

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: THE ELIOT INFLUENCE: THEODORE ROETHKE'S "NORTH AMERICAN
SEQUENCE" AS ALTERNATIVE TO FOUR QUARTETS

Abstract approved: _____

This study examines the influence of T.S. Eliot and the effect of his Four Quartets on Theodore Roethke and his "North American Sequence," one of Roethke's last major sequences.

That Eliot held a position of predominance over poetry in the 1940s and early 50s, the period which marks the ascent of Roethke's career, is evident after the publication of Quartets in 1943. By 1950, Eliot had published Quartets, had received the Nobel Prize in literature, and had begun production of several successful plays. The praise in the reviews of Quartets, coupled with an expanding level of criticism, established Quartets as a poem of major importance, and by 1950, Eliot's dominance over poetry was universally recognized, although some critics and poets deplored Eliot's preeminent position. Roethke, embarking on a career at this time, could not have ignored the hold Eliot held over poetry.

Evidence from Roethke's publications up to "North American Sequence," from his letters, notebooks, and other prose, confirms that Roethke was very much aware of Eliot. A theory which describes Roethke's relationship with Eliot is offered by Stephen Spender: love-hate. Roethke's competitive view of literature led him to criticize, sometimes vehemently, Eliot and his poetry. However, such strong criticism was at the same time allied with Roethke's respect for Eliot as a poet and a thinker, as indicated by his frequent references to Eliot in major poems and sequences.

Roethke's love-hate attitude toward Eliot also described his attitude toward Quartets. While he recognized its important place in poetry written after World War II, he also felt that the meditative, abstract tone of Quartets led to major flaws in the poem. One flaw concerned the form of Quartets. Roethke felt that Eliot's abstract tone led to weak or "tired" rhythms in the poem. He also felt that Eliot's philosophical, speculative terminology failed to engage the reader. The result was that Quartets, Roethke felt, was undramatic and therefore unengrossing to the reader. In order to address many of the themes of Quartets, yet avoid this flaw in form, Roethke cultivated free verse techniques, sought a concrete vocabulary, and relied heavily on images to convey meaning. These are evident in the form of "North American Sequence."

Roethke, in "North American Sequence" addresses similar themes as Quartets, in particular, the subjects of time and death. However, Roethke's treatment of these themes is in marked contrast to their treat-

ment in Quartets. While Eliot offers a skeleton of his autobiography in the titles of each of the Quartets, Roethke fully and explicitly uses personal memories and autobiographic details in "North American Sequence." While one of Eliot's themes in Quartets is the inadequacy of a temporal, linear understanding of time to resolve the inevitability of death, Roethke chooses to immerse the persona of "North American Sequence" into simple linear time. Last, while Eliot uses symbols such as the four elements and the rose in Quartets, he uses them impersonally, preferring their meaning to derive from their context in the poem. Roethke uses similar symbols in "North American Sequence," but by contrast, their meaning is always the result of the memories and experiences of the poet which are also a part of the poem. Their context in the sequence is personal.

While Roethke alludes to Quartets in several places in "North American Sequence," his allusions always lead to the rejection of Quartets and its statements on time and death. The difference between the poems suggests a division which has significance beyond differences in the two poets. Eliot, by positing a separate order beyond the order of personal experience, allies himself with a Puritanistic world view. Roethke, by preferring to find an enlightening order in the natural world about him, aligns himself with the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Whitman.

THE ELIOT INFLUENCE: THEODORE ROETHKE'S
"NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE" AS ALTERNATIVE TO FOUR QUARTETS

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PREFACE

I feel the need to address really only one point in this preface. As I undertook this little project, people, out of natural curiosity or politeness, asked me what it was about. When I responded something to the effect that I was examining the influence of T.S. Eliot and his Quartets on Theodore Roethke and his later poetry, either they had never heard of Roethke, and said, politely, "Oh," or they expressed concern that I was attempting to write an "influence thesis." One professor from a university far, far away went so far as to snarl: "No department should allow such animals!"

I do, however, realize part of the validity of this attitude; a lot of junk has been expounded on the influence of this fellow on that one. But with Roethke and Eliot, I felt relatively safe. As Roethke's notebooks indicate, he himself acknowledged debts to a great many poets, and at the idea of being "influenced," he never batted an eye: "Someone said you have been influenced? Indeed, and no doubt you also drank your mother's milk."

What really interested me in this topic was another little notebook tidbit:

Advice to the young: don't fret too much about being "influenced," but make sure you chew up your old boy with a vengeance, bloods, guts, and all.

If by any chance, I felt, he was referring to Eliot, then my research might make for a bit of excitement.

To these people I gratefully extend my thanks and recognize my indebtedness: Keith Denniston, an extremely valuable first reader, friend, and very wise man for his age; John Somer, a partial second reader and the instructor who first shook me up about Roethke; Dr. Charles Walton, my graduate advisor and constant supporter.

Beyond these individuals, thanks also goes to Teddy C. Helberg, who kept me drunk and sober, in the proper proportions, and finally, Mom, Missy, and Mrs. Nesbit, who, each in her own way, helped me along the way.

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M. H. C.

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Chapter I

ELIOT'S PREDOMINANCE AFTER QUARTETS

Theodore Roethke died in 1963. With his death came a flourish of articles, surveys, and dissertations concerning his work. The ten years following his death brought two book length studies of his poetry, one book of critical essays, one biography, one volume of his collected letters, one volume of his collected prose, and one volume devoted to entries in his notebooks. Roethke, never one to shun recognition, would have loved the attention.

However, since the initial outburst of activity surrounding Roethke's poetry, there has been a marked falling off of criticism toward Roethke. The following table indicates the number of articles written about Roethke and his poetry since 1961 and is segmented into three-year increments.¹ Publications about Robert Lowell, considered along with Roethke as a major poet since World War II, and T.S. Eliot, probably the major poet of the century, are also provided for comparison:

¹ Statistics are drawn from the MLA International Bibliography, years 1961-1978.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Roethke</u>	<u>Lowell</u>	<u>Eliot</u>
1961-63	5	8	90
64-66	16	14	147
67-69	17	41	157
70-72	28	48	255
73-75	36	48	259
76-78	23	51	232

The table suggests that criticism toward Roethke peaked in the early seventies and is perhaps now on the wane, while criticism for Lowell continues to increase. In the 1960s and early 70s, few critics or anthologists would have objected to citing Roethke, Lowell, and perhaps John Berryman as the three major American poets of the post-war era.² But anyone pursuing criticism about Roethke's poetry in the late 1970s discovers that Roethke draws about as much print as the forgotten Beat poets.

Another interesting indication of Roethke's critical recognition is that most of the books concerning Roethke come out of the University of Washington Press, Roethke's teaching home from 1947 to his death. One might suspect that the school is prompting a one-institution effort at saving Roethke's place in American poetry.

This decline in attention toward Roethke suggests two possible futures for his place in American poetry. Either the initial wave of criticism has extracted from the poetry

²See William Meredith's "A Steady Storm of Correspondence," in Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Arnold Stein, p. 52.

all that is valuable, and Roethke will be delegated to the crowd of "minor" 20th century poets, or a second wave of criticism, based on different emphases and perspectives, is soon to come. This thesis seeks to adhere to this second possibility, and its focus is prompted by issues relatively unaddressed in the initial criticism.

The first wave of criticism about Roethke has this in common: nearly all critics seek to offer a "reading" of the poetry. The major studies, notably Karl Malkoff's Theodore Roethke, Ralph J. Mills' Theodore Roethke, and Dorothy Sullivan's Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master, let the chronology of Roethke's books of poetry organize their formats, and the authors, following this chronology, suggest major themes and developments in the works. Thus, these studies take on the tone of "introductions" to Roethke's works. Malkoff's analysis of Roethke's works is subtitled "An Introduction to the Poetry." Arnold Stein's Theodore Roethke-Essays on the Poetry aims to "extend and create understanding of Theodore Roethke's work as a poet," implying that we first need to understand Roethke's verse, and only then can we judge its significance, place it in historical perspective, and explore Roethke's influences.³

³Arnold Stein, "Introduction," in Stein, p. iiiii.

The effort to create an "understanding" of Roethke's poetry, the goal of the first critical wave, has been valuable in several ways. It has established Roethke's central theme, here articulated by Spiller, but found in roughly the same language in most studies of Roethke: "Roethke's obsessive theme, evident from The Lost Son (1948) through his last book, The Far Field (1964), is the struggle of the soul to be born into self knowledge."⁴ The criticism has noted that Roethke was interested with innovation in form, and that he constantly shifted his technique, as illustrated by the tightly rhymed and metered, clipped lines of Open House (1941), to the hauntingly irregular lines of The Lost Son (1948) and Praise to the End! (1951), to the freer, Whitmanesque forms of The Far Field (1964).

What the initial criticism does not attempt to establish is a central, specific focus toward the poetry. Much has been remarked about Roethke's works in general, but little has been attempted with specific volumes or poems. No critic has concentrated on Roethke's metrics. No one has pursued an autobiographical, formalistic, Jungian, or sociological reading of the poetry, although nearly every critic mentions these approaches. No one has made it his sole effort to examine, in depth, the influences of Yeats or Blake

⁴Robert E. Spiller, et. al. Literary History of the United States: History, 1974 edition, pp. 1435-36.

on Roethke, even though Roethke himself claims a great indebtedness to them.

This thesis seeks to address this void in the criticism toward Roethke by examining the influence of T.S. Eliot on Roethke and his poetry. More specifically, it seeks to uncover elements of Eliot's Four Quartets, his final major poem, in Roethke's "North American Sequence," from The Far Field, Roethke's last volume of poetry. Roethke, in the sequence, repeatedly addresses similar problems raised by Eliot in Quartets, yet Roethke consistently rejects solutions offered in Quartets for his own.

Eliot's name, like Yeats or Blake, appears frequently in the criticism on Roethke. As Anthony Libby has said, "The Four Quartets has been cited by one critic or another as the source of almost every extended sequence Roethke wrote...."⁵ However, beyond mentioning possible influences of Eliot, no critic has detailed Roethke's attitude toward Eliot and his poetry and Roethke's use of that poetry in his own work. In order to accomplish this and give Libby's statement full context, it is necessary to accomplish several things. First, it is useful to establish the dominance that Eliot and the Quartets held through the 1940s and 50s. If Roethke was active in post-war poetic and critical

⁵Anthony Libby, "Roethke, Water Father," American Literature, 46 (November 1974), p. 272.

circles, and given his acquaintances, including W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and William Carlos Williams, this appears to be so, then a strong Eliot impetus over the period could be significant to Roethke's work. Second, and the subject of the next chapter, it is valuable to understand Roethke's personal and poetic attitude toward Eliot. Understanding this attitude may help to explain why Eliot's Quartets figures so prominently in Roethke's poetry. Reference to Eliot from Roethke's prose, his letters, statements to and by his peers, serve as the source material for deriving such an understanding. Last, it is necessary in the final two chapters to narrow the focus to "North American Sequence" in order to examine, in technique and subject matter, elements and echos of Four Quartets. This closer analysis enables us to establish how Roethke comes to terms with Four Quartets, how he assesses it and responds to it.

Eliot's dominance over poetry during Roethke's life assumes an odd twist when we realize that, while Eliot outlived Roethke, Roethke was only beginning his career in poetry at the same time Eliot was concluding his. Roethke's Open House, his first volume of poetry, was published in 1941. Eliot's Four Quartets (each, except "Little Gidding," published separately from 1935-1943), found final collection and publication in 1943. Thus, Eliot's career in poetry more or less ends during World War II, while at the same time Roethke's career is just underway.

This odd crossing of paths helped to ensure that Roethke would pursue his career in a field constantly aware of Eliot. While Eliot had established his reputation 20 years earlier with the publication of "The Waste Land" (1922), it was only with the publication of Four Quartets that critics could begin the task of analyzing, evaluating, and judging Eliot's cannon of poetry. This critical attention, with special emphasis on the Quartets themselves, was underway in the 1940s, and it established Eliot as the central figure in poetry during this decade.

This attention began with the 1943 publication of Four Quartets. The initial reviews of the volume were mixed, but primarily favorable. While one reviewer lamented that Eliot had adopted an attitude of "intellectual defeatism," most of the more recognized literary reviewers lauded the poem.⁶ Delmore Schwartz maintained that Four Quartets was in the "climate of great poetry."⁷ Louise Bogan saw in the poems a "renewed poetic strength."⁸ And these were the more constrained views. Horace Gregory had no qualms in claiming that the Quartets were the "best poetry of their kind since Wordsworth wrote 'The Prelude.'"⁹

⁶W.E. Garrison, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, Catholic World, August 1947, p. 553.

⁷Delmore Schwartz, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, Commonweal, 28 May 1943, p. 148.

⁸Louise Bogan, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, New York Times, 10 May 1943, p. 2.

⁹Horace Gregory, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, New Republic, 7 June 1943, p. 767.

Even those reviewers who did not directly praise the poems advanced Eliot's reputation. Some reviewers took up the task of defending Eliot against those who had criticized him. Some answered the line of criticism that had evolved during World War II, directed often at Eliot specifically but usually at poetry in general: that poets during the war had deserted their social responsibility and that poetry had failed to respond to the circumstances facing the Allies. Hence, Horace Gregory, in addition to praising the Quartets, says:

With Mr. T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets before me I wish to modify the gloomy accusation that the better poets of our time have been "irresponsible" or have failed to realize¹⁰ the seriousness of living through a difficult hour.

Other reviewers sought to dilute another criticism of Eliot: that his poetry was too intellectual and thus not designed for popular consumption. To this charge there were two responses. Some defended the apparent difficulties of the Quartets, claiming that such complexities were "stimulating."¹¹ Others, such as Malcolm Cowley, made claims that the "Four Quartets is one of those rare books that can be enjoyed without being understood."¹²

¹⁰Gregory, p. 767.

¹¹Rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, Christian Science Monitor, 29 May 1943, p. 11.

¹²Malcolm Cowley, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, Nation, 24 July 1943, p. 102.

All three of these assessments--outright praise of the poem, the Quartets as Eliot's response to World War II, and defense of Eliot's apparent "intellectualism"--helped to make Eliot a major figure in poetry immediately after 1943. Reviews of the Quartets were carried in every major newspaper and magazine, from primarily literary publications to such popular magazines and newspapers such as Time and The New York Times.

Robert Lowell's review of the Four Quartets anticipates the amount of critical attention Eliot was to receive in the 1940s and 50s. Besides maintaining that it "is probably the most powerful religious poem of the twentieth century" and that it "is probably Eliot's best poem," he cogently points out that the poem was to be the center of much attention: "I suppose no poem has come into the world with so many critics to attend it."¹³ The shift from reviews of the volume to criticism and explication was almost instantaneous. Even as most major periodicals were reviewing Four Quartets in 1943, many critics were already examining and analyzing the poem. F.O. Matthiessen was one of the first. His article in the Kenyon Review in early 1943 traces the

¹³Robert Lowell, rev. of Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, Sewanee Review, 51 (1943), p. 433.

elements and themes of Eliot's early poetry in the Quartets.¹⁴

By 1950, Eliot's predominance over post-war poetry was firmly established. There are a variety of gauges which indicate this predominance. For example, John Ciardi, in his introduction to Mid-Century American Poets (1950), a popular anthology of contemporary poetry which included such poets as Roethke, Karl Shapiro, and Robert Lowell, draws attention to the vast variety in poetry and poets in the middle of the century, yet he maintains that every poet in the volume "paid homage to Mr. Eliot's poetry and criticism."¹⁵ Delmore Schwartz's 1947 lecture on Eliot titled "The Literary Dictatorship of T.S. Eliot" maintains that Eliot had assumed the role of literary dictator over poetry and literature in the century. In that lecture, Schwartz claims that "Eliot has occupied a position in the English-speaking world analogous to that occupied by Ben Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold."¹⁶ The year 1950 saw the publication of Helen Gardner's The Art of T.S. Eliot, a book length study of

¹⁴F.O. Matthiessen, "Eliot's Quartets," The Kenyon Review, 5 (1943), pp. 161-178.

¹⁵John Ciardi, "Foreward," in Mid-Century American Poets, ed. John Ciardi, p. xxx.

¹⁶"The Literary Dictatorship of T.S. Eliot," in Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz, ed. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker, p. 312.

Quartets, where she claims the poem to be "Eliot's masterpiece."¹⁷ Archibald MacLeish, the major literary figure at Harvard in 1950, was vehemently praising Eliot as the major poet of the century.

Probably most indicative of Eliot's importance during this period was his acceptance of the 1948 Nobel Prize for Literature "for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry."¹⁸ We would expect high praise for Eliot in Anders Osterling's presentation of the Prize, yet statements such as:

The purely poetical part of Eliot's work is not quantitatively great, but as it now stands out against the horizon, it rises from the ocean like a rocky peak and indisputably forms a landmark...

accurately reflect Eliot's position in poetry during this time.¹⁹ Eliot, in his acceptance speech, recognizes this position. Perhaps too modest to make such claims, he recounts the words of Gustaf Hellstrom of the Swedish Academy in conversation:

As a poet you have, Mr. Eliot, for decades, exercised a greater influence on your contemporaries and younger fellow writers than perhaps anyone else of our time.²⁰

¹⁷Helen Gardner, The Art of T.S. Eliot, p. 2.

¹⁸"T.S. Eliot," Nobel Lectures-Literature, 1901-1967, ed. Horst Frenz, 1969, p. 430.

¹⁹Anders Osterling, presentation speech, Nobel Lectures, p. 432.

²⁰T.S. Eliot, acceptance speech, Nobel Lectures, p. 437.

The publication and production of several of Eliot's plays, beginning with The Cocktail Party in 1950 in London and New York, ensured continuing praise and recognition for Eliot into the 1950's. The Cocktail Party opened in New York on January 21 and ran for 409 performances. One indication of its success: the play was reviewed by the New York Times 12 times.

Thus, the publication of Four Quartets, the praise of the reviews immediately after, the increasing critical attention given to Eliot in the 1940s and early 1950s, all stand as evidence to affirm Robert Spiller's statement:

By 1950 one fact that all critics and literary historians could agree upon was Eliot's impressive influence in England, in the United States, and pretty much all over the world where poetry in English was read.²¹

Roethke, embarking on a career in poetry which began in the early 1950s, virtually could not have avoided Eliot, and evidence indicates that Roethke was likely aware of Eliot's towering position over the poetry of this time, a position that was solidified with the publication of Four Quartets, the 1948 Nobel Prize, and the success of the plays.

It might appear inconsistent to suggest that Eliot's dominance over the late 1940s and early 50s had any influence on Roethke when he conceived and wrote his "North American Sequence" during the late 50s and early 60s. This inconsistency can be resolved if we recall Spiller's statement

²¹Spiller, pp. 1397-98.

that Roethke's central themes did not change radically throughout his career. Allan Seager, Roethke's biographer, concurs with this assessment:

...Ted wanted each book to be new, and The Lost Son was, new entirely, but others, although he did not think so, were new only technically, in manner, in length of line, or in different influences that gave him certain promptings. There was no change²² of vision or new profound poetic impulses at work....

Major elements of Roethke's themes appear frequently throughout his work. These include, among others, the greenhouse and plant imagery, his father, and the journey motif. The constant reemployment of these elements also suggest that Roethke's central vision remained consistent throughout his volumes. Because of this consistency of vision and theme, it is not unlikely to suppose that those poets who dealt with themes similar to Roethke's would exert a constant influence on him. Rosemary Sullivan comments:

Most often the young poet struggles against an initial antagonist blocking his way to autoumous creativity: Blake's Milton, Shelley's Wordsworth, or Wallace Stevens' Pater. But with Roethke the battle against engulfment was continuous throughout his life. He seems to have had a personal need to come²³ to terms with the great poets who influenced him....

A survey of criticism about Roethke supports this consistency in influence in the case of Eliot. Jenijoy La

²²Allan Seager, The Glass House-The Life of Theodore Roethke, p. 19.
²³Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master, p. 19.

Belle substantiates that "The Lost Son" (1948) particularly part five, corresponds to part three of Eliot's "East Coker" from Four Quartets in both imagery and language.²⁴ Randle Jarrell is one of many critics who suggests that Roethke's "Meditations of an Old Woman" from Words for the Wind (1958) shows an influence of Four Quartets.²⁵ Anthony Libby, previously quoted, summarizes the view that Eliot remained a consistent influence through Roethke's career and that Quartets is a concern in every major sequence by Roethke.

In many of Roethke's sequence and poems he employs an image drawn from his childhood memories. Roethke's family, during his childhood, owned and ran one of the largest greenhouses in the Midwest. At the head of that greenhouse-world stood the domineering, god-like figure of Roethke's father, constantly arranging, ordering, maintaining. Roethke's father prompted another major theme in Roethke's poetry, and again, in many poems, his personas seek to come to terms with their father figures. Just as Roethke sought to confront this overpowering father figure in his poetry, so did he find himself confronted by the dominant figure of Eliot in the post-war world of poetry.

²⁴Jenijoy La Belle, "Theodore Roethke's 'The Lost Son' from Archetypes to Literary History," Modern Language Quarterly, June 1976, pp. 179-195.

²⁵See Randall Jarrell's, "Fifty Years of American Poetry," in The Third Book of Criticism, p. 327.

Chapter II

LOVE-HATE: ROETHKE'S PERSONAL AND POETIC ATTITUDE TOWARD ELIOT

Essay: I Hate Eliot
1st sentence. Why?
Because I love him too much--²⁶

Roethke in his lifetime never met Eliot, though he made one attempt, so we are left without any direct conversations or incidents which might help us to understand Roethke's attitude toward the figure many modern critics hail as the major poet of the twentieth century. This fact makes the influence Eliot held over poetry immediately after World War II an important part of Roethke's attitude toward Eliot, because while Roethke never had any kind of personal relationship with him, Roethke could not have avoided reading Eliot, confronting him in the classroom, and discussing him among a circle of friends and colleagues.

One poet who was personally acquainted with both Eliot and Roethke is Stephen Spender, and Spender offers us, in his essay "The Objective Ego," a revealing theory about

²⁶David Wagoner, ed., Straws For the Fire-From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-63, p. 245. Subsequently referred to as Notebooks.

Roethke's relationships with other poets and writers.²⁷ Spender, in the essay, recalls a time in the early 1950s when he gave a reading at the University of Washington. Roethke, who had invited Spender, also had the task of introducing him. Spender recollects Roethke's introduction:

Mr. Spender...was one of these English poets, who come over to America--are received everywhere, paid, listened to, perhaps applauded. What made the speaker [Roethke] so sore was not that he knew himself to be a better poet...but that Mr. Spender was going to be paid more than the introducer received on the occasions when he gave a reading.²⁸

It should be noted that Roethke, by the early 50s had published just two volumes of poetry, Open House (1941) and The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948), and he was just beginning to receive critical recognition, while Spender at this same time had published his collected works and was recognized in both America and England as a major poet and critic. Spender goes on to mention in the essay, "Afterwards he said or wrote to me that it was all love-hate--if he didn't love me he would never have said those hard things."²⁹ Love-hate, Spender suggests, was Roethke's "norm" in relationships.

²⁷ See Stephen Spender, "The Objective Ego," in Stein, pp. 3-13.

²⁸ Spender, p. 4.

²⁹ Spender, p. 5.

The letter which Spender probably recalls is dated in September of 1961. In that letter, Roethke expresses bitterness toward Eliot (then an editor for Faber & Faber) because Faber turned down his book of children's verse. I Am!
Says the Lamb:

In this country four out of five notices are raves...The fifth guy always wants to drum me out of Christendom. I know kids like these when they hear them-even as young as two (I'm carrying on so long, I suppose, because I feel Eliot...[has] treated me very shabbily, alas!).³⁰

In his own footnote, Roethke admits, "I'm always grumbling about Eliot: it's the old love-hate business. He can't stand anyone who will duel with God."³¹

Roethke, from references such as this one, might have agreed with Spender's theory, and there is evidence throughout Roethke's career which offers love-hate as a way to understand his relationship with Eliot. References to Eliot are either infused with personal jealousy and dislike toward Eliot, or implicitly speak of love and respect for Eliot as a thinker and poet.

The span of this love-hate axis can be explored by pursuing oblique references to Eliot from Roethke's earliest days as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan to

³⁰"To Stephen Spender," 25 September, 1961, Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, Ralph J. Mills, Jr., ed., p. 250. Subsequently referred to as Letters.

³¹"To Stephen Spender," 25 September 1961, Letters, p. 251.

his final days as a poet-in-residence at the University of Washington. In order to place a perspective on these references, it is useful to arrange this chronology into three periods: 1925-1936, Roethke's undergraduate and graduate years at the University of Michigan; 1936-1950, Roethke's years as apprentice poet to his first publications of Open House (1941) and The Lost Son (1948); and 1951-1963, his later period of recognition and widespread publication which includes Praise to the End! (1951), Words for the Wind (1958), and his posthumous volume, The Far Field (1964). Such an examination helps us to follow the softening or hardening of attitudes Roethke held toward Eliot, and it is especially useful in offering insights into how Roethke came to terms with Eliot in The Far Field. Also from this examination one becomes aware that Roethke had determined Four Quartets to be Eliot's most significant poem. It is elements of Four Quartets which consistently inhabit portions of Roethke's major sequences, from the sequence containing "The Lost Son" and poems from Praise to the End!, to the sequence "Meditations of an Old Woman," from Words for the Wind (1958), and most significantly, "North American Sequence," from The Far Field (1964).

One of the earliest pieces of writing by Roethke from the 1925-1936 period is an essay titled "Some Self-Analysis," which he wrote for a class while an undergraduate

at the University of Michigan in 1926-1927.³² In the essay, Roethke writes: "My mother insisted upon two things,--that I strive for perfection in whatever I did and that I always try to be a gentleman."³³ In many of his references to Eliot, Roethke's language and vocabulary is anything but gentlemanly. However, Roethke's mention of a strive for perfection figures prominently in Roethke's dislike for Eliot.

One illustration of this striving for perfection comes from Roethke's love of tennis. Roethke, in addition to teaching literature and creative writing courses, often taught or coached tennis. One teenage friend of Roethke describes his efforts at tennis:

He had this Prussian thoroughness. We had a practice board. If any of us did ten minutes on it, we had had enough, but I have seen Ted out there going bang! bang! bang! for three hours at a time. Pretty soon³⁴ he was trying shots that only Tilden could have made.

Allan Seager offers an interesting analogy based on Roethke's affection for tennis. He suggests that Roethke "played poetry the way he played tennis, competitively...To view literature as a contest to be won is a Saginaw Valley, Middle Western, American set of mind..."³⁵

³²See "Some Self Analysis," in On the Poet and His Craft-Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., pp. 3-6. Subsequently referred to as Prose.

³³"Some Self Analysis," in Prose, pp. 4-5.

³⁴Seager, p. 45.

³⁵Seager, p. 92.

Roethke saw in his contemporaries a major competitor in Robert Lowell. In a letter referring to publication of The Far Field, Roethke writes, "(I've got old Cal beat, but really); and if you don't think it's one hell of a book, I'll turn in my suit."³⁶ At another time, Roethke arranged for Irish poet Tom Kinsella to read at the University of Washington. With Roethke in the audience, a student asked Kinsella who he felt was the best living American poet. Kinsella responded, "Robert Lowell." Later that evening, Roethke muttered to party guests about Kinsella, "That bastard, damn him. Did you hear what he said?"³⁷

Roethke's competitive attitude toward literature extended beyond his own generation. Karl Malkoff, referring to "Meditations of an Old Woman," has pointed out: "T.S. Eliot has often been cited as having influenced the structure, and, to some extent, the content of these poems. At this suggestion, Roethke was highly indignant..."³⁸ The seeds for this indignation can be found in Roethke's undergraduate and graduate days at Michigan.

³⁶"To Isabella Gardner," 17 February 1963, Letters, p. 258.

³⁷Seager, p. 285.

³⁸Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke-An Introduction to the Poetry, p. 14.

Roethke attended the University of Michigan in the Fall of 1925. He went on to do graduate work toward a Master's degree at the same school in the 1929-1930 academic year. However, he did not receive his graduate degree until 1936, but during this time he taught four years at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

If we accept evidence from this period at face value, apparently Roethke never read Eliot in college. Seager says concerning Roethke's school days, "He makes a point of saying that he has never worked much with Eliot..."³⁹ In a 1959 letter to Ralph J. Mills, Roethke confirms this early ignorance toward Eliot: "...I came to some of Eliot's and Yeats's [sic] ancestors long before I came to them..."⁴⁰ The academic attitude toward Eliot in the 1930s was mixed. Given the fact that the University of Michigan at the time was in the traditional Midwest and was probably conservative in outlook, it may very well have been the case that Roethke heard little about Eliot in the classroom.

However, one problem we confront in examining Roethke's first approach to Eliot is that much of this evidence comes from Roethke's looking back on his school days. Evidence from sources other than Roethke suggest that he was

³⁹Seager, p. 228.

⁴⁰"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr." 12 June 1959, Letters, p. 230.

not so untutored in Eliot's poetry. First, Seager points out that Roethke, while at Michigan, was good friends with a Professor Peter Monro Jack, a "local proprietor" of T.S. Eliot.⁴¹ Second, Rolphe Humphries, a colleague of Roethke's at Lafayette, claims Roethke's knowledge of the Moderns was excellent: "He know modern poetry-that is, since 1900-really well, especially the English."⁴²

Such evidence leads one to suspect that Roethke was aware of both Eliot's works and the increasing recognition of Eliot by the critics. When Seager points out that "Ted rarely acknowledge Eliot's abilities," we can suspect that Roethke was aware of those abilities and simply chose to ignore them, not that Roethke failed to acknowledge those abilities because he was ignorant of them.⁴³

It is plausible that Roethke, a student just deciding to embark on a literary career, found himself irritated with the amount of attention Eliot was receiving. In a letter to Dorothy Gordon in February 1934, Roethke, with no other mention of Eliot in the letter, says flatly, "I'm tired of all this Eliot-Pound worship. Eliot's a good poet, but there are others."⁴⁴ It is possible that Professor Jack contributed to this feeling with his over-enthusiasm for Eliot.

⁴¹Seager, p. 66.

⁴²Seager, p. 76.

⁴³Seager, p. 66.

⁴⁴"To Dorothy Gordon," circa February 1934, Letters, p. 12.

As Roethke entered into his period of apprenticeship in literature, from 1936 to roughly 1950, the references which indicate Roethke's dislike for Eliot increase in number and intensity corresponding to Eliot's increase in recognition and popularity. Roethke, establishing himself as a published poet in the late 1930s and early 40s, was content to be associated with the anti-Eliot camp in poetry unofficially led by William Carlos Williams. In a 1946 letter to Williams, Roethke is anxious to get Williams' latest "blast" against Eliot.⁴⁵ In a 1950 letter, he is more bold, probably due to the critical success of The Lost Son (1948): "Old T.S.E. can fall dead after this: We're both writing rings around him now, I say with the usual modesty."⁴⁶

From 1925 to nearly the end of his life, Eliot was an editor for Faber & Faber Publishing House. Roethke, as some references indicate, began to feel Eliot as an editor was neglecting Roethke's talents as a writer. In a letter to Eddie and Eleanor Nichols, Roethke points out that "Auden has sent the MS of the book (The Lost Son) to Eliot. Nothing will come of this."⁴⁷

⁴⁵"To William Carlos Williams," 8 May 1946, Letters, p. 122.
⁴⁶"To William Carlos Williams," 8 February 1950, Letters, p. 165.
⁴⁷Seager, p. 173.

Also during this period we have an indication of how Roethke was treating Eliot's works in his classes. Seager reprints some notes taken by one of Roethke's students and preserved in Roethke's papers. Among these notes is a mention of Eliot: "Eliot-he's sort of wormy."⁴⁸

The years between publication of The Lost Son (1948) and Praise to the End! (1951), as critical recognition for Roethke began to expand, references indicate that Roethke felt he was "outdoing" Eliot in the literary world. In a 1949 letter, Roethke writes about what was soon to become the poems of Praise to the End!:

I think I've got hold of a really big theme: it's got everything, involves just about every neurosis, obsession, fundamental itch or what have you. I wish I could sit down and talk to you a little about it. It may take me five years or longer; but when I get done, Eliot will be nothing: a mere litterateur. He ain't much more, anyway.⁴⁹

Among other things, it is significant that Roethke chooses Eliot as the poet that he will out do. That Roethke saw Eliot as the major voice in poetry is also substantiated by another 1949 letter in which Roethke claims "everybody is tired of Tiresome Tom, the Cautious Cardinal, and wants to hear about the new jump-boy, the master of didle-we-care-couldly."⁵⁰

⁴⁸Seager, p. 180

⁴⁹"To Kenneth Burke," 8 May 1949, Letters, p. 145.

⁵⁰"To Kenneth Burke," 6 September 1949, Letters, p.

Thus, evidence from the middle, apprenticeship period of Roethke's career indicates that, as his list of publication and recognition grew, Roethke's attitude of competitiveness toward Eliot became more intense. This increase in intensity, in turn, reveals many of the hostile attitudes Roethke held toward Eliot.

Roethke's final period, from 1951-1963, can be considered his established period, at least in the sense of critical recognition, praise, and the amount of work he published. During this time he published Praise to the End! (1951), The Waking: Poems, 1933, 1953 (1953), Words for the Wind (1958), his book of children's verse titled "I Am!" Says the Lamb (1961), and, posthumously, The Far Field (1964). During this period, he won an array of awards, including the Pulitzer prize in 1953, a Fulbright Grant in 1955, and the National Book Award in 1959. He was also receiving a steady stream of praise and money for his poetry readings. During this period of greatest number of publications and amount of recognition, references to Eliot become yet more intense, at some points almost vehement.

Part of this increasing hostility toward Eliot may have been the result of the only exchange of letters between the two poets. Roethke, in England in the summer of 1953 for a BBC Broadcast, wrote to Eliot on August 5th at

Faber.⁵¹ In his letter, Roethke included a manuscript of his book of children's verse for consideration at Faber, and he also suggested the possibility of Faber publishing some of his serious work. Eliot, as the dates of the letters indicate, replied the same day:

Thank you for your letter of August 5, I was pleased that you should submit your manuscript of children's verse, with illustrations, to this Firm, and am sorry that it does not fit into our list.

I am, however, very much interested in considering your volume of Selected Poems, and wrote as much to Madame Bassiano, who had informed me that it was about to appear. So I shall be very glad if you will have the book sent to me for consideration in September. I put it this way, because unhappily I cannot possibly fit in a meeting a week, as my otherwise free time is at the moment entirely occupied with rehearsals. I am very sorry that you are leaving so soon, and should have been happy to make your acquaintance.

Yours sincerely,
T.S. Eliot⁵²

Seager claims Eliot's response "enraged" and "hurt" Roethke: "He seems to have taken it as a sign that his reputation was...not high enough to make him a man that Eliot could not afford to ignore."⁵³ While there is no direct references which indicate Roethke felt particularly enraged by this exchange of letters, the exchange did nothing to quell Roethke's already somewhat hostile attitude toward

⁵¹See Seager, pp. 214-15.

⁵²Seager, p. 215.

⁵³Seager, p. 216.

Eliot. Roethke continued, in his notebooks and letters, to write angrily about Eliot.

Two entries in Roethke's notebooks dated after 1954 make specific mention to Eliot. The first, dated between 1954 and 1958 by David Waggoner, says this about Eliot:

Guesses about Eliot: As a moral man, he just makes it.
 As a mystic, he don't even get to
 the fringe.
 As a literary politician, he has
 raised politics to statesman-
 ship.⁵⁴

The second entry, dated between 1959 and 1963 is a short piece titled "Two Retorts to Eliot," written possibly with Four Quartets in mind. The first retort is:

Our God Himself adores
 Only beasts upon all fgours
 Humility's for bores.⁵⁵

The last line of the retort may be an echo of the lines from Part II of Eliot's "East Coker," second of the Quartets: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless."⁵⁶

However, it is not in Roethke's notebooks that we find the most colorful attacks on Eliot. In a 1959 letter to Ralph J. Mills, Roethke goes into some depth about his opinion about Eliot as a poet: "My point: for all his great

⁵⁴Notebooks, p. 239.

⁵⁵Notebooks, p. 244.

⁵⁶T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950, p. 126.

gifts...Eliot is not honest, in final terms, even about purely technical matters."⁵⁷ And later in the same letter:

Christ, Eliot in the Quartets is tired, spiritually tired, old man. Rhythm, Tiresome Tom...Not only is Eliot tired, he's a...fraud as a mystic--all his moments in the rose-garden and the wind up his ass in the draughty-smoke-fall-church yard.⁵⁸

And finally, "It's time the Pound-Eliot cult and the Yeats cult, too, got nudged and bumped, no?"⁵⁹

Several aspects of Roethke's dislike for Eliot become clear from the variety of statements about him from these four decades. First, Roethke did not feel that Eliot was an honest poet. Eliot, he felt, wore a mask when it came to poetry: "(Whitman) influenced Eliot plenty technically...--and Eliot, as far as I know, has never acknowledged this--oh no, he's always chi-chi as hell: only Dante, the French, and Jacobean, etc."⁶⁰

Second, Roethke came to consider Eliot as less and less of a poet and more as some sort of religious philosopher or statesman. Roethke asks in a 1955 letter to Jackson and Marthiel Mathews, who recently had visited England:

230. ⁵⁷"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr.," 12 June 1959, Letters, p.

231. ⁵⁸"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr.," 12 June 1959, Letters, p.

231. ⁵⁹"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr.," 12 June 1959, Letters, p.

230. ⁶⁰"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr.," 12 June 1959, Letters, p.

"How is England? Did you see the Cardinal's room-mate [John Hayward]? or His Eminence himself?"⁶¹ Another reference in Roethke's notebooks indicates this same view: "I'm aware that among the expert (unfrightened) trans-Atlantic literary theologians to approach God without benefit of clergy is a grievous lapse in taste, if not a moral sin."⁶² Thus, Eliot, at best, was a "literary theologian" to Roethke and not a true poet.

Finally, and most significant, the irritation that Roethke felt toward the amount of attention Eliot was receiving in critical and academic circles remained a factor to Roethke to the very end of his career. As indicated, as the attention that Roethke himself received increased, his apparent jealousy of Eliot seemed to intensify. Roethke, constantly claiming to have outdone Eliot, seemed never satisfied from one volume to the next that he had done so.

The intensity of this irritation did not subside during the final decade of Roethke's life. Seager establishes that Roethke, with the publication of The Waking (1953), began to feel he had gained a level of respectability as a poet:

⁶¹"To Jackson and Marthel Mathews," 14 December 1955, Letters, p. 205.

⁶²Notebooks, p. 244.

Ted does not seem to have felt the anxiety about the publication of The Waking that he had with his earlier books. There had been enough praise, enough prizes now for his work to give him--in his upper levels at least--a certain confidence in himself as a poet.⁶³

This self confidence continued up to his final publications. In a 1961 letter to Louis Utermeyer, Roethke writes about what will become the second poem of "North American Sequence":

...if you don't use "Oyster River" [in an anthology] you are totally mad; I've had the most extraordinary set of letters from various people on this. [One said] ⁶⁴"Not since Whitman and Yeats have I been so moved," etc.

Yet even with this confidence coupled with the critical acceptance of his poetry, Roethke still seemed overly concerned with Eliot, quizzing people who had recently visited him, constantly pointing to what he felt were Eliot's shortcomings as a poet, consistently angry about his dominance over literature and poetry. In a 1960 letter, Roethke is satisfied to point out, "Look at Eliot's translation of The Anabasis, St. -J. Perse. At least 80 major boo-boos."⁶⁵ And again, quoting from his 1961 letter to Spender: "It saddens me that Mr. Eliot seems to think me a thug...I am convinced I can write rings around some of those punks on his list."⁶⁶

⁶³Seager, p. 217.

⁶⁴"To Louis Utermeyer," 27 February, 1961, Letters, p. 243.

⁶⁵"To Dorothee Bowie," circa September 1960, Letters, p. 238.

⁶⁶"To Stephen Spender," 25 September 1961, Letters, p. 250.

One explanation for this increasingly hostile attitude toward Eliot may involve the Nobel Prize. Eliot was awarded the prize in 1948 and thus became one of the few English speaking poets to have received it. However, Roethke was never awarded the Nobel, and it becomes apparent that he saw the Nobel as the highest achievement in literature. What also becomes apparent is Roethke's feeling that he deserved the Prize for his accomplishments. In a conversation with Ken McCormick, Roethke illustrates much of his attitude toward the Nobel:

Why shouldn't we begin mending and weaving and doing whatever is necessary to bring the Nobel in poetry to America? Certainly I'm a vastly better poet than Quasimodo, and this last French man is good but does the same thing over and over. I think WYSTAN Auden should be next, than Pablo Neruda, ⁶⁷ then me and that's a cold, considered objective judgment.

The Nobel Prize remained on Roethke's mind nearly up to his death. In an article by Rikutaro Fukuda, one of Roethke's Japanese translators, Fukuda recounts a December 1961 conversation with Roethke which includes: "Oh, I have been awarded so many prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize that I do not remember exactly all of them, but I have not obtained the Swedish prize yet."⁶⁸

In Roethke's competitive world of literature, the Nobel stood as the prime achievement, the ultimate prize.

⁶⁷Seager, p. 273.

⁶⁸Seager, p. 276.

Roethke's ill feeling toward Eliot may have been constantly fueled by the fact that Eliot received the Nobel and Roethke saw his prospects for receiving it growing dimmer year by year.

Much of Roethke's attitude toward Eliot from these references consisted of dislike, jealousy, and even at times disgust. However, not all references substantiate Roethke's hatred for Eliot. While the available references which support the love axis of Spender's theory are not nearly as numerous as those which illustrate Roethke's dislike for Eliot, they appear consistently throughout Roethke's career. The first source for these references is from hints in Roethke's notebooks and letters. The second and more important source is Roethke's poetry. Elements of Eliot's verse, particularly the Four Quartets, appear frequently in Roethke's major extended sequences, from "The Lost Son" up to and including "North American Sequence." These elements indicate that Roethke admired Eliot as a thinker and respected Eliot as a poet.

The references which indicate Roethke's praise of Eliot also tend to support Seager's speculation that Roethke viewed the literary world competitively. Roethke, while constantly dueling with Eliot, often displays a great respect for him, a respect similar to that displayed by one good tennis player to another. Roethke respected Eliot's

contributions to poetry. In a 1943 letter to Leonie Adams, Roethke offers a proposed outline for a course in verse writing. For the teaching of free verse poems, Roethke chose for reading materials works of Eliot, Marianne Moore, and early Ezra Pound.⁶⁹ Another reference, this one from 1961, indicates that Roethke greatly admired some of Eliot's poetic techniques. Concerning Praise to the End!, Roethke writes to Ralph J. Mills:

...it is one thing to make amazing metaphors as opposites on a string;--this Thomas does, but rarely does he go in for real jumps in associating...Eliot does, bastard that he is....⁷⁰

References from Roethke's notebooks also substantiate this interest in Eliot's poetry. Dorothy Sullivan points out that Roethke would copy out in his notebook long sections of poems that interested him at the time. These included Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" and large parts of Four Quartets.⁷¹ A few individual lines in the notebooks suggest Roethke's respect for Eliot. One line from between 1949 and 1953: "A new bathed man approaching a smell: Eliot toward much of his material," implies that Roethke felt that Eliot rendered his subject matter with a certain level of clarity and sureness of technique.⁷²

⁶⁹"To Leonie Adams," 5 March 1943, Letters, p. 108.

⁷⁰"To Ralph J. Mills, Jr., 15 December 1961, p. 70.

⁷¹Sullivan, p. 93.

⁷²Notebooks, p. 198.

The most compelling evidence that Roethke greatly admired Eliot and realized him to be one of the most recent major voices in poetry is derived from considering Roethke's two major sequences up to "North American Sequence." These are "The Lost Son" sequence which begins in The Lost Son and Other Poems and is completed in Praise to the End!, and "Meditations of an Old Woman," a sequence from Words for the Wind.

Ralph J. Mills echoes Spiller when he says that Roethke's central concern in his poetry is with:

...the evolution and identity of the self, its beginnings with an individual's birth, its organic growth which resembles the growth of things in nature, and its attainment of a maturity and independence that brings it into a new, harmonious relationship with creation.⁷³

With this as Roethke's central theme, "The Lost Son" sequence represents the first step in the self's quest for identity. As implied in the title poem, the reader encounters a young persona who has become alienated or separated from his father and the various symbolic connotations implicit in a father image. The poem then presents the sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious return of the persona to new terms with existence, a first step in what might be called the persona's spiritual autobiography. As

⁷³Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "In the Way of Becoming-Roethke's Last Poems," in Stein, p. 115.

Roethke has written about the sequence: "Each poem...is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual program; an effort to be born...."⁷⁴

Several critics have suggested that Roethke consciously alludes to Four Quartets in specific sections in the sequence and they draw special attention to the fifth section of the title poem to substantiate this conclusion. The section, "It was beginning winter," includes these lines:

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The wind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.⁷⁵

Frederick J. Hoffman draws upon these lines to suggest an echo of Eliot: "...this condition of silence will become symbolically contained, like and yet very different from the various stillnesses of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets."⁷⁶ Karl Malkoff makes similar suggestion about the fifth section: "Many critics have seen in these lines a direct allusion to Eliot's "still point of the turning world," a line from Eliot's 'Burnt Norton.'"⁷⁷

⁷⁴"Open Letter," in Prose, p. 37.

⁷⁵Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke, p. 55. Subsequently referred to as CP.

⁷⁶Frederick J. Hoffman, "Theodore Roethke--The Poetic Shape of Death," in Stein, p. 100.

⁷⁷Malkoff, p. 90.

One of the most impressive consideration of the presence of elements of Quartets in the sequence is by Jenijoy La Belle.⁷⁸ She claims that Roethke "consciously chose to imitate" Eliot's "East Coker" in the fifth section of "The Lost Son."⁷⁹ She quotes from both poems and maintains: "Not only does Roethke adopt Eliot's vocabulary, but also he uses the words "beginning," "bone," "wind," "Beginning," "light," "field," and "silence" in the same sequence."⁸⁰ She also points to other parallels between the two poems, that both poets deal with an "in-between time," that both sections address the cycle of nature, and others.⁸¹

If "The Lost Son" sequence represents the quest for self identity beginning with the initial separation from father, Roethke's "Meditations of an Old Woman" presents a persona in the final stages of spiritual autobiography. The poem offers an old woman described by Roethke in a letter: "...she's tough, she's brave, she's aware of life and she would take a congeries of eels over a hassle of bishops any day."⁸² The sequence presents the various attitudes of this persona in her effort to solidify her existence for the final confrontations with death. That Eliot's Quartets was

⁷⁸La Belle, pp. 179-95.

⁷⁹La Belle, p. 193.

⁸⁰La Belle, p. 194.

⁸¹La Belle, p. 194.

⁸²"To Ralph J. Mills," 13 June 1959, Letters, p. 231.

a major concern to Roethke in this sequence is established by Roethke himself. In a 1959 letter to Ralph J. Mills he comments to some length on the poem, constantly comparing his old woman persona to the persona Eliot establishes in Quartets, particularly in the first of the quartets, "Burnt Norton."

Many critics are quick to point out parallels and echos in the two poems. John Wain has said, "...Meditations of an Old Woman"...draws heavily on the Eliot of Four Quartets."⁸³ W.D. Snodgrass agrees: "This poem [contrary to Roethke's "The Dying Man"] shows a different influence, but one which seemed much less confining--the Eliot of Four Quartets."⁸⁴ Denis Donoghue quotes from "I'm Here," a poem in "Meditations" to illustrate what he feels Roethke learned from Eliot's Quartets, "mainly, I think, how to be expressive while holding most of his ammunition in reserve."⁸⁵

The love-hate relationship Roethke had toward Eliot is evident throughout Roethke's career in a variety of forms. Roethke's conversations, letters, notebooks, formal prose, and poetry all contain seemingly mixed and conflicting attitudes toward Eliot. As Roethke's career proceeded

⁸³ John Wain, "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," in Stein, p. 67.
⁸⁴ W.D. Snodgrass, "That Anguish of Concreteness," in Stein, p. 82.
⁸⁵ Denis Donoghue, "Roethke's Broken Music," in Stein, p. 159.

and his level of recognition grew, his hostility and jealousy toward Eliot seemed to increase. Yet, as his poetic sequences moved closer in its concerns to the subject matter of Quartets, Roethke found himself reading and seriously considering Eliot more and more. In "North American Sequence" Roethke's ambivalent attitudes toward Eliot find their final effect, yet, as a closer examination of the two sequences will show, those attitudes also take on new dimensions.

Chapter III

"NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE": ROETHKE'S SEARCH FOR FORM

In 1950, in the forward to his anthology of modern poetry titled Mid Century American Poets, John Ciardi explains that he "invited each poet to select a group of his own poems and to prepare a prose foreward for them in which he explained as best he could his personal writing principles or rejection of principle."⁸⁶ Roethke is included in this volume, and his prose introduction comes in the form of a letter, addressed to no one in particular and titled by Roethke "Open Letter."⁸⁷ This letter is one of his few prose works published during his lifetime, and his purpose for writing it is to assist the reader in approaching some of the poems which make up "The Lost Son" sequence.

A close reading of the letter uncovers at least one oblique reference to Eliot. In explaining "The Lost Son," Roethke writes, "The line, 'Hath the rain a father?' is from Job--the only quotation in the piece. (A third of a line, notice--not a third of a poem)."⁸⁸ The parenthetical remark

⁸⁶Ciardi, p. xxvii.

⁸⁷Ciardi, pp. 67-72.

⁸⁸Ciardi, p. 68.

probably refers to Eliot's "The Waste Land," in which Eliot's collage technique incorporates many direct quotations from, allusions to, and parodies of a vast range of well known as well as obscure works of literature.

However, "Open Letter" is valuable not only for its jabs at Eliot, but for its insights on Eliot's influence on Roethke. In it, Roethke explains to the reader how to approach some of the structural and formalistic oddities which his poem presents. To most readers in 1950, without the aid of criticism or explication, lines such as:

Is this the storm's heart? The ground is unstilling
itself.
My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out
their fire?
Is the seed leaving the old bed? These buds are live as
birds.
Where, where are the tears of the world?⁸⁹

would sound like gibberish. As if to compound the problem, the third section of the poem Roethke titles "The Gibber."⁹⁰

If we examine some of Roethke's statements intended to help the reader understand "The Lost Son," and then follow similar statements by Roethke concerning his poetry up to and including "North American Sequence," we should be able to chart Roethke's emphasis on form and his continual shifts in technique. This examination should enable us to determine to what extent he borrow from and then adapts some of the techniques of the Four Quartets.

⁸⁹CP, p. 53.

⁹⁰CP, p. 52.

In "Open Letter," Roethke emphasizes some of the techniques in form in his poetry and "The Lost Son" in particular. First, he insists that the sequence of poems should be read aloud: "Listen to them, for they are written to be heard...."⁹¹ This emphasis on sound remains important to Roethke throughout his lifetime. In his efforts to publish his book of children's verse, I Am! Says the Lamb (1961), Roethke tried unsuccessfully to have inexpensive records of the poems read by himself included in each copy of the book.⁹²

Another technique Roethke calls attention to is his use of the cyclical method: "...at least you can see that the method is cyclic. I believe that to go forward as a spritual man it is necessary first to go back."⁹³ To a great extent, this cyclical technique shapes much of the subject matter in Roethke's verse. Dorothy Sullivan sees this cyclical method as the primary unifying device in the poetry as well as providing one of Roethke's major themes: "If one were to search for the persistent pattern which unifies Roethke's work, making it such a coherent body of work, one would have to settle on the pattern of rebirth."⁹⁴

⁹¹Ciardi, p. 68.

⁹²Seager, p. 188.

⁹³Ciardi, p. 69.

⁹⁴Sullivan, p. 190.

The technique most emphasized in "Open Letter," and an element in poetry which seems to have preoccupied Roethke, is drama, the need for the reader to understand "The Lost Son" as dramatic poetry instead of discursive or reflective poetry. Roethke's perspective on dramatic poetry surfaces repeatedly in the letter, and from these references we can gain an understanding of what Roethke meant by dramatic poetry. He first mentions drama in reference to the poem "Where Knock Is Open Wide": "The earliest piece of all (in terms of age of the protagonist) is written entirely from the viewpoint of a very small child: all interior drama; no comment; no interpretation."⁹⁵ He later suggests that the "revelation of the identity of the speaker may itself be a part of the drama..."⁹⁶ He also refers to drama when he remarks on the apparent difficulties of the poems:

If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language; the "meaning" itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement.⁹⁷

Last, stated in a postscript, Roethke concludes: "The next phase? Something much longer: dramatic and playable. Pray for me."⁹⁸

⁹⁵Ciardi, p. 70.

⁹⁶Ciardi, p. 71.

⁹⁷Ciardi, p. 72.

⁹⁸Ciardi, p. 72.

These references to drama suggest that Roethke felt that dramatic elements in his poetry are integrally fused to the persona and the persona's language in the poem. At one point remarks on the sequence as a whole:

I believe, that in this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal in himself, should not rely on allusion; should not comment or employ many judgment words; should not meditate (or maunder). He must scorn being "mysterious" or loosely⁹⁹ oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery.

The drama in poetry, Roethke thus maintains, is the drama of the persona. The rendering of the various states of the persona's consciousness or unconsciousness by language reveals the tensions plaguing the persona. This tension, in fact, becomes the essence of the poem.

That Roethke saw this fusion of drama, persona, and language to be central to the form of poetry is reiterated in another prose piece delivered by Roethke on the BBC in 1953: "All these states of mind were to be rendered dramatically, without comment, without allusion, the action often implied or indicated in the interior monologue or dialogue between the self and its mentor...."¹⁰⁰

In these public essays, no direct references are made to Eliot or to the Quartets. However, private correspondences during this period make it clear that Roethke had

⁹⁹Ciardi, p. 71.

¹⁰⁰"An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Poems," in *Prose*, p. 10.

Eliot very much on his mind. Ralph J. Mills suggests that much of the content in Roethke's "Open Letter" comes from an earlier letter which Roethke wrote to Babette Deutsch.¹⁰¹ The similarities in vocabulary and syntax in the two pieces tend to support Mills' conclusion. However, in the private letter to Deutsch, Roethke specifically identifies Eliot in his statements on dramatic poetry:

In this kind of poem, the poet should not "comment," or use many judgment-words; instead he should render the experience, however condensed or elliptical that experience may be. (That's what has happened to Eliot in the Quartets. His rhythms are weakened; there's too much talk. It's a reflective, not a dramatic poetry.¹⁰²

A still earlier letter of May 8, 1946 to William Carlos Williams supports the view that Roethke saw the Quartets as essentially nondramatic and, in Roethke's terms, "tired." In reference to "The Lost Son" sequence, Roethke says that the mood and action in the poems is "on the page, not talked-about, not the meditative, T.S. Eliot kind of thing."¹⁰³

When Praise to the End! appeared in 1951, it contained the poems which concluded the sequence started in The Lost Son. In these poems, Roethke continues to cultivate

¹⁰¹ See "To Babette Deutsch," 22 January 1948, Letters, pp. 139-42.

¹⁰² "To Babette Deutsch," 22 January 1948, Letters, p. 142.

¹⁰³ "To William Carlos Williams," 8 May 1946, Letters, p. 127.

his technique of dramatic poetry much different from his view of the reflective, nondramatic poetry of Quartets. Lines such as the following, Roethke might have suggested, are not found in the Eliot of Four Quartets:

Such owly pleasures! Fish come first, sweet bird.
 Skin's the least of me. Kiss this.
 Is the eternal near, fondling?
 I hear the sound of hands.¹⁰⁴

Lines such as these contain no commentary, and while they may be obscure, it is not an obscurity caused by the speculations of complicated ideas or concepts. Part of the dramatic tone is caused by the tension between awareness of the world around the persona but the lack of full comprehension of that world. The sound of hands is only heard, its meaning is not subject to enlongated discussion.

The personas throughout The Lost Son sequence are young, ranging in age from birth to youth to preteen. Roethke, in order to reinforce the credibility of these personas, employs a language and rhyme in the sequence which is appropriate to his use of persona. Lines early in the sequence, featuring a predominantly young persona, are short, with a vocabulary appropriate to a young child:

A kitten can
 Bite with his feet;
 Papa and Mama
 Have more teeth.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴CP, p. 83.
¹⁰⁵CP, p. 67.

Another way in which Roethke shapes his language and rhythms to his persona is his use of simple nursery rhymes, especially in the poems utilizing a young persona:

I wish I was a piffebob
 I wish I was a funny
 I wish I had ten thousand hats,
 And made a lot of money.¹⁰⁶

As the personas in the sequence age and mature, the use of language, vocabulary, and rhyme also matures. Line lengths increase and the level of sophistication in vocabulary heightens:

A fish jumps, shaking out flakes of moonlight.
 A single wave starts lightly and easily shoreward,
 Wrinkling between reeds in shallower water,
 Lifting a few twigs and floating leaves,
 Then washing up over small stones.¹⁰⁷

However, while the level of sophistication matures with each advance of the persona, the form adheres to Roethke's sense of dramatic. These lines, from late in the sequence, still do not comment, the persona instead only describes what he senses, what he experiences.

Since the sequence which comprises "The Lost Son" and many of the longer poems in Praise to the End! deals with a young persona confronting his first emotional, sexual, and spiritual crises, and because the form the poems in this sequence takes is suited to such a persona, comparisons between the sequence and Eliot's Quartets are not obvious

¹⁰⁶CP, p. 71.

¹⁰⁷CP, p. 89.

throughout. Quartets offers an older persona, reflective and to some degree experienced beyond those things which so violently confuse and disorient the young personas of Roethke's first sequence. Among these are the first losses of the child's ordered and somewhat simplistic world, the discovery and uncertainty of sexual yearnings and abilities, the movement from childhood play to young adulthood responsibilities. Because of the difference in emphases in the two major poems, elements of the Quartets do not pervade the entire "Lost Son" sequence; they can be found, as La Belle has indicated, only in certain segments of the sequence.

However, the reverse is true concerning Roethke's "Meditations of an Old Woman" sequence. In this sequence, Roethke offers the reader an old woman, near death, confronting many of the spiritual and physical uncertainties of the persona in Quartets. Because of this similarity of persona and subject matter, critics, as noted in the previous chapter, have suggested that the entire "Old Woman" sequence shows a marked influence of Quartets. However, available references, especially Roethke's 1959 letter to Ralph J. Mills previously cited, support Karl Malkoff's statement that Roethke was "highly indignant" at suggestions that Eliot greatly influenced the sequence.¹⁰⁸ A brief

¹⁰⁸Malkoff, p. 14.

examination of the sequence suggests some of the possible reasons for his indignation.

Roethke felt that his "Lost Son" sequence was both more exciting and more dramatic than the "tired" poetry of the Quartets. It appears that even with the similarities between "Meditations" and Quartets, Roethke still felt "Meditations" was a dramatic sequence, much more immediate and engrossing to the reader, and therefore superior to Quartets. As he indicated to Ralph J. Mills in 1959:

As for the old lady poems, I wanted...to create a character for whom such rhythms are indigenous; that she be a dramatic character, not just me.¹⁰⁹

In the same letter he compares his "old lady" with the Eliot in Quartets, claiming that his old woman would take "a congeries of eels over a hassle of bishops any day."¹¹⁰

One reason for Roethke's claim that "Meditations" is closer to "The Lost Son" sequence than to Eliot's Quartets is that many of those techniques he emphasized in his "Open Letter" concerning "The Lost Son" were also present, Roethke felt, in "Meditations." The emphasis on sound remained important to him in both sequences. His use of the cyclical method as a structuring device is also present. The old

¹⁰⁹"To Ralph J. Mills", 12 June 1959, Letters, p. 231.

¹¹⁰"To Ralph J. Mills," 12 June 1959, Letters, p. 236.

woman repeatedly uses the present as a departure point into past memories and experiences:

There are times when reality comes closer:
 In a field, in the actual air,
 I stepped carefully, like a new-shod horse,
 A raw tumultuous girl
 Making my way over wet stones.
 And then I ran-
 Ran ahead of myself,
 Across a field, into a little wood.¹¹¹

That which she recalls from her past or observes in her present, she employs in her speculations of her approaching death:

To try to become like God
 Is far from becoming God.
 O, but I seek and care!

 I rock in my own dark,
 Thinking, God has need of me.
 The dead love the unborn.¹¹²

Most important to Roethke in "Meditations" is that he utilizes, as in "The Lost Son" sequence, a strong persona. As Roethke put it, "not just me." He establishes the dramatic tensions of that persona in the third stanza of the sequence:

How can I rest in the days of my slowness?
 I've become a strange piece of flesh,
 Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
 With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.
 What's left is light as a seed;¹¹³
 I need an old crone's knowing.

¹¹¹CP, p. 160.

¹¹²CP, p. 166.

¹¹³CP, p. 151.

As with the persona of the young child in "The Lost Son" sequence, Roethke successfully adapts the language and perspective of the "Meditation" sequence to the persona of an old woman: "The poems are irradiated by a beautiful, tender, imaginative sympathy. One feels that the personality behind them really is feminine, really does feel life ebbing away." Again and again, Roethke shapes the language of the sequence to draw the reader into the old woman's perspective:

Is it enough?-
 The sun loosening the frost on December windows,
 The glitter of wet in the first of morning?
 The sound of voices, young voices, mixed with sleigh-
 bells,
 Coming across snow in early evening?¹¹⁴

instead of relying on a persona who resorts to philosophical or abstract commentary, as he felt did the persona in Quartets.

The volume which contains Roethke's last major sequences, The Far Field, was published posthumously, and thus we cannot gauge the interplay between the critics and Roethke. However, a close examination of the "North American Sequence" in light of Four Quartets, plus an understanding of Roethke's attitude toward Eliot and Quartets, enables us to discover the relationship between the form of the Quartets and the form of "North American Sequence."

¹¹⁴CP, p. 155.

Since Roethke died before The Far Field was published, he did not encounter the adverse criticism that the volume received, more than any of his previous volumes. With reference to "North American Sequence," many of the criticisms of the volume pointed specifically to form and technique. Malkoff maintains that Roethke's final volume "is devoted to the perfection of old forms rather than to the development of new ones."¹¹⁵ W.D. Snodgrass says of "North American Sequence": "The language grows imprecise with pain, or with growing numbness and half-asleep as an escape from pain."¹¹⁶

Roethke undoubtedly would have been bothered by this adverse criticism of "North American Sequence," but what would have bothered him even more was the charge that the techniques employed in "North American Sequence" are too obviously derived from Four Quartets. James G. Southworth says that the form for the sequence comes directly from the Quartets. Sullivan claims that "Roethke's syntax and rhythms are again so similar to Eliot's that the echoes can seem detrimental."¹¹⁷ Libby, positing a more personal criticism, suggests that "Eliot may have intruded more upon his (Roethke's) consciousness than he liked."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵Malkoff, p. 16.

¹¹⁶W.D. Snodgrass, "'That Anguish of Concreteness'" in Stein, p. 85.

¹¹⁷Sullivan, p. 144.

¹¹⁸Libby, p. 274.

Roethke faced much of this same criticism, although not to this degree, with "Meditations." However, he felt the persona employed in that sequence was original and much more dramatic than the persona in Eliot's Quartets and critics, for the most part, concurred. Roethke could not have felt the same way concerning "North American Sequence," because while "North American Sequence," and "Meditations" may be similar in subject matter, the one thing present in "Meditations" that is absent in "North American Sequence" is a strong, central persona, a persona clearly other than Roethke himself. On "North American Sequence," Malkoff writes: "This time, however, the protagonist is for all practical purposes the poet himself..."¹¹⁹ Since Roethke saw the persona in Quartets as essentially Eliot, his use of persona in "North American Sequence" is closer to the persona in Quartets than any other sequence Roethke wrote. Any argument Roethke might have made supporting the superiority of "North American Sequence" to Quartets could not as clearly have centered on his use of a dramatic persona. And since much of the syntax and language in the earlier sequences is directly the result of the persona Roethke employs, the use of these techniques in "North American Sequence" must be based on something else.

¹¹⁹Malkoff, p. 175.

As Roethke repeatedly claims in his letters, Quartets is weakened by an overabundance of commentary, abstract terminology, and philosophical speculation:

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.¹²⁰

Lines such as these present only the seeds of a philosophical argument concerning time. This, Roethke felt, challenges the reader only at the mental level. More importantly, tension is not created between a persona and the actual world around him.

The overuse of commentary by a "tired" persona, Roethke felt, caused Eliot to choose a weak rhythm in the Quartets. Helen Gardner draws on the first three lines of Quartets in order to show the approximate metrical pattern of the poem: "The norm to which the verse constantly returns is the four-stress line, with strong medial pause...."¹²¹ Eliot, she claims, presents two main variations in the Quartets, a shorter, three-stress line and a longer six-stress line, but he utilizes the four-stress line "as a norm to depart from and return to."¹²² It was this

¹²⁰Eliot, p. 117.

¹²¹Gardner, p. 29.

¹²²Gardner, p. 32.

adherence by Eliot to a persistent four-stress line and abstract commentary which Roethke felt made Quartets undramatic and weak.

While Roethke wanted to avoid what he perceived were the major weaknesses in the form of Quartets, he found himself interested in dealing directly with a poem of similar scale and subject matter. The "Meditations" sequence deals with many of the same themes as Quartets, the prospect of old age and death, the questions posed by an eternal vs. temporal existence, time, God, but those themes are presented through the eyes of a strong, consistent persona of an old woman. By suggesting that Roethke desired to deal with these themes "directly," that is to say he wanted to confront them on his own terms, without the use of a persona. His notebooks from the period before "North American Sequence" speak to this desire: "I remember telling Kenneth Burke that I was saving for my old age two things: the belief in God and a consideration of abstract thought. Both are beginning, and there's no alas in me."¹²³

This desire to deal with many of the ideas raised by Eliot in the Quartets, yet avoid what he perceived to be flaws in the form of the poem, presented difficulties to

¹²³Notebooks, p. 211.

Roethke. As Dorothy Sullivan points out in her consideration of "North American Sequence":

The problem was how to incorporate things on their own terms and, at the same time, to convey what he conceived to be their value without resorting to generalized statement. This ambition differentiates Roethke from Eliot on the one hand, and from Whitman on the other. He does want meaning and order, but without philosophical commentary.¹²⁴

One way Roethke felt he was to avoid the weaknesses in the rhythms of Quartets was to avoid Eliot's adherence to a predominantly set meter. Evidence from his notebooks from 1954 to 1963 indicate a growing dislike of any formal rhythms and an evolving interest in free verse. Many lines from the notebooks attack conventional forms: "The sonnet: a great form to pick your nose in."¹²⁵ Many lines are devoted to the subject of free verse. One section taken from the notebooks is dated between 1959 and 1963:

I've always found Robert Frost's remark about free verse—he'd rather play tennis with the net down—I've always found this wonderfully suggestive...Frost, he had a racket and balls all his life; but some of us out in the provinces operated under difficulties: we've had our disorganized lives and consequently our intractable material: we've had to use free verse, on occasion.¹²⁶

Another line from this period suggests the difficulty which Roethke saw in successful use of free verse:

¹²⁴Sullivan, p. 168.

¹²⁵Notebooks, p. 255.

¹²⁶Notebooks, p. 246.

I never could understand the objection to "free" verse—it's only bad, i.e. slack, lax, sloppy free verse one objects to. For the net, in final terms, is stretched even tighter. Since the poet has neither stanza form nor rhyme to rely on, he has to be more cunning than ever, in manipulating, modulating his sounds, and keeping that forward propulsion, and making it all natural.¹²⁷

Also as indicated in the notebooks and prose references during this period, Roethke felt that it was free verse which offered the post-Eliot generation the greatest opportunities for innovation and freedom from the metrical patterns established in Quartets. In a 1960 essay, "Some Remarks on Rhythm," Roethke claims:

There are areas of experience in modern life that simply cannot be rendered by either the formal lyric or straight prose. We need the catalog in our time.¹²⁸

At another point in his notebooks, also from this period, Roethke claims some of his reasons for adopting free verse include:

1st, To point out a few of the elements, structural or otherwise, which seem to make for the memorable, particularly striking lines.

2nd, To show how texture affects rhythm, particularly in the song-like poem.

3rd, To indicate a few of the strategies open to the writer of the irregular prose-like poem.¹²⁹

In "North American Sequence," Roethke offers the reader an extended sequence written entirely in free verse. The

¹²⁷Notebooks, p. 246.

¹²⁸"Some Remarks on Rhythm," Prose, p. 83.

¹²⁹Notebooks, p. 254.

movement in the sequence is in the form of irregular line lengths which have no precise meter:

Over the low, 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;
 Then a runnel behind me, creeping closer,
 Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climb-
 ing in and out of the water.¹³⁰

The sequence at no points offers any formal rhyme scheme, and only occasionally does Roethke use internal rhymes, as with the words "slight" and "midnight" in the following lines:

A slight song,
 After the midnight cries.¹³¹

While "Meditations" utilizes a free verse form, it is frequently marked by predominantly shorter lines and greater use of conventional rhythms and rhymes:

Out, out, you secret beats
 You birds, you western birds.
 One follows fire. One does.
 My breath is more than yours.¹³²

"North American Sequence" features short lines only occasionally, usually at the end of sections of the sequence, and then the short lines are irregular:

In the first of the moon
 All's a scattering.
 A shining.¹³³

¹³⁰CP, p. 184.
¹³¹CP, p. 188.
¹³²CP, p. 161.
¹³³CP, p. 186.

Whether Roethke successfully avoids the weak rhythms of Quartets through the use of this free verse remains in dispute among critics. Hughes Staples finds much of the success of the sequence a result of Roethke's use of free verse:

It is impossible to establish any single metrical pattern in this poetry; indeed, part of the charm arises from the endless variety of Roethke's accent, and from the delicate tensions of motion and stasis of which his lines are compounded.¹³⁴

W.D. Snodgrass, on the other hand, suggests the open form represents a major flaw in the sequence: "What appears dominant in the last book is a desire to escape all forms and shape, to lose all awareness of otherness..."¹³⁵

Regardless of the final critical judgment of the use of free verse, it is clear that Roethke himself felt that he had avoided the metrical weaknesses of Quartets through its use. Speaking of the fourth poem in the sequence, "The Far Field," he wrote to Isabella Gardner in February of 1963: "It's a vulnerable piece, and part of a sequence of six: but I'm damned if I can find a lousy passage."¹³⁶

¹³⁴Hughes Staples, "The Rose in the Sea-Wind: A Reading of Theodore Roethke's 'North American Sequence,'" American Literature, 36 (May 1964), p. 192.

¹³⁵W.D. Snodgrass, "'That Anguish of Concreteness,'" in Stein, p. 85.

¹³⁶"To Isabella Gardner," 17 February 1963, Letters, p. 259.

Roethke felt the use of free verse would provide him with the strong rhythms he desired, rhythms he did not feel were present in Quartets. By the same token, in order to avoid what he perceived to be Eliot's second major problem in form-abstract philosophical language-Roethke utilizes a second technique. As Anthony Libby suggests about Eliot in Quartets: "Eliot consistently moves away from things into the realm of pure logic to suggest, through paradox that pulls logic apart, what may lie beyond logic and reason."¹³⁷ He points out that Roethke, in "North American Sequence," "deliberately works against Eliot's constant tendency to abstract, for instance, to make journeys and destinations into symbols."¹³⁸ Roethke achieves this by specifically emphasizing place in the sequence. An example of this technique occurs in the third section of the final poem, "The Rose":

What do they tell us, sound and silence?
 I think of American sounds in this silence:
 On the banks of the Tombstone, the wind-harps having
 their say,
 The trush singing alone, that easy bird,
 The killdeer whistling away from me,
 The memetic chortling of the catbird
 Down in the corner of the garden, among the raggedly
 lilacs,
 The boblink skirring from a broken fencepost....¹³⁹

¹³⁷Libby, p. 272.

¹³⁸Libby, p. 272.

¹³⁹CP, p. 198.

In addition to these sounds, Roethke lists seven other specific sounds in the scene around him in an effort to give a fuller context to the somewhat abstract speculation in the first line. Malkoff points out that Roethke, "unlike, or the introspective mystical tradition...emphasizes the specific "place" in space and time, rather than the unchanging eternal."¹⁴⁰

In a further effort to establish a sense of place in the sequence, Roethke demonstrates a preoccupation with imagery drawn from the world of nature around him. Concrete images serve in "North American Sequence" much the same function as philosophical commentary in Quartets. As Eliot uses commentary in an effort to move beyond commentary, Roethke uses imagery in an effort to move into the world about him: "Beatitude, in the Roethkean scheme, consists of nothing so tangible as a message, nothing that can be "known" in the sense of being excogitated and handed on in abstract form. It means, rather, a sense of union with Presence."¹⁴¹ Just as the excessive commentary in Quartets indirectly speaks to the futility of language in light of the mystical "still point," images in "North American Sequence" directly lead to the possibility of a mystical

¹⁴⁰Malkoff, p. 187.

¹⁴¹John Wain, "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," in Stein, p. 73.

presence. Malkoff points out that the "newborn child or the reborn man gains strength from his temporary identity with the natural world," and this natural world is provided through imagery: "The image, or cluster of images, has always borne a crucial part of the meaning of Roethke's verse; but here, the significance of many sections is communicated almost exclusively by recurrent or obsessive imagery."¹⁴²

Malkoff provides a summary for Roethke's technique of consistently employing imagery in order to keep the sequence on a temporal, more concrete, level: "It is through place that one exceed place."¹⁴³ Thus, one reason Roethke uses imagery to such a great extent in the sequence is to establish a strong sense of place. That sense becomes the starting point for more important thematic considerations, but by using imagery, Roethke felt, he was assured that the sequence would avoid the abstract speculations and commentaries which are the major flaws in Quartets.

Given the differences in form between the two major poems, especially in the use of meter and imagery, one might conclude that, instead of borrowing from the Quartets, Roethke was more set on reacting to it. However, Sullivan

¹⁴²Malkoff, p. 189.

¹⁴³Malkoff, p. 188.

points out one major technique in "North American Sequence" which Roethke undoubtedly borrowed from Eliot: "Eliot's Four Quartets seemed, at least to Roethke, to offer a more fruitful example of how the sequence could be made to satisfy demands for larger, comprehensive forms without sacrificing exacting standards of unity and coherence."¹⁴⁴ Those demands, grounded in the subject matter of the two poems, offer a starting point for examining Roethke's final assessment of Quartets and its contents as demonstrated in "North American Sequence."

¹⁴⁴Sullivan, p. 142.

CHAPTER IV

TWO ROSES: "NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE" AS ALTERNATIVE TO QUARTETS

Helen Gardner has said, "The effort of every true poet is to unify his experience, and the development of every great poet is the extension of the amount of experience he can order into poetry."¹⁴⁵ Four Quartets marks Eliot's final effort to unify his experience and order it into poetry. Although he published a few poems after Quartets, they are primarily personal or occasional pieces, not intended to rival Quartets in scope. Quartets is recognized by critics as Eliot's [age 55 at the date of publication] last great poetic statement.

What is not as recognized is the similar position "North American Sequence" has in Roethke's poetic career. Though he died at a relatively young 55, he seemed to foresee that The Far Field would be his last volume of poetry. In a letter to Isabella Gardner in February of 1963, Roethke says of The Far Field, "...if you don't think its one hell of a book, I'll turn in my suit. I say this, I suppose,

¹⁴⁵Gardner, pp. 184-85.

because I always have the terror that I won't write another, etc."¹⁴⁶ Critics have the advantage of hindsight, and this statement does not go unnoticed in their discussion of "North American Sequence." Snodgrass points to particular lines in the sequences, suggesting: "Here, as elsewhere in the book, Roethke accurately predicts his own death, clearly longing for it."¹⁴⁷ Sullivan offers similar conjectures: "The poems read like last poems, attempts to integrate his themes and bring his vision to final statement."¹⁴⁸

A second similarity in the poems is their structure. Both are extended in length and segmented into separate poems which their authors intended to stand alone or work together. Quartets is divided into four separate poems, "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding." "North American Sequence" offers us six sections, "The Longing," "Meditation at Oyster River," "Journey to the Interior," "The Long Waters," "The Far Field," and "The Rose." A more important similarity in the structure of the poems is in their initial complications. Both poems offer a persona who is initially perplexed and who, through the poem, works toward a resolution to that initial perplexity. In "Burnt Norton," the persona in the

¹⁴⁶"To Isabella Gardner," 17 February 1963, Letters, p. 158.

¹⁴⁷W.D. Snodgrass, "'That Anguish of Concreteness,'" in Stein, p. 85.

¹⁴⁸Sullivan, p. 147.

rose-garden is troubled by a brief moment of illumination, an intersection of time with the timeless. As quickly as it comes, the moment disappears, and the persona is urged to "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/Cannot bear very much reality."¹⁴⁹ The rest of Quartets in varying degrees represents the persona's efforts to understand and come to terms with that experience. In "North American Sequence" the problem to the persona is clear. The sequence opens with "The Longing," where the persona describes a "kingdom of stinks and sighs," consisting of:

Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,¹⁵⁰
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels....

The complication to the persona becomes, as the poem states, "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?"

The most significant similarity in the poems is their personae. Not unlike the authors of the poems themselves, the persona in each of the poems recognizes that he is a man, in time, approaching death. The term "man" has particular resonance, for both Eliot and Roethke use the term to refer to themselves as individuals and mankind in general. At the very center of these personae is an awareness of the two realities of the human condition which are common to all men--time and death.

¹⁴⁹Eliot, p. 118.

¹⁵⁰CP, p. 181.

The fact that each of these poems represents its author's final poetic statement, the similarity in structure in the poems, and more importantly, the similarity in the personae of the poems may explain why the poems have similar themes. Quartets has as its major themes the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings," death and the "hints and guesses" of existence apart from the temporal world, the "use of memory" and personal experiences and their value to the individual, "time present and time past" and the relationship between that which is in time and that which is timeless. A brief survey of critics' efforts to state the themes of "North American Sequence" show a strong similarity. Spender suggests that Roethke's final theme is "the separation of spirit from body, the confrontation of death."¹⁵¹ Malkoff sees as the primary themes, "Beauty, being, and God."¹⁵² Sullivan says of the sequence, "...its theme is the need to find a way to accommodate the fact of death within an acceptable view of life."¹⁵³ Common to all of these statements is the problem posed by linear time and the reality of death.

While Quartets and "North American Sequence" share similar themes, Roethke makes it clear early in "North

3. ¹⁵¹Stephen Spender, "The Objective Ego," in Stein, p.

¹⁵²Malkoff, p. 186.

¹⁵³Sullivan, p. 147.

American Sequence" that the complications raised by and the resolution to time and the possibility of death are in sharp contrast to those offered in Quartets. At the end of "The Longing" he even challenges Eliot:

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Oglala?
Iroquois. 154

This first line recalls for the reader the concluding lines of "East Coker":

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.... 155

Rothke's challenge to Quartets provides a starting point for discerning many of the essential differences between the two poems. His reference to Eliot's "explorers," especially followed by two native American Indian tribes, suggests the early Spanish and English explorers of America, who moved from the known continents and seas of Europe to the uncharted areas of the Western hemisphere. While Eliot's use of the term is not so literal--his explorer would move into "another intensity" in lieu of moving to undiscovered continents--the definition of explorer is applicable to both: one who searches or ranges over for the purpose of discovery.

154 CP, p. 183.

155 Eliot, p. 129.

Roethke makes it clear that he rejects Eliot's "explorer" metaphor. Roethke's "old man" would be an American Indian, the native Americans who the explorers found in their quests to this continent. While Eliot's metaphor suggests that we move into the occult or mythic unknown to find a "further union," Roethke prefers to stay on less alien territory, feeling that any quest for a further union does not require a rejection of the environment around him. He prefers explorations which "will be made over a terrain far more concrete than Eliots...."¹⁵⁶

This difference in terrain from which each poet proceeds is obvious from the opening of each poem. Eliot, in "Burnt Norton" devotes the first thirteen lines to an abstract consideration of time. Only by the fourteenth line does he move from a "world of speculation" and into the rose-garden. Oddly enough, Roethke also does not establish the scene until the fourteenth line of "The Longing," yet the world described in the first thirteen lines, far from abstract, consists of:

Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
 Agony of crucifixion on barstools.
 Less and less the illuminated lips
 Hands active, eyes cherished;
 Happiness left to dogs and children--¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶Malkoff, p. 178.

¹⁵⁷CP, p. 181.

Both poets quickly present their obstacles. The persona in Quartets, realizing the possibility of death, needs to come to an understanding of time which includes "the still point of the turning world," For Roethke's persona, the obstacle is a plaguing sensual emptiness and the problems of transcending it. The way in which the poems proceed from these obstacles shows many parallels. Among others, both involve memory and personal experience, time, and the use of symbols, specifically the symbol of the rose. Yet to examine these parallels reveals the extent to which Roethke rejects the solution of Quartets for his own.

The poet's autobiography, consisting of his personal characteristics, personal experiences, and memories, function to greatly different degrees in the two poems. If one was to follow the criticism of Quartets closely, he would discover that the title of each of the four poems is a specific location in some way important to Eliot. Burnt Norton is the name of a manor house in England once visited by Eliot, but this fact and its significance to Eliot's personal life is nowhere revealed in the poem. As Gardner points out:

In Burnt Norton the actual place is hardly described at all. Critics have spoken of the seventeenth-century manor house and its garden, but as far as we can learn from the poem it might be any house and garden in the country....¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸Gardner, p. 58.

East Coker is a village where many of Eliot's English ancestors lived, but this fact is revealed only obliquely in the poem. The Dry Salvages, a group of rocks off the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts, is near the place where Eliot spent many summers as a child. We may also assume that Eliot at some point in his life visited the small chapel at Little Gidding, another small village in England, but nothing in the poem substantiates this.

While Eliot titles the four poems of Quartets from locations which are a part of his personal history, his relationship to them is not the subject of the poem. The locations are only sparsely described, and their significance is defined only by their importance to the persona's quest. Their importance to Eliot is part of his private world, which Gardner says "can hardly be communicated; it lies deep beneath the personality which others know."¹⁵⁹

In similar fashion, while memory is an important subject of Quartets, Eliot's personal recollections are not. Memory is objectified, as in "Burnt Norton":

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden, My words echo
Thus in your mind.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹Gardner, p. 65.

¹⁶⁰Eliot, p. 117.

The proper function of memory to the individual is also examined, as in "Little Gidding":

This is the use of memory:
For liberation-not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.¹⁶¹

Yet memory never approaches a personal level; at no point is the reader invited to share in Eliot's personal recollections.

Roethke's use of autobiography and memory stand in direct contrast to their use in Quartets. After one reading of "North American Sequence" the reader is aware of the fact that Roethke is from Michigan, that his father was proprietor of a greenhouse, that as a child he spent much time in greenhouses, and that, at the time of the poem, he resides in the state of Washington. Each poem in the sequence, except perhaps "The Longing," adds more information about Roethke's past history. As Sullivan points out: "Eliot took his pattern of images from history and tradition. Roethke turned to the absolute privacy of his own psyche."¹⁶²

A crucial part of that psyche is Roethke's memory, and he constantly draws upon memories to rekindle his senses:

¹⁶¹Eliot, p. 142.

¹⁶²Sullivan, p. 88.

I remember how it was to drive in gravel,
 Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the
 wheels whined beyond eighty-
 When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale,
 The trick was to throw the car sideways and charge
 over the hill, full of the throttle.¹⁶³

Instead of providing only sparse descriptions of scenes from his past, Roethke immerses the reader into specific details and images:

Always a sharp turn to the left past a barn close to
 the roadside,
 To a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children,
 The highway ribboning out in a straight thrust to
 the North,
 To the sand dunes, and fish flies, hanging, thicker
 than moths...¹⁶⁴

Through this full rendering of moments from his past and his effort to include the reader in those recollections, Roethke moves from the purely sensual and factual details and into a state not unlike Eliot's moment of illumination in the rose-garden:

I rise and fall, and time folds
 Into a long moment;
 And I hear the lichen speak,
 And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet-
 On the shimmering road,
 On the dusty detour.¹⁶⁵

Thus, both poets employ elements of their autobiography in their poems. Eliot provides only the skeleton of an autobiography, suggesting its presence, and prompting the

¹⁶³CP, p. 187.

¹⁶⁴CP, p. 187.

¹⁶⁵CP, p. 188.

reader to fill in his own memories and experiences to make the skeleton complete. Roethke, in many portions of "North American Sequence," thoroughly reconstructs past experiences, seeking to share those experiences with the reader. Both poets seek for themselves and their readers to move beyond mere memory, to make more of past recollections, or as Eliot says in "The Dry Salvages," to reach the point where the "past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence--...."¹⁶⁶

The use of autobiography and memory in the poems suggests another parallel theme--time. In "Burnt Norton," the poet's moment of illumination in the rose-garden in section one, what he later refers to as the "still point of the turning world," forces him to reject a conventional, linear understanding of time: "I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where./And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time."¹⁶⁷ The persona's desire to explain "the still point," or what is later referred to as "Incarnation" in "The Dry Salvages" leads to repeated struggles with the subject of time.

Much of the persona's struggle with time results from the complexities of the subject itself. Incarnation, we

¹⁶⁶Eliot, p. 132.

¹⁶⁷Eliot, p. 119.

discover in "The Dry Salvages," is the point of intersection of the timeless with time, the point where eternity enters time. However, the only tools the persona has to explain Incarnation or his own brief mystical experience are memory and words, and both are inadequate. Memory fails the task because:

...only in time can the moment in the rose garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in ~~the~~ draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered.¹⁶⁸

Words too suffer from this temporal quality: "Words move, music moves/Only in time..."¹⁶⁹

Only in an attempt to transcend our understanding of time can the "gift" referred to as Incarnation be fully understood. This need to move beyond a conventional understanding of time, to find relief for our "strained time-ridden faces," becomes the major obstacle posed by time in the Quartets.

In "North American Sequence," Roethke rejects Eliot's perspective toward the relationship between linear, temporal time, and the timelessness of illumination, although Roethke too is troubled by time. In "The Longing," the persona's view of time is disturbed by the various "stinks and sighs":

¹⁶⁸Eliot, pp. 119-120.
¹⁶⁹Eliot, p. 121.

In a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year,
 The slag-heaps fume at the edge of the raw cities:
 The gulls wheel over their singular garbage;
 The great trees no longer shimmer;
 Not even the soot dances.¹⁷⁰

However, the persona's solution to the problem posed here does not involve a struggle to move beyond a conventional understanding of time. Rather, the persona immerses himself into linear, temporal time in his efforts to revitalize himself. Almost all references to time in the sequence occur in prepositional phrases beginning with "in":

Or the Tittewawasee, in the time between winter
 and spring....¹⁷¹

In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but
 does not fall....¹⁷²

In time when the trout and young salmon leap for the
 low flying insects....¹⁷³

Only at one point in the sequence is time treated as a subject itself, and then Roethke makes it clear that any abstract consideration of time is to be rejected for the time instilled in the immediate world about him:

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in
 the mower,
 My grief was not excessive.
 For to come upon warblers in early May
 Was to forget time and death:
 How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless
 cloud, all one morning...¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰CP, p. 181.

¹⁷¹CP, p. 185.

¹⁷²CP, p. 188.

¹⁷³CP, p. 191.

¹⁷⁴CP, p. 195.

Eliot sees in the timeless unchanging eternal true humility and salvation: "Love is most nearly itself/When here and now cease to matter."¹⁷⁵ In contrast, Roethke, in direct echoes, searches for it in the temporal: "What I love is near at hand,/Always, in earth and air."¹⁷⁶ As if to underscore the contrast, even the rhythms of Roethke's lines are reversed: Eliot alternates a three beat time with four beats in the second line; Roethke alternates a four beat line with three beats.

Roethke's desire to explore his personal past and present experiences and to keep those explorations on a temporal level shapes the most obvious contrast between Quartets and "North American Sequence"--their use of symbolism. As with the use of autobiography and the theme of time, we are better able to see the contrast because initially Roethke's use of symbolism shows several parallels to Eliot's. Gardner points out that the thematic material of Quartets "is not an idea or a myth, but partly certain common symbols."¹⁷⁷ These symbols include the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water, and finally, the rose. The four elements essentially shape the form of the poem; "Burnt Norton," air; "East Coker," earth; "The Dry Salvages,"

¹⁷⁵Eliot, p. 129.

¹⁷⁶CP, p. 195.

¹⁷⁷Gardner, p. 44.

water; and "Little Gidding," fire. The image of the rose, symbol for natural beauty, eternity, and love, appears throughout Quartets. Roethke, too, utilizes symbolism. Sullivan points out the importance of symbolism to Roethke's poetry: "More than any other modern American poet, Roethke writes almost entirely in symbols,"¹⁷⁸ She goes so far as to suggest that Roethke consciously borrowed from Eliot's techniques, suggesting that he learned from Eliot "how to manipulate symbolism as a means to unify the long sequence."¹⁷⁹ She also points out that Roethke "uses symbolism in a similar fashion [to Quartets], if less dogmatically, so that the symbols of wind, fire, water, light, recur within his sequence with constant modification."¹⁸⁰

While Roethke, like Eliot, uses symbols in his poetry, and while he may have even adopted some of Eliot's techniques, a close examination of the use of symbols in "North American Sequence" indicates that Roethke employs them to different ends than their use in Quartets. These different ends are suggested by the number of references to specific symbols and to their context or reference in the poems.

¹⁷⁸Sullivan, p. 98.

¹⁷⁹Sullivan, p. 142.

¹⁸⁰Sullivan, p. 142.

Even though the thematic material of Quartets is made up of common symbols, the frequency of references to these symbols is not, in terms of the length of Quartets, high. Specific reference to the rose, though accepted as probably the most important symbol in the poem, occurs but twelve times, with references appearing nearly evenly in the four poems. We accept that "Burnt Norton" is the poem about air, even though specific mention of air and its counterpart, wind, occurs but two times each in the poem.

By contrast, "North American Sequence" is marked by specific repetitive symbols. While the sequence is less than half the length of Quartets in number of lines, specific references to the rose or roses occur thirteen times. More importantly, the final poem itself abounds with references to roses, with ten in total. Malkoff suggests that the extent to which Roethke communicates the significance of many sections of "North American Sequence" almost exclusively by recurrent or obsessive symbolic images may constitute "an entirely new method: the use of leitmotiv as symbol."¹⁸¹ He points to the recurrences of the tree symbol in the sequence for support.

The fact that Roethke uses symbolic references in greater number than Eliot is not in itself a significant

¹⁸¹Malkoff, p. 189.

difference between the poems. More significant is the way in which the symbols are employed, what they mean to the context of the poem. Eliot prefers for the meaning of a particular symbol to derive from its context. Thus, while a symbol may be repeated in Quartets, its meaning, given its context, may never be the same. Gardner illustrates this technique, pointing out that, while the yew tree has great symbolic weight in Quartets, it is referred to only three times in the entire poem, and at each of these points it has great and different significance. Its first reference prompts a "sense of foreboding," its second, a "sense of security," and the last reference to the yew suggests an "apprehension of life."¹⁸²

Roethke, on the other hand, derives meaning from symbols almost strictly from a personal rather than a contextual reference. References to specific symbols are almost always the result of observation and description of the immediate scene or the result of personal recollections of the poet. Nearly all of Roethke's symbols derive from a strong personal affection for nature, evident from his earliest days at Michigan: "I have a genuine love of nature. It is not the least bit affected, but an integral and powerful part of my life."¹⁸³

¹⁸²Gardner, p. 51.

¹⁸³"Some Self Analysis," in *Prose*, p. 4.

An illustration of this grounding of symbolic significance in personal rather than contextual reference occurs in the second of six poems in "North American Sequence," "Meditation at Oyster River." Part one of the poem is devoted to description, and as indicated by the title of the poem, water is a major theme. The river is described in gentle "tide-ripples," which eventually lead to "one long undulant ripple" before the "wind slackens."¹⁸⁴ In section two, reference to water moves from the descriptive level to a meditative one:

With these I would be,
 And with water: 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 under-
 currents
 The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of
 stone
 The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.¹⁸⁵

In section three, the persona draws upon memory to reconstruct two scenes in which water takes on two different forms, one, "The first trembling of a Michigan brook in April," the other, the spring thaw of the Tittewabawasse river when "The midchannel begins cracking and heaving from the pressure beneath," resulting in the whole river moving forward, "its bridges shaking."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴CP, p. 184.

¹⁸⁵CP, p. 185.

¹⁸⁶CP, p. 186.

After describing water, identifying with it, and rendering it in different forms through his memory, the persona concludes the final section of the poem by adopting it as a sort of personal symbol:

Water's my will, and my way
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves....¹⁸⁷

Even though water may take different forms as a result of personal reference, its symbolic value to the persona remains constant. As Malkoff points out:

Water, for example, appears as stagnant pond, flowing stream, and rocking, engulfing sea, with different implications associated with each aspect; most important, water is neither exclusively beginning nor end, but both, since it travels in a continuous cycle, at various states of which it appears to change its nature while really retaining it. This is Roethke's most frequently used symbol of permanence in apparent change.¹⁸⁸

Thus, Eliot uses symbols sparsely, and their function and meaning is the result of their context in the poem. The use of symbols in Quartets in this sense is impersonal, they do not rely on the persona for their meaning or significance, their importance to the subject matter is derived from the subject matter. In contrast, Roethke uses symbols repeatedly, and each reference is the result of his personal observation or recollections. The symbol may appear in different forms, but its significance remains constant, and is determined by the persona.

¹⁸⁷CP, p. 186.

¹⁸⁸Malkoff, p. 178.

These differences in the use of symbols, autobiography, and time are especially apparent in "The Rose," the final poem of "North American Sequence." In what might echo "East Coker," Roethke begins the poem:

There are those to whom place is unimportant,
 But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
 Is important--¹⁸⁹

Unlike "Little Gidding," where reference to the chapel is made but once, Roethke makes clear his environment with prolonged description of the scene--the harbor, wildlife, and fauna, culminating with the rose:

But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Stays,
 Stays in its true place,
 Flowering out of the dark....

A single wild rose, struggling out of the white
 embrace of the morning glory....¹⁹⁰

This symbol of the rose is unique to Roethke, as Sullivan points out:

His flower is a single wild rose struggling out of a tangle of matter underbrush, in that place of conjunction where fresh and salt water meet...It is not Eliot's heavily acculturated symbol, but a single solitary bloom, growing toward clarity out of confusion. For Roethke, the symbol embodies the energetics of the life process itself.¹⁹¹

As is now typical of his technique, Roethke follows description of the rose with a recollection of roses from his childhood:

¹⁸⁹CP, p. 196.

¹⁹⁰CP, p. 197.

¹⁹¹Sullivan, pp. 162-163.

And I think of roses, roses,
White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot green-
houses....

And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me,
to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.¹⁹²

The personal significance of the rose in each reference re-
mains the same to the persona. Malkoff indicates, "just as
the rose in the sea wind beckons the adult, the greenhouse
roses beckon the child out of himself."¹⁹³

The concluding lines of "The Rose" summarize
Roethke's contrasting position to the Eliot of Quartets. As
Eliot sees in the moment of the rose-garden an order apart
from the temporal, and that through true humility and love,
reconciliation can be made with that order, Roethke finds
order in the immediate world about him. For Roethke, immer-
sion in the natural world brings about the sense of oneness
and unity sought by Eliot. As he indicates in a prose piece
titled "On Identity," Roethke says:

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being,
the identity of some other being-and in some instances,
even an inanimate thing-brings a corresponding heighten-
ing and awareness of one's ownself, and, even more my-
steriously in some instances, a feeling of oneness with
the universe.¹⁹⁴

This "sense of oneness" which overcomes the "sensual empti-
ness" which opens the sequence, is achieved through the per-
sonal symbol of the rose:

¹⁹²CP, p. 197.

¹⁹³Malkoff, p. 188.

¹⁹⁴"On Identity," in Prose, p. 25.

And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
 Gathering to itself sound and silence-
 Mind and the sea wind's.¹⁹⁵

As Sullivan suggests, this is a moment "of calm beyond doubt during which [Roethke] seems to discern the deepest rhythms of nature not described but felt passionately, ubiquitously; moments transcending death because accepting it is an inevitable process of life."¹⁹⁶

Roethke, by rejecting Quartets, suggests a contrast between the two poets which has deeper roots in American literature than Roethke's personal and poetic quarrels with Eliot. As the Puritans posited an ordered world beyond this one, so, in his own fashion, does Eliot. While man is plagued by hints and guesses of that more ideal world, its final apprehension remains, as Eliot says, the "occupation for the saint." True satisfaction can be achieved on earth, but only through a rigorous discipline of humiltily and enlightened love. Thus, Eliot seems to restate in modern terms the problems of existence characteristic of the Puritan and stated to some extent by the leading literary theologian of that time, Jonathan Edwards. This view, to varying degrees, has adherence for such ranging modern authors as Hemingway and Faulkner and such poets as Dickinson and the early Robert Lowell.

¹⁹⁵CP, p. 199.

¹⁹⁶CP, p. 131.

Roethke, on the other hand, suggests a tradition found in the Transcendentalism of Emerson and, to some extent, Whitman. "North American Sequence" supports the idea that a transcendental order can be found in the world of nature, and the recognition of that order depends on the individual's ability to purge his own pious selfishness. Man must overcome his own selfish perspective for the broader, enlightening perspective offered by nature. With his variation of this tradition, Roethke can be allied with such modern poets as William Carlos Williams and the Beatnick poets and with such novelists as Jack Kerouac.

"North American Sequence" marks one of the final poems in the evolution of Roethke's career. Throughout most of that career, Eliot stood as the predominant figure in literature. Roethke's personal ambivalent feelings toward Eliot, in addition to his desires to address many of the same themes as Quartets remained troubling barriers to the creation of Roethke's poetry. One way to consider "North American Sequence" is that it stands as one of Roethke's major efforts to overcome those barriers.

The impact and significance of "North American Sequence" on American literature is, as yet, unsure. Roethke's popularity, if we accept the amount of criticism about his work as a gauge, is presently on the wane. Roethke does offer us in "North American Sequence," however,

one of the first major post-Eliot poetic statements. His attempt to engage the Eliot of Quartets and cast what may become a valid poetic alternative in "North American Sequence" is, in itself, a worthy undertaking.

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