

## Preface

This book, as its title suggests, was created as a companion to the poetry of American poet Theodore Roethke (1908–1963). Forty-four essays about representative poems, sequenced in the order of the poems' appearance in Roethke's *Collected Poems*, provide brief explications that illuminate Roethke's poetics, themes, and biographical, historical, cultural, and literary contexts.<sup>1</sup> The essays need not be read in sequence; they may be consulted as one leafs through field guides to birds, mammals, flowers, trees, or rocks, seeking a clear picture of a particular subject. Consultation, rather than continuity, is the principle at play. In addition to formalist close reading, contributors employ a number of critical approaches, including ecocriticism (Aaron Moe, for example, on "The Pike," and Bernard Quetchenbach on "The Far Field"), feminist criticism (Marcia Noe and Laura Duncan on "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz"), and reader-response (Carrie Duke on "Transplanting" and Jeff Vande Zande on "Otto"). Many of the authors have previously published scholarly articles on Roethke, and seven have published books on the poet: Peter Balakian, Don Bogen, Neal Bowers, Norman Chaney, William Heyen, Walter Kalaidjian, and Jay Parini. In the small world of Roethke scholarship, they are the stars, and their contributions to this book provide welcome postscripts to their earlier work.

Essays in this book are organized into sections focused on Roethke's individual volumes. Roethke published seven books of poetry during his lifetime: *Open House* (1941), *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), *Praise to the End!* (1951), *The Waking* (1953), *Words for the Wind* (1958), and *I Am! Says the Lamb* (children's poems; 1961). At the time of his death in 1963, he was preparing *The Far Field* (1964). Only that final, posthumous volume and the first two are full-length collections of new poetry written for adults. *Praise to the End!* collects and extends the *Lost Son* sequence begun in *The Lost Son*, and both *The Waking* and *Words for the Wind* are volumes of collected and new poems. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* appeared in hardcover in 1966, featuring all of the poems from the previous books, along with a section of "Previously Uncollected Poems." The 1975 paperback edition of *The Collected Poems* has slightly different pagination. Because it is the version still in print, the present book cites it in all cases.

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Roethke's poetry evolved over time, advancing through a series of stylistic phases. The formalism and metaphysical abstraction that characterize much of his first book gave way to the wildly original psychic autobiography of the free verse "greenhouse poems" and *Lost Son* sequence, followed by the heightened formalism, some of it strongly influenced by Yeats, of his midcareer work. His later poetry continued shifting between free verse and poetry in meter and rhyme, while adding a new approach, a long, descriptive, and meditative line inspired by Whitman and Eliot. Although some critics have charged Roethke with inconsistency not only in style but also in quality, with some suggesting that his later work is too derivative of earlier poets, the scholars in this book make a case for Roethke's poetry as a complete and unified body of work that acquired new qualities and values as his career progressed. The poet's range and progression lend themselves to, and even necessitate, the wide variety of theoretical approaches taken in the present volume. That the essays shift from one perspective to another reflects the complexity and multivalence of the poetry. Contributors are exploring a poetic landscape with features as varied as the actual territories of Roethke's life, from the Michigan of his youth to the Pacific Northwest of his last years, both of which provided imagery and themes for some of his greatest poems. The essays are by authors with divergent perspectives, concerns, and styles, a diversity that underscores this book's contribution to Roethke studies.

## NOTE

1. Most of the essays in this book have as their subject a single poem. Three diverge from that pattern, as discussed below.

Michael Hinds's essay deals with both "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (*later*)," the first two poems in Roethke's second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948). The two exist symbiotically, as if the second poem is a revision of the first, or a commentary on it.

Adam Putz focuses on "The Dance," the first part of "Four for Sir John Davies," which functions differently from Roethke's other long poems with numbered parts. While "The Lost Son," for example, is quite unified as a single poem, "Four for Sir John Davies" consists of four poems, as suggested by its title. The four are only marginally more integrated than the separate poems in Roethke's sequences, such as "North American Sequence." They have been previously approached by scholars both individually and as a single long poem.

Joseph T. Thomas Jr.'s essay draws wider conclusions about Roethke's poetry for children by focusing on three poems about a pair of anthropomorphic turtles, Myrtle and her cousin. The "Myrtle" poems, as Thomas points out, constitute Roethke's only grouping of poems for children.