

# Theodore Roethke's “North American Sequence”: Religious Awakening in the West

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Toward the end of his life, Theodore Roethke wrote a group of poems collectively titled “North American Sequence” that changed the terms through which Roethke’s poetry searched for spiritual meaning. These poems are grounded in encounters with specific places and things to an extent that was unprecedented in his poetry. As Roethke’s poetry began to attend to the circumstances of his present life, he came to discern a spiritual being who did not emerge from the depths of the self but was present in what is other than the self: in the landscapes of the American West and Northwest; in premonitions of his own death; and in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1943).

The six poems in “North American Sequence” appeared serially in the years immediately preceding the poet’s death in 1963. Before his death Roethke himself arranged and titled the Sequence, and it opened his posthumous collection, *The Far Field* (1964). The title itself announced that this was a new undertaking, for few of his earlier poems had situated themselves in any named, specific setting. But the Sequence insists in every poem that “this place . . . is important” (*Collected* 202). “This place” is, immediately, the straits and sounds, the flora and fauna around Seattle, where Roethke lived after 1948, while

teaching at the University of Washington. “This place” is as well the West, the high plains over which he would travel by train and by car to and from his native Michigan and points eastward. It was at least a preliminary sketch of America, for the Sequence may have been Roethke’s overture to a poetry more expansive, less interior, than the psychological sequences on which his reputation had been based, and which, even today, represent for many his most significant achievements.<sup>1</sup>

The first of those earlier sequences was “The Lost Son” (1948), to which Kenneth Burke drew attention in “The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke,” the essay that established Roethke’s importance as a poet. Roethke’s next two books, *Praise to the End!* (1951) and *The Waking* (1953), included similar sequences, each reenacting what can accurately be described as the archetypal Night Journey. The narrator recounts, in what purports to be the speech of a child, his passage from a state of unstable, conflicted adult consciousness back to a childhood world where he re-encounters the person or event held responsible for the adult’s neurosis—usually the father, either in his stern authority or in his early death. (Roethke’s father was a successful wholesale florist in Saginaw, Michigan; he died when Roethke was fourteen.) Bearing the golden bough of this retrieved memory, the speaker then returns to present consciousness. Though his inward journeys enact the recovery of childhood experience, the poems usually generalize that experience rather than capitalizing on the particulars of Roethke’s own childhood. What is important is not the evocation of Otto Roethke’s greenhouse nor of Saginaw but, rather, a more universalized dream landscape founded on the grotesque passages from life to death to life for which the greenhouse was the setting. The first poem in “The Lost Son” follows such a dream quest:

Running lightly over spongy ground,  
Past the pasture of flat stones,  
The three elms,

<sup>1</sup>Harold Bloom, for example, in the introduction to the Chelsea House

The sheep strewn on a field,  
Over a rickety bridge  
Toward the quick-water wrinkling and rippling.  
(54)

The pasture, the elms: the definite articles proclaim the uncanny familiarity of a dream landscape and imply that it is familiar not only to the quester but to the reader as well: it is an archetype.<sup>2</sup> In his first book, *Open House* (1941), Roethke had anticipated the symbolic method of "The Lost Son" in a poem titled "Night Crow":

When I saw that clumsy crow  
Flap from a wasted tree,  
A shape in the mind rose up:  
Over the gulfs of dream  
Flew a tremendous bird  
Further and further away  
Into a moonless black,  
Deep in the brain, far back.  
(49)

The daylight experience, a crow in a wasted tree, is singled out because it matches "a shape in the mind," a generalized bird that can fly in the absolute dark of the brain. Can crows, real crows, do that? Dream birds can. Reflecting on those poems and their symbology, Roethke would later describe his persona as "A prince of small beginnings, enduring the slow stretches of change, / Who spoke first in the coarse short-hand of the subliminal depths" (170).

What exactly is the outcome for those flights to the back of the brain, those returns to beginnings? Though the journeys are manifestly psychological, they have a spiritual, religious tinge to them as well. At the end of "The Lost Son," the quester arrives at a vision of

<sup>2</sup>Jenijoy La Belle attributes this habit to Roethke's reading of Whitman and Eliot (131). Auden, whom Roethke much admired, also uses such archetypes

light: “was it light within light?” he asks (52); and many of the sequences close with visionary images or performative statements of belief. “Praise to the End!” for example, begins by reiterating Wordsworth’s thanks for the providences of Nature and ends “I believe! I believe!”—that is, he entrusts himself to visionary experiences of nature, in which he has heard “the heart of another singing”:

Wherefore, O birds and small fish, surround me.  
Lave me, ultimate waters.  
The dark showed me a face.  
My ghosts are all gay.  
The light becomes me.

(88)

Lynn Ross-Bryant, catching the religious tone in these poems, has argued that Roethke always wrote a poetry sensitive to the spiritual connection of self with nature and with God. The reunion proclaimed at the end of these sequences occurs as the individual psyche is reunited both with its own discontents and also with the divinity present within and beyond the birds and fish, the waters and the dark. The larger epiphany effects the private healing.

The spiritual awakenings repeatedly traced in these poems are found not only in the British Romantics but even more clearly in Americans like Emerson and Whitman, whose influence on Roethke Jay Parini has amply demonstrated.<sup>3</sup> Not at all anxious about his influences (with the important exception of T. S. Eliot), Roethke invoked Whitman in one of his late poems, and encouraged Ralph Mills to attribute aspects of his poetry such as the meditation and the “looser line” to the example of the Good Gray Poet (Mills, *Selected* 230–31). The spirituality of much of Roethke’s poetry is indeed like that of the American Transcendentalists. The “Universal Being”

<sup>3</sup>When Emerson, in the preface to *Nature* (1836), described the forces that hitherto had been thought inexplicable—“language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex” (3)—he was naming the topoi that Roethke would claim for his own.

which circulates through Emerson in the first chapter of *Nature* cannot, we gradually discover, be clearly distinguished from Emerson's own self: in the final chapter, "God" is the self-redeemed human soul, re-creating the world by seeing it "in the light of thought" (35). Whitman likewise seems to find in God nothing mysterious or intractable, but rather the image of his Self. In "Song of Myself" (1855, 1891-92) Whitman depicts a cosmos that keeps turning inside out. One moment the experienced world is real and he finds God in the street, and the next moment nothing is real but his own consciousness, and that consciousness real only inasmuch as some unknown person is reading his poem. Many critics of Roethke have sought to explain the repetitiveness of the early sequences: why must he go again and again on the night journey? Perhaps because our most deeply felt dreams tend to repeat themselves; perhaps because of the recurring basis of his own mental illness; perhaps because as a poet he too was enclosed in a cosmos like Whitman's, where the visionary light was his own, the healing spirit his own best hope for himself; and when these fade into the light of common day, the quest must begin again. There is no other Self to intervene.

In a symposium at Northwestern University a few months before his death, Roethke gave a short talk on "identity." He articulated his determination to move beyond the isolation of the Romantic self:

A very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being—and in some instances, even an inanimate thing—brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. . . . If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee. (Mills, *On the Poet* 25)

Neal Bowers and Peter Balakian have read Roethke's career as a passage from a poetry of inwardness to a poetry that acknowledges the other—at least the intimate other.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps inspired by his use of

“Thee” in the Northwestern talk, some of Roethke’s defenders such as Ross-Bryant and Nathan Scott have invoked Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship to chart his progress from an “I”-centered poetic, which takes all “others” as “Its,” as possessions of the self, to a poetry of intimacy with nature, with his beloved, and with God.

Since Roethke’s talk on identity ends with explicit religious confession—“There is a God, and He’s here, immediate, accessible” (27)—his “Thee” is probably a metonym for God rather than a reference to Buber’s celebrated, and sometimes misunderstood, relationship. If he was referring to Buber, he had read *I and Thou* (1923) very carefully. “I-Thou” does not describe a merging of persons, however affectionate. What Buber, in the third part of his book, wrote about our relationship with God, “the eternal Thou,” applies to all “Thou” relationships:

Of course God is the “wholly Other”;<sup>5</sup> but He is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present. Of course He is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows; but He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my I. (79)

To apply this passage to Roethke, we must reverse Buber’s rhetorical emphasis, but the point remains the same: for the second person to be truly Thou, she or he must be both wholly present and yet wholly other, *mysterium tremendum* while more intimate than the self. Roethke acknowledged this tension earlier in the “identity” talk, saying, “I can’t claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. No, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled

<sup>4</sup>These two were answering other critics who had noted the obsessive interiority of Roethke’s early achievement: Burke’s seminal essay had ended with a suggestion that the next phase in Roethke’s career should undertake “the greater *individualizing* of human relations” (281), and Denis Donoghue’s memorial essay regretted that “Roethke became his own theme, the center of a universe deemed to exist largely because it had such a center” (149). Perhaps Roethke realized that his competition with Robert Lowell suffered because of Lowell’s ability to enlarge the significance of his personal and family history. Roethke’s defenders often stress the love poems that he began to publish in the early 1950s as evidence of the beginning of his transition to a less solipsistic poetry.

<sup>5</sup>Buber is alluding to Rudolph Otto’s *Das Heilige* (1917).

with" (Mills, *On the Poet* 26). Though this experience of separation from God would not enter his poetry until "The Abyss" in 1964, his notebooks suggest that around 1950 he was moving toward a realization that attentiveness—to nature, to other humans and to God—must entail recognizing both separateness and identity, assimilation and reverence. In his notebook from that period he had written: "God is all which is *not me*" (Wagoner 219).

When Scott wrote his tribute to Roethke at the end of *The Wild Prayer of Longing* (1971), it was to epitomize what he had said earlier in his book, appropriating Heidegger, about the need to achieve a "letting-be" if we were ever to come into the presence of Being: "paying-heed," by an act of the imagination, to "the strange kind of stoutness by which [the world's] things and creatures are steadied and supported" (67–68). Scott attributed to Roethke a "sacramental imagination," the recognition of an "otherness" in the creatures of the earth which must be approached with humility and reverence, a mysteriousness that was grounded in their reflection of, and animation by, "some primal reality, which may be denominated simply as Being itself" (85–87). Scott found this sacramental imagination everywhere at work in Roethke's poetry as part of the poet's response to oncoming death. Although he devoted only a few paragraphs to "North American Sequence," it is in these late poems that the sacramental imagination, as Scott described it, at last frees itself from an imagination that possesses and assimilates, devouring the world to provide a syllabary for the Self. We can only conjecture about how Roethke became attentive to the mysterious distinctness of beings. Perhaps it was a corollary of his deepening love for his wife Beatrice, who seems to pass from archetypal woman to particular person as Roethke's poems about her unfold.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps

<sup>6</sup>His biographer Allan Seager writes that "What he seems to have needed before he could even see, before any sight could burn in his mind, was a strong bond of love for some person, as if things were visible only in its light." Seager attributes the West coast imagery of *The Far Field* to the presence of Beatrice—no longer an "acquisition" but a lover and confidante: "Then he could see the mountains, the siskins, the madronas, and begin to use them" (237–38).

it was part and particle of his ongoing spiritual journey (and so we might call it “grace”). And, since his mature work continued to be “nature” poetry, it may have been also his awakening to the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, enhanced by a premonition of death. In any case, the Sequence traces a spiritual process that is founded on his recognition of the substantive presence of the land and sea, the birds and plants, of the specifically western America in which he was dwelling. Within them he glimpsed the presence of a Being that was summoning him beyond his self, from Otherwise to Thee.

In 1947, Roethke moved from Bennington, Vermont, to the University of Washington in Seattle. George Lundberg, a sociologist whom he had known at Bennington and who had already emigrated to Seattle, wrote him a letter before he started the trek west:

As for transportation out here, you will find that trains go as far as Missoula, Montana, after which you go by 24-mule team to Spokane and then walk the rest of the way. You should pick up an Indian squaw for a guide as Lewis and Clark did and she will take care of you. . . . If you get near any towns that have a railroad . . . you can easily live off of the dead buffaloes the train will kill as it picks its way westward. (Seager 171)

Lundberg’s jocularity bespeaks the discomfort that an Eastern or Midwestern academic might have felt, at least then, about a Western locale presumed to be deficient in sophistication, culture, and perhaps civilization. Kermit Vanderbilt has described the process by which Roethke assimilated Seattle, and by which Seattle assimilated Roethke, who at first called himself “the only serious poet within 1,000 miles of Seattle” (Mills, *Selected* 144). In a notebook entry some years later, the poet was still reassuring himself: “It is not true that, as you go West, life gets more trivial” (Wagoner 109). He never got used to the rain; but in less than a year he was pleased with Seattle’s profuse vegetation, which he described with a nomenclature not yet seen in his poems:

The campus is a riot of wonderful natural life—as well as new buildings and old. There is no need to barber and pamper the landscape; everything grows green and strange—the rhododendron, holly, hawthorne, horse chestnut, pink and white dogwood, Japanese cherry, Scotch broom, and the ever-present evergreens. Even the stones and sides of trees bear a fine mossy sheen. (qtd. in Seager 173)

Though such specific names for flora can be found occasionally in his letters, they would not appear in his poems until *The Far Field*. In “North American Sequence” Roethke not only discovers his own immediate present setting but also the actuality of childhood landscapes that hitherto had appeared in his poetry only in archetypal, dreamlike generalizations, “the coarse short-hand of the subliminal depths.”

In its form the Sequence is a modern instance of the genre that Meyer Abrams named the “Greater Romantic Lyric,” a meditation based on an encounter with a specific landscape, like “Tintern Abbey” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Like Roethke’s earlier sequences, this one develops through seeming digressions and regressions in its passage from disquiet and alienation to a sense of harmony. The qualities most important in its landscape are the interfolding of land and water, the awareness of the Pacific as limit, and the view of the West as the *Abendland*, where light and life fade out. The Sequence begins in spiritual despond, “a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year” (*Collected* 189). Rallying himself to seek a new life, envisioned in the symbol of a rose, the poet paraphrases T. S. Eliot’s “East Coker” (189): “Old men should be explorers”—but counters “I’ll be an Indian” (*Collected* 189), that is, someone who renews a dwelt-in world rather than an outsider seeking novelty. In “Medi-tation at Oyster River,” Roethke looks carefully at that world, describing a rivermouth on the east coast of Vancouver Island as tide begins to come in just before sunset. His language, shifting from the archetypal toward the specific, invokes the “elephant-colored” rocks and a “fish raven” in a dead tree, and recreates the stillness of sea and land (190). Quieted, the eye sees into the heart of things: out of the

scene “Death’s face rises afresh,” and the meditation shifts into memory, taking the poet back across the continent to his Michigan childhood (190). Not to his father’s greenhouse, however, but to the Tittabawassee, Saginaw’s river, as its winter ice-jam breaks up and “the spirit” begins to “run . . . / In and out of the small waves” (192). The next three poems journey further into the American interior and into personal and national memory, describing automobile travels around Saginaw and across the Great Plains and the Rockies before returning to the “long waters” of the Northwest to affirm that “The spirit of wrath [i.e., the frantic mood of the earlier dream-quest poems] becomes the spirit of blessing” (195).

Though Roethke read extensively in the mystics (and many critics have found in the Sequence the stages of mystical enlightenment), spiritual insight here arises not from ascetic detachment but out of the plenitude of the experience of nature. The poet’s eye is on the details of “a country of bays and inlets,” apprehended not as mental or sensory phenomena but as independent beings. “All finite things,” he sees, “reveal infinitude,” and he finds himself “renewed by death, thought of my death,” because “What I love is near at hand, / Always, in earth and air” (201). The Sequence culminates in “The Rose.” Watching the tide set in and the sun sink into the sea, swaying “outside myself” into the processes of nature (202), he encounters the goal of his quest. The rose is a traditional figure of spiritual fulfillment; it is also an emblem of his florist father (seen, for perhaps the first time, as a person rather than as a psychological symbol)—and yet it is also an actual flower, blooming “Out of the briary hedge . . . / Beyond . . . the wind-tipped madrona” (203). He says, “I stood outside myself, / Beyond becoming and perishing, / A something wholly other” (205). Although this ending conforms with Abrams’s “Greater Romantic Lyric” in returning to the outer scene “with an altered mood and deepened understanding” (528), the separation between self and not-self has not been dissolved, but rather understood and affirmed in a wholly new way.

In 1950, during a visit to Saginaw, Roethke had bought his first car and drove it back to Seattle. Seager writes that “The journey im-

pressed him deeply. It was the first time he had experienced the breadth of the continent except in glances from a train window" (193). Seager quotes a letter:

Here I don't know just how the material will be resolved but for next or possibly later book [sic] will be a happy journey westward—not along the Oregon Trail but on Route 2; in a word, a symbolical journey in my cheap Buick Special toward Alaska and, at least in a spiritual sense toward the east of Russia and the Mongolian Plains whence came my own people. (194)

In 1959, around the time he began writing the poems of the Sequence, Roethke had applied for a Ford Foundation grant; among his projects was "a sequence of serious poems beginning with a long dirge which will express . . . the guilts we Americans feel as a people for our mistakes and misdeeds in history" (Seager 257). Though neither of these descriptions corresponds to the poems Roethke actually wrote, they suggest that the poet had taken to heart the implications of his overland trek to the Pacific, which his friend George Lundberg had anticipated in his jocose comparison to the journey of Lewis and Clark. The result was an altogether different poetic landscape from the *paysage psychologisé* in which he had previously sojourned. While "The Longing" opens the Sequence in the imagery and cadences of Roethke's middle period—"The light cries out, and I am there to hear— / I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon, / Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm" (188)—in its final lines there is an important shift in both line length and imagery:

On the Bullhead, in the Dakotas, where the eagles eat well,  
In the country of few lakes, in the tall buffalo grass at the  
    base of the clay buttes,  
In the summer heat, I can smell the dead buffalo,  
The stench of their damp fur drying in the sun,  
The buffalo chips drying.

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

(188-89)

We are in South Dakota (near US 12, not Route 2), just west of the Missouri, in the country of the Teton Dakotas, whom Lewis and Clark had encountered on their exploration of the Northwest. But the poet takes the Indian role instead of the explorers'. Casting back not in personal memory but in the memory of the continent, he smells the dead buffalo—possibly an Oglala hunt, but perhaps the mass slaughter of the herds that accompanied the suppression of the Sioux and other Plains peoples. And the last word of this poem, “Iroquois,” carrying us eastward to New York, reinforces the assertion that these will be poems about the continent in which indwelling is more important than passage: the mind of the Iroquois, rather than that of the Sioux.

Throughout the Sequence, however, Roethke repeatedly invokes the High Plains in traversing the continent, making a “Journey to the Interior” (the title of the third poem), seeking a northwest passage “out of the self” (193). These traverses are written over a tradition of American “road” literature, and have been amply interpreted as such by Roethke scholars since Hugh Staples’s article appeared in *American Literature* soon after they were published. In the context of that tradition they are notable for the intensity of some of their descriptions:

All flows past—  
 The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle of the  
     prairie,  
 The dead snakes and muskrats, the turtles gasping in the  
     rubble,  
 The spikey purple bushes in the winding dry creek bed—  
 The floating hawks, the jackrabbits, the grazing cattle—

I am not moving but they are,  
And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the Tetons,  
While, farther away, the heat-lightning flashes.  
I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,  
The wind veering the car slightly to the right,  
Whipping the line of white laundry, bending the cotton  
    woods apart,  
The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house. . . .

(194)

Roethke's reiterated use of the definite article links this account with his earlier dream landscapes, but now his intentions are more clearly representational, and the recognition implied by "the" speaks not of familiarity but of newly acquired clarity of sight. Shifting his language in the direction of the particular, using a westernized vocabulary of arroyos, buttes, and canyons, the poet conveys an immediate, particular encounter with the land. Nevertheless, the High Plains are for him a passageway, and Roethke significantly depicts himself as an attentive spectator, enclosed in a car westward bound.<sup>7</sup> This is not his dwelling place, though he is alert to the existential being of the trees, the Tetons, the ranch house.

If the Sequence does imply a lamentation for the continent, as implied in the Ford Foundation letter,<sup>8</sup> the role of these passages remains deeply subtextual. It may suggest, prophetically, that deliverance from the spiritual desolation portrayed in "The Longing" can only be accomplished by getting out of the car, both physically and spiritually: by taking root in a place, as Roethke once had in Saginaw and where now

<sup>7</sup>The summer southerlies are pushing his car to the right.

<sup>8</sup>Indeed, in the view of Cary Nelson, the Sequence fails because (among other faults) it does not speak from its political and historical moment (47, 60).

<sup>9</sup>Vanderbilt has identified the "three journeys" in Roethke's later poetry: the "Northwest Passage," the return to Saginaw, and the "journey to the interior" (204). My emphasis on tension in these encounters makes my interpretation different from his, which stresses convergence and reconciliation.

he had, with Beatrice, beside Lake Washington in Seattle. The traveller's clear-sightedness depends on his dwelling-place at the western terminus of his journey, the Pacific Northwest.<sup>9</sup> And that terminus is where Roethke situates the second poem in the Sequence, "Meditation at Oyster River." Nowhere in his earlier poetry has he looked so steadily at his subject: the poem opens with a sustained, twenty-three line depiction of the rivermouth at twilight as the tide begins to come in. He painstakingly amasses details: clam shells, young crabs, the mew and whimper of gulls, the feel of light wind and dewfall, the crackle of a fire on the beach, the rush of water over the rocks. All are caught in tension—day against night, tide against river, security against danger, observer against object.

Thus grounded, the middle parts of the poem move into reflection, beginning "The self persists like a dying star," and linking the self, at first obscurely, with the thrust of the incoming tide (190). As in other poems in this genre, the scene shifts into memory, instantly passing to the other terminus of Roethke's spiritual geography, his childhood home in Michigan—but not the archetypal greenhouse. Instead the poem recollects other waters, "a Michigan brook in April, / . . . Or the Tittewawasee, in the time between winter and spring" (191). The Tittewawasee flows through the southwest side of Saginaw, joining another stream to become the Saginaw River. Roethke's earlier poems have plenty of streams and rivers, but they are silted with psychological symbols and have no names—especially not a Whitmanesque name like "Tittewawasee." This river too carries a psychological or spiritual load, but Roethke is remembering very specifically a citybound stream breaking up at the dirty end of winter:

The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its debris of  
 branches and sticks,  
 Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's shoe riding  
 a log,  
 As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles,  
 And the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges  
 shaking.

(191)

The waters at Oyster River and the rivers of Michigan are thus linked by spiritual associations of resistance and release, but this inwardness is made possible by what Gerard Manley Hopkins would have called the “instress,” the resistant selfhood of things, seemingly irrelevant tin cans, a child’s shoe, beds of kelp along the Strait of Georgia.

A six-word clause late in the Sequence captures this instress: Seattle is “important,” he writes, because it is “where sea and fresh water meet” (202). The campus and its students, the city, the lake, all were important to him in life, although Roethke had not yet found how to incorporate them into his poetry, as earlier he could not accommodate the actual flora and fauna along the Tittewabawasee, though we know from his letters and miscellanea that he could see and name them. The Pacific littoral, its confluence of moving waters salt and fresh, its birds and some of its vegetation are the primary inscape of “North American Sequence.” His vision sharpened by two contrary forces—his love for Beatrice and his premonitions of death—he was finding his spiritual struggle incarnated in the ebb and flow of the “long waters” around him. That scene at Oyster River catches a moment of quiet created by the poise of contrary forces in the landscape. Though there is “not a ripple” in the air, the tide has begun to come in, “one long undulant ripple” covering the stones downbeach and displacing the poet from his seat by the cliffside (190). The scene disrupts his meditative and pictorial detachment: as Whitman, at the end of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is summoned to attend to the “word” from the surf (253), Roethke is led to reconceive the elements of the setting. “Death’s face rises afresh” for him out of the complex resistances between the river’s flow and the tide’s advance:

. . . the waves coming forward, without cessation,  
The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp, miscellaneous  
driftwood,  
Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous undercurrents  
The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone,

The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.  
(190-91)

When the Sequence returns to this Pacific setting, after its “journey to the interior,” the thrust of salt water against fresh, and of sea wind against pine trees, has become a feature of the landscape that Roethke feels physiologically and spiritually in himself (193).

Death now feels to him like the tide, a natural force that both resists and absorbs the self-willed motion of his own life:

The river turns on itself,  
The tree retreats into its own shadow.  
I feel a weightless change, a moving forward  
As of water quickening before a narrowing channel . . .  
My mind moves in more than one place,  
In a country half-land, half-water.

I am renewed by death, thought of my death. . . .<sup>10</sup>  
(200-01)

At the end of the Sequence he is on another shore, looking west at “The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water” (202). The West has become the Twilight Land, the end of the trail. (Perhaps he had reached that point in life when you know that the place where you are living is the place where you will most probably die.) That he recognizes oncoming death makes it no less “other,” but he can say he has “learned not to fear infinity, . . . The sprawl of the wave, / The oncoming water” (200). These passages, as Scott says, display Roethke’s “letting-go” in the presence of being: “baffling and fearful as the thought of death may be, once the spirit gathers itself together to ‘embrace the world’ [Collected 198], it will find itself no longer fearing

<sup>10</sup>One thinks perhaps of a comparable flex of tension and release in the nineteenth poem of *In Memoriam* (1850), where Tennyson’s grief is eased at the moment when the tide ebbs in the Severn and the Wye can again flow sea-

[death]" (114–15).

Further, the tension that Roethke apprehends within the sea-bound waters reflects his awakening to the "otherness" of the beings in whose presence he stood—the flowering of what Scott called his "sacramental imagination." These beings are selves; they resist becoming the phenomena of his consciousness, or characters in the "coarse short-hand" of his psychobiography. Vanderbilt has asserted the Northwestern character of those particulars,<sup>11</sup> noting that "The Rose" opens with a list of a dozen birds common to that area (210); but one must single out Roethke's naming of alder, birch, and ma-drona, scoter and fish raven, as marks of his recognition that the flora and fauna around him were not archetypal "trees" and "birds" but subspecies associated particularly with the Cascadian seaboard.<sup>12</sup> This exact naming is an index of the poet's attentiveness to the existential reality of his setting, a reality that summons him to recognize the limits of his self and to revere the selfhood of the creatures about him. Cary Nelson detects in the Sequence the centripetal and centrifugal motion of Whitman's imagination (39); however, Whitman recoils from the centrifugal limit, back toward the security of the asserted Self, while Roethke does not. He speaks of his need to "stand at the stretch in the face of death, / Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves" (*Collected* 195). This sharpening of poetic vision and of nomenclature not only affects his present experience but also allows him to reclaim his boyhood in Saginaw on new terms. In "The Far Field," as the sequence revisits the Midwest, we encounter birds peculiar to that climate, orioles and warblers ("Blackburnian, Cape May, Cerulean" [199]), as well as more widely distributed finches and flickers. In "The Rose," his father, appearing as Otto Roethke and not as frightful Papa, raises not plants or blossoms or even roses, but "Mrs. Russells" (203).

<sup>11</sup>He mentions "the abundant varieties of Northwest coastal images—the leaping fish, the ivy rooting in sawdust alongside the uprooted trees, the casual osprey and dawdling fisherman, and a sea surface full of imagined flowers both alive and dead" (208).

<sup>12</sup>A poem later in *The Far Field*, "All Morning," identifies so many specific birds that it seems to have been written with Peterson's *Field Guide to Western*

Of course this shift toward particular names, as a signal of encounter, is limited by the inherent generalizing function of language. No net of words, however fine-meshed, can catch the singular oriole. However, what Roethke is gesturing toward is that moment when one acknowledges another's being, when the ego recognizes the claim of an independent reality. (Nowhere is this felt more poignantly than in a passage in *Walden* [1854], where Thoreau yearns to recapture for his reader the immediacy of an actual experience, the song of a robin: "O the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he*; I mean *the twig*" [312].<sup>13</sup>) The Sequence began with an archetypal rose, symbol of a "quiet at the heart of form" (188); at its end, he comes upon an actual rose:

A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of  
 the morning-glory,  
 Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted underbrush,  
 Beyond the clover, the ragged hay,  
 Beyond the sea pine, the oak, the wind-tipped madrona,  
 Moving with the waves, the undulating driftwood,  
 Where the slow creek winds down to the black sand of the  
 shore  
 With its thick grassy scum and crabs scuttling back into  
 their glistening craters.  
 (203)

Clearly this is the rose he was seeking. It "Stays in its true place, / Flowering out of the dark" (203). "Near this rose," he writes, "I came upon the true ease of myself"; and "I rejoiced in being what I was" (205). The disease and alienation with which the Sequence began have been quieted. But (like Marianne Moore's strawberry) the rose itself is in a struggle, a state of tension with everything around it—

<sup>13</sup>George Steiner wrote that "The more intense, the more maturely considered the fiction . . . the more palpable inside it will be the tranquil fury of secondarity" (204).

its immediate botanical competitors, its seashore ecology, the sea-wind, the sea pine, the coastal madrona, the interpush of creek current and Pacific wave, and even Otto Roethke's remembered "elaborate hybrids" (203). Few symbolical roses have had to share their space with briars, grassy scum, and scuttling crabs. Symbolic it is, like Dante's, Yeats's, Williams's, or Eliot's; but he says, three times, it is still "*this* rose."<sup>14</sup> Its *this*-ness, its particular physical being, and Roethke's recognition of the mystery in that being, culminate the effort of the Sequence to look into the face of an American landscape. In its mystery—or "instress"—the poet senses a presence more mysterious still; and to that we shall come presently.

The Sequence also dramatizes its poet's struggle to come to terms with a human person, specifically another poet. As La Belle shows in her study, Roethke's creativity thrived on emulating ancestor poets, John Davies or Blake or Wordsworth or Whitman or Yeats. He encouraged Ralph Mills to link his later poetry with Whitman—by way of rejecting Yeats and Eliot. About Eliot he is especially surly: "Eliot in the Quartets is tired, spiritually tired, old-man. Rhythm, Tiresome Tom" (Mills, *Selected* 230–31). We know that Roethke, like most poets, competed fiercely with his contemporaries, in his case Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell. But with Eliot, then enjoying his heyday as both the poet of *Four Quartets* and the critic of *The Sacred Wood* (1920), Roethke could not well occupy either the role of emulator or that of competitor: but somehow he was both, one role flexed against the other. LaBelle tells us that he wrote out, longhand, many copies of "Ash Wednesday" and the *Quartets* (155). In a late notebook he wrote:

Essay: I Hate Eliot

First sentence. Why?

Because I love him too much—

(Wagoner 245)

Toward the end of "East Coker" Eliot had remarked that each poet

struggles to say for himself what he knows “has already been discovered . . . by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate” (189). For Roethke, writing “North American Sequence” meant not writing someone else’s poem about a spiritual journey stretching from childhood memories of a rose-garden to visionary moments in specific geographical places, whether named Oyster River or East Coker.

La Belle interprets Roethke’s relationship to Eliot by citing a book by Sydney Musgrove, *T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman* (1952), which Roethke knew well and which he invoked, in that letter to Ralph Mills, to depreciate Eliot by calling him a covert imitator of Whitman. La Belle’s strategy, however, makes it easier for her to note resemblances among the three poets than to explore Roethke’s mix of love and hate, emulation and argument.<sup>15</sup> Certainly there are similarities in style, which both she and Musgrove point out: the end-stopped line of indefinite length, the syntactically matched clauses, the catalogs, the shuttling between experience and reminiscence—even the specific symbol of birds, shared by all three (126–40). In these poems Roethke often resorts to the epic simile, a device Eliot used in “East Coker” and “The Dry Salvages.” And there are passages in “North American Sequence” in which the tone so resembles Eliot’s that Mills asked Roethke whether he was “parodying” the elder poet (*Selected* 230):

Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,  
 But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,  
 Minnows can hear, and butterflies, yellow and blue,  
 Rejoice in the language of smells and dancing.  
 Therefore I reject the world of the dog  
 Though he hear a note higher than C  
 And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song.

<sup>15</sup>La Belle does recognize Roethke’s antagonism toward Eliot, especially as it is evident in the difference between Eliot’s “Gerontion” and the speaker-protagonist of “Meditations of an Old Woman” (157–58). One of the Meditations, “What Can I Tell My Bones?” incorporates another spar with Eliot: “It is difficult to say all things are well / When the worst is about to arrive” (172).

(196)

A passage like this functions in the Sequence in just the way that in each of the *Quartets* a lyrical passage begins the second movement which the rest of the movement, or the whole Quartet, will question or qualify—"That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory" Eliot writes in "East Coker" (184). Like Eliot's "Old men should be explorers" (202), which Roethke had challenged in "The Longing," these lines serve as a seamark against which Roethke must plot his own course. This is a poet whom Roethke cannot simply assimilate, as he had Yeats or John Davies or Wordsworth—as he once had assimilated natural beings into the symbology of his psychic struggle, and his wife into an archetypal Beatrice. Eliot occupies space in the Sequence on terms similar to those held by the scoters and madronas of the Washington coast: another being whom he must approach with reverence, and whose explorations he must compare with his own. Roethke's river makes headway against Eliot's tide.

Perhaps Roethke's encounter with Eliot in "Meditations of an Old Woman" and "North American Sequence" is like Eliot's encounter in "Little Gidding" with the mysterious other-poet in the streets of London following an air raid, "Too strange to each other for misunderstanding, / In concord at this intersection time" (203). In the third section of "Little Gidding" Eliot anticipated the "strangeness" between Roethke and himself, describing three "conditions which often look alike / Yet differ completely" (205). The last of these is "indifference," anomie, of which Eliot had written so often, and from which Roethke's Sequence set forth in "The Longing." The second is the way of detachment, the course overtly taken in the *Quartets*: acknowledging Eliot's lifelong fascination with Hinduism and Buddhism, let us call that here the way East. The first is Roethke's way, through "Attachment to self and to things and to persons" (205): the Western way. (Eliot's poem, remember, was first conceived as "a happy journey westward.") The Sequence again and again affirms the poet's desire for, and love of, the beings that surround him; and it also affirms the self, the self purged of obsession and egotism. At the end of "The

Long Waters” he writes,  
 I lose and find myself in the long water;  
 I am gathered together once more;  
 I embrace the world.

(198)

This way of attachment—the *via affirmativa*—dominates in “North American Sequence” (as it may be a secondary mode in the *Quartets*). Eliot’s next lines almost uncannily anticipate this final phase of Roethke’s poetry: “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” (205). Throughout the Sequence, Roethke reconceives his Midwestern greenhouse world no longer in terror but in love, remembering his father lifting him high so he could see the roses better (203): through memory he has been liberated from the past. And likewise liberated from the future, for Roethke anticipates none beyond his impending death. “I am renewed by death,” he says, “thought of my death, / The dry scent of a dying garden in September, / The wind fanning the ash of a low fire. / What I love is near at hand, / Always, in earth and air” (201).<sup>16</sup>

Though “The Rose” may begin with another glance at “East Coker” (“There are those to whom place is unimportant” [202]), in concluding the Sequence this poem appropriates one of Eliot’s most constant symbols, to embody the spiritual insight which has accumulated during its journeyings. Roethke’s rose of course is rooted in his own past, while Eliot’s is not only personal but also linked to British history and to Dante’s mystical flower. But it is nonetheless an affirmation of spiritual discovery. Roethke writes,

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped  
 madronas,  
 Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of  
 myself,

<sup>16</sup>Are there in these lines more echoes from the *Quartets*?—the dying garden

As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,  
And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other,  
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,  
And yet was still.  
And I rejoiced in being what I was. . . .

(205)

This passage, with its echo of “Ash Wednesday,” is affecting because it claims so little. Years earlier, concluding “Praise to the End!” Roethke had written “I believe! I believe! . . . I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing” (88). “The Rose” ends less assertively but perhaps more affirmatively: in attaining “ease” with his “self,” the poet has been brought to stand outside the self, “something wholly other.” Compared with its forerunner, “Meditations of an Old Woman,” and the “Mixed” and “Sometimes Metaphysical” sequences that follow later in *The Far Field*, “North American Sequence” is very sparing of the God-word and very reticent about visions of God. Remember that in the talk at Northwestern University, Roethke confessed that “God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled with” (26), not someone to be bidden to turn up at the end of a poem. “What Can I Tell My Bones?” (one of the “Meditations of an Old Woman”) concludes, saying,

What came to me vaguely is now clear,  
As if released by a spirit,  
Or agency outside me.  
Unprayed-for,  
And final.

(173)

What this announces, “North American Sequence” embodies, namely the recognition of agencies beyond the self: the sundown coasts of Washington, the “long undulant ripple” of an incoming tide, the face of death that “rises afresh” out of deer, snake, hummingbird, and

wave (190). In their resistant physical being, their this-ness, bound as it is into time, Roethke glimpses something deeper. “All finite things,” he writes, “reveal infinitude” (201). Summoned by finitude, the poet’s spirit discerns the presence of a spirit that is not his own projection on the scene, a *mysterium* exceeding him, something to be confronted, as river confronts tide. This he can acknowledge only through simile (“as if another man appeared out of the depths of my being”)—

And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other,  
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,  
And yet was still.

(205)

This presence goes unnamed in the Sequence, though later in *The Far Field* Roethke would call it, cautiously, “God” or (echoing Paul Tillich) “Godhead above my God” (*Collected* 246). The moment of recognition is muted and invested altogether in earthbound life; but nevertheless it is a religious posture, of unassuming openness to the will and goodness of an unexpected and uncomprehended Being. Ross-Bryant has associated it with Tillich’s “theonomous” revelation (196). Scott’s term “sacramental imagination” captures this attentiveness better than the term “mysticism,” so often used to describe the final phase of Roethke’s work.<sup>17</sup>

In the second movement of “The Rose” Roethke introduces the seaside flower and after describing it casts back into memories of his father in the greenhouse; the fourth movement revisits the rose, in the rejoicing lines quoted above (202–03). In between, the third move-

<sup>17</sup>Perhaps an even more valuable approach is William Lynch’s “analogical imagination,” which grounds this recognition of presence not in the mind of the perceiver but in the “act of existence” through which each being is given its unique selfhood: “in the whole of this kind of cosmic pattern, . . . there is absolute sameness [of being] and absolute diversification [of beings]” (153). While Roethke and the beings in the landscape stand irresolvably distinct, the poet has now glimpsed the source of existence in which he and they all

ment returns to the motif of transcontinental journey. "I think of American sounds in this silence," he writes; and a Whitmanesque catalog ensues, naming "wind-harps" on the banks of the Tombstone Lakes in Oregon, "the ticking of snow around oil drums in the Dakotas," birdsongs recollected from a Michigan childhood, even the mechanical noises of bulldozer, sandblaster, and taxicab horn (204). It ends with an unnamed sound:

I return to the twittering of swallows above water,  
And that sound, that single sound,  
When the mind remembers all,  
And gently the light enters the sleeping soul,  
A sound so thin it could not woo a bird. . . .

(204)

Earlier, the poet has acknowledged his previous "foolishness with God," namely his seeking for revelation in the romantic sublime, "the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists" (196). With this tiny whispering sound, audible only to the quieted soul, enlightenment is given him.

In the final phase of "Little Gidding," Eliot answers the challenge he had uttered in "East Coker": though old men must be explorers, "The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (208). The late phase of "North American Sequence" similarly answers the challenge Roethke had issued to Eliot early in the Sequence, when he chose the indwelling way of the Iroquois over the nomad life of the Oglala. His spiritual passage through the western American landscape has taken him nowhere—and everywhere. Like Whitman's ferryboat shuttle across the East River, it leads to the discovery of the familiar actual, and to a litany-like recital of familiar names and actual things. Nothing has changed; everything has changed. Looking at the rose, Roethke writes "I rejoiced in being what I was"; there follows a quick coda-catalog—lilac, reptile, dolphin, bird—and, finally, "this rose, this rose in the sea-wind, / Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light" (205). Rejoice.

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## A Sweeping Rain