, but they are present as human ideals, the notion of a perpetual natural scene will become highly valuable for the poem's impact. When the poem describes the ocean, it creates this sense of a perpetual natural setting through the omission of evident details as it declares: "the waves corning forward, without cessation," (Roethke, 1964, 2, line 8). Once again, any person may read the line above and relate it to the natural movement of water in the ocean. However, the poem mentions the advancing

motion of the waves, but it omits its receding movement. It is highly improbable that the speaker failed to notice the backward motion of the waves on account of poor observation. Indeed, the verse adds “without cessation” to emphasize the constant direction of the water, which shows that the omission is not accidental. By excluding such an evident natural feature, the speaker is intensifying the notion of perpetual advancement: an idea that humans understand and can relate to, but that, at the same time, is artificial because human limitations forbid individuals from experiencing true perpetuity.

Purposeful omissions and commonly shared experiences are not the only devices that the poem employs. Another metaphorical construct to enhance the setting through descriptions of natural elements is that of obstacles in one’s way. Human beings, regardless of their social position, must deal with hindrances that alter their direction many times. This very idea is present in “Meditation at Oyster River”:

The waves, altered by sand-bars,  
beds of kelp, miscellaneous driftwood,  
Topped by cross-winds, tugged at  
by sinuous undercurrents  
The tide rustling in, sliding between  
the ridges of stone,  
The tongues of water, creeping in  
quietly. (Roethke, 1964, 2, lines 9-12)

Readers can notice that the waves follow a path; still, this direction causes them to collide with different objects, all part of the setting, that end up modifying the trajectory of the water. This situation is not alien to readers; they are able to relate to all these images

because they have also faced challenges along their life. Thus, through the use of the images of obstacles that make waters alter their direction and movement, the speaker enhances the setting.

### Natural Elements as Tone Promoters in the Poem

A highly relevant element in poetry is tone. Wiesen (2022) summarizes the role of tone in poetry as follows: “The function of tone in poetry is largely meant to set the mood or feel of a poem for the reader. Tone typically allows a poet to control the way in which a poem is to be read, or the attitude that the speaker in the poem takes toward the subject of the poem” (para.1). As one can notice, the tone of a poem can be disclosed through a careful analysis of the words and expressions that become the work of poetry. The tone is set by the poet, usually through devices like the poem’s speaker:

Tone in poetry, much like other works of literature, refers to the overall attitude that seems to be expressed within the work and the mood that this creates. It is important to note, however, that tone and mood are not synonymous, but that tone is usually utilized as a way to set the mood in a work. Tone can be established and developed in a number of different ways, depending on how the poem is written and how well-established the speaker is within the structure of the poem. (Wiesen, 2022, para. 2)

Another important observation about tone, derived from Wiesen's ideas, is that the tone's effect on readers becomes the mood of the poem. In "Meditation at Oyster River", the speaker's vivid remarks about the natural surroundings set the specific contemplative tone for the work.

Roethke's specific choice of natural elements to set a contemplative and thought-immersed tone, indeed, illustrates with great precision the close relationship that many observe between poetry and philosophy: "It is in giving substance and meaning to things which in themselves do not have it that the office of a poet and a philosopher approach each other" (Singh, 1964, p.65). Natural elements do not simply constitute a static background for the theme in "Meditation at Oyster River." Instead, they are setting enhancers and also fulfill a vital role related to the tone. Along with their function to enhance the setting, images related to nature help the poet create scenes that serve as an active environment disclosing the speaker's tone.

First, natural elements serve as tone promoters by becoming physical manifestations of the speaker's emotions. For example, a simple action of trying the water with one's foot to then moving somewhere else becomes an emotion-charged depiction: "I dabble my toes in the brackish foam sliding forward, / Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliffside" (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 15-16). At a first sight, the verses do not seem to reveal anything beyond the natural setting for the actions of the speaker. However, the ambivalent tone of the lines is also present in the nature described. The foam is an ephemeral substance. Also, its nature

is mixed as it is made up of salty water and river water. In this light, the foam itself is a concrete manifestation of the speaker's feelings. The same is true about the rock. When the speaker decides to leave for another place, his resolution becomes solidified symbolically in the rock that sits "higher up". Right there, the speaker has moved away from the inconsistent and advancing foam to stay in a safer ground. These natural elements, thus, are not simply a static part of a passive setting; they are active agents that promote the poem's tone.

Another way in which nature becomes active to help conveying the tone in the poem is by highlighting one special feature of a natural element that will, in turn, disclose the emotions needed for the poem's tone. An example is the following: "The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit, / Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance, / The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning— (Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 3-5). In the former lines, the different birds in the scene are transformed into embodiments of the different attitudes that the human spirit takes and are concretized by the flesh. The insightful tone of these lines receives the aid of the nature described and thus it is easily understood. As it can be noticed, the birds are active agents promoting the speaker's tone instead of simply being the background for the poem.

The poem also uses natural elements as tone promoters by creating dual images composed of both past and present experiences. One example is when the speaker, while meditating, thinks of a series of very positive memories (Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 6-11) and then mentions the Tittabawasee River:

Or the Titebawasee, in the time  
between winter and spring,  
When the ice melts along the edges  
in early afternoon.  
And the midchannel begins  
cracking and heaving from the  
pleasure beneath,  
The ice piling high against the  
iron-bound spiles,  
Gleaming, freezing hard  
again, creaking at midnight—  
(1964, 3, lines 12-16)

The river itself takes an active role in adding a positive tone to the memory that the speaker describes when it cracks and heaves “from the pleasure beneath” (lines 14-15). Bearing this in mind, readers observe that the natural elements in the recollection of this past event is utterly cheerful. Still, the poem unites this memory to an event that is currently taking place:

And I long for the blast of dynamite,  
The sudden sucking roar as the  
culvert loosens its debris of branches  
and sticks,  
Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird  
nests, and a child’s shoe riding a log,  
As the piled ice breaks away from  
the battered spiles,  
And the whole river begins to  
move forward, its bridges shaking.  
(Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 17-21)

To fulfill the speaker’s current desire of hearing a blast, the waters of Oyster River create a sudden, strong sound that takes the speaker’s attention to the present events. In this way, the old memory is connected to the current happening and both are strongly linked by the tone. Past and present are now one, and the startling effect

of the blast of dynamite in the past is achieved by the roaring sound of the waters in the culvert.

One more way in which the poem uses nature as an active agent to promote tone is with the direct influence of natural elements on the speaker’s emotional state. While the former examples act as an echo of the speaker’s emotions, nature also induces specific emotional states. For example, light, the morning, water and even birds work together to produce a soothing effect:

Now in this waning light,

I rock with the motion of morning;  
I’m the cradle of all that is,  
I’m lulled into half-sleep  
By the lapping of water.  
Cries of the sandpiper. (Roethke,  
1964, 4, lines 1-6)

The lines above present nature not simply echoing the emotions—and hence, the tone—of the speaker. This time, natural elements are a strong influence in creating a calming state that, at once, relax the speaker to near sleeping. Considering this, the peaceful tone of the former lines becomes an actual product of nature. Natural elements not only respond to the speaker’s emotions to promote the poem’s tone, but also actively create it.

Providing the setting or promoting the poem’s tone, nevertheless, is not the most important function of nature in this work. Even though natural elements in “Meditation at Oyster River” seem to be limited to the descriptive realm on a surface level, they actually play a determinant role. The poem describes the speaker’s approach to eternity, and the elements from nature assist his or her deeper understanding of



the eternal while also portray the stages in this process of rising discernment.

The first stage is perceived through the silent elements that create a blissful quietness; the second stage is depicted by the active natural elements, which highlight the sense of movement, and the most mature stage is perceived through the mutable ones, that enable the speaker to understand the idea of change as an eternal drive in life.

### The First Stage to Understand Eternity Through Nature: Self-Realization

To comprehend the link between natural images and Roethke's initial conception of eternity, it is necessary to perceive the effect of the poem's setting in the mind of the speaker. Monika Fludernik (2005) establishes the connection between the setting of poems (or "scene", in her terms) and relevant moments in the lives of their speakers:

I have used the term scene to invoke a quasi-setting in which one or more embodied quasi-characters can be glimpsed. Such a scene may be one of wooing, a stroll in the woods, or any other situation in which at least one human subject is present at a specific time and place in a certain situation. The term describes a holistic image of a situation in which a human subject is involved. (p.106)

From Fludernik's statement, one can notice that the role of the setting in poems detaches from the commonplace idea in narrative that settings merely constitute the background. In poetry,

emotions and feelings are intertwined with local descriptions. In the case of "Meditation at Oyster River," upon transcending the surface level, readers are able to perceive the correlation between nature and the speaker's stage of self-discovery, which becomes the initial step towards grasping eternity.

A valid question at the present point is how a personal appreciation of one's surroundings, either called "setting" or "scene," can become an insightful experience with universal implications. When Fludernik further explains her concept of *scene*, she offers some light about the issue:

What I mean by scene can also be explained by reference to Walker's definition, "a crucial moment abstracted from an implied enclosing story" (35). In a scene a specific time and location are suggested. One can picture a situation in which the protagonists are enmeshed — it may be a situation of wooing, of scene of recognition or departure. The vignette is a segment of their life story, so to speak. (p.106)

From a first glimpse, readers might only notice a vignette in which the speaker contemplates the surrounding setting. However, in the case of "Meditation at Oyster River" such vignettes depict a strong connection between nature and self-realization. This, in turn, becomes the departing point for the speaker to understand eternity.

Natural elements help the speaker learn about eternity and, at the same time, disclose the first stage of the speaker's understanding about it. The speaker, through nature, learns that his or her mind must be pure and quiet to be able

to enter a meditative state. The speaker describes a natural scene of blissful quietness that reflects this initial stage: "Over the barnacled, elephant colored rocks, / Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without sound, toward me, / Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows of dead clam shells;" (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 1-3). In this scene, the gray rocks provide the idea of intense quietness. This is increased by the description of the tide-ripples, which are almost silent. The use of the phrase "toward me" is determinant, for it discloses the idea that water, which is a symbol of life and knowledge, is softly coming near him or her, as shy animals do, which reveals the speaker's pureness. The sea gulls that are described also highlight the idea of approaching peace and understanding: "No sound from the bay. No violence. / Even the gulls quiet on the far rocks, silent, in the deepening light," (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 6-7). The adjectives "quiet" and "silent" highlight the idea that learning is taking place, for they manifest the self-control of a disciple in front of his or her teacher.

In sum, nature does not function in "Meditation at Oyster River" simply as the setting. Actually, the speaker's allusions to natural elements reveal a deeper function of nature in the poem: it is through nature that the speaker becomes immersed into an initial state of self realization that will lead to a final understanding of eternity.

### **The Second Stage to Comprehend Eternity Through Nature: Constant Action**

The second stage in the speaker's mastery of the eternal is also depicted

by nature. The speaker has learned that innocence is the first stage to comprehend eternity, and it is through natural elements that he or she learns that action is the next phase. This insight, however, involves the full internalization of opposite forces conceptualized as progression and regression. Jung's psychological research will serve to explain these vital concepts.

Jung (2011) defines progression and regression as energetic transformations of the soul. Progression consists of achieving external adaptation (which is unilateral) depending on the changing conditions of the environment, but this can only be achieved through an attitude. If this environment changes, so does the attitude. On the other hand, regression increases the renewing value of those internal aspects that are excluded from this previous adaptive process. For example, thinking and feeling are functions that require different and incompatible adaptive attitudes; therefore, in a situation that demands empathy, thinking would fail as an adaptive attitude, but, through regression, the sentimental function (which is compatible with the situation) would be activated. Facing the impossibility of progression, consciousness is forced to resort to the regressive contents it tends to resist (pp. 33-37).

In various psychoanalytic theories, there is a dismissive perspective about the background of the soul because, from a superficial outlook, regression only brings out turbid, dark, disposable, and worthless internal aspects. Nonetheless, to allow the adaptation of the soul and the renewal of the present, the immersion in such a mud of repressed behaviors and instincts

must become a part of seeking a state of consciousness. For Jung, regression does not represent a step backwards; instead, it is a necessary phase for the development of consciousness even if one is not aware of such development. Regression, however, can be considered an involution when the regressive contents are not used and the persona remains wandering in them. In this case, progression is made (in time), but without evolving (p. 38). Progression then responds to the demands of the environment, to the inherent need of adaptation, repressing the impulses to reach individuation, while regression focuses on the needs of the inner self, but both processes are needed and interdependent. That is, the external adaptation is fulfilled if the adaptation to the internal world is also achieved. If, for example, the necessities of the inner self are prioritized, as in Roethke's work, the inner elements will manifest themselves in the adaptation to the outside world. Indeed, Jung clarifies that the energy of the soul, in addition to moving backwards and forwards, also moves inwards and outwards, for which he introduces a dual dynamism to the energetic transformations of progression and regression. The psychoanalyst explains that both progression (the vital movement in time) and regression (the adaptation to the elements of the self) may lead to two outcomes. The first one, which he calls extroversion, is the result of adjusting or leaning into the conditions of the outside world. The opposite, resulting into a withdrawal from the world is defined as introversion (p. 42).

This dual energetic principle is projected by Roethke in his poem "Meditation at Oyster River" although it is

clearly marked by an introverted outcome. The persona represents the creative force, the vital energy of the self and the physical environment seems to become a tangible projection of its progression, regression, and the evolution derived from it. Here, both energetic transformations of the soul move inward: to the elements of the inner self. The first stage would then be the progression in time: "Come the first tide ripples, moving, almost without sound, toward me, / Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows of dead / clamshells; / Then a runnel behind me, creeping closer," (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 2-5). Water symbolizes the vital energy that runs forward in time. All of a sudden, the regressive phase presents its obstacles: "...one long undulant ripple, / Blue black from where I am sitting, / Makes almost a wave over a barrier of small stones, / Slapping lightly against a sunken log" (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 11-14). These blockades represent the possibilities of a new direction as long as their presence awakens consciousness. Instinctively, the inner self resists the regressive contents and becomes stagnant: "Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliffside. / The wind slackens, light as a moth fanning a stone — / A twilight wind, light as a child's breath, / Turning not a leaf, not a ripple" (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 16-18). The first line of the previous fragment unveils that the adaptation to this natural setting is tainted by the aspects of the inner self, highlighting that the energetic transformations move inwards.

At the beginning of the second section of the poem, Roethke illustrates, through the animals that the speaker observes, the hope harbored within

the soul. Then, he describes the distress that occurs after regression due to the consciousness awakening: "...the waves coming forward, without cessation, / The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp, miscellaneous driftwood, / Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous undercurrents / The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone, / The tongues of water, creeping in quietly" (Roethke, 1964, 2, lines 8-12). With these visuals of the impetus of water, the speaker depicts the renewed force by which the self restarts its path forward.

In the third segment of the poem, the author portrays the genuine interest of the persona in the process of self-discovery. Along this part, Roethke compares the energetic phenomena of the soul to ice and thaw. He is always foregrounding the potential of those regressive elements to transform the present: "... I long for the blast of dynamite, / The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its debris of branches and / sticks, / Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, and a child's shoe riding a log, / As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles, / and the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking." (Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 17-21). The recurrence of energetic transformations of the soul is echoed within the cycles of nature described in the poem: calmness and disruption, darkness and light. The persona is aware of these inner cycles: "And the spirit runs, intermittently, / In and out of the small waves," (Roethke, 1964, 4, lines 8-9). The evolved progression of the soul is governed by a constant ebb and flow of necessary turbulence and renewed calm.

In line with Jung's principle of energetic transformations, Roethke

uses natural events as the physical representations of the soul. From the present contemplation of nature, past episodes emerge and the persona interacts with them in a convergence between the unconscious and the conscious. These resources provided by regression constitute the energetic inputs to boost and redirect the adaptation of the self embedded in the inner elements. In other words, nature's constant and perpetual movement causes a state of understanding that, eventually, will lead the speaker to the final stage: an insight of eternity.

### **The Third Stage Toward Eternity Through Nature: Grasping Mutability**

Even though some might perceive natural elements in Roethke's poem as purely the setting, in reality they provide a more transcendental impact. Through nature, the speaker experiences self-understanding as an initial stage of insight. Also, the full internalizing of progression and regression through natural elements leads the persona to grasping change as a constant drive in existence. This, concurrently, lets the speaker of "Meditation at Oyster River" access the highest level of acknowledgement: Mutability as a manifestation of eternity.

A commonplace notion about eternity is that it somehow involves the absence of change. Nature, however, teaches the persona that mutability is the essence of the eternal. A short lived experience of a very personal essence, for example, may very well become a manifestation of eternity. Nietzsche (1968) outlined this idea: "For nothing

is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed” (pp. 532-533). Many fail to understand or even detect these moments of eternity because they are mentally conditioned to look for the eternal elsewhere, commonly linked to an idea of destiny (personal goals that individuals see as immutable or religious notions of Heaven.)

Still, for the German philosopher, destiny (an eternal cycle of change and repetition was to be cherished in what he defined as *amor fati*: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it” (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 714). In the previous words, when Nietzsche expresses that “one wants nothing to be different”, he refers to the idea that individuals should accept life’s perpetual cycles without the desire to transform them, not that the concepts of eternal and immutable are equivalent. In sum, he declares that *amor fati* can be summarized as the total acceptance of destiny, being this destiny a life of perpetual cycles.

This perception of life and an eternal destiny of cyclical movement is revealed to the persona in Roethke’s poem through natural elements. The speaker has learned that purity marks the start of the process of understanding, and he or she has also learned that action is part of this process, but nature

teaches the speaker the direction of this action through its mutable elements. One of these elements is ice: “When the ice melts along the edges in early afternoon” (Roethke, 1964, 3, line 13). Ice helps the speaker understand that change is fundamental in eternity: The ice piling high against iron-bound spiles, / Gleaming, freezing hard again, creaking at midnight” (Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 15-16). Ice enables the speaker to grant that eternity is a constant action of renewal and destruction.

The idea of impermanence as a constant in the universe is also present in Buddhism. Buddhism, for example, teaches the difference between an illusory fixed reality and the real perpetual mutability of everything: “All physical and mental events are not metaphysically real. They are not constant or permanent; they come into being and dissolve” (Billington, 2002, pp. 56–59). In this light, when individuals yearn for a fixed eternity, one that lacks change, they are moving away from the actual essence of the eternal, the one that nature manifests. Buswell and Lopez (2013) reaffirm the Buddhist belief of impermanence: “All temporal things, whether material or mental, are compounded objects in a continuous change of condition, subject to decline and destruction” (pp. 47–48). The link between nature and the eternal is, thus, this perpetual state of mutability that individuals need to understand.

In the poem, the use of the gerund provides a sense of constant action in time, which reinforces the idea that the speaker has to participate actively in changing his or her self to reach eternity. He or she has grasped that in order to transcend time, he or she has to reject being always the same,

and the Tittewawasee River exemplifies this ceaseless profound change in the poem: “Or the Tittewawasee, in the time between winter and spring, / . . . / And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving from the pressure beneath,” (Roethke, 1964, 3, lines 12-14). The river, in addition to being a source of knowledge to the speaker, reflects his or her most mature stage of understanding, for it portrays the change in the attitude that the speaker is undergoing.

## Conclusions

Descriptions of nature are abundant in Roethke’s “Meditation at Oyster River.” Although at first sight these natural elements in the poem may be perceived solely as providers of the setting or promoters of the tone, in reality their role transcends those functions: they teach the speaker about eternity and, at the same time, disclose the different stages in his or her process of such understanding.

Nature in Roethke’s poem, beyond simply constituting the setting, enables the speaker to initiate an inner journey toward eternity in three stages. The first one, self discovery, is aligned with Fludernik’s concept of “scene” and its implications for the speaker: recognition and departure. The persona, after recognizing himself or herself, sets forth into a deeper journey. Self-discovery points to the path for the persona to continue a meditative state into recognizing not only his or her nature, but also the connection between the self and the natural world.

To be connected to nature means, unavoidably, a process of adaptation of

the self. Nature is in a constant state of change and thus the speaker of the poem must undergo an adaptation of the self by the endless inner ebb and flow reflected in nature. The active natural elements help him or her to fathom the idea that eternity is deeply related to movement: “young crabs climbing in and out of the water” (Roethke, 1964, 1, line 5). The crabs teach the speaker that a key to eternity is movement and that in order to learn about the eternal, passivity and the refusal to change must be vanquished. The water also changes the speaker’s notion of eternity, for it provides the speaker the sense of continuous movement: “The waves coming forward, without cessation” (Roethke, 1964, 2, line 8). The words “forward” and “without” are vital; the former discloses the conception of future, of a process, and denotes positivism towards it; and the latter reaffirms the notion that movement and eternity are in a close relationship. In the light of this, the speaker’s understanding of this second stage is both provided and reflected by nature.

The third and most mature stage of mastering eternity for the speaker in “Meditation at Oyster River” is the knowledge of nature’s perpetual mutability as the expression of the eternal. Indeed, one of the most important ideas that natural elements convey is that death is necessary in the process of reaching the eternal: “A fish raven turns on its perch (a dead tree in the rivermouth), / Its wings catching a last glint of the reflected sunlight” (Roethke, 1964, 1, lines 21-22). As destruction and renewal are essential in nature, and one cannot occur without the other, eternity is expressed through mutability, not through static

states. "Meditation at Oyster River" sums up, therefore, the path of insight, through nature, that the speaker undergoes until finally grasping the idea of the eternal. Nature becomes, in this sense, a true sanctum for introspection in Roethke's poem.

Finally, Roethke's "Meditation at Oyster River" motivates readers to become more aware of the abundant natural processes around them and encourages their more detailed observation. The poem discloses the strong, albeit forgotten by many, bond between the human being and nature. Also, it prompts readers to acknowledge nature's dynamism as equivalent to readers' inner processes in the act of self-discovery.

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