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THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT

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Manuscript draft of his speech of acceptance of the  
Emerson--Thoreau Medal \*

\* The pencilings are those of Mr. Eliot. No one else  
has touched the manuscript.

RWB I insist we keep this in a safe place. *Gene Watson*

TSEliotMS Oct 21, 1959

American Academy

When I was informed <sup>of the time placed on my disposal</sup> that I should be allowed an hour for what I might have to say on this occasion, I was seized with apprehension. I most heartily wished to signify my appreciation of the honour which has been accorded to me by the Academy. Any allocution to that end should, I considered, be something quite new, fresh - even if not epoch-making. In any case, I do not keep a drawerful of unpublished lectures and sermons for repeated use, and when I have <sup>undertaken to</sup> delivered an address for the second time I have usually found it a painful experience: for I <sup>am</sup> ~~was~~ sure to come across some passages of which I had <sup>all</sup> forgotten the meaning, and others where I <sup>have</sup> ~~had~~ come to disagree with my own opinions. I wished to write something quite new, and if possible worthy of the occasion; but I knew that between the time of the invitation, and my departure from England, I simply should not have the leisure. ~~[I had recently been reading "Martin Chuzzlewit" aloud to my wife, and so was reminded of the occasion on which Martin was invited, at a few hours notice, to address the Watertoast Association on the subject of the Tower of London, or any other subject of his own choosing.]~~ I was ~~also~~ reminded of the time, many years ago, when I did deliver, in this country, the same lectures repeatedly in various universities: it was a way of getting about and seeing America and ~~also~~ <sup>the</sup> earning <sup>to do so.</sup> money. There was one occasion on which I <sup>had to prepare</sup> ~~did~~ prepare a new lecture at short notice, and a lecture which I never delivered again anywhere. I had undertaken to speak at a certain university - I prefer to forget where - and two days

beforehand encountered a friend who said that he looked forward to hearing me on the subject of the great English letter writers. Startled, I returned to my rooms and looked up the correspondence; sure enough, the invitation was to deliver a lecture on a foundation dedicated to Great English Letter Writers. <sup>So I</sup> ~~I did prepare~~ a lecture of the right length, with some references to Letter Writers in it, the letters of Keats and D.H. Lawrence being fresh in my memory; I managed to take up a good deal of time, I remember, by expatiating on the subject of my own ignorance in general, with particular reference to my ignorance of English Letter Writers. Whether the address was a success or not I do not know.

You may suspect from this anecdote that what I am saying now is merely an elaborate way of saying that I have nothing to say. Not so. I shall only talk briefly, it is true, and after that I propose to read to you one of my "Quartets", <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ there is a relation between what I have to say and the poem I shall read. For my subject is simply The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet. The association of ideas by which I came to the subject is somewhat as follows. This is the Emerson-Thoreau Award; it brings to mind Concord in particular and New England in general. Then I reflected that my honoured predecessor, the doyen of American poets to-day, was Robert Frost, distinctly in the mind of everyone a New England poet. I then asked myself whether I had any title to be a New England poet - as is my elder contemporary Robert

Frost, and as is my junior contemporary, Robert Lowell; and I think I have. Of course I know that the Academy is the American Academy; and just as the French Academy is not the Paris Academy, but draws its immortals from every region of France, so likewise the American Academy draws upon all the - I was about to say 48 but realise that I must now say 50 states; and let me extend my best wishes to Alaska for future representation here as well as in Washington. Nevertheless, this seems the occasion for me to stake my claim to a New England status. I am used to dealing with the question of whether I am, qua poet, American or English; and usually can escape by pointing out that whichever Wylan Auden is, I am the other; though seriously my poetry, like that of other poets, shows traces of every environment in which I have lived.

Now, when I speak of the influence of landscape, I am not thinking of Nature Poetry. Robert Frost is not definable as a Poet of Nature; his scope is much wider than that, and he is a poet of human nature as well as of flora, fauna and landscape; but he is certainly a poet who has been deeply affected by the New England landscape. It is true that I am from Missouri, and that my father before me was born in St. Louis. But Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, which is a good deal farther away <sup>from New England</sup> than <sup>is</sup> St. Louis. He came East, according to that useful compendium, "The Oxford Companion to American Literature", at the age of ten. Well, I came East too, at the age of 17, to a school not remote from Brookline; and ~~before that~~, as far back as I can remember and before, my family had

spent every summer on the New England coast. So my personal landscape is a composite. In St. Louis, my grandmother - as was very natural - wanted to live on in the house that my grandfather had built; my father, from filial piety, did not wish to leave the house that he had built only a few steps away; and so it came to be that we lived on in a neighbourhood which had become shabby to a degree approaching slumminess, after all our friends and acquaintances had moved further west. And in my childhood, before the days of motor cars, people who lived in town stayed in town. So it was, that for nine months of the year my scenery was almost exclusively urban, and <sup>a good deal of it</sup> seedily, drably urban at that. My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed. It was also, however, the Mississippi, as it passes between St. Louis and East St. Louis in Illinois; the Mississippi was the most powerful feature of Nature in that environment. My country landscape, on the other hand, is that of New England, of coastal New England, and New England from June to October. In St. Louis I never tasted an oyster or a lobster - we were too far from the sea. In Massachusetts, the small boy who was a devoted bird watcher never saw his birds <sup>at the season when they were</sup> making their nests.

I am not maintaining that early impressions are the only ones that count. <sup>far from it:</sup> Later impressions come to cover them, and to fuse, in some sort, with them. English landscape has come to be as significant for me, and as emotionally charged, as New England landscape. I do believe, however,

that the impressions made by English landscape upon myself are different from those made upon poets for whom it has been the environment of their childhood.

What I have been saying was, in its first intention, merely an elaboration of the simple "Thank you". But I hope that my words will shed some light upon the poem I am about to read; and also substantiate, to some degree, my claim to being, among other things, a New England poet. You will notice, however, that this poem begins where I began, with the Mississippi; and that it ends, where I and my wife expect to end, at the parish church of a tiny village in Somerset.