Tact and the Poet's Force

I want to begin by reading, for my text, a poem from a children's record called "The Carrot Seed":

Carrots grow from carrot seeds;
I planted one to grow it.
I'll water it; I'll pull the weeds.
Carrots grow from carrot seeds.

On the record, this is the song of the hero, a little boy who plants one single carrot seed, believing it will come up. Every day he cultivates around the seed, waters it, pulls up weeds; every day he watches for his carrot. Meantime, his older brother stands around singing:

Nyaa, nyaa, it won't come up;
Nyaa, nyaa, it won't come up;
Won't come up; won't come up;
Nothing's coming up!

Even worse than that, this little boy has parents. They say, "Well, your carrot *might* come up, but you mustn't feel too badly, *if*. . . ." and they have a little song:

Grownups know a lot of things
That little boys can't know,
So don't be disappointed, if
Your carrot doesn't grow.

Faced by this multitude of skeptics, our hero can only reply by singing, once again, his credo:

Carrots grow from carrot seeds;
I planted one to grow it.
I'll water it; I'll pull the weeds.
Carrots grow from carrot seeds.

This is a story, then, about faith. This little boy has a theory about life and growth in the universe, about his relation to natural processes; it is his answer to all questions, all doubts. One must admit that he has better luck with *his* theories than most of us have with ours: one day, in a mighty fanfare, a regular sunburst of trumpets and kettle-drums, the biggest carrot in the whole world springs up. When his astonished family asks him what in the world's going on out there, he replies in the most matter-of-fact tone:

The carrot. Came up.

He shows neither surprise nor triumph: this is exactly what *had* to happen; he had always *known* this.

After I had heard this record several times, I sat down to read the record jacket. I got a severe shock. I could recall that little boy's voice saying, with plangent certainty, "I know it." But those words weren't on the jacket. They weren't on the record either—he had never said them. I heard them, yet he had not said them. What happened, apparently, was this: when he sang

Carrots grow from carrot seeds;
I planted one to grow it.

I must have thought ahead, half-consciously, and tried to guess the rest of that old familiar stanza-form:

I'll water it; I'll pull the weeds
And it will grow, I know it.

Instead, when he got to that last line, he fooled me—he simply repeated the first line, his cherished principle:

Carrots grow from carrot seeds.

Now the problem I want to raise is this: Why, when the story is already about a little boy's feeling that "he knows it," and when the poem so openly prepared a place for him to say that, why didn't he say it?

Let me leave that question hanging for a moment, to establish a second text—a slightly more conventional one. Early in the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a passage where Gray describes the "solemn stillness" of the twilit landscape around the church. He can hear a few beetles droning, a few sheepbells tinkling; everything else is silent

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bow'r
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

That passage admittedly does not share many qualities with "The Carrot Seed." Yet these two poems are alike, I think, in showing a very high degree of tact—a tact so highly refined that both passages are colored (perhaps even controlled) by crucial words or phrases which are never even spoken.

If you go back through the many different versions of this poem which Gray published during his lifetime, you discover something

surprising. The earliest version and the deathbed version give that stanza exactly as I read it. All the many intervening versions, however, have instead of a "secret bower" a "sacred bower." And I submit that the purpose of the word "secret" is not to convey that the owl's bower is hidden—that's of no importance one way or the other—but rather to suggest that some "sacred" power, to which this owl is related, looks down over the scene.

Several factors contribute to this sense of sacredness. First, the physical presence of the church and graveyard; second, the similarity in sound between "secret" and "sacred"; third, both "secret" and "bower" already have holy connotations because of their use in the Bible and other earlier literature; finally, the interplay between "secret" and the phrase "ancient solitary reign." It's a mighty unusual owl that has an "ancient solitary reign"—you won't find him in Roger Tory Peterson. Thus, all resources have been used to suggest that crucial word "sacred." All resources, that is, *except* assertion.

The most interesting thing here, though, is that Gray had had that word "sacred" consciously in his mind, even published it. But he finally repressed it. For his final version, he must have decided that his first impulse—"secret"—was right; that the passage was better and the bower perhaps more sacred, if that sacredness was created by suggestion and atmosphere, not by assertion.

I must ask you to believe that poetic examples of this sort might be multiplied almost endlessly. The problem I want to address, then, is that old question asked so often by exasperated businessmen—my father among them—"Why don't you guys, you poets, say what you mean?"

I believe—and I hope this sounds either dangerously revolutionary, or else hopelessly old-fashioned—that it is a poet's business to say something interesting. Something so interesting and so valuable that people should stop whatever it is they are doing and listen . . . should stop thumbing through their order books, turning the dials on the TV, chasing the secretary around the desk. Truly, none of those things is

trivial. The pursuit of a living, of some opinion to shape your life, of love—you must offer people something more valuable so they can dare to stop.

Of course, I am not saying that people *will* listen if you do say something interesting; quite the reverse is true. Unfortunately, people prefer writing that is dull, so most writing is intentionally dulled for its reader. Its real aim is the domination of that reader's spirit by the writer, or by those who pay him. That is best accomplished by being dull and so stultifying the reader's intelligence, his ability to discriminate, to make his own choice. This is true, of course, not only of such written material as newspapers, novels, and magazines, but of all forms of communication—radio, television, movies, nine-tenths of the talking done by merchants, teachers, parents. Their aim is to control—to get us to choose this whisky or that political group, this tobacco or that god, this brand of coffin or that system of values. In order to control our choice, they limit our area of vision, our awareness of the choices; the best way to do that is simply to say over and over again the things we have already heard and given at least nominal acceptance.

To such purposes, the artist—the man who wants to be interesting—stands constantly opposed. He always says something we have not heard before; he always suggests possibilities. This, however, makes him suspect if not actually hated, for we resist anything new with terrible ferocity.

That is understandable. We have done much magnificent theorizing about the world; the world remains a mystery. Man may become extinct, tyranny may prevail, your business fail, your wife leave you, tomorrow. There is a strong possibility that no idea works *all* the time. All the ideas carry guarantees, of course; the only trouble is that nobody knows where you go to get your money, or your life, back. This terrifying possibility that no idea always works is suggested every time someone offers us a new fact or a new idea. The more ignorant we are, the more sluggishly we think, then the more desperately we

cling to the hope that our ideas are adequate. They clearly are not. The only way we can reassure ourselves is simply to deny the existence of anything which does not fit our preconceptions. So, all tyrants pander to our prejudices. We, in relief and gratitude, will give over control of our lives to anyone or anything that will just repeat to us those dangerously comforting half-truths we have invented about our world.

If, however, we fear any new fact or idea because it implies freedom of vision, we fear far more any new person, because he implies freedom of choice. We hate the man we can't disarm by slipping him into a stereotype, the man who won't fit our preconceptions about Man. Feeling as inadequate as we do, we automatically assume that anyone different must be better. And *that* we do not permit. So, we enforce our weaknesses upon each other. We hate the man who reminds us of the value of our differences.

We hate him even more because he reminds us that we are ourselves, not by force of circumstance, but largely by our own choice. If we do not approve of ourselves, we could have chosen differently; we can still choose differently tomorrow.

Unfortunately for the writer, he will always have to frighten people, and in just these ways. He can say nothing worth hearing, nothing worth stopping for, unless he says something new and different. He can only do that in one of three obvious ways:

First, he might have a new idea.
Second, he may have a new set of details and facts structured within old ideas.
Third, he may have a new style; that is, he may have a way of talking which symbolizes a new and different person.

If there are other ways to be interesting in a poem I have not seen them.

I want to devote the rest of my paper, then, to an analysis of the problems presented by this classification. First, and though many

modern critics would disagree, I do believe a poem may have value simply for the idea it expresses. This is true, however, only if the idea is a new one—and there is nothing about which people more willingly fool themselves. It rather seldom happens; still it is possible: a writer *could* have a new idea. Let me give an example by the British poet Philip Larkin: a poem addressed to Sally Amis, the newborn daughter of his friend Kingsley Amis.

BORN YESTERDAY
for Sally Amis

Tightly-folded bud,
I have wished you something
None of the others would:
Not the usual stuff
About being beautiful,
Or running off a spring
Of innocence and love—
They will all wish you that,
And should it prove possible,
Well, you're a lucky girl.

But if it shouldn't, then
May you be ordinary;
Have, like other women,
An average of talents:
Not ugly, not good-looking,
Nothing uncustomary
To pull you off your balance,
That, unworkable itself,
Stops all the rest from working.
In fact, may you be dull—
If that is what a skilled,
Vigilant, flexible,
Unemphasised, enthralled
Catching of happiness is called.

This idea—that Sally may be luckier to grow up neither specially gifted nor good-looking—is only new in some relative sense. We have all suspected it at some time—perhaps about our own children—but it so quietly overthrows our ordinary values about success and happiness that we usually repress it. So, in some vital sense, a new idea. And it is worth our time to listen to a man who believes this so earnestly that he can look at the newborn daughter of his friend and can honestly wish her to be ordinary so that she can be happy.

In this poem the idea has interest *as* an idea. Larkin gives almost no concrete details—he doesn't need them. Again, there is almost nothing of interest in the style, the voice; the man who could honestly speak this new idea was, automatically, a new and interesting man. Unfortunately for any of us who write, though, the bloom is already rubbed off that subject—in that poem, by that poet. From now on, a writer cannot merely by its use say anything new or valuable; that's been done.

So, one of the things I am doing here is to rebel against an old commandment of my schooldays: Thou shalt not use abstract words or ideas in thy poem. Although the abstract words—truth, justice, happiness, democracy, love, kindness, etc.—are usually dull, that is because they are normally used to narrow the field of vision, to keep people from seeing. There is no reason they cannot be used to widen vision, if the writer is either more honest or more capable of abstract thought than most of his culture is. It is not impossible to be interesting when talking about ideas or when using ideational language; it is merely improbable. The poet's chosen vocation is to try something improbable.

There are, however, two hints. First, most people who are very anxious to tell you their ideas have none. That's why they're anxious to tell them. Second, if you *are* looking for a new idea, you are more likely to find it close to home. Any truth worth mentioning is probably something we all know far too well already but which we are laboring to obscure. Freud once remarked that he was considered one of the

geniuses of his age because he had made three discoveries—no one of which was unknown to any nursemaid on the whole continent! When Larkin says, "May you be dull" or, in another poem, "We all hate home/And having to be there" he has widened our vision to include something we always knew. This releases the energy we have wasted trying to hold it out of sight; at the same time, it suggests whole new areas of possible choice. It does not control which of the choices we shall make; it only makes us freer to choose, more responsible to the thing we *do* choose, and stronger to support it.

Now I certainly am not suggesting that a poem can never state any idea unless that is a new idea. In any poem, there may very well be a statement of idea, which poem we, however, will value for other qualities. This can come about in a great number of ways. It happens perhaps most commonly, certainly most significantly, when an idea is discovered by the poem itself to be already underlying one of its own patterns of words and facts. The *discovery* of any such idea (or emotion—I am using the terms quite interchangeably) is one of the most exciting events in our world; it has a value quite distinct from any value inhering to the idea *as* an idea. Consequently, just such a discovery is very often the climactic action of a poem. Let me give a single example, a poem by Rilke, which I give in a rough prose translation:

AN ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO

We will not ever know his legendary head
Wherein the eyes, like apples, ripened. Yet,
His torso glows like a candelabra
In which his vision, merely turned down low,

Still holds and gleams. If this were not so, the curve
Of the breast could not so blind you, nor this smile
Pass lightly through the soft turn of the loins
Into that center where procreation flared.

If this were not so, this stone would stand defaced, maimed,
Under the transparent cascade of the shoulder,
Not glimmering that way, like a wild beast's pelt,

Nor breaking out of all its contours
Like a star; for there is no place here
That does not see you. You must change your life.

You must change your life. You wouldn't walk across the street to hear *that.* How many people tell you that each week? And with what a multitude of ulterior motives! Enjoy life; eat at Fred's! Give wings to your heart; Northwest Orient Airlines! The poet's motive is only that you become someone discovering that; someone looking at the statue and having the impression that its lost eyes have somehow spread through the whole trunk. Now the whole body seems to watch *you;* you came to the museum to look at the statue; it is looking at you. Suddenly, the discovery of this idea—You must change your life—transforms the whole poem. You see that this body, maimed as it is, does not show you *its* inadequacy, but *yours.* This experience, and the emergence of the idea from it, is worth crawling miles for. What you do with that experience is your business.

So much for the handling of ideas. Let me turn now to the problems of tact in handling details. I want to take an extreme example: "Protocols" by Randall Jarrell. In this poem, several German children tell of their trip to the concentration camp at Birkenau in Odessa, and of how they were put to death in gas chambers which were disguised as shower rooms. You may not know that the poison gas, phosgene, smells like clover or hay—hence, the smell of hay mentioned at the end of the poem. Again, as the children are entering the camp, they see a smokestack; they think it's a factory.

PROTOCOLS

We went there on the train. *They had big barges*
that they towed,

We stood up, there were so many I was squashed.
There was a smoke-stack, then they made me wash.
It was a factory, I think. *My mother held me up*
And I could see the ship that made the smoke.

When I was tired my mother carried me.
She said, "Don't be afraid." But I was only tired.
Where we went there is no more Odessa.
They had water in a pipe—like rain, but hot;
The water there is deeper than the world

And I was tired and fell in in my sleep
And the water drank me. That is what I think.
And I said to my mother, "Now I'm washed and dried,"
My mother hugged me, and it smelled like hay
And that is how you die. And that is how you die.

How many poets tried to write this poem and failed! How many could not resist saying that this is evil—that it is wrong to kill children. That is not worth saying. If the reader doesn't know that by now, there is no use *your* telling him. Everyone agrees that other people should not kill children; we only disagree as to when it may be necessary, what might be more important, and whether or not children *are* being killed. Jarrell's business, here, is to show that this reality exists, children *are* being killed. He has had the tact to see that any statement of idea would have weakened his poem.

But beyond this, he has seen the need for an extreme tact in choice of details. How many poets could have resisted the brutal guard who would beat the children and curse them for Jewish swine?—the weeping and hysterical sobbing?—the final horror when the Jews discovered the phosgene in the shower, the rush for the door, the strangling and trampling? They are all true—all happened at some time. Why are they kept out of the poem?

First, the strategy of argument suggests that when the facts are so strong you make a better case by showing your opponent's argument

at its best. If at its best it is horrifying, you needn't argue the rest. This is Jarrell's strategy. The children rather enjoy the trip; everything is exciting, like a trip to a big city department store. The guards appear only as "they" who give orders to wash. Thus, we are not distracted into questions of manner; the real problem here is not *how* people should kill children, it is the reality that people *do* kill children.

But there is another reason why restraint is so crucial here. This subject lies in an area where we give habitual consent without real belief. For years, all the communication media told us about the German extermination camps; as a result, many of us were surprised to find that they really *did* exist. Not that we had ever said, even to ourselves, that the news reports were false. Rather we accepted them in their own spirit: as self-comforting rationalizations proving our own moral superiority and justifying our policies. Yet, we knew that the existence of such camps did not really account for our foreign policy; knew that we would have been told roughly the same things even if they had not been true; knew that even if the facts were true, they could be selected in accordance with any desired effect. We accepted the stories about concentration camps much as we accepted the advertisements that appeared beside them: we don't believe the tobacco really *is* better, we just buy it. Most of us already desired or accepted our government's policies, so we accepted the stories about concentration camps without really *believing* them.

We had so often used these truths *as if* they were lies, we could no longer believe in them. Such subjects become almost impossible to write about—during the war, in fact, Auden said they *were* impossible. Yet, if you cannot write about these, almost the key subjects to our civilization, why would anyone go to the terribly hard work that writing is? Jarrell shows what is required—a complete removal from any ulterior motive, an absolute dedication to the object and the experience.

Oddly enough, we find that Jarrell's understated version is nearer the literal fact than is the propagandist's version. In such camps there

was little public brutality; that would cause hysteria or resistance and hinder the efficient operation of extermination procedures. Besides, the guards, however much trained in brutality, remained pretty much ordinary people. They reacted much as you or I might have. Unloading bodies from gas chambers drove most of them mad in about three months. That job had to be given over to trustees *(sonderkommando)* who could themselves be gassed when *they* went mad. Of course, some of the guards were brutal—many of us, when we think we're doing something wrong, do it with greater emphasis, hoping this proves it right. But most of us react differently. Most of us who operate gas chambers, hang nooses, or electric chairs prefer to do so with every demonstration of kindly concern, since we too want to believe ourselves kindly and gentle people.

Yet this question of nearness to literal truth can be very misleading. What the writer seeks is imaginative truth; and *that* Jarrell's poem has. You know at once that this is no news editor trying to arouse your feelings (or his own) to the support of some particular line of action; these are merely several children who died there, who tell you exactly, simply and directly, what it was like, how it felt. They would not *dream* of enlisting you. Hence they are more real than propaganda's children ever become; too real for anyone's comfort. They might be of any nationality; so might their guards. And this makes the poem terribly threatening, indeed. It does not say "He did it," or even "You did it"—it merely says "This is." It leaves open the horrifying possibility: "I did it. We *all* did it. We all *could* do it."

To write this poem, you must first be willing to imagine yourself as a child in the situation—a *real* child, who might even enjoy parts of the trip. Then, you must be willing to imagine yourself a guard—this is the real test—and see how you would act. You must admit that moral weakness *could* lead you into such a position, could at least strongly tempt you. Until you are willing to admit that you share some part of humanity's baseness and degradation, you cannot write about humanity's dignity and gentleness. Of all the ulterior motives,

none is more common, none more debilitating, none more damning, than the pretense to moral superiority.

To show what happens in the absence of this kind of tact, let me take a passage from a man who, in his earlier works, had been a very fine poet indeed, Kenneth Rexroth. *The Dragon and the Unicorn* tells about a journey through Europe shortly after World War II. After describing the miseries of the poor in Capri, Naples, and Sorrento, Rexroth turns to address an imaginary reader:

> Sitting there, reading this in your
> Psychoanalyst's waiting room,
> Thirty-five years old, faintly
> Perfumed, expensively dressed,
> Sheer nylons strapped to freezing thighs,
> Brain removed at Bennington
> Or Sarah Lawrence, . . .
> . . . you
> Think this is all just Art—contrast—
> Naples—New York. It is not. Every time
> You open your frigidaire
> A dead Neapolitan baby
> Drops out.

This is probably one of the most significant of ideas for us—that our prosperity is based on the poverty, even the starvation, of others. Yet no man in his right mind could think that a new idea; any man capable of hearing that has heard it. What does Rexroth offer in voice and detail, what of himself does he contribute, to bring his idea to life again? Only the most blatant hyperbole, whose purpose clearly is not to introduce people to a reality they want to ignore, but rather to impress upon them his moral superiority. This amounts to an act of spiritual violence intended to dominate the reader and force his acceptance.

Such spiritual colonialism is as inimical to art as its techniques are inimical to peace when employed by nations. Such a failure of tact

could come about, I think, only because of a deep insecurity in the writer. If he really thought his idea were adequate, would he quite so desperately need my agreement? Yet this kind of insecurity tends to dog the heels of any older idea, since the longer an idea is around, the more we will be aware of that idea's failures to cover the complexities of the world and of our minds. As John Jay Chapman remarked, anything you've believed more than three weeks is a lie. Yet it's true, too—as true as the first day you found it. But if your mind is at all active, so many qualifications will soon arise in your consciousness (not to mention the subconscious) that even that idea's complementary opposite must also be represented if we are to do justice to our minds.

Carrots *do* grow from carrot seeds. However, after planting a garden several years ago, I can report to you that carrots also do *not* grow from carrot seeds. This may have something to do with the fact that farmers plant them broadcast.

Our prosperity *is* based on the poverty of others. I would furnish you no excuse for ignoring that. Yet we must also see that it is based on the prosperity of others; many other people's prosperity is based on *ours*. Many valuable things and many revolting things exist because of that prosperity; you will not sum up your knowledge of it or your feelings about it in any simple statement.

The problem is that most people, once committed to any line of thought, cannot endure the unavoidable weaknesses and complexities of their position. They shout their idea louder and louder, hoping to quiet everyone else's doubts and especially their own. Soon, every claim to certainty is a proof of doubt. The man who really *does* know something will show it in his actions and his tone of voice—like the little boy in "The Carrot Seed." And it does seem that somewhere we must mention that however much we admire his confidence, his faith, he *was* wrong.

Too many people, however, outgrow Rexroth's kind of naïveté only to adopt its complementary opposite—a spurious superiority. They

mature enough to see that no idea will permit them to be right all the time, so they reject *all* ideas. They become intellectuals. They live only to demonstrate their detachment from all positions, their utter superiority to any belief or any feeling. To them, the greatest sin is passion or energy. *Our* problem, I think, is to discriminate, yet not lose the ability to believe and act; to belong energetically to the world without being an idiot. We can do this only if we have the strength to live inside human limitations, to know that it *is* better to have lived, even though this means being wrong a good part of the time.

In contrast to Rexroth's poem, I want to quote another poem on the same subject, "The Golf Links" by Sarah Cleghorn. I think that these four lines demonstrate, as little else can, the strength that comes into the poet's voice when he has the inner security to let the facts speak in their own ungarnished strength.

THE GOLF LINKS

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

This brings me to the problems of tact in style—and in a certain sense I have been talking about this problem all along, since the way we use ideas or facts is a part of our style. The particular point of my argument has been to prevent some misuse of facts or ideas from destroying the poet's voice in his poem.

If that is not to happen, a very great deal must be left to the tone of voice, the choice of language, the suggestiveness of words. As an example, let me take one of the most familiar poems in the language:

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING
—*Robert Frost*

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;

He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Why *does* so much have to depend on the furtive tone of "He will not see me"? On the despair implied by "The darkest evening of the year"? (Some readers apparently thought they could find that on their light meter!) On the sleep and death associations of "easy" and "downy"?

Simply because Frost must remain faithful to the truth of the experience; must resist the temptation to a spurious superiority. When the woods speak to you, they don't say, "Commit suicide"—or if they do, you'd better have someone look to your woods; they're getting thinned out. If you hate yourself, they say (as they say in a poem of Robert Lowell's), "Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now. Now." If you hate your world, they say—in the softest, gentlest voice, "You are *so* tired; surely you deserve a *little* sleep. We are lovely, dark and deep." To weaken the seduction of that voice would be to destroy the poem.

Just as the writer must give up all pretense to intellectual superiority, he must give up also all pretense to moral superiority. No man detached enough to use the word "suicide" would be standing there

to "watch [those] woods fill up with snow." "Suicide" is committee language. It is always easy to say "I am a terrible sinner" or "I have suicidal urges" or "I have an Oedipus complex." You *say* you have troubles; you sound so superior to them that you belie your own statement in making it. The hard thing, the strong thing, is to say in simple, personal language, how that problem affects the pattern of your life.

Frost unquestionably knew he was writing about a suicidal urge; he may have known that this was probably related to a desire for the womb. To have said so would have been a gross failure in humility. Again, however, this humility is terribly threatening to those who do not happen to share it. We all would like to think ourselves far above such feelings. But just as Larkin's poem cannot choose in favor of home (as it does) until it has faced the fact that "we all hate home," so Frost's poem cannot honestly choose life (as it does) until it has humbly admitted how good death sometimes looks.

Studying the worksheets of this poem, it appears that "downy" was one of the last words added to the poem—it appears that Frost felt once he had found this word he had guaranteed the poem's experience, the seductive call of the woods to just step in and fall asleep, to have it downier and easier than this life ever gives it to you. No doubt, Frost could easily have picked a more "deathy" word and so have made his meaning unmistakable—even to those with a vested interest in misunderstanding. At the same time, this would demonstrate his command of the situation, his detachment from it. Not only would this distract his attention from the experience; it would strongly suggest that his real aim was our admiration for him, not our participation with him.

Why, finally, is all this tact required? Why must ideas and emotions be repressed from conscious statement into details and facts; repressed again from facts into the texture of language, the choice of words, connotations; repressed finally into technical factors like rhyme and echoes of other words. Why must we even depend on words like

"sacred" or "I know it" which aren't in the printed poem at all? For two reasons which are really one: we aim at truth to experience and we aim at powerful expression. We are concerned here with problems of inmost belief and of strong emotion—and these again are areas of habitual disbelief. We simply do not credit people's conscious statements in these areas. And for very good reasons—most people simply do not use their conscious minds for the discernment or the revelation of the truth. They use their conscious minds to disguise themselves from others and from themselves, to make themselves look better than they are.

We simply do not believe anyone who talks very easily about matters of great feeling or ultimate belief. We are more impressed by the man who implies, almost by accident, that a bower is sacred to him or that "He knows it." We are not impressed with this kind of talk unless we see that the feeling is strong enough to force its way out past some sort of reticence.

Auden once wrote:

> The mouse we banished yesterday
> Is an enraged rhinoceros today

He was referring to the way we often repress some idea or feeling, which then collects great strength and spreads through the whole pattern of our lives. Often enough this process is terribly destructive; sometimes it is very useful. The poet's chief business is the revelation of the pattern of our lives, regardless of whether he approves of that or not. Thus, he has more use for an enraged rhinoceros in his poem than for a mouse. Too much consciousness, misapplied, leads directly to mousy poems.

So the poet imitates life, often, by carrying on in his poem a process similar to that of our life. He takes some idea, ordinary enough in itself, and represses it from conscious assertion, so that it can spread into the details, the style, the formal technique. Like the lost eyes of Rilke's statue, this lost consciousness spreads throughout the whole

trunk; it soon stares out from every pore. Since it is out of the reach of conscious assertion, we know it is less liable to manipulation toward any false motive; its genuineness is more nearly guaranteed.

Thus, in his work, the poet faces that same problem faced daily by the individual conscience. We know that we must restrain some part of our energies or we destroy ourselves. Yet, as we turn our energies back against ourselves, they too may destroy us. In the case of mental and emotional energies, they can make us short-sighted, cramped in mind, dull, dispirited. We must learn to restrain and refocus our powers in such a way that we will not be right at the expense of being dead and worthless; must learn to be, though necessarily both right and wrong, yet stronger, livelier, fitter to survive, and more worth the effort of preserving.

11/6/82

Finding a Poem

In the Introduction to his *Collected Poems,* Robert Frost writes:

> It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best
> of it was thought of first and saved for the last. . . .
> No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.

If this is true, revision may be one of the most important creative acts; it is certainly the creative act most easily studied.

I find that my own revisions fall into two categories. First, many appear to be purely stylistic. I was raised, poetically, in a highly intellectual atmosphere; William Empson was my first love. When one of my poems goes bad, I almost always have to go back and write it longer—develop, openly and extensively, ideas which I have been trying to imply intensively. This does not involve changing the poem's denotational sense, only its way of speaking. That does not mean that such changes are unimportant; it is at least possible to argue that a