Spiritual Quest as Poetic Sequence: Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence" and its Relation to T S Eliot's "Four Quartets"

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SPIRITUAL QUEST AS POETIC SEQUENCE:
THEODORE ROETHKE'S NORTH AMERICAN SEQUENCE AND ITS
RELATION TO T. S. ELIOT'S FOUR QUARTETS

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the spiritual quest presented in Theodore Roethke's *North American Sequence* is a "re-vision" of the one T. S. Eliot presents in *Four Quartets*.

Through a comparison of the content and structure of both sequences, it is clear that while Eliot pursues the via negativa in his religious quest, Roethke swerves from Eliot's Anglican concepts of asceticism and purgation, and offers a different interpretation of the religious journey, one that involves accepting the self as a part of the natural world, as a means to spiritual enlightenment.
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W. B. Yeats's influence on Theodore Roethke has been acknowledged by critics and Roethke himself. Yet it was Roethke's grappling with T. S. Eliot's unwelcome influence that produced one of his major works, the six poems of *North American Sequence*. A comparison of Theodore Roethke's *North American Sequence* (from *The Far Field*, 1964) with T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) illustrates how the two poets took different paths that lead to union with the Divine. Indeed, Roethke's religious poetic sequence can be read as a "re-vision" of Eliot's; while Eliot pursues the *via negativa* in his religious quest, Roethke swerves from Eliot's Anglican concepts of asceticism and purgation, and offers a different interpretation of the religious journey, one that involves accepting self as a part of nature, as a means to spiritual enlightenment.

Karl Malkoff writes about the Greenhouse poems in *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry*: "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. Perhaps
he was protesting too much" (14). Readers cannot deny, despite Roethke's indignation at the suggestion that his work parallels Eliot's in structure and content, the echoes of Eliot's work are present—echoes that travel beyond the Greenhouse poems.

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. included in his Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke a letter Roethke wrote in response to Mills' assertion that parts of "Meditations of an Old Woman" contain parodies of Eliot:

Christ, Eliot in the Quartets is tired, spiritually tired, old-man. Rhythm, Tiresome Tom. Is my old lady tired? The hell she is: 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. 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.

He ended the letter by asking Mills: "It's time the Pound-Eliot cult and the Yeats cult, too, got nudged and bumped, no?" (231). From this letter we glean two things beyond the fact that Roethke became ruffled at having his work compared to Eliot's: that he does not think Eliot a mystic and that he feels a need to "nudge and bump" him through "reworking" his predecessor's poetry.

While Roethke did addressed subjects which Eliot
also addressed, Eliot was not Roethke's only poetic influence. If we were to delineate the literary genealogy of poets who influenced Roethke, we would not, of course, create a vertical listing stemming from Aristotle, but more of a web with interconnections.

One master to whom Roethke pays tribute, in addition to Whitman, Williams, and Stevens, is Yeats. In his essay "How to Write Like Somebody Else," Roethke writes: "I should like to think I have over-acknowledged, in one way and another, my debt to Yeats" (qtd. in Mills, On The Poet 70). And in the first section of Roethke's poem "Four For Sir John Davies" we see evidence of this acknowledgement: "I take this cadence from a man named Yeats; / I take it, and I give it back again" (Roethke 101).

Terence Diggory also acknowledges Yeats's influence on Roethke, and examines how this influence affected Roethke's poetry. He writes in Yeats & American Poetry that Roethke "calls on Yeats because he does not feel strong enough to rely on himself, and he rejects Yeats because he fears that the stronger presence might obliterate his identity altogether" (182). Roethke would not have agreed with Diggory's claim that Yeats's stronger presence might obliterate his own identity, for he thought "if a writer has something to say, it will come through," and that "the very fact he has the support of a tradition,
or an older writer, will enable him to be more himself—or more than himself" (qtd. in Mills, On The Poet 69). Eliot also enables Roethke to be "more than himself" in that he sets a precedent by delineating in Four Quartets a spiritual journey, which Roethke can "rewrite" from his own perspective.

W. D. Snodgrass also notes Yeats's influence on Roethke. However, he is one of the few commentators on Roethke's influences who points out that Roethke was more successful in "assimilating the model of Four Quartets...in 'North American Sequence,' but not as successful when emulating Yeats" (qtd. in Diggory 196). So while Yeats's is obvious in parts of Roethke's work, some critics feel that Roethke attained fuller success when laboring under Eliot's influence. In other words, Eliot brought out the best in Roethke's writing, despite the latter's indignation at being compared to his predecessor.

Anthony Libby sees Eliot as a natural antagonist for Roethke due, in part, to Roethke's indignant feelings when having his works compared to Eliot's. Libby believes that Roethke did not like Eliot's work, and writes in Mythologies of Nothing that "Eliot especially has had a considerable impact on poets (like Roethke) who claimed to dislike his work" (18). Certainly Roethke's repeated mention of Eliot in Mills's Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke leaves us to assume that if Roethke did not "like"
Eliot's work, he certainly was obsessed with it.

For in a letter to Dorothy Gordon he wrote, "I'm tired of all this Eliot-Pound worship. Eliot's a good poet, but there are others" (qtd. in Mills, *Selected Letters* 13). In another letter to Stephen Spender he wrote about Eliot's supposed hasty dismissal of some of his own works: "It saddens me that Mr. Eliot seems to think me a thug," going on to complain of the writers Eliot did like. In the postscript of the letter he included: "I'm always grumbling about Eliot: it's the old love-hate business. He can't stand anyone who will duel with God" (qtd. in Mills, *Selected Letters* 251).

While Eliot probably did not intentionally snub Roethke (in fact, Eliot encouraged other writers), Roethke's feeling that he had been "dismissed" seems to have enraged him; but this rage fueled Roethke's poetic ambition.

Libby writes that "despite Roethke's professed admiration for Williams, and his late identification of Stevens as 'our father,' it was obviously Eliot with whom he had to contend. Partly the simple fact of Eliot's reputation dictated this..." (104). But it was not only Eliot's reputation that made him a natural "opponent" for Roethke. They were also put at immediate odds due to their philosophical differences.

Both Roethke and Eliot explored in poetry the metaphysical quest for a "transcendent experience," a
quest that critic Harold Bloom, in his essay "A Meditation upon Priority," claims stems from the poet's need to rebel "more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do" (qtd. in Richter 707). Metaphysical transcendence results in a union with the Divine and offers revelations that go beyond sense and logic. However, Roethke swerved from Eliot's ascetic withdrawal from physical life as the proper path towards such revelations, and offered a different interpretation of the spiritual journey--one in which we need not be saints or ascetics in order to participate.

While Eliot takes the via negativa as a path toward enlightenment, Roethke takes the via positiva. Cleo McNelly Kearns writes about the two pathways in his essay "Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in Four Quartets: A Derridean Reading":

The negative way seeks, through a process of progressive elimination of the partial, to attain a posture of complete humility and self-erasure before the void; the positive way calls for escalating degrees of recognition and self-affirmation, proceeding from like to like to a place comensurate with contemplation of the whole. Likewise, the negative way, or way down, seeks to move the consciousness beyond the body and its images; while the affirmative
way, or way up, seeks to move it more deeply into them, and with more and more degrees of conscious spiritual awareness. (qtd. in Lobb 132)

Kearns notes that the way down is the "way of ascetism and abstraction, while the way up is the way of erotic experience, metaphor and imagination" (qtd. in Lobb 132). Whereas Eliot seeks to escape the physical, Roethke attempts to integrate its essence into his existence.

Eliot's writing in *Four Quartets* can be seen as "meditative," where self-knowledge stems from contemplation of the Divine. Such poetry has often been written as part of the poet's preparation for religious ceremonies. While Eliot did not write *Four Quartets* to prepare for a specific ceremony per se, his writing can itself be viewed as a religious ceremony, a ceremony that leads to a fuller understanding of God, expressed in *Four Quartets* as the point where the temporal and the eternal meet.

Louis Martz, former Roethke student and current literary critic, suggests that in meditative poetry, "central meditative action consists of an interior drama, in which a man projects a self upon a mental stage, and there comes to understand that self in the light of a divine presence" (qtd. in Holman and Harmon 284). Considering that Eliot was confirmed in the Anglican Church
seventeen years before publishing *Four Quartets*, and considering the places described, such as East Coker, etc.—places which held much religious interest for Eliot—we can assuredly assume that Eliot is attempting to understand his place "in light of a divine presence" through Christian self-purgation.

This search for knowledge is evident in the first lines of "Burnt Norton," which act as a kind of abstract to delineate what will be explored in the other sections of *Four Quartets*:

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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 unredemptable. (13)
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By using the words "perhaps" and "if" at the start Eliot gives this section a supplicating tone, a tone that conveys humility and an emptying of self in preparation for meditation. Eliot continues in this first part of "Burnt Norton" to inform the reader of themes that will be addressed (immortality, transcending a temporal setting through meditation, the disturbance of memory, etc.); and, by ending this section with "I do not know," offers further evidence of the emptying of self needed to begin a search for understanding: "But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not
know" (13). We also sense that the works to come will be "works in progress," works in which the speaker is opening himself to insight as to the purpose of his writing, which will come about through the act of writing, itself a sort of meditation.

While Eliot can be viewed as a meditative poet who seeks to move as close to the Divine as is humanly possible through painful self-negation, Roethke, also seeking knowledge of the Divine, can be viewed as a mystic.

Martz, however, does not see Roethke as a mystic, since Roethke rejected the mystic's withdrawal from life; but Hugh B. Staples gives evidence of the viability of seeing him as such (qtd. in Chaney 71). While Staples understands why some might consider Roethke's rejection of the mystic's withdrawal from life as reason not to equate him with mysticism, he recognizes that Roethke acknowledges in his own way the "mystical region of human experience" (71).

Although Roethke did not withdraw from life as did Thoreau, for example, he nonetheless expresses the characteristics of mysticism we associate with a transcendent experience. Roethke seeks to unite with the Divine by transcending the physical, and his journey requires him to rely on "self" in the sense that he must accept, not deny, the self in order to enter "a way of
This mystic quest to unite with the Divine through an acceptance of nature as a counterpart of oneself is evident in an explanation Roethke offers for the ineffable feelings he experiences during moments of spiritual enlightenment. Ralph J. Mills includes it in his compilation of prose selections by Roethke, *On The Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*:

If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity, so can the living--and I mean all living things, including the sub-human. This is not so much a naive as a primitive attitude: animistic, maybe. Why not? Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically: St. Thomas says, 'God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things.' (24-25)

Roethke continues to explain in this selection that not only do inanimate things bring a "heightening and awareness of one's own self," but also, "in some instance, a feeling of the oneness of the universe" (25). He explains the attainment of this feeling of "oneness" as an ability to see, really see something, and explains that this can come about by looking at something so long
that "you are a part of it and it is a part of you" (25). He says that this oneness is "the first stage in mystical illumination...the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitably accompanied by the loss of the 'I,' the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocency" (26).

Roethke describes in his notebooks a time when he feels the "oneness of the universe." Richard Allen Blessing includes in his book Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision excerpts from Roethke's notebooks that address the poet's mystical experiences. One entry which Blessing includes from Allan Seager's The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke is one in which Roethke writes about "a mystical experience with a tree" that leaves him able to know how "to enter into the life of everything." Roethke told Seager, "I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, even a rabbit" (qtd. in Blessing 59). Roethke also told his wife after this episode that he had induced this state "'to reach a new level of reality'" (qtd. in Blessing 59).

Blessing also writes that this new level of reality stemmed from Roethke feeling as though God had entered his "mind or his body," but that whatever actually happened to him, his notebooks show "an effort to know more and to love more, the twin goals of the mystics, for whom
love and knowledge finally merge into a perfect whole" (59). It seems logical to pair Roethke and Eliot, then, since Eliot wrote, prior to Roethke, in order to "know more" and "love more"—to experience God to the fullest degree possible.

Roethke honors his predecessor, Eliot, through his "reworking" of the spiritual quest. Roethke examines what makes up a journey toward spiritual enlightenment; but he does not explore such through the via negativa, as does Eliot, but through the via positiva.

Eloise Knapp Hay explains in T. S. Eliot's Negative Way that the via negativa requires the recognition that "God is not the highest in a hierarchical continuum," but is "wholly other than any being we know by immediate perception or intuition," that "God Himself is nothing, compared with everything we know" (154). However, Roethke does not see God as "wholly other," but as present and attainable in everything, including ourselves if we are able to perceive ourselves as part of nature, not separate from but infused with the Divine, because nature is God's creation.

The idea of the via negativa is expressed by Eliot in "Burnt Norton":

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World no world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement.... (18)

This passage emphasizes the self-negation, loneliness, and pain involved in emptying oneself in order that one might be open to spiritual enlightenment.

And following the idea of St. John of the Cross that God is not at the top of a hierarchy, nor on any continuum we can fathom, a follower of the via negativa would propose the negative way over the affirmative way, as Eliot does when he writes, "This is the one way." Eliot does not, however, deny that there is another way to seek enlightenment, the via positiva, but merely that other paths do not reach the stillness, the sense of "nothingness" of self that the via negativa requires.

Hay expounds upon the via negativa:
To begin 'the way' toward union with God (different from intellectual recognition that He exists), the soul must actively seek a complete purgation, a way of pain and dispossession necessary because of the soul's
propensity to mistake the love of creatures for the love of God. (154)

Hay explains that this purgation is "extremely painful" and does not lead toward light, but toward "an abyss of darkness" (154).

While Roethke's North American Sequence parallels Eliot's Four Quartets in that both depict questers who journey toward spiritual enlightenment, it does so in a drastically different manner than does Eliot's. The two sequences are parallel in structure (Eliot's Four Quartets contains four poems, each titled, each with five numbered sections, while Roethke's North American Sequence contains six poems, each titled, each with anywhere from three to five numbered sections); but the linearity conveyed in the numbered poems conveys a different process each poet goes through to reach enlightenment.

Four Quartets depicts a journey in which one's meditation must involve the rejection of flesh and the acceptance of "excrutiating pain" that inevitably come when one seeks God through the via negativa. Roethke's poetry involves accepting the sentient nature of the self.

Walter B. Kalaidjian writes in Understanding Theodore Roethke:

'The Longing' takes up Eliot's command to be 'still and still moving' but abandons his meditation on a theological center of Christian
authority. Roethke's longing for 'the imperishable quiet at the heart of form' is just that--a longing, not an orthodoxy. For his part, Roethke abandons Eliot's 'still center' of belief for the more existential immediacy of mortality's 'redolent disorder.' (130) Kalaidjian is saying that Roethke's quest is not Christian-centered, but God-centered, in the sense that God encompasses the natural world and, reciprocally, nature--including man\(^1\)--encompasses God.

As stated earlier, the beginning of Eliot's "Burnt Norton" contains an "abstract" of the themes he will cover: immortality, transcending a temporal setting, memory, etc. Roethke's North American Sequence comprises six poems ("The Longing," "Meditation at Oyster River," "Journey to the Interior," "The Long Waters," "The Far Field," and "The Rose") that detail the journey Roethke takes, and addresses the same themes as in Eliot's Four Quartets.

The first poem in North American Sequence, "The Longing," begins with the speaker asking "How to transcend this sensual emptiness?"--the question he will wrestle with throughout the poetic sequence. The speaker is at this point amidst chaos and death:

\(^1\)"Man" is used here and elsewhere to denote "humankind"; the terminology is preserved as it appears in cited texts.
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools. (181)

Beginning with this scene of despair and death is an immediate signal that the speaker is beginning his quest from a degraded condition, one from which he will move upward, away from despair to a sense of affirmation.

Just as the beginning of "Burnt Norton" can be read as an overture presenting what we can expect Eliot to address, "The Longing" can be viewed as an abstract for the rest of the poems in North American Sequence. But "The Longing" reworks Eliot's themes, veering from them in that Roethke addresses: how body and soul should not be seen as opposing one another (and therefore the body should not be renounced); how communing with the physical world is necessary in order to experience any sort of transcendence of it; and how "moving back" is necessary in order to move forward.

Eliot's abstract ends with an admission of lack of knowledge: "But to what purpose / ... / I do not know" (13). Beginning from a state of unknowing enables Eliot to explore the possibility of transcending his spiritually dead wasteland.

Roethke's "The Longing" addresses a similar problem:
"How to transcend this sensual emptiness?" One way Roethke's speaker wrestles with this question in the three sections of "The Longing" is by beginning to see death as a comfort, a natural extension of earthly existence, instead of fearing it. He desires to perceive death as the promise of a new beginning. Death "calls" him. He is drawn to:

This ambush, this silence,
Where shadow can change into flame,
And the dark be forgotten.

I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of night is still wide. (182)

Jonah had to come to a state of submission before God allowed him to be vomited from the body of the whale. Roethke's speaker also leaves the body of the whale more submissive, more submissive to death. Instead of fearing death ("the mouth of night") because it is an unknown, Roethke, believing that we are sentient creatures who learn by experiencing, attempts to see death as one more experience--one no human can understand while living. This "challenge" appeals to him, and we observe the poet throughout the sequence acquiring what we can term a "death-wish."

The speaker's "death-wish" is evident in the following lines from the second section of "The Longing," but even here "Death's face" is softened by lyrical images from
the natural world:

The self persists like a dying star,
In sleep, afraid. Death's face rises afresh,
Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across
the highway,
The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting
for its fly,
The hummingbird, whirling from quince-blossom
to morning-glory--
With these I would be. (184-185)

Not only do Roethke's descriptions of death as having a fresh face, as rising among nature, etc., offer a picture of life, but the lengthening of each successive line denotes the further acceptance of death, and the short conclusion "With these I would be," a willingness and "wish" for death.

Thus "The Longing," the first poem in *North American Sequence*, begins the move toward not fearing death, as Roethke's seeker plunges himself into the initial wasteland. He then makes connections between himself and nature—he becomes "a stalk," which causes him to feel "free," but "all alone" (182). In his loneliness he is free to begin the acceptance of all moments, even the moment of death. He starts to realize all moments as new beginnings that we must experience in order to see our moment of death as joyous. In this sequence, death prefigures death.
Like Eliot, Roethke's speaker longs for "the imperishable quiet at the heart of form" (182). The word "imperishable" denotes Roethke's acceptance that the enlightenment he seeks--this "quiet at the heart of form"--cannot be hindered by time. The line, "I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form," echoes "Burnt Norton's" "still point of the turning world" (15) and Eliot's lines: "Except for the point, the still / point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance" (16). For Eliot the "still point," that moment where past and future intersect to create a sense of timelessness--the eternal--makes our "dance" on this earth bearable.

There is another point in "The Longing" where Roethke seems to directly respond to a line from Eliot's *Four Quartets*. He "responds" to Eliot's claim that "[o]ld men ought to be explorers" ("East Coker" 32). In the close of "The Longing," Roethke writes: "Old men should be explorers? / I'll be an Indian. / Ogala? / Iroquois" (183). Eliot and Roethke seem to be saying the same thing--that old men must search out their own sense of meaning through exploring the workings of their souls.

Eliot's "Old men ought to be explorers" can be taken to mean that men cannot pass on internal knowledge that comes only through experience; therefore, men must continue to seek knowledge only for themselves, which, in turn, cannot be passed on to future generations. Roethke's
passage certainly means that he, too, thinks men must continue to explore in order to understand their connection with the Divine; but by introducing the Native Americans, Roethke reemphasizes the need to connect with the earth, "fur drying in the sun" and "buffalo chips" (183). His is a New World, "North American" answer to Eliot's Old World, British, and Anglican world view. Also, by choosing to be an Iroquois instead of an Ogalala, Roethke is rejecting the Plains Indians (the Ogalala) for the Indians of forests and rivers (the Iroquois).

In "Meditation at Oyster River," the second poem in Roethke's sequence, the speaker moves from contemplating death as an abstraction to contemplating his own death. Roethke gives us a "close-up" in the first section as the speaker sits upon a rock looking out over water. He then draws back the camera, as it were, and has us take in not only nature, but the essence of nature:

In this hour,
In this first heaven of knowing,
The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit,
Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance,
The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning--
I shift on my rock, and I think. (185)

Again, the lengthening lines convey the speaker's further movement toward seeing death as more than an unavoidable
act; and the short declarative conclusion, "I shift on my rock, and I think," suggests the speaker's willingness to take what he has seen and apply the perceptions to himself.

Switches in points of view give the sense of Roethke panning in and out of the scene. The middle two sections are more objective in tone, but he ends with the subjective voice with which he began this poem. He begins and ends with descriptions of the natural world that immediately surrounds his "perch"—presenting us with the "runnel" behind him, and the "tiny striped fish" at the beginning and "small waves" that run with "the intrepid shorebirds" at the end. But he devotes the middle sections to explorations of things not physically close to him:

I shift on my rock, and I think:
Of the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April,
Over a lip of stone, the tiny rivulet;
And that wrist-thick cascade tumbling from a cleft rock,
Its spray holding a double rain-bow in early morning,
Small enough to be taken in, embraced, by two arms. (185)

This interweaving of tones creates a link between the previous poem, "The Longing" (in which death is an
abstraction), and the second poem, "Meditation at Oyster River," with its more personal view of death.

Eliot, too, uses cinematic techniques in his poetry, but they are used to a different end. He shifts from scene to scene, but remains broader in his scope than does Roethke, such as when he moves in the first section of "East Coker" from the harvest dancers, to "dung and death," to "I am here / Or there, or elsewhere" (24-25). After moving us from the ritualistic dancers to their decayed flesh, he locates himself, but as the camera's eye as opposed to being within a physical setting.

Eliot usually uses "we" and "us," unlike Roethke's "I"; and when he turns to "I" it is usually to introduce a meditation instead of an action: "I think," "I do not know," "I wonder," etc. When Eliot writes, about midway through his sequence, "So here I am, in the middle way," we cannot actually envision where he is, but know that he is somewhere contemplating "[t]wenty years largely wasted" (30). But when Roethke says in the third section of "Meditation at Oyster River," "I shift on my rock, and I think," we know his physical location as well as his internal state.

One means by which we know the speaker's internal state in "Meditation at Oyster River," as well as in the other poems in *North American Sequence*, is by Roethke's usage of natural images to reflect the internal state
of the speaker, much in the Romantic tradition that Eliot had ostensibly rejected.

The first section of "Meditation at Oyster River" has the speaker sitting on rocks watching the evening tide approaching. Norman Chaney writes in Theodore Roethke: The Poetics of Wonder that both the speaker and the river are in a "state of transition" (69). The speaker is moving to fuller understanding of death--symbolized by the sun setting over Oyster River--as a welcome event, just as the river is moving toward a fuller tide. The fact that the speaker "dabbles" his toes in the water also conveys that he is not quite ready to accept death as fully as he would like, but is still "testing the water." After he tests it, he "retires to a rock higher up on the cliff-side" (184). In other words, he is not yet ready to surrender to death.

But here the image of water--Oyster River--is ambiguous. By the end of the poem the speaker is more willing to surrender to the water. Thus Roethke closes "Meditation at Oyster River" with these lines:

Now, in this waning of light,
I rock with the motion of morning;
In the cradle of all that is,
I'm lulled into half-sleep
By the lapping of water,
Cries of the sandpiper.
Water's my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds--
How graceful the small before danger!

In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,
A shining. (185-186)

Roethke "reverses" in this section what we normally accept certain symbols to represent. Not only does water, often associated with birth, symbolize death, but illumination for the speaker comes when the sun is setting and the moon rising. The language Roethke uses in relation to death, such as "cradle" and "cries," converts his death images to life images, denoting the death of the old self before renewal.

Also, the reference to the "small before danger" conveys that the speaker is beginning to see himself and his worries in a different light, after his riverside experience. He is lulled into a "half-sleep"--he is becoming more comfortable with the idea of his death.

In "Journey to the Interior," the third poem in his North American Sequence, Roethke uses the metaphor of a car trip to illustrate "the long journey out of the self" (187). By surrendering to the journey, the speaker
realizes the control inherent in surrender. This is not unlike the surrender Eliot adheres to in his Christian orthodoxy; but Roethke's surrender does not involve pain and suffering to the degree that Eliot would contend is necessary to seek union with the Divine. The speaker, once he is willing and able to rebuke the "intellectualization" of driving (living), and willing to allow the wind to move the car (surrender to nature), is able to live in the physical world with a heightened awareness of the Divine.

After describing in the first section of "Journey to the Interior" the risks of attempting to gain spiritual enlightenment--wheels hanging "almost over the edge," "washed-out interrupted raw places," "detours," etc.--Roethke switches his point of view to one of remembrance. He recalls in the second section of "Journey to the Interior" having to drive "in gravel," and having to confront the obstacles of the road, and conveys how in the present, once he stops "thinking" about driving, he does not even have to move, but need only stay still and let his surroundings move. Roethke describes the speaker's view of his surroundings: "I am not moving but they are." He continues to say that "...time folds / Into a long moment," as the speaker sits in the car observing his surroundings. (188) In other words, the speaker now realizes his ability to be part of his surroundings while
being set apart from them.

This sense of stillness at the crux of movement once again echoes Eliot's "still center." Walter B. Kalaidjian addresses in Understanding Theodore Roethke the stillness as it relates to enlightenment in Eliot's and Roethke's work:

Although Eliot's appeal to the "still" transcendence of Christian Incarnation resembles the "long moment" depicted in "North American Sequence," Roethke's centering is a more existential act. His moment neither transcends its grounding in local place nor points to an ideal core of universal truth. Instead, out of the focused possession of place nature speaks to the poet through its indigenous plants and animals. (138-139)

This passage conveys that Roethke can be viewed as not moving, as does Eliot, outside of the physical, or away from nature in order to find the still center, but into nature in order to reach a feeling of timelessness. But, like Eliot, Roethke knows that he catches only "glimpses" of the Divine, as is evidenced in this passage at the close of "Journey to the Interior":

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,

I know this change. (189)
Kalaidjian refers to the end of "Journey to the Interior" as "the poet's reconciliation to his literary tradition" (140): 'The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing, / And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep'" (189). Kalidjian feels that "by transplanting the writing" of Eliot and others into "local landscape of American place" that Roethke "renovates" their work "in a more contemporary verbal performance" (140). One example of Roethke contemporizing the language of Eliot occurs at the end of the second section of "Journey to the Interior." Roethke writes:

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. (188)

Roethke, like Eliot, can experience the timeless moment, but also remain attached to the physical things of this world. Thus he takes a "dusty detour" from Eliot's withdrawal from the physical, yet still reaches a similar destination.

Roethke opens the third section of "Journey to the Interior" further describing a timeless moment and the illumination experienced in such:

In the moment of time when the small drop forms,
but does not fall,
I have known the heart of the sun,—
In the dark and light of a dry place,
In the flicker of fire brisked by a dusty wind.
(188)
Not only does the "small drop" that forms and seems to remain suspended in time act as symbol of timelessness, but Roethke's "heart of the sun," Kalaidjian notes, recalls Eliot's "heart of light" from the garden in "Burnt Norton" and the "mediation of light and dust returns to the moment in 'Burnt Norton' 'Between un-being and being. / Sudden in a shaft of sunlight / Even while the dust moves'" (Kalaidjian 141, Eliot 20).

Neal Bowers writes in Theodore Roethke: The Journey From I to Otherwise that in "Journey to the Interior" there is a "movement into self that ultimately leads out of self: 'The way down and out.' This paradox is at the very heart of mystical experience, for it is by turning [Roethke's] thoughts inward in pure concentration on the Absolute that the mystic transcends self and moves outward toward the Absolute he desires" (162). While Bowers is correct in his statement that Roethke moves "into self," it is is arguable that Roethke moves "out of self." Instead, he concentrates on self in order to accept self as man and nature united.

In "The Long Waters," the fourth poem in North American
Sequence, Roethke moves even closer to experiencing the timeless moment because he moves closer to an acceptance of death. He calls upon Blake's Mnetha (based on an anagram of Athena) to "protect" him "from the worm's advance and retreat"--that is, from death. (190) Since Athena is the protector of poetry, Roethke, in essence, is shedding his protection because he has come to understand that she, like he, is governed by nature:

But what of her [Mnetha]?
Who magnifies the morning with her eyes,
That star winking beyond itself,
The cricket-voice deep in the midnight field,
The blue jay rasping from the stunted pine.

(190)

It is after his rejection of Mnetha that Roethke realizes nature as the only muse he needs. And it is communing with nature that enables him to see his link to all physical things. He, like Whitman, seems to recognize that he will continue to live in a purer state in nature after his death. The close of "The Long Waters," in the fifth section, exemplifies this understanding that he is part of eternity, through his union with the nature, and thus the Divine:

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,
Become another thing;
My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world. (192)

This passage conveys his ability to be his own muse, since he now sees himself as a new creature in nature.

The penultimate poem in Roethke's six-poem sequence, "The Far Field," shows us that Roethke's now more-intimate link to nature has him closer to accepting death. He writes about memories of seeing "the shrunken face of a dead rat" and tom-cat "entails strewn over the half-grown flowers," but does not allow these images to cause him to fear death. In fact, seeing death helps him overcome his fear of dying. He writes in the second section of "The Far Field":

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water. (194)

This passage conveys, of course, Roethke's fearless acceptance of the eternal; but also, by embedding the "wheel turning away from itself" between images of nature, Roethke expresses his understanding of how the physical things of this earth affect the earth (the turning wheel).
Roethke sees benign examples of death and rebirth in nature. It is the speaker's commitment to perception and imagination that gives him the power to commune with nature, allowing him to overcome his fear of death. He writes at the close of the third section of "The Far Field":

I am renewed by death, 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 an air. (195)

In this section he expresses his commitment to a sensual perception of the natural world and how that allows him to embrace the idea of death.

He finally accepts death as a stage towards union with the Divine, culminating in rebirth. We have evidence of this in the fourth and last section of "The Far Field":

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
The murmur of the absolute, the why
Of being born fails on his naked ears.
His spirit moves like monumental wind
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude. (195)
After man realizes that he embodies all finite things, and that finite things reveal infinitude, he understands that he is eternal.

The culmination of Roethke's journey occurs in the sixth and last poem of his North American Sequence, "The Rose." The speaker seems to "split" in this piece. While one part of Roethke enjoys the things of this world, the other transcends the finite through imagination and comes to terms with his own death.

The poem begins by ensuring that we not see "place" as only a symbol but also as the physical place itself. Roethke writes: "There are those to whom place is unimportant, / But this place, where sea and fresh water meet, / Is important-" (196). After continuing to describe the physical, he writes in the third stanza of the first section of "The Rose": "I sway outside myself / Into the darkening currents" (196). This "separation" of self can be seen as Roethke finally giving into the death of self. This, of course, does not mean that he actually dies, but that he has come to understand the place death has in life.

The rose in this poem can be seen as symbolizing a number of things: the eternal, Roethke's consciousness, and experience. It can also be read as an allusion to Eliot's roses in his Eden-like garden from "Burnt Norton," which symbolize, among other things, moments of enlightenment. This rose garden is rarely reached, however,
as is evidenced by Eliot's claim: "Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden" (13).

Roethke writes in the second movement of "The Rose":

But this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Stays,
Stays in its true place,
Flowering out of the dark. (197)

Further in this passage we see Roethke at one with the physical world ("Moving with the waves"), but, if we take the rose to stand for Roethke's consciousness, the seeker has also transcended the physical. This is implicit in the repetition of "beyond": "Beyond the clover, the ragged hay, / Beyond the sea pine, the oak, the windtipped madrona" (197).

In the final stanza of "The Rose," after Roethke has written of his move beyond nature, he writes of the greenhouse roses he remembers from childhood. He implies in this description that, even then, he was drawn toward pondering nature as a means to experience spirituality. He thinks of "white and red" roses, symbolizing life and death, and thinks about how "those flowerheads seemed to flow toward" him, "beckon" him "out of" himself. But then he adds a human, familial element to his search for spiritual truths, as is evident in his question: "What need for heaven, then, / With that man, and those roses?" (197).
Here is where Roethke introduces—in the final poem—an element not present in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the physical father as a symbol of divinity. As a child Roethke looked to his father, master of the greenhouse, for meaning. Roethke's description of fathers in previous poems connotes both fear and love—the Greenhouse father to whom he refers in "The Lost Son" as "Father Fear" whose "look drained the stones" (53), or the papa from "My Papa's Waltz" who "beats time" on his son's head but who lovingly waltzes off with the boy still "clinging to his shirt" (43). But in Roethke's final poem of *North American Sequence*, "The Rose," Roethke associates "father" with time (in the sense that time is linked with death and negativity), and no longer sees him as intimidating, but actually perceives him as a means to experiencing more fully the Divine. Here, Roethke reaffirms the connection he has made earlier between the Master Gardener of the greenhouse and the Father of nature (God).

While Eliot does not write about his own ancestors in *Four Quartets*, he does write about his poetic ancestors in "Little Gidding," where he meets the "compound ghost" (who represents Dante, Yeats, and Herbert, and other poets whose influence is felt in his works). The apparition tells him that he is not "eager to rehearse thought and theory which [Eliot has] forgotten," and reminds him: "These things have served their purpose: let them be" (53).

Roethke denied that Eliot had influenced his poetry,
but it is apparent from work cited that Eliot's *Four Quartets* impacted the structure and content of Roethke's *North American Sequence*. Roethke, however, veered from Eliot's path of asceticism and purgation, accepting the self as a part of the natural world created by God, and therefore his means to spiritual enlightenment. Both poets moved beyond "becoming and perishing" (Roethke 199), beyond the limited spiritual vision most of us accept, and journeyed through their major poetic sequences on a spiritual quest that led them to union with the Divine.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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