MAKING A POEM

By Melville Cane: A WIDER ARC

Making a Poem

AN INQUIRY INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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In Memory of Florence

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INTRODUCTION

I HAVE ALWAYS been interested in writing poems, and not at all in writing about them. In the past I shied away from any analysis of the creative process, not so much to hug the secret of how my poems had come to pass but because of doubt that I could communicate anything worth while. Perhaps I felt unconsciously that I had never tried to explain to myself, let alone to anyone else, the seemingly unfathomable mystery.

A chance conversation changed all this. It differed from earlier ones on the general subject since this time I summoned the energy to write it down, however reluctantly.

That evening, after our guests had left, I was still in a glow from having talked about myself. Most importantly, I had deeply impressed my wife. She proceeded to read me a lecture on obstinacy and insisted that I do something about it, not tomorrow or next week but right now. So, cutting short further argument, I capitulated then and there and put everything down on paper before turning in for the night. I called the piece "Making a Poem," and sent it to *The Forum* magazine which accepted it.

The matter might have ended there but for an unforeseen circumstance. The piece attracted attention. Letters began coming in—from fellow poets not usually tempted to praise, from teachers of literature, and from people altogether removed from the world of esthetics but curious to know what makes

the wheels turn. "Making a Poem" soon found its way into anthologies and textbooks on creative writing. Its encouraging reception stirred me to further interior exploration of the creative process as I experienced it.

What moved me most strongly was the realization that a large general public existed which held itself aloof from poetry as something not to be comprehended or enjoyed by the average intelligence. As this realization sharpened I grew more willing to take the world into my confidence, to expose myself autobiographically by reporting so far as lay within my powers the step-by-step, trial-and-error operations from the first tappings on the door of the unconscious to the emergence of the final form, the completed expression. This I have sought to do honestly, accurately, and faithfully. A retentive memory and my notes and worksheets have been of much help.

The task has moreover been illuminating for me as a revelation through self-investigation and self-analysis of the nature of my own psychological and esthetic constitution. In reviewing the poems, as will be seen, I have discovered influences and factors of which I was wholly unaware at the time of and in the act of composition.

Specialists in these matters inform me that my type of approach, non-technical, personal to the point of self-disclosure, circumstantial in its detailed examination of particulars, is something new in the literature. I know nothing about this.

Poe in his "Philosophy of Composition" at a century's distance anticipates what I have done here. With a sly thrust at the vanity of poets and their failure to understand their own processes, he observes:

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could detail,

step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say; but perhaps the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy —an ecstatic intuition; and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought, at the true purposes seized only at the last moment, at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view, at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable, at the cautious selections and rejections, at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions, the tackle for scene-shifting, the step-ladders and demon-traps, the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred constitutes the properties of the literary histrio.

"Authorial vanity" has not deterred me and I don't compose "by a species of fine frenzy" but laboriously and gropingly.

I have no wish to impose my views on others or to dogmatize on how poetry should be written. It would be presumptuous to do so since I am no authority except for myself.

Many of these pieces have already appeared in *The American Scholar, The University of Kansas City Review, The Saturday Review of Literature,* and *The Forum.* Their publication and the favorable response thereafter suggest that the material is of interest and, I trust, of value to a variety of readers.

Finally, my deepest regret is that the person to whom I owe most is no longer here to take her rightful share in what has been a true collaboration. I cannot close without acknowledging my vast debt to Florence, my wife, whose unfailing understanding, support, and devotion to the project has inspired and guided me to its fruition.

MAKING A POEM

ONE

Making a Poem

"But HOW DO YOU go about writing your poems?"

A fair question, but I confess I usually stiffen and close up under it, as if the answer were too complicated for utterance, in any event incomprehensible. However, on occasion when the questioner by her serious eagerness—it's usually a she—has demonstrated her right to enlightenment, I've been moved to search for an intelligible answer.

When I was a small boy we had in our library huge, uncomfortable one-volume editions, in calf or morocco, of *The Complete Poetical Worlds* of Byron, Scott, Moore, Burns, also the New England "classics," Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson. I recall with what awe I approached them. Their authors were "Poets," and as such aloof Olympians, divinely chosen, whose words were all equally holy and beautiful beyond the reach of criticism. These rare and special souls grouped themselves in my imagination upon a mountain peak, close to the All Highest, sharing his ethereal rays.

While my particular case was doubtless extreme, it represents, I find, to an amazing degree the attitude of the uneducated reading public toward poets and poetry. Poets apparently are of a race apart, their work is "inspired." To most persons

the nature of the creative act, the factors involved, remain a mystery too troublesome for investigation.

Being a lawyer as well as a writer of verse makes my situation even more perplexing, produces further questions.

"How do you find time to do it?" "How do you manage to have enough energy over, after a long day at the office?" "I suppose you write only on summer vacations." Self-consciously disclaiming any superiority of virtue, one replies that the time some people take for bridge or golf can be used in writing; that the intense desire to do a thing may generate its own energy in the doing; that the act of composition can assert itself, regardless of place, day of the week, or season.

Now, if this simple preliminary observation manages to sink in acceptably, I may next be confronted with the query which opens this piece:

"But how do you go about writing your poems?"

There's an element of bafflement in that challenging "but." I counter with:

"You've oversimplified the problem. Each poem proceeds from its own peculiar momentum."

The other evening a sympathetic young woman pursued this very line of cross-examination, ending with: "But you must start with some form, mustn't you?" She was fingering the pages of a book of mine. "Take this short piece," she said, " 'One by One.' What have you got to say about that?"

This, in substance, is what I said about that. But first to set down the poem, in all its simplicity.

ONE BY ONE

One by one,
Branch to branch,
Leaves topple,

Zigzag
Through motionless October,
Struggle,
Founder,—
Golden birds
With broken wings.

I was spending a Sunday in the country at the height of autumn. The foliage had turned to gold and scarlet; the sun, bright in a cloudless sky, had lost some of its earlier intensity. On every hand were intimations of a dying season. I walked along a shady road past fields stacked with corn-stalks, past fading wild flowers. The scene held both serenity and sadness. Unconsciously as I moved along I must have relaxed the stresses of city life, yielded to the mood of the season, and for the moment been at peace. It is this state of detachment, this absence of conflict which must ensue before artistic creation is possible. This condition can be induced consciously; more often it simply happens.

That day it simply happened. The gentlest breeze stirred; a few leaves now and then slowly drifted down from tall New England maples, not in a cloudy swirl but one by one. That was how I saw and felt them, "one by one." The words persisted warmly, appealingly. I stepped through the file of trees to the beat of them. This one-by-oneness, this singleness of each leaf fitted my own sense of solitude; the phrase had acquired heat and feeling. It had soon become an entity, a nucleus, the signal to me, should I choose to heed it, that a poem was in process of becoming. In this instance I did choose to listen and obey. Accordingly I set to work to report the experience as objectively, as free from moral comment, as possible.

The initial haunting phrase struck me as the right unit line to set the pace and suggest the climate of the poem. I likewise

saw the need of brevity in the telling. These were not arbitrary, a priori decisions, mentally arrived at, but rather commands imposed on the sensibilities by something beyond my control. A convenient name for this something is the creative process; through its activity form and content are inseparable manifestations of one unifying operation.

Thus my first line became

One by one.

I then proceeded to reobserve the occurrence. The movement extended down from the top of each tree, from

Branch to branch.

This made a satisfactory companion line to the first, of equal length and appropriate weight. With these preliminaries at least tentatively sketched—for they were of course subject not only to change but to abandonment—it was now the moment to introduce the dramatis personae and their course. I next wrote:

Leaves flutter,
Zigzag
Through glorious October.

But, submitted to a sharper test, "flutter" seemed commonplace and inexact as well, and "glorious" seemed mere filler, contributing nothing to the life of the poem. Once freed from the branch the leaves more accurately "went down" rather than fluttered. "Topple" seemed best to describe the helplessness I wished to indicate. "Zigzag" I liked from the beginning since it suggested retarded movement, backing and filling. And further to emphasize a certain timelessness and impendingness, I substituted "motionless" for "glorious."

By this time the poem was well along its brief career, the leaves were making their inconsequential descent. If their destiny were merely to drop to earth, the situation would have been unworthy of record. Something more was implicit, a sense of drama which I attempted to supply with the single word

Struggle,

followed by the word of defeat:

Founder.

I chose these two words carefully out of many synonyms not only for their apt meaning, but because "struggle" made a sound-balance, though not a rhyme, with "topple," and "founder" with "October," thus also weaving a closer texture for the poem.

Up to this point, therefore, I had written:

One by one,
Branch to branch,
Leaves topple,
Zigzag
Through motionless October,
Struggle,
Founder.

I had induced the mood, found the right line-by-line pace, suggested the slow, seasonal disintegration, but had yet to infuse the whole with that emotional glow, that electric charge without which a poem fails to come off and to be memorable to the reader. I needed a vivid, poignant image to sum up and crystallize the sense of pain and beauty, an image which to carry must be relevant and extracted from the materials at hand. And so, as I refelt the experience and brooded on it, there came to me this picture:

Golden birds
With broken wings.

I had done what I set out to do.

Emily Dickinson once said: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." Not meaning to invite comparisons, I confess to a similar stirring of the blood after finishing any piece which keenly satisfies my intentions. This physical recognition, being subjective, is of course no criterion of the poem's ultimate worth or of its impact upon the reader or listener. One can only hope that the desired communication will result.

To repeat, no two poems have the same origin or travel parallel paths in their development. And no two poets have the same approach. The spark which notifies the poet that there's a poem on the way may arise from a chance word, from a thought slowly, persistently germinating, from an intimation defying classification.

I am dealing essentially with lyric poetry. Both the problem and the aspiration of the lyric poet can at least be hinted at in the words of Professor Whicher, biographer of Emily Dickinson:

> The lyric … lay ready to her hand as the traditional vehicle of impassioned thought. She accepted it as unquestionably as she accepted the alphabet. There were black symbols on white paper, words arranged in rhythmic patterns. How could these dead, mechanical things be made to throb with the high excitement of the soul? How could the living truth be flashed through them from mind to mind?

TWO

Threshold to Creation

MANY AND VARIOUS are the impulses that lead to the writing of verse. I shall by no means attempt to catalogue all of them. One person may be driven by an inner urge to formulate some personal truth or revelation, half buried, and in need of clarification and assertion. Another may take a sheer sensory delight in the sound and shape of words, in their rhythmic relationships, the felicitous interplay of vowels and consonants. Still a third person, brooding on the mystery of the cosmos, may seek to extract its secrets and preserve in harmonious form his humble and fragmentary discoveries. Whatever the motive, it stems from the need to make a concrete design out of unexpressed feeling, sensations, intuitions, to extract and lift particles of order out of the general chaos.

The creative experience, however, is destined to failure, unless the preliminary conditions for the adventure are recognized and soundly established. Assuming that the initial impulse is active and eagerly present, I suppose the first requirement before it can be successfully employed is the need for receptivity. One cannot create, since one is not in a state of receptivity, if one's libido, to adopt Dr. Jung's use of the term, is already involved elsewhere. One must first rid oneself of involvements both internal and external.

A person can't function as a free agent if his emotional energy is consumed in worrying over a mother's health, or a husband's business troubles, or the children's minor tragedies, to name but a few obstacles across a writer's path. The number of distractions could be increased indefinitely.

Even if none of such deterrents may block one, we unfortunately—each according to his perverse fashion—make other difficulties to plague us. In order to write, and especially to write verse, one must arrange one's life so as not to be caught and trapped by outside activities. The writer of verse, whose work is so largely spasmodic, is in an extra-hazardous position for that very reason.

By outside activities, I include everything inimical to wholehearted immersion in what should be one's sole concern; to name a few distractions, service on committees, community drives, occupation with politics, addiction to the movies, watching baseball games or prize fights over television, listening to radio programs, killing time on crossword puzzles.

These suggested prohibitions should not imply that the poet divorce himself from social or civic life with its responsibilities and frivolities. They do, however, more sternly command that during the period of a poem's gestation he must stoutly renounce all temptations of the hour, whether virtuous, in the public sense, or wastefully self-indulgent.

The point to be stressed is that the artist, whatever his field or medium, must regard his own work as of paramount consequence. To this extent he must be egoistic, self-dedicated. He must stand ready and braced to meet the criticism of being ruled by selfishness, to withstand the accusation that he is not doing his duty in society. In his case self-interest or selfishness are merely uncomplimentary epithets for faith in his own individuality, belief in his calling and his star. Without such faith

and belief, torn and divided, he will be unable to create to his capacity and will be foredoomed to failure.

This apparent digression brings me back to my starting point, the prime and basic need of establishing at the outset a condition of receptivity. Before a work of art, in this case a poem, can germinate, one must faithfully prepare the soil, one must gain detachment. And, since the unconscious is the reservoir of the material from which one draws in order to create, one must deliberately plan to induce and achieve inner peace and serenity before tapping this source and preparing to compose.

How to attain this detachment, therefore, is one's first task. The means will vary according to the individual. In my own case I try to cut myself off from the telephone or the ringing of the doorbell. I close the door to my room; if the sunlight is distracting—it usually is—I pull down the shades. If it happens to be evening, I often sit for a while in the dark before touching a pencil.

I don't try to think and I don't try not to think. I do, however, try to make myself comfortable and free from bodily strains. After a while I become gradually relaxed. Relaxation in turn invites a state of passivity, the desired condition of receptivity. The deeper the passivity the closer one draws to the unconscious.

When one arrives at this condition of receptivity he rests on the threshold of creation. The technique I've been describing is not mere theory; it's been proved; it works. A personal experience will best illustrate how the mood and the muse can be summoned and to what effect.

One winter I was living with my wife and children in a New York hotel. The conditions in a cramped apartment were most unfavorable for creative work. I had written nothing for

months and was distressed over the impasse. One evening, in desperation, I decided to take an affirmative step to try to overcome the negative forces blocking me.

Directly after dinner I said good-night to the family, explaining that I was not to be disturbed, closed myself in my bedroom, and sat down in the dark. Up to that moment I hadn't a glimmer of an idea for a poem. I started out from scratch.

As you may suppose, it took quite a while for me to settle down inside myself. Eventually, however, sitting patiently, quietly, undemandingly, in the dark, I began to see within the dark. Images, vague and dim, were taking shape and pressing through; the most persistent, forceful image had to do with sunshine. It seems that naturally and unconsciously I am drawn to the effects that light produces at different hours and seasons and under varying weather conditions. Critics had pointed this out in their reviews before I had realized it by myself.

To return: this general field of sunshine narrowed down with growing intensity to the transitional spell of twilight slipping into complete and utter darkness, the swift absorption of all natural phenomena into a sea of black, the cancellation of daylight and all its incidences. Thus the visual area had become limited and fenced off; with this concentration came the beginning of concreteness. As the concept strengthened in its appeal, my receptivity for sensory impressions, detailed refinements, selective particulars, correspondingly grew more acute. I had generated sufficient power to take off.

With faculties now alive and urgent, I snapped on the electric light and began sprinkling words and phrases on paper. Inside of two hours I had completed what looked like the finished product but which turned out to be only the semi-final version.

This isn't the place to deal with the verbal mechanics of the operation. I shall deal with technical procedures in later chapters. I might, however, state in passing that the key word for the poem was the adjective "deleble." It possessed persuasive values and advantages. It exactly evoked the impermanence and evanescence of daylight which I wished to convey, the impression that it could be readily erased and expunged. It also was a pleasing word to utter and to hear, and to read as well, with its fluent arrangement of the letters d, I and *b*. It had the further merit of rarity and strangeness, in fact its very existence as a word was later brought into question. But I could defend its validity and moreover the exceptional spelling, eble instead of tfble or ible, remembering the word as a poser in the spelling matches of my grammar-school days.

I mustn't be diverted from the subject under consideration, the initial need for receptivity as a preliminary to creation. But as I will show by reproducing here the semi-final and final versions of this poem, one should develop and possess a second and later kind of receptivity, a willingness to subordinate the ego when the poem has been completed and to be open to discerning, constructive comment from others. One should remember that the poem one regards as beyond change or improvement still carries within it potentialities of further perfectability.

The first version follows:

Now that the sun has passed
Beneath the west,
Now that the rosy spread
Begins to fade
And after-light is thinning,
Night advances, winning
Inch on golden inch.

Too deleble, alas!
The dapple on the branch,
The shimmer on the grass;
The yellow-green too frail
On apple-leaves that pale.
Violet dims, night hastens,
Blue lessens, black fastens;—
Not a thing the eye can shape
Can escape.

On finishing version i I showed it to my old friend, John Erskine, who responded with expressions of praise.

"But," he added good-naturedly and characteristically, "you know I'm never quite happy without registering at least one note of dissent. It's about those last two lines. You're dealing here with the swift, almost imperceptible, transition from light to dark, and you've registered this fleeting change in the right tempo until you come to the final couplet. Then, instead of closing sharply you slow down with 'can shape' and 'can escape.' The lines are too leisurely. Instead they should move with the utmost rapidity. You need to accelerate the speed."

The advice was so right, so satisfying to my sense of musical values, that I accepted it unhesitatingly. We were in agreement that the active verbs "shapes" and "escapes" took care of his objection. And so I wrote down version 2:

Now that the sun has passed
Beneath the west,
Now that the rosy spread
Begins to fade
And after-light is thinning,
Night advances, winning
Inch on golden inch.
Too deleble, alas!
The dapple on the branch,
The shimmer on the grass;

The yellow-green too frail
On apple-leaves that pale.
Violet dims, night hastens,
Blue lessens, black fastens;—
Not a thing the eye shapes
Escapes.

The poem "Too Deleble, Alas!" is the story of the application of my theory that the psychological preparation and adjustment of the poet is a prerequisite to composition.

Things of course don't always work out so well. But the principle prevails nevertheless; receptivity must be established before creation can ensue.

THREE

To Heed the Signal

❁

I SHOULD LIKE TO STRESS the need of awareness and vigilance at the instant when one first feels the mysterious summons of the creative current. Such a summons, it often happens, is but a feeble signal and liable to pass unrecognized. Figuratively one should prick up one's ears in alerted anticipation. As one's sensory, emotional, and mental stimuli grow more acute and swift, after many repeated experiences, one develops the habit of expectancy, and is not so easily caught off guard. In time one may even be able to objectify the onrush of poetic energy as a physical event, and to harness it to one's will.

When our senses become sharpened and our emotions highly charged the intensity of this poetic stream deepens and mounts with increasing psychic urgency. One becomes not only possessed but at the same time and in the same operation one may consciously gain possession and mastery.

This heightening and heating up of the emotions may arise from an infinite variety of reactions, from elation and ecstasy, from rage and hate.

Let me illustrate, since the report of an actual experience will bring home the point far more effectively than any generalization.

I was spending a quiet and contented vacation at home in the

country when suddenly an episode occurred to shatter my peace of mind and lash me into a fury. It involved a piece of injustice and cruel behavior. I boiled over with helpless anger, a negative emotion and correspondingly destructive. Ordinarily, and in response to impulse, the situation would have overwhelmed me. The surge of emotion would have risen and receded without profit, leaving nothing but a residue of pain and injury.

But on this particular occasion I saw objectively the state I had whipped myself into; I became sufficiently detached to realize that here at hand was an unexpected gift of creative energy, which I must not reject but put to positive advantage. To state it in another way I was driven consciously to convert this emotional shock from its negative content to something positive and constructive. Should I succeed in this effort at self-control I would psychologically do myself a service and in the process conceivably achieve a poem. The kind of poem I might produce, its subject, its mood, was of course unpredictable.

With this aim I rushed upstairs to the calm of my room and seated myself before my desk with pencil and paper. Curbing my agitation but preserving its potency I ultimately produced the following verses, which, to my surprise, made a picture of blissful serenity—quite the opposite condition from the one which had generated it.

Here is the poem:

CLOUDS

There were no flowers in the sky,
Only a cobalt field
Of glittering July.
Under
My gaze of wonder
You grew
From gathered dew,

Your soil the fertile breeze,
Your seed the hum of bees,
Rootless,
Stemless,
Earthless
Blossoms alone and complete.

Now though you retreat and disappear
Out of the singing sphere,
There shall be no lament for fleeting beauty,
No sighing breath
For this which is not death.
Rank decay or rot of leaf
Cannot mar your passage brief.
Heaven bore you without pain,
Heaven a garden will remain,
Fragrant and without a stain.

For this one time, at least, I had heeded the signal.

FOUR

Unfinished Business

❁

You START OUT confidently, thinking you've hit your stride, when suddenly and discouragingly you find yourself bogged down. What has happened to cancel that condition of serenity and on-going?

The causes are many. Perhaps the project is too ambitious for your present capabilities; or the mood may have been destroyed by some disturbing intrusion. To be called to the telephone only to be told: "Sorry! Wrong number," can be exasperating enough to upset one beyond repair for the time being. Or, maybe you've got off on the wrong foot by the premature choice of an unsuitable form, such as the adoption of a scheme of rhymes, when blank or free verse might be the better vehicle, or perhaps there aren't enough available words to take care of the rhyme-scaffold you're trying to build.

Perhaps it's simply that you've grown too tired to follow through on the first creative level, or, perhaps, you were too tired to have begun in the first place. At such a moment I find it best to call a temporary recess, do something quite different, take a day off if necessary, and not resume work until I am refreshed and re-energized.

This is the moment of danger, when in a fit of disgust and self-mortification the poet is liable to tear up what he has done

as worthless. It's important not to succumb to this mood of despair since one is in no condition to evaluate whatever he may have accomplished up to this point.

Therefore one should salvage those trial sheets from the waste-basket, and keep them available so that they may be reconsidered at some later time. You'll often find, to your agreeable surprise, that your original impulse was sound and capable of further successful development.

So far I have dealt only with breakdowns in the midst of creation. A different type of unfinished business occurs when because of lack of time or untoward circumstances one feels a poem coming on but is unable to devote oneself to its execution. If one exposes oneself generally and freely to the poetic experience this situation is likely to happen not infrequently.

For such occasions one should carry a notebook. The memory cannot be trusted to protect these first tender impressions against withering. I make it a practice to keep notes, as a reserve store of material for the future, especially for a dry season.

In the summer of 1926 I was spending a vacation in the Italian Alps near St. Moritz. Shortly before leaving I took a long walk, through fields of brilliant wild flowers, along steep mountain paths. Soon I had given myself completely to the spirit of the scene, its almost unearthly serenity. The heightened fragrance and colors of the wild flowers in the dazzling sunshine, the sounds carried from unseen distant cow-bells, the rarefied air itself lifted the imagination to remote heights. An image emerged as I walked on, transported, an image of a high pool, filled with sound and scent rather than with water. I stopped to jot down a few shorthand notes on the back of an envelope and returned to my hotel to get ready to leave.

No time remained to develop the notes. I left directly for the United States to be occupied with less poetic matters.

In the winter of 1928, two and a half years later, I came across the forgotten envelope in a wallet I hadn't used since my trip abroad. Instantly the memory of that Alpine walk leaped up in all of its original clarity and brilliance. Throughout that long interval the poem had slept in my unconscious; it was asking to be written down. My brief, fragmentary notes, those key words, had kept it from dying. They were like the live coals of a banked fire, kindling the memory to recapture a seemingly lost hour of rapture.

The poem, which I then developed, is called "Engadine," from the name of the southern section of the Swiss Alps. Here it is:

In the high hills,
In the hollows of the high Swiss hills,
Far above the lake that sleeps
So still, so far below,
Lies an airier pool.
Its springs arise in fragrant space
Above the wild flowers,
And not a stream that flows therein
Flows through earth.
Across uneven pastures,
By the shores of the high pool,
Lumbering cows munch bright colors,
Trample on fragrance.
From heavy throats of ever-hungry cows
Soft bells dangle.
Cows amble,
And sound runs and ripples from the bells,
Filling the pool.
Gay and sunny are the waters of sound.

In Alpine hills
A pool is fed by bells.

While on the subject of taking notes and preserving them, my recommendation would be this:

Write down anything and everything that may occur to you. Everything is raw material. The essential need is to gather enough of this material to enlist and arouse the imagination. It may be a bit of prose containing a germ, or an adjective which strikes your fancy, as the word "deleble" once appealed to me, or a line of ungrammatical shorthand, or a pair of unusual felicitous rhymes dangling in space. Keep accumulating until interest lags. Put down even what to the logical mind may seem ridiculous or irrelevant. There's no telling from what odd source the first spark may fly.

This early stage is not the time for passing judgment on the value of one's notes. To do so will only censor the free flow of the creative current. Only after one has gathered in enough stray data to suggest the possible nature and future of a poem has the time arrived for any conscious appraisal or assessment, or organization or selection.

FIVE

Random Observations

BY TEMPERAMENT I seem to favor the short poem; my longest, "Houdini," which runs to ninety-three lines, is a narrative and therefore required extended treatment in order to tell the whole story. Failure to write discursively may well be a limitation. I certainly don't regard it as a virtue. It's simply the way I operate. I suppose my experience as a writer of legal briefs has been an influence. Too many examples of verbosity, over-elaboration, citations of ten legal authorities for a proposition where one might well serve the purpose, have taught me the value of compression, the advantage of succinctness over diffusiveness.

It isn't necessary to assert dogmatically, as Poe has done, that no poem to be any good should run beyond one hundred lines. But I am sympathetic with his general position that the afflatus of a lyric, its capacity for sustained singableness, cannot be indefinitely prolonged.

I believe that poetry is primarily meant to be heard and should first of all be addressed to the ear, and is only secondarily meant to be read and for the eye. My complaint against much contemporary verse is that the order is reversed; the emphasis is placed on the printed page and the appeal is pointed more strongly to the mind than to the senses and feelings. And since

thought is the dominant motivation in the latter type of poem, the danger exists that it may tend to the condition of prose.

Since my first consideration is how a poem sounds rather than how it looks or what it means I make it a practice as I develop a poem to read it out loud to myself. By hearing what I've written I am better able to value each vowel and consonant and to discover and correct verbal crudities and combinations that clash. At the same time I also become more sharply aware of the sense of the poem. It sometimes happens that in my eagerness to set down the sense I pay insufficient heed to the sounds. One shouldn't favor sense over sound any more than sound over sense. They interrelate: each strengthens the other.

When I start writing a poem I don't think about form but let it shape itself as it grows. I don't decide in advance whether it's to rhyme or not to rhyme, or be part rhyme and part not, or free verse or blank verse or iambic pentameter or trochaic tetrameter. It frequently turns out that I write in strict rhyme and with matched lines of equal length. Other poems come out as mongrel combinations of rhymed and unrhymed, or with a mixture of meters. I try in all cases to follow the lead of my unconscious; it's the surest guide.

I find that in developing my lyrics the last version usually comes out shorter than the first; that they gain in effectiveness through the elimination of extraneous matter. Accordingly, I strive to cut out the unnecessary, merely decorative adjective, to avoid repeating any phrase, single word or idea which fails to advance the progress of the poem. Repetition is of value only if it can be employed for emphasis or for a bridge to what may follow.

And of course one must be sure to know when to stop. One is often too close to the poem to realize that that final stanza

is superfluous and weakening. It may take someone else to observe pointedly:

"You're so bent on nailing down your meaning that you fail to give the reader any room or credit for the exercise of his intelligence. The complete realization of a poem depends on the partnership between writer and reader. The reader is both entitled and required to share in the creation by actively using his imagination. If you tell him too much too literally, you destroy the poem's suggestability and stifle his incentive to participate."

Since the act of creation is twofold, an offering and a response, the poet cannot be satisfied with merely pleasing himself. If that were all, he would not need to be understood by anyone but himself; he could indulge his fancies at will for his purely private consumption. The poet fails when he fails to communicate.

My ambitious aim is to make each poem incorruptible, to remove all matter which may harbor seeds of decay. I have the audacity or cherish the ideal to write not simply for the present hour but for posterity. Danger lies in references or in language which a future generation may not understand; in local allusions, topical situations, contemporary and ephemeral colloquialisms.

Equally to be guarded against is a fondness for an outmoded vocabulary. The idiom of Milton or Shelley is not ours; it would sound artificial and antiquated in a present-day poem. The modern poet should draw his material from current usage in so far as it may serve his intentions. For current speech possesses freshness, vitality, color and nuance; it is the natural medium of our age, with infinitely expressive possibilities. The art of Robert Frost, subtle and deceptively simple, offers a first-rate example of its effectiveness.

Similarly, the use of abstractions should as a general rule be avoided since they are vague in their effect and lack the power to convey a concrete image. Poets who content themselves with employing capitalized nouns like "Honor," "Love," and "Beauty" and then stop short without particularization have defaulted on their job, whether through sheer laziness or unawareness of their esthetic responsibilities and opportunities.

The presence in a poem of a cliche or any stereotyped metaphor or simile simply means that for the moment the creative eye was not on the ball. When attention lags, energy recedes and instead of expressing oneself in a fresh, personal idiom one unconsciously borrows whatever may be at hand and ready-made by others.

For a poem to survive it should be memorable in language, metaphor, and form; it should be recognizable and stamped with the personality of the poet. Poets as far apart as Browning and Edna St. Vincent Millay carry this signature of identification.

Too many poems lack this necessary singularity and individuality. Most magazine verse is so devoid of individual idiom or fresh expression that it is forgotten as soon as read. The current school of cerebration is marked by a similar loss of distinction. Its product can often be as readily assigned to one man as to another; all is interchangeable, unidentifiable, and without definite character.

SIX

''Linda" and the Dictionary

❁

EMILY DICKINSON once said: "For several years my lexicon was my only companion." I would go even further with the admission that in my own case a dictionary is not only a companion but a collaborator which receives no public credit for its contributions to my poems.

In settling down to write I find that the mere presence of a dictionary, preferably unabridged, on my table is an agreeable incitement to creative activity. This is especially true when I get off to a poor start and the impulse to push on is weak and unchannneled. I am fortified then with the assurance that within reach of my hand I may find needed support.

I should perhaps explain that I compose slowly, tentatively, even pedestrianly. It takes many trials and false beginnings before I can achieve anything near the Wordsworthian state of recollecting emotion in tranquillity. It never happens that I am "inspired" to transmit full-born to paper my imaginative concept. I must work and build through version after version. It is a ceaseless round of testing, rejecting, substituting, reading what I've written as objectively as possible, and above all, of listening. In the process I employ words, phrases, rhythms only provisionally until I have established the desired pattern.

It becomes important to recognize that these provisional experiments may only approximate one's intentions. With the realization that they are approximations and not finalities, I strive constantly for greater precision, sharper clarity.

Here is where the value of the dictionary comes in. It serves as a challenge to accuracy of statement; it invites and induces, by its revealing and refining definitions, its colorful synonyms of equivalents, a desire for further creative exploration. It thereby arouses the imagination to greater industry in its progress toward the ultimate esthetic expression, the finished artifact.

But beyond these incidental pilferings from the dictionary, sufficient in themselves to justify my acknowledgment of its role as collaborating partner, I have literally and liberally plagiarized entire phrases, pregnant with invention and illumination when incorporated in specific poems.

This brings me to the "Linda" part of the title of this chapter. It refers to a poem which I called "A Song for Linda," and which appeared originally in the *University of Kansas City Review.* Here is the poem. Whatever its merits, it serves as an example of the value I place on the dictionary as an aid to the creative process:

A SONG FOR LINDA

Linda lives in the welkin,
Linda, ten months old,
Snug in a snowy cloud cocoon,
Dreaming her warm, sweet milk in.

In Linda's vault of heaven
There's neither time nor space,
Neither morn nor even,
Only blessed grace.

All innocence, she babbles
Her syllables of bliss,
In fragrant airs she dabbles
Within her chrysalis.

Within her microcosm,
So far, so high, so rare,
No evil leaps the chasm
From our polluted star.

Linda, there in the welkin,
Coos in her snug cocoon—
Her safe cocoon, and silken,
Dreaming her milk in.

This is how the poem came to be. I started out by watching my infant granddaughter as, half asleep, she guzzled her bottle. The operation fascinated me as I witnessed its repetition day after day. It called for definition in a germinating phrase. What the baby seemed to be doing was not so much drinking, as, rather, *'dreaming* her milk in." That feeling became the motif for the poem.

It was not only an odd feeling, it was an odd phrase and charged with potential energy. The feminine line-ending, "milk in," led to a search for rhymes; the only matchings I could discover were "silken" and "welkin." Now, "welkin" at once caught fire, for welkin is not a mundane locale, but a place, so to speak, out of this world, a place where the child had her habitat and was breathing her angelic life.

Vaguely I associated welkin with the upper ether, a cloudy area unknown to me except in the expression: "Let the welkin ring." Curiosity for further light on the word, perhaps a "hunch," drew me to the dictionary to learn more about welkin. To my delight and astonishment I found it described

as *"the vault of heaven,"* a strikingly poetic phrase, and exactly right to further the mood and spirit of the theme.

I borrowed it promptly. It came at a moment when my confidence was deserting me; it strengthened the current of my faith in the basic motif to such a degree that its potency carried me along to deeper, more fertile reflection. It stretched my imaginative resources to the pitch where I was able to sustain the mood of the poem and to complete it without loss or diminution of its initial incentive.

In such ways as this the dictionary has come to mean for me not a dry repository of prosaic words but a living treasury of poetry.

SEVEN

How "Humbly, Wildly" Was Born

HUMBLY, WILDLY

Water boils on the flame,
For use, for need;
Water boils in the flume,
A torrent freed.
Element bound in a pot,
Humbly to serve;
Current of passion untamed,
Crashing to curve.

My wife and I had settled at a ranch on a fork of the Platte River, in Colorado. The stream raced and roared and tumbled down a canyon. As I walked along an abandoned railroad bed following its course, I noticed the white water; it was "boiling." "Boiling" was the word that held the germ of a poem. It teased me. Soon I found myself reflecting that "boiling" could result either from the application of heat or of power. If the latter, boiling could be cold, even icy. In short there were at least two kinds of boiling. I was struck with the contrast and began to mull over it. One boils water on a stove, a range, a hearth, in a vessel, a pan, a kettle, a pot. You confine and control it for your own purposes. You enslave it, but in a worthy domestic cause, to cook your food, for instance.

That was one way of looking at boiling. But how different the cosmic boiling of a cataract, a Niagara! The contrast sharpened, as the concept took more definite shape.

I might note, at this point, my general state, both physical and psychological. The previous three weeks had drained my energies—winding up my professional ties in New York, running a class-reunion celebration at Columbia University, flying to Kansas City to give some talks at the Writers' Workshop, plus a poetry reading at Denver University, and the delightful though exhausting demands of two insistent grandchildren. Add to this the need of acclimatizing myself to an altitude of 8,000 feet. I was thoroughly depleted to the point of grogginess, apparently in no state to summon creative resources thus deeply submerged.

However, long experience has taught me that out of seeming drought, far below the surface there lie hidden springs available for tapping, awaiting an invitation. I recognized, even in my unpropitious condition, the acquisition of two suggestive leads, one, that boiling can be both hot and cold, and two, that water is both responsible and irresponsible. If you look at these "discoveries" in critical cold blood, they will of course seem obvious and utterly commonplace. On the critical level that would be true; on the creative level, however, that would be untrue, since nothing is so obvious or commonplace that it cannot be utilized for creative material. It is in the subsequent process that the material is lifted out of the obvious and commonplace to a new, vital, and singular form.

So, in order to get something concrete down, however banal, I wrote on the back of an envelope, as I walked:

Water boils in a pot,
Water boils in the stream

I also set down a few stray, disconnected words for possible future use: "Icy, domestic, tame, wild, unbridled, freedom, electricity." Certainly a feeble, unpromising start.

My next venture was to find a more evocative word than "stream" for the thunderous force behind the icy boiling. I chose "flume" both for meaning and for euphony. Having picked "flume," my mind darted to "flame," a near-rhyme. Revising I wrote down:

Water boils on the flame,
Water boils in the flume.

These lines, separately, satisfied me for the moment; however, I didn't care for them as a couplet.

This was about all I succeeded in accomplishing that first day. It seemed so puny that my impulse was to forget the whole business and angle in other waters. But too much of the theme had become embedded in my consciousness to be so readily dislodged. I had won the preliminary skirmish with my evil spirit, that critical man ever ready to disparage such tentative fumblings.

Next day, partly refreshed, I returned to the battle. The first thing was to write down the two lines once more; to me the mere act of writing, of using a lead pencil (as I am doing as I write these words), acts as a release. I suppose I am on the friendliest terms with myself and with the world when the words flow along the lines and mount to pages.

Rereading the two lines, I noted two things, first that I had lost the specific "pot" object of the earliest notation, and second, that I hadn't begun to describe the contrast between the two activities, their functions, their social or amoral characteristics, etc. Accordingly I began to particularize thus:

Water boils on the flame,
For use, for need;

And then, without much hesitation:

Water boils in the flume,
A torrent freed.

Thus ended the second day. The actual writing time so far probably ran to less than two hours, but the mental and emotional involvement had shut out all other considerations. My satisfaction consisted in the knowledge that I had won my second bout with my censor; I had survived his assaults (for two days) and had actually set down four lines!

As the third day came around, with these four lines as a body or at least part of a body, I had acquired a structure capable of development. These lines I carried with me in my head as I walked over to the main camp for breakfast. I carried them back on my return, and with pad and pencil sat down on our cabin porch looking out on a more placid stretch of the river. Between the river and the porch lay a meadow over which many different birds were disporting. Soon I found myself absorbed in their enterprises, and in particular noted the hop-hop-hop of a certain small bird. That hop-hop-hop was another device of my devil, this time more tempter than censor, to divert me from my appointed project. I had begun to construct a fantasy that poetry is the language and rhythm for birds, and that prose is for cows. Indeed I may still write that poem. I'll tuck away the line: Prose is for cows.

Fortunately, that bit of play served to stimulate me for my job. I was soon ready for line 5:

Element, bound in a pot.

At first I had written "trapped" for "bound," but dismissed it as possibly too melodramatic. At least that was my decision, rightly or wrongly. Then I reflected on the meaning of water boiling in a pot; it signified service. How to serve? "Tamely"? But that seemed unjust, with a sneery innuendo. "Humbly"? Yes, doing its simple duty with quiet dignity. So:

> Element, bound in a pot,
> Humbly to serve.

Up to this point there were six lines. The ultimate structure was evolving; two sets of complementary couplets would probably take in all I might want to say. Accordingly I concluded that this was to be an eight-line poem, spare and compact. Unwittingly I had set myself a difficult problem. "Serve" has few rhymes to go with it: "swerve," "verve," "nerve," "curve." I refused to change "serve" for a rhyme less troublesome, since the idea of service was basic to the poem. Of the choice left only "curve" seemed to contain the necessary potential for a suitable climactic finale. But I had to tread warily to avoid an artificial or strained or inept image—in short, a dud.

I had been mentally shaping line 8, before tackling line 7. Its opposite would of course be line 5:

> Element bound in a pot.

Line 7 would have to picture a force unbridled, reckless, feckless. Line 7 must be in service not to the household gods but to Dionysus. With this concept in mind and within the limitations and exactions of a line of at most seven syllables and three main stresses, I perpetrated:

> Power and passion untamed,

and, thinking of the course and shape of a waterfall, followed with:

Carving a curve.

Writing down these eight lines, and reading them aloud to myself for melody and the true harmony between vowels and consonants, I fell into the error of being too easily pleased with the result. And after picking "Humbly, Wildly" as the title and again testing each word for sense as well as for sound, I felt sure that the poem was in a shape defying revision.

In this state of self-congratulation I saw my wife advancing over the field toward the cabin. My wife* needs to be explained. She is a person essentially intuitive to a rare degree, who functions primarily through sensory and feeling impressions. A painter and a teacher of painting, she nonetheless has a subtle appreciation of all forms of art; she is especially drawn to poetry. To test a poem she applies her sharp intuitions rather than any technical prosodic equipment or literary erudition. Her senses report to her what's right or wrong.

Over the years we've developed a technique for testing out my poems, a technique involving awareness by each of the other's psychology, my innate stubbornness about changing a word or line unless convinced by an intelligible argument, her inability as a rule to advance intelligible arguments, but rather her reliance on some nonmental process for divining the soft spots. I should call her approach one of criticism by esthetic instinct. As time goes on my openness to comment has grown concurrently with her increasing clarity. The experience has been mutually enriching.

"I've produced young," I announced with quiet triumph, handing her the paper as she climbed the wooden steps.

* Died April 30, 1952.

She read slowly, reread, then:

"I think it's fine, but there's something lacking in the last two lines. I haven't been able to put my finger definitely on what bothers me, but I know it's in those two lines. The rest is tops."

She read it again, thoughtfully, searchingly, and, this time, analytically. "I think I've got hold of something. The poem expresses duality in pairs, but you fall down on the last pair. You haven't made a complete correspondence with 'Element bound in a pot.' It trails *oft* rather than rises to a climax. You haven't expressed the contrast clearly. Tower and passion' are too abstract. I haven't anything specific to suggest, but that in general's my first objection."

I didn't at all take kindly to the idea. In fact I dismissed it with curt finality.

"You're treating it too literally. Something must be left to the reader's imagination. If people can't get it," I went on warmly, "that's just their hard luck. It's all right as it stands."

"Rubbish and rationalization," she shot back. "You sound like W.; when a person can't make head or tail of his obscurities and tells him so, he answers smugly with 'Sorry, you can't get it.'"

That thrust made me laugh and thereby restored my good temper and to a degree my good sense as well.

Pondering the matter I came up with: "Current of passion untamed."

"That's splendid," my wife said. "'Current' parallels 'element' and carries out the pairs of opposites throughout the poem.

"Now there's only one soft spot left. I don't like the word 'carving'; it's inadequate. 'Carving' is too narrow, suggests one

dimension. 'Carving' is for roast beef. What's needed is something more terrific, more dynamic."

Despite this onslaught I wasn't in the mood to surrender. On the contrary I argued stoutly:.

" 'Carving a curve' expresses for me the arc of a waterfall. And besides, there's the matter of alliteration. It makes for agreeable euphony, which is especially important at the end of a poem."

"I'm afraid you're not practicing what you preach," she fired back. "You always insist on the search for the one and only right word. You've fallen in love with 'carving' because of its sound rather than its sense. You'll have to do better than that."

We persisted in thrashing the thing out, and as we did so the force of her comments began to sink in and have meaning. Regretfully, almost painfully, I said good-by to "carving" for which I had developed an overdeep attachment. In its place, I tried out "leaping," "flinging," "dashing," before deciding on "crashing." It still gave me my desired alliteration and ends the poem on an emphatic crescendo.

"How about 'crashing'?" I diffidently ventured.

"Swell," she answered, "that really does it. Isn't it great the way something fruitful always happens out of these give-and-takes?"

I acknowledged that she was the ideal collaborator.

EIGHT

Concerning "Hotynson"

❀

HOKINSON

Her subject womankind, her special model
A dowager in danger of a waddle,
That matron of a fairly ripe and round age
Whose inausterity pays off in poundage.

Hers was the art that launched a thousand hips
And firmly tucked the bulge beneath the girdle,
That picked those silly hats on shopping trips,
Those foolish frocks that scaled the social hurdle;

And hers the wit that caught the fatuous unction
Of Madam Chairman at some garden function
Or registered the embarrassing inanities
Of females, willing victims of their vanities.

Her pencil, poised in mischief, camera-candid,
Scored cleaner hits than ever any man did,
And gentler, too, the satire and the mockery
More kind than Swift, more frolicsome than Thackeray,

As if to say, "One never can be tellin';
Yes, there but for the grace of God, goes Helen."

The impulse that produced "Hokinson" came from an entirely different quarter from that which conceived a poem like

"Humbly, Wildly." That was essentially lyrical; it grew out of random seeds blown by winds of intuition.

"Hokinson," on the contrary, proceeded from the mind. The operation, the performance, was primarily mental. By that statement of course I don't mean to suggest that the writing was synthetic and unemotional. What I do mean is that whereas with the lyric I started out with a single word or a feeling for a particular rhythm, and built until it created its own content and contour, with "Hokinson" I knew what I was about from the very beginning. I started with a definite subject, to wit, a congenial personality I had never met except on the pages of *The New Yorker.*

But why, it may be asked, choose Helen Hokinson from all the possible others? Because, I suppose, without having been conscious of the fact, the cumulative effect of her drawings over the years had registered appealingly and deeply; they had fed and fortified a kindred outlook on the foibles of humanity. "What fools these mortals be," cried Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Hokinson never viewed her creatures that harshly. The stroke of her pencil carried both impishness and fellow-feeling, even, perhaps, pity. She regarded mankind, or rather womankind—I don't recall any drawing of a man—with philosophic amusement. Her irony was gentle; emotionally it had no trace of the sardonic, of the savage indignation of a Swift or a Goya.

On November I, 1949, Helen Hokinson, at the height of her powers, was dashed to death in an airplane crash. As I read the news I identified with the crash. Her loss was personal; something rare, sustaining, and vital had without warning been expunged from the world and from my life.

I have just said that the poem "Hokinson" proceeded from the mind. I refer to the construction, the craftsmanship, the

techniques, the build-up around a set theme. It's obvious that its origin, its promptings, its insistence on being written, emanated from the stored, cumulative impact of over twenty years on my consciousness. In a sense not wide of the truth it may be stated that the poem was over twenty years in the making. But it took a shock, an explosion, to deliver it from the depths to the daylight.

On November 2, 1949, I read of the tragedy and at once decided to attempt a poem. Because of my professional work in a law office, I couldn't come to grips with it until the week end, alone, at leisure and in the country. Over that week end I finished it. It appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, after having been rejected by two other national magazines on the sole alleged ground that their make-up commitments prevented its use for several months. Presumably the editors felt that Hokinson, a name as potent as Babbitt in the social history of our times, would be forgotten by then.

I first set to work to establish the right mood for the poem. I knew what it certainly should not be. It should not be funereal; it should not be solemn. As to form I rejected the sonnet as conducive to solemnity and possibly stuffiness. I was averse to any tone of conventional eulogy or of elegy. I didn't think Hokinson would be pleased with that sort of tribute. From such negatives as these I proceeded to consider more positively what might have appealed to Hokinson; it seemed best to attempt to project the spirit of Hokinson in verse. What was that spirit? To hold the mirror up to nature, to puncture folly playfully yet pointedly, to turn the spotlight on feminine frailty in its various aspects of vanity, the desire to appear youthful beyond one's advancing years, the need to be in the latest fashion no matter how incongruous. And all in the spirit of quiet levity. Above all things one should be neither caustic

nor moralistic, nor superior. By their deeds, by their behavior, let them convict themselves.

With these considerations uppermost in my mind and now operating actively, I eagerly prepared for the actual writing. Following my custom, like an artist who squeezes blobs of color on his palette preparatory to composition, I scattered a mass of words over the page, the first words to enter my head, regardless of sense or of relevance, my preliminary blobs of color.

I've retained that earliest page which preceded the first sketch, and now reproduce, without editing, much of the material spread out thereon: outrageous hats the silly hat garden clubs meetings get-togethers Mme. chairman milliners civic conclaves couturieres victims of their vanities feminine matrons insanities inanities sartorial atrocities avoirdupois embonpoint nit-wit brain feather-brain harebrain look upon her like again bondage to rolls of surplus poundage foibles follies Hokinson—unfailing subject of her wit and art Alas! untimely! ridiculous mischief mockery deft and gentle—pencil deftly—not unkindly Gentle amusement rather than contour torso bulge divulge girdle When shall we look upon her like again? The bulge within the girdle They look at themselves in the mirror, But see only the way they looked when young.

If you'll turn back and examine the finished poem at the head of this account you'll readily see how many of the random ideas and haphazard words and phrases found their way into the final version, and how many disappeared forthwith. Of the latter note "Look upon her like again" and "Alas! Untimely!" the feeling is sentimental, falsetto, utterly wrong. OUT!

You will also note, as I was quick to do, that in these shorthand jottings lay the groundwork for the ultimate composi-

tion and that by putting down such items as "outrageous hats," "garden clubs," "surplus poundage," "the bulge within the girdle" I was conjuring up in my mind's eye the well-known Hokinson characters and situations of a thousand drawings. It was settled then and there that so far as I was concerned, the most fitting way to pay homage to Hokinson was to reproduce her "girls" in verse.

That first page reveals further signs pointing to the technical shape as well as to the subject matter of the future poem; for instance, the problem of rhyme. You will observe the appearance of such words as "vanities," "insanities," "inanities," "atrocities," "poundage," "girdle." Plainly none of these words would be seemly in any traditional threnody. They suggest the opposite of lugubriousness; they are not the prescribed raiment for mourning. Apparently my mind from the outset was traveling toward the gaiety and playfulness of the lady who was my subject.

A rhyme with "bondage" would be of two syllables, with the accent on the first; the textbooks call this a feminine rhyme, as distinguished from such one-syllable, robust, masculine rhymes as "doom" and "gloom." Feminine rhymes are most frequently employed in light verse; they lend themselves to odd, unexpected matings such as "poundage" and "round age," and make for suppleness. The same effect is augmented with rhymes of three syllables like "vanities" and "inanities." The lines were thus destined to be written with feminine rhyme-endings.

Another clue to be found in that hodge-podge of loose words anticipates an attitude or point of view. "Victims of their vanities," "gentle amusement." These phrases were later to set what might be termed the critical tone toward the ladies. Like Helen's drawings, the poem was to be free of condemnation

or accusation; at most the rebuke was to be mild and implied from the situation. Accordingly "insanities" was a word to be avoided as too violent. "Nit-wit brain" was far too sharp. I might think these misguided matrons had nit-wit brains, but I mustn't say so, if I were to remain faithful to the temper of the drawings and the spirit of their creator. I must never attack.

With these preliminaries fairly established I then turned to the actual composition and began to ask myself questions. What was her subject matter? How was it circumscribed? The answer to the first came promptly: Womankind. But what variety of womankind? What type, what special model? Definitely, a middle-aged, overweight, fatuous matron, invariably ridiculous as to choice of clothes and hats and not too bright as chairman of a fashionable function. This about covered the Hokinson range and area of observation.

My first line easily shaped itself:

Her subject womankind, her special model.

That was as far as I got; I was suspended in mid-air with the dangling word "model." I needed to find a fitting mate for it. As luck would have it in flew "waddle," exactly what was required to spur me on. Overstuffed, nondieting matrons are in danger of acquiring a waddle. So, working backward, I filled in with:

A dowager in danger of a waddle.

That line satisfied, with its slow pace of middle age, and its verbal felicities, if I may say so, of "dowager" and "danger," the *ds* and the soft *gers.*

To amplify the portrait I seized on "poundage," and quite unashamed yoked it with "round age." With these two guideposts, after a bit of experimentation, I came through with:

That matron of a fairly ripe and round age
Whose inausterity pays off in poundage.

Now at least I had achieved an acceptable first stanza; it sounded right both in tone and in texture. I could look ahead with gathering confidence; I was definitely on my way.

One consideration must never be lost sight of, the dual aspect of the poem. I must remember first and always to celebrate Hokinson herself, her art and her wit. Secondly I must exemplify both her art and her wit through appropriate illustrations. Such was to be the pattern.

Following the order of the opening stanza, I began stanza 2 with attention on the artist as I wrote down:

And hers the art that launched a thousand hips.

It's not for me to decide whether I was justified in profaning Marlowe's superb line; I can only say that I chose the gamble. It may have offended some readers, but so far as I know, it was generally received without hostility.

"Hips" of course brought up "girdle," as a natural. And so line 2 of stanza 2 became:

And firmly tucked the bulge beneath the girdle.

I tested both "stowed" and "tucked," finally choosing the latter as an internal rhyme for "picked" which was to fit into line 3. "Hips" was to be the only masculine line-ending in the whole poem. I rhymed it with "trips," thus:

That picked those silly hats on shopping trips.

At first I'd written "purchases" for "silly hats," but substituted the latter as more specific and accordingly more reminiscent of the Hokinson sketches. Similarly the "silly hats" recalled "foolish frocks."

At this point I struck a snag. To find a passable rhyme for "girdle" was a tough assignment, for there were only two words possible, "hurdle" and "curdle."

My trial line ran:

> Those foolish frocks that made the blood-stream curdle.

Plainly that would never do—far-fetched, overemphatic, lugged in for the rhyme. I was left with "hurdle" and after a struggle, produced:

> Those foolish frocks that scaled the social hurdle.

This line seemed more in character; at any rate, it was the best I could do in the narrow circumstances. The second stanza was thus completed.

Adhering to my plan, I next dealt with die artist's wit, and made many versions of the third stanza. It suffices to reproduce only one:

> And hers the wit to catch the vacuous unction
> Of Madam Chairman at some civic function,
> And register the hundred-andone inanities
> Of ladies who are victims of their vanities

I toned this up as follows: Changed "vacuous" to "fatuous"; "civic" to "garden"; "hundred-and-one" to "embarrassing"; "ladies who are victims" to "females, willing victims." The characterizations were heightened through sharper, closer observation.

Now I had composed three four-line stanzas, having selected most of the salient features of Helen's "girls." It seemed' about time to move on to a climax and conclusion, which should sum up in a few phrases my estimate of the artist and give fitting expression to the warmth of my admiration. The last six lines

accordingly formed a combination of critical evaluation and praise.

The idea for the concluding couplet really came from Helen herself. In an article appearing shortly before her death in which she discussed her attitude toward her work I remembered her saying in effect that she was no different from or better than any of her "girls." What I had retained was the impression of a completely cheerful soul, without a trace of superiority or malice, and quite as ready to laugh at herself as at the world. With this image in my mind it seemed inevitable that the end should read:

"Yes, there, but for the grace of God, goes Helen."

To the foregoing account a brief postscript should perhaps be added. In certain quarters the tone of the poem was resented as flippant, irreverent, and therefore lacking in good taste. I can understand that my poem may offend persons brought up to assume a certain attitude in the presence of death. I can only say that for me it is unnatural to adopt a standard tone under such circumstances, to mute one's voice and wear an artificial expression to comply with some conventional notion of what constitutes proper behavior. Truly, proper behavior it seems to me flows from the sincerity of one's feelings, from one's innate sense of decency and delicacy. It is individual, not collective.

I can only hope that the comment of a friend may give the right answer. He said:

"I think Helen would have enjoyed it."

NINE

Slow Germination

IN THE TWO preceding articles, "How 'Humbly, Wildly' Was Born" and "Concerning 'Hokinson,'" I attempted to illustrate two different approaches to the composition of lyrical verse, the intuitive and the deliberate. I explained how in "Humbly, Wildly" the sight of plunging, white water suggested the word "boiling"; how the word then took hold and aroused me to speculate until it finally generated the necessary temperature to start me on the poem. The intuitive experience came sharp, moved swiftly to a consummation.

In the piece on "Hokinson," I explained how quite in contrast I began with a chosen subject and proceeded to build consciously and primarily upon that foundation. "Hokinson" grew rationally, in the manner of sonnet-writing. "Humbly, Wildly" grew irrationally from the impact of a random word.

Under the caption "Poems That Refuse To Be Written," I once listed a group of false starts, where I had succeeded in producing an inviting line or couplet but was unable to summon the necessary vigor to move on further. These beginnings were both intuitive and conscious. Yet no matter how often I might return to pick up the thread, my imagination would balk. For the time being at least I conceded defeat.

On the other hand one becomes involved with poems that

insist on being written eventually. It may take a long time, even years, before one finally surrenders and becomes victorious through the surrender. There are many causes for this obstinacy, but perhaps the most common cause is that the original impulse though recognized lies too deep in the unconscious to be dredged up. One has the feeling that though the climate is right the time is not yet ripe; one lacks that involvement with the material which will either evoke an intuitive kindling hint or lift a definite theme to consciousness.

The condition is one of slow, delayed immersion.

I call to mind one particular case which continued to nag me vaguely but never with the needed stimulation. The hour was always midnight; the prod would always come from the striking of an old-fashioned bedroom clock. And my response, such as it was, would issue out of a disturbed wakefulness. Restlessly I would toss in anticipation of those twelve fateful strokes. At times they would carry ominous overtones, but the nature of the communication I was unable to fathom. Ominous or otherwise, I nevertheless detected a significance in its increasing attraction and hold on me. The recurrent drop of twelve identical equipoised tones began to register as a fixed pattern.

Such was the first slight but encouraging token of possible delivery from my stubborn torpor. It had produced a recognizable image.

The image, whether it be sensory, emotional, or mental, is the emerging seed in the mystery of creation. It may either progress to fertility or lose its life through lack of nourishment. The outcome depends on the intensity of its impress, its capacity for suggestion and reflection.

In the present case my original image was strong enough to enlist my attention and carry me on a step further. I now pro-

ceeded to reconsider the midnight strokes; this time they came to me separately instead of in a general pattern. As each one was released it took on a globular shape with a dense content. I thought of a series of balls regularly falling, but without satisfaction in the image. Still, the qualities of rotundity and density continued to engage me. Then, without warning, like a conjuror's trick, the twelve balls turned swiftly into twelve apples; they dropped naturally, not from undefined space but from a flourishing tree.

So it happened that what had originally been an ordinary bedroom clock was magically and metaphysically transformed into the tree of time.

"The tree of time"! The phrase both verbally and as a metaphor struck me as usable, as a clear manifestation of the poetic process in operation. It moved me to reflection, to consider psychologically the nature of this strange fruit. So doing, I let my mind and my feelings go back and relive those many midnights of emotional disturbance.

What did they signify? The dominant prevailing feeling had been one of distress and self-accusation. I had been unconsciously reproaching myself for things undone which should have been done, for opportunities lost and never to be retrieved. In brief I had been bewailing the fact that *time* in its subtle passage and flight had eluded and circumvented me. *Time* had been my triumphant antagonist.

Deeply moved by this discovery I concluded that I had been obsessed by a sense of defeat and that the moment had arrived when I must come to grips with time and no longer be its slave. How to overcome its beguilement was the problem.

The decision led me to re-examine the fruit image and the midnight harvest. My previous turn of mind had been negative, self-destructive. I must loosen its seductive grip. The adjective

"seductive" furnished a clue. It warned me of the true nature of the situation. The fruit I had been picturing was not sound but unwholesome. It was really "Dead Sea" fruit. Time, as I had contemplated it, instead of giving me sustenance from its tree had actually fed me poison, the poison of despair.

At last there was revealed to me the character of my predicament, and with its revelation came a release of energy which ultimately found the following expression:

A HARVEST TO SEDUCE

Upon the tree of time
The fruit looms high,
The fruit so fair to pluck.
The hour's late and black.
The time-tree quivers,
Loosens and delivers
The midnight crop.

Twelve drop,
A harvest to seduce,
Lacking joy or juice.

Beware the vain lament,
The hunger for what's spent.
This is dead-sea fruit
And ashes to the taste.
Quash it with your foot.
What is past is past.

TEN

The Story of "Bed-Time Story"

❁

BED-TIME STORY

Once there was a spaniel
By the name of Daniel,
And a pig,
Sig,
And a pussy,
Gussie—
She chased a mouse,
Klaus;
And a squirrel,
Errol,
And a white she-bear,
Claire,
And a Scotch lion,
Ian,
And a very fierce shark,
Mark.

You'll agree, my dear,
They were rather a queer
Assortment
Of temperament and deportment.

And yet,
My pet,
In spite of their diversities
And perversities

Both zoological
And ideological,
They all gathered together
One day, when the weather
Was especially frightful, and decided
It wasn't safe to stay divided
Any longer, and that they should,
For their common good
(Rather than risk another calamity),
Try amity.

And that's the way there began to dawn a
Plan they christened UNITED FAUNA.

. . . . . .

"And did they live happily ever after, Daddy?"
"I'll tell you the rest tomorrow. Good night, dear."

One often achieves unexpected results from a mere jingle. Several mornings running I found myself afflicted, as I woke up, with the childish rhyme

Once there was a spaniel
By the name of Daniel.

It was just one of those annoying things you pick up like a tack when you walk barefooted. But unlike the tack it was not so easily extracted; it had evidently become embedded for the duration.

The rhyme was no less childish than my mood. Before long I started playing around with other animals. Following Daniel, and with the eagerness of a five-year-old, I continued:

And a pig,
Sig,
And a pussy,
Gussie—
She chased a mouse,
Klaus;

And a squirrel,
Errol,
And a white she-bear,
Claire,
And a Scotch lion,
Ian,
And a very fierce shark,
Mark.

This outburst just about satisfied my appetite for further exploration. What amused me about the performance was its element of free association; it reminded me of the kind of improvisation a parent might string out for a sleepy child demanding one last story before being tucked in for the night; it would probably have no ending but would trail off inconclusively, as the eyes closed and consciousness faded. It was the beginning of a bed-time story; that was what I christened it.

A word or so about the meter. The method of free association induced equal freedom in rhythmic structure. The erratic choice of the animals, the lack of constraint from any formal scheme, the utter unpredictability and inconsequence of what might be coming next, all made for novelty and freshness of form. I dared use as complete lines such monosyllables as "Sig," "Klaus," "Claire," and "Mark," to produce an abrupt staccato effect.

Up to this point, therefore, the doggerel was devoid of serious meaning. That there might evolve some deliberate sense first dawned on me as my mind picked up the "white she-bear." It suggested Russia. The suggestion of one country spread to the other countries (the "Scotch lion," "Klaus"), not by any close or exact analogy but as a general picture of a world family of animals, ferocious and harmless, majestic and insignificant, without central harmony or relationship.

I began to think in terms of fable or allegory, with an undercurrent of irony, and thus emerged from the atmosphere of innocence into that of sophistication. Continuing to follow the original pattern—"my dear," "my pet"—I departed from infant simplicity of speech to the adult vocabulary of "temperament and deportment," "diversities and perversities both zoological and ideological." By this time the poem had definitely become one about the United Nations and the world conditions which had demanded its establishment. It required little effort to fill in the outline; the details appear in the third stanza.

Now I was faced with the task of coming through with an effective ending. I couldn't mention the United Nations as such, for that would have destroyed the allegory. Aesop and La Fontaine had taught me that the technique of allegory or fable was approach by indirection. What, therefore, must one substitute for "United Nations" ? The poem was about animals and animals are fauna. This congress or convocation of the animals was to be a meeting of fauna as a body for the sake of union. It must adopt an official name. Could there be any alternative to "United Fauna"? On these two words I ended the poem.

"Bed-Time Story" is a poem that found its punch line at the very finish; it grew out of the situation as it developed. In this respect the poem differs fundamentally in origin and construction from those which start from a tempting last line and build up hindwise.

Technically I suppose I might have properly stopped here. A footnote, however, seemed to be called for, even if in prose, and if only to hint that civilization progresses not through the formation of institutions but through the spirit which animates them.

Besides, I wanted to return to the blissful state of my opening.

ELEVEN

Climate of the Heart

IT FREQUENTLY HAPPENS that the psyche, which has a life of its own, finds itself in opposition to what might be expected of it in one's contemplation of natural phenomena or in one's feelings for a given situation.

The psyche not only has a life of its own but is a law unto itself. It represents rebellion against convention, defies the attitudes and habits of thinking and feeling imposed by society, and flies a bright flag to symbolize its declaration of independence.

Take for example the picture of a day in spring. Overhead the sky hangs in cloudless blue purity. The sunlight sheds a gentle radiance over the green landscape. Breezes play softly over fresh leaves and gay flowers. The scene, one might assume, would impart its spirit of serenity to the observer. It will succeed in doing so, however, only if his inward state happens to coincide with the harmony of nature. Otherwise the bland invitation will be rejected, and the contrast between the joyous visible world and the dark mood of the beholder will only intensify a sense of dejection. Similarly the sight of a parade—the uniformed marchers, the colored banners, the glad music of the bands, may elicit only sadness from the breast of the spectator on the curb.

On the other hand the spectacle of a devastating storm, of the elements in tumult, may serve as a release to a similar disturbance within the individual and lead him to a state of peace.

Illustrations such as these indicate the separateness between life as it meets the eye and life as it is experienced beneath the surface level. The psyche in its vagaries, its contrariness, its insistence on a private idiosyncrasy, resolutely refuses to submit to dictation or control by any external authority whatsoever. The psyche simply can't be counted on to behave according to accepted standards or proprieties.

Considerations such as these have often attracted me, but never to the point where I felt urged to write about them—until one day when I came back from a funeral. In all conscience there was no apparent excuse for my reactions. The deceased was a friend whose death I sincerely deplored; the service was affectingly simple and free from the stencils of ritual. Yet in spite of the demands of the occasion I found myself having difficulty in restraining my laughter and barely succeeded in not calling attention to myself. I can offer no satisfactory explanation. It just happened.

The sharp incongruity between the way I felt and the way I should have felt stirred me to register the general idea in a short poem in which against the background of Nature I might impose certain subjective implications. As it turned out the composition came more easily than was usual. The tide, as I recall, came first:

CLIMATE OF THE HEART.

It expressed in an apt phrase exactly what I had in mind, a condition of weather and atmosphere outside of calendar and almanac and season; a nontemporal state. With these incite-

ments I soon assembled and shaped my material into the following form:

CLIMATE OF THE HEART

Heat and beat of summer in December;
Color of autumn, seen in earliest green;
Then green again, despite the faded leaf;
Blight of frost on June's high noon
When all is lost in grief;—
Such is the wayward climate of the heart.
Immune to weather-chart,
Above all temporal, all natural reason,
It choses, whensoever it will, each season.

TWELVE

Genesis of "The Dismal Month"

THE DISMAL MONTH

Struggling to shake off
The clutch of sleep,
To strike off
Winter's irons,
Spring, imprisoned maid,
Stirs, arises,
Bedraggled, disheveled,
Dead leaves sticking to her hair.

March is the dismal month of her delivery.

Cautiously,
In gown of shabby green
She picks her way unsteadily
Under lowering skies,
Over ruts still frozen,
Through dregs of snow.

But, as the sun
Every so faintly
Nudges through a bank of slate,
She brightens with its shine.

Now,
Less wearily,
Less warily,

She quickens
Over the hill,
Across the meadow,
Along the twinkling brook,
Hair flying,
Dead leaves blowing.

Soon—
Such is her art of magic and surprise—
You will awake one morning
And behold!
Pure gold!
A rush of confident crocuses
Before your eyes.

This poem was built on two levels. I don't mean that it has a latent profundity beyond what the words obviously convey to the eye and ear. I am merely stating a physical fact; the poem was started at about sea-level in my law office in mid-town Manhattan; it was continued and completed months later at a ranch in the Colorado Rockies and at an altitude of 9,500 feet. The fact by itself is of no consequence, since many poems, even short ones, are composed bit by bit at different times and places.

What seems worth recording, rather, is the psychological and esthetic experience. The first half of the poem was actually written in the dismal month of March. My mood, if not dismal, was certainly one of impatience and dissatisfaction, as I looked back on too long a period of unproductiveness. With a calculated act of will I set aside a half-hour in the middle of a professional working day. Soon my habitual tensions and concerns disappeared; I had taken myself out of the city and found myself contemplating a country landscape. The date happened to be March 21, and as I noted that fact and looked out on the murky sky, I said to myself, wryly: "This is spring."

The point of view for a possible poem resided in that stray observation, which translated and extended, came to this:

A fine kind of spring! Not the standardized spring of the poets, but the last chapter of winter down-at-the-heels. Shabby green.

"Shabby green" took hold. I found no obstacle to its use although I had picked it as a title for another poem twenty-five years earlier. Shabby green represented the color and shoddiness for my unspringlike season. Letting my fancy roam at will I began to fill in the details, to picture the struggle of life breaking through the coils of inertia, really my own personal problem at that moment.

So in due course out of the notes set down at an office desk the poem grew into its first fifteen lines, an imagistic presentation, with a somewhat unconventional point of view.

I didn't overvalue the result as poetry; psychologically, however, I had gained a minor reward from the mere effort of determined concentration. The verses, when typewritten, seemed respectable; examining them objectively, however, I decided against publication. They called for further, perhaps later, consideration. So, instead of tossing them in the wastebasket, I tucked them away in a compartment of unfinished business. There they remained fallow with other items to be subsequently available if and as the spirit might move me.

In July I set off on a long vacation in the Colorado Rockies, which turned out to be more fruitful than was usually my good fortune. I reminded myself how so often in the past, through some psychological barrier, I had perversely thrown away similar opportunities and had come back to the daily job empty-handed and unhappy.

But this time it turned out differently. I might assign the difference to unexpected encouragement. In June I had taken

part in a writers' workshop at the University of Kansas City. The University's president, Clarence R. Decker, had placed his own value on my poetry and my talks on poetry by offering me as much space as I wished to use for new poems and articles in the University's quarterly review.

Excepting for one unpublished poem my larder was bare. The incentive to produce, however, now became powerful, inescapable, and in a few weeks, at ease and in the isolation of a mountain cabin I succeeded in completing two new poems, and three prose articles. One poem was a short lyric ("Humbly, Wildly"), the other a satiric portrait. The prose articles told the story of how each of three poems had come to birth. I am telling a similar story in this article on the genesis of "The Dismal Month."

To Mr. Decker's incentive I should add the constant faith of my wife in these poetic confessions, and her insistence, despite my reluctance, that they would make a unique contribution to the literature of the creative process. Be that as it may.

From the foregoing digression, which is perhaps not a digression after all, I return to "The Dismal Month." The vacation was almost over. In anticipation of my return to the city and my law work, I was already adjusting my professional harness and robbing myself of the fulfillment of these final days, a destructive procedure, a negative pattern of whose repetition I now became acutely aware.

At this point I pulled out the verses set aside in March. They did not satisfy, yet held interest. So far as they went they made a complete poem, but from another point of view they seemed only the first section of a poem that had yet to be formed.

I had personified the season, and shown her before she had attained her comeliness. Now there came the wish to follow her progress as she fulfilled herself, passing from the shabby,

the dismal, the sluggish, by a miracle of transformation, to something quick with life and rare with the beauty of motion and color.

Two concepts aided to define this second panel or section, the idea of a quickening as against torpor, and the idea of confidence or self-assurance winning over weakness. The two words in this section which possessed most importance for me were "quickens" and "confident." To these I might add "brightens."

The chief difficulty lay in indicating a progression from the first stage which should be gradual rather than abrupt. I had to feel my way with as much subtlety as I could command. After a few try-outs, I hit on the idea of sunlight feebly penciling through onto the barren scene. To be right in tone, it had to come through, "ever so faintly." Early sunlight with meager heat.

With this much settled I proceeded to establish the transition to a more benign atmosphere. Technically I liked the use of the adverbs "cautiously" and "unsteadily" in the first section, and decided to repeat the effect in the second section with "faintly," "wearily," and "warily," thereby supplying a strand of connective tissue between the two parts.

A further correspondence and contrast ensued from the repetition—with a difference—of the "dead leaves" image. In the first section they represented a hampering of life; in the second they no longer mattered; they had become detached and were blown into the past. Life now moved forward fleetly, warmly.

I now approached the ultimate stanza, which should express the wonder of new birth. Up to this moment the poem was without rhyme. I had no intention to end it on a rhyme; it simply turned out so. The evolution of this stanza may be of interest. In the earlier versions the last three lines went:

And behold
The first confident crocus
Before your startled eyes

This seemed reasonably satisfactory, excepting for "startled," an intrusive, worthless adjective and promptly ejected. But my wife raised a more telling objection. To her the emergence of a single crocus as a climax to nature's magnificent resurrection seemed inadequate and diminutive. I might have rejoined with Blake's line of "all heaven in a wild-flower," had I not felt the justice of her comment. I had rather expected her to question "confident," and was pleased with her acceptance of it.

Reconsidering those last lines, then, and adding the color gold to enrich the picture, I conceived the following, which met the point of her criticism:

And behold!
Pure gold!
A rush of confident crocuses
Before your eyes.

As a footnote I might add that the adjective "confident" has especially appealed to many readers, perhaps not so much for its unusual attribution to a flower, but rather for the implicit suggestion of the renewal of faith.

THIRTEEN

Light Verse

WHEN I WRITE light verse I try to give to it the same thought, the same craftsmanship, the same scrupulous discipline that I give to verse commonly labeled as serious. I make no degrading discriminations; the desire and the ideal to produce each poem as perfectly as possible operate without distinctions.

Light verse, accordingly, so far as I am concerned, is not slight verse, nor should it be slighted, Noah Webster to the contrary notwithstanding. He described it condescendingly as "designed merely to entertain," as though pleasure were sinful.

The range is wide both technically and on the levels of subject matter. One can skate blithely on the surface, kick one's verbal heels in the air, or, under the guise of banter, give expression to deep and heated emotions such as scorn, contempt, indignation over injustice.

Its essential characteristics appear in its tone and temper. As the adjective implies, it should avoid all traces of heaviness and it should invariably be cheerful even in the treatment of an ironic or satiric theme; in short it should always be good-humored.

It allows for infinite variety, versatility, and virtuosity, and, to generalize, it gains its choicest effects through technical ingenuity. Its vocabulary is without limit, since it disdains con-

finement to the dictionary and in its imaginative flights may coin a language never heard or dreamed of before. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," Edward Lear with his "runcible spoon," and, in our own day, the nonsensical pyrotechnics of Ogden Nash offer striking examples.

The inventiveness of the light-verse writer is especially called into play when it comes to rhyming, where he may allow free rein to his acrobatic skills. Much of the amusement from a piece of light verse depends on the element of surprise over an unusual or unexpected coupling of rhymes. Here one finds combinations which in a serious poem would be too outrageous to be tolerated.

For over a half-century I have cavorted over this gay field and plead guilty to the charge of being an incurable addict. My malady is due to a fatal weakness for words. I enjoy them separately for their sounds and shapes, the way they feel on the tongue and appeal to the sight. My fondness is sensory; meaning may come later. Like a child with a bag of bright varicolored beads, I like to arrange words in patterns that will please both the ear and the eye. Making such patterns leads to deeper and wider exploration, to the extended musical line, the appropriate choice of rhythm and meter, the subtle interplay of vowel and consonant.

It often happens that an item in the daily newspaper starts me going. "Topicals" offer a perennial invitation to verbal experiment and adroitness. A cable from London on September 29,1949, to the New York *Herald Tribune* once challenged me. It read:

Princess Elizabeth turned up her royal nose at long skirts today.

That statement, humorously phrased, certainly held possibilities for a bit of foolery. I felt it should be handled with a

neat, crisp line, the briefest possible, and most of it in the rhyming. This is the way it came out:

THE PRINCESS HOLDS THE LINE

The Princess
Evinces
Dissent,
Asserting
Her skirting
Intent.

Her passion
For fashion's
Decree
Subsides
As it rides
At the knee.

Her hemline
She'll streamline
In reason,
Unbending
To trend
Or to season.

It's written,
No Briton's
A slave,
And Bess
Wears the dress
Of the brave.

Ideas for light-verse poems may originate where and when one least expects to encounter them. Certainly one would hardly expect them to issue out of a symphony concert. And yet there is abundance of material right there if the listener becomes sufficiently inattentive to escape the spell of the music. I confess

to such an experience at a performance of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I know I should have been reverently absorbed but my mind wandered and my eyes instead of being focused on Koussevitzky were directed to the members of the orchestra and especially to the person who played the harp. There he was, sitting up there for the whole of a symphony plucking no more than a twang or two. I began to speculate on his situation —the long wait, and then the danger of coming in on the wrong beat and wrecking the entire rendition. My sympathies then spread to the drummer and the cymbalist, with their similar plight. Moreover one could neither ignore nor resist "twang or two," with its incitement to tricky rhyming. So, instead of going out at the intermission, I stayed in my seat to sketch out what eventually became something entitled:

ORCHESTRA NOTES

Pity the wretched harp-player!
Lord, he must suffer a pang or two.
Sitting up there
For the whole of a symphony,
Plucking no more than a twang or two.

Pity the hapless drummer!
What man's lot could be glummer?
Tense with concern,
Waiting his turn
To release his appropriate bang or two.

And the scrupulous wielder of cymbals,
On pins and needles and thimbles!
Marking each beat
For the moment discreet
To crash his climacteric zing or two.
(He surely could tell us a thing or two.)

But what if anyone misses?
Who gets the hisses, the odium?
Would anyone choose
To step into the shoes
Of the guy on the brink of the podium?

It takes no more than a chance word or phrase to propel one down the road of irresponsibility to a deep but harmless state of intoxication. I have often succumbed to this sort of thing.

There was the time when I was pursued by the line, "the shriek of a shrike." I had to consult the dictionary to discover what kind of a bird a shrike is, and I never learned whether or not it shrieks. That of course made no difference, since I felt no call to scientific accuracy. But I did feel the urge to snare a fair collection for an aviary under the heading:

ORNITHOLOGICAL

The shriek of a shrike
I dislike;
The look of a rook
I can't brook;
The wail of a quail
I'd curtail;
The squeal of a teal
Lacks appeal;
The lilt of a stilt
Best unspilt;
The gush of a thrush
Pure mush;
The hoot of a coot
Leaves me mute,
And I'm immune
To the croon of a loon.
As for nightingales and curlews,
I'm glad they don't infest these purlieus.

The chief technical fun in Operation Ornithological lay in the use of an interior rhyme or near rhyme in every odd line to supplement the regular line endings with the same sound, as!

Shriek, shrike, dislike;
Look, rook, brook.

And the shift from a clipped meter to the longer lines of the closing couplet, together with its brace of fresh rhymes, helped considerably.

Another example of this relish for word-play, which may have grown out of a youthful fondness for W. S. Gilbert's complicated rhyme-schemes, is something called

IT ISN'T.

It's a kind of verbal "Song of the Bee" or "Minute Waltz," in which I keep up the spinning and jingling until I'm about out of breath:

IT ISN T

It isn't the heat;
It's the humidity.
It isn't the cold;
It's the frigidity.
It isn't the bulk;
It's the solidity.
It isn't the grief;
It's the morbidity.

It isn't the speed;
It's the rapidity.
It isn't the greed;
It's the avidity.
It isn't the thaw;
It's the liquidity.
It isn't the law;
It's the jaridity.

It isn't the vice;
It's the perfidity.
It isn't the ice;
It's the too-skidity.
It isn't the glue;
It's the viscidity.
It's not even you;
It's my hyperacidity.

Then there's the type of poem that builds up like a sectional bookcase, each unit complete by itself. The poem can stop with the first unit or it can go on as long as the supply of fuel holds out. I once wrote this momentous couplet:

Folks in Fordham
Die of boredom.

A sociological conclusion requiring no further elaboration. However, it amused me enough to follow with the observation that

In Canajohane
They just won't marie

and from there to mount to the gratifying climax:

But in Yonkers
Love conkers.

This effort, which was practically effortless, suggested the inane flavor of a column of local jottings in a country newspaper. It now gave me a title:

THE WORLD AROUND Us

and committed me to the ensuing sequence of detached brevities:

These nights, at Cazenovia,
You sleep with blankets ovia.

Some move to Oneonta,
Others don't wonta.

Throughout the whole of China
There's not an Elk or Shrina.

And, likewise, in Canarsie,
One seldom meets a Parsee.

It's blackberry time at Pelham.
They can 'em, stew 'em, jelham,

The summer crowd at Brewster
Is bigger than it yewster.

A nudist fan at Hudson
Was warned to put his dudson.

A physicist at Chatham
Last Monday split an atham.

While this review of certain kinds of light verse doesn't pretend to cover an area which has no limits either of form or content, one should perhaps make a few further observations.

Around the turn of the century a favorite type of light verse was built on the use of French forms, such as the triolet, the rondeau, and the villanelle. Each in turn demanded strict conformity as to length and number of lines, orthodox rhyme schemes, and pattern of development. The English poet, Austin Dobson, was perhaps the most prominent of its practitioners and his influence was especially strong on college undergraduates of the period. I experimented freely with these French forms.

The mood was generally romantic rather than comic, well-bred with a pleasant gaiety, but lacked exuberance largely because of the tight restrictions imposed. Nevertheless these models served as valuable exercises in technical discipline and

in improving one's craftsmanship. They could still be employed to advantage today for the same purpose.

It would be a mistake to think of light verse only as a vehicle for cleverness or nonsense or the antics of comedy high or low. It often has qualities similar to those one finds in more serious lyrics, quiet grace, concern with the natural scene, the use of historical or literary allusion, to name but a few. I tried to incorporate such qualities in a playful tribute to the late Major Bowes when he was engaged in a tree-planting competition with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on Fifth Avenue at Radio City. I also wanted the piece to be a vignette of Manhattan. Here it is:

HAIL TO THE MAJOR

All hail to Major Edward Bowes,
Supreme of impresarios,
Who, magically, without theatrics,
Has set a grove around St. Patrick's,
Mightiest feat of legerdemain
Since Birnam moved to Dunsinane.
The ancient stones, austere and papal,
He warms with greenery of maple,
Building isles of cloistered shade
For office boy, for man and maid.

But is the major's appetite
For nature satisfied? Not quite.
He looks at John D. Junior's realm
Where elm sedately nods to elm,
Then plants his own, to parallel 'm.

And so, municipal thanks we give.
(We hope they'll live.)

As I suggested near the beginning, beneath the innocent cover of good-natured light verse, thought and comment may

exist with deeper meaning. The medium is congenial to satire and irony. The easy tone, the seemingly amiable treatment may prove more effective than one pitched in anger.

A chance to do a piece of this sort turned up when the Russian composer, Shostakovich, visited this country ostensibly to attend a convocation to promote intercultural relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. The question in most people's minds was whether Shostakovich came as a political propagandist or as a nonpolitical artist. With this doubt unresolved I wrote:

SALUTATION

Dubious greetings, Shostakovich,
Friend or foe, we'd like to *kjiow* which,
Artist-brother of Stravinsky?
Or an envoy of Vishinsky?
We should hate to think the latter,
We prefer to hope you'll frater-
Nize within our tranquil borders
As a guy not under orders,
On a true esthetic mission;
And, to strengthen your position,
Won't you bring along that Dove
Of Peace? With love,

It's about time to close this chapter. Although the subject is inexhaustible, the reader's patience is not. All I have meant to do here has been to present not too pedantically, I trust, a general view of the nature of light verse, its standards, its variety, its special techniques, its place in the poetic scheme.

By way of illustration I have offered selected samplings of my own work. Perhaps the right note on which to end would be with this friendly parting injunction, with a hint from Kipling:

NEVER

Never try to emulate the emu,
A-burying your head within the sand,
Never aim to simulate the sea-mew,
Unless you have a parachute at hand.

Never seek to monkey with a mongoose,
No matter how appealingly he begs;
Remember that by nature he is *one* goose
Incapable of yielding golden eggs.

Never stop to reason with a rhesus,
You'll find him disappointingly obtuse;
Yea, though he may possess the wealth of Croesus,
He lacks the brain to turn it to his use.

Never risk adventure with a vulture,
His point of view is not as broad as yours;
He's backward both in background and in culture.
You'd better keep away till he matures.

Never try to trifle with a truffle,
A fungus with a missing sense of fun.
Such fancies, if you stifle, if you muffle,
You'll never be a man, my son.

FOURTEEN

Snow: Theme with Variations

AT THE MOMENT of creation one is often unaware of the role played by the unconscious; behind the wings, for all that, it dominates the stage. It chooses the theme from its inexhaustible store, thrusts it up to the surface and insists on its expression. It may be only long after the poem has been written that in retrospect one discovers the hidden predilections which have demanded to be released, recognized and made manifest in an esthetic form.

Each one of us has his own favorite themes predetermined in this way. They bear the stamp of his personal imagery.

In my own case as I reread poems written during the past thirty years I am confronted with the frequency with which I write about snow. I've preserved a dozen or so of such pieces and no two duplicate each other whether in the approach to the subject matter or in the technical treatment.

I suppose it all goes back to that pristine experience when a child in wide-eyed wonderment contemplates for the first time a sky suddenly alive with white particles whirled from nowhere, flying, drifting, floating in air, and at last soundlessly covering the earth. The miracle somehow becomes incorporated in the infant psyche, never to lose its magic, to be vividly

fed with each fresh snowfall to the end of the chapter.

At least so it has been with me. And so it is that as the snows pile up year after year in the imagination which preserves them against melting into forgetfulness, they form a deep, indelible body of material for anyone attracted by the marvel and disposed to interpret its enchantment.

I have just written of "white particles whirled from nowhere." Perhaps I have too rashly assumed how this appears to a child as it first meets with the mystery. But it may be otherwise. My own fantasy at the noninfantile age of forty-five conjured up both a locus and a source in

SNOW TOWARD EVENING

Suddenly the sky turned gray,
The day,
Which had been bitter and chill,
Grew soft and still.
Quietly
From some invisible blossoming tree
Millions of petals cool and white
Drifted and blew,
Lifted and flew,
Fell with the falling night.

This brief lyric has been frequently reprinted in anthologies for children and whatever popularity it may have won I attribute largely to the fact that the image of a tree with white petals instinctively and acceptably appeals to the sensibilities of a growing child watching it snow.

As I re-examine the snow poems I find that although they originated from many moods and even at different levels of the imagination their dominant note is almost always benign. This can perhaps best be illustrated by these four lines, not from a snow poem but from one called "White Fog":

Bury deep the black world
Underneath the white.

Nothing can be seen,
Everything grows clear.

Snow similarly becomes a symbol of peace and illumination, transcending the pain, the turmoil, and the despair of man's pilgrimage in the world of reality. As the flakes gather, organize, and patiently descend, they develop a mystical power of conquest; weightless, they overcome with secret strength the adverse forces of earth. And as we witness the spectacle we undergo a change in our own psyche; we have loosened our mundane adhesions and have arrived at a state of release.

Before proceeding to a fuller discussion of the benign and mystical properties I ascribe to snow, I should like to contrast them with my feeling toward nature when it is locked in ice. Whereas snow in most cases stands for affirmation and life, ice usually represents negation and death. I draw this conclusion from two poems, "January Garden" and "Deep in Wagon-Ruts."

Deep in wagon-ruts
Blue frost settles.
Crystal lilies
With silver petals
Whiten blue pools.
Shadows
On stiffened meadows
Spread blue the snow.
A last quiver—
The strangled river
Glazes ice-blue.

Here I started out to write a simple imagist poem. The eye is focused on the object; the senses are enlisted to note the natural operation that produces frost, with its prevailing colors

of silver and blue. But as the lines proceed a subjective element creeps in. The poem is no longer merely or purely pictorial; it begins to acquire the overtones of a personal point of view. This added constituent is introduced by "shadows on stiffened meadows," which at least for me conveys a sense of sadness. It forecasts the final three lines with their description of a death scene in nature. The choice of the lurid words "quiver," "strangled," and "glazes" illustrates how a mood of dejection has taken possession and has converted what set out to be a fragment of visual observation into something beyond the sensory.

"January Garden" is born of the same attitude, although here it is held throughout. The cold is "insidious" in its inexorable iciness; indeed it is the personification of death sealing "the flower-border like a grave."

The poem is hopeless—quite the opposite of Shelley's intimation that if winter comes, spring cannot be far behind. Stanza by stanza it advances to emphasize the implacable grip of a malign agency over life and beauty as they flourished in spring and summer.

Take a sharp pick,
Break the harsh thick
Wintry metal;
Once you might have found
Springing through the ground
What goes to shape a petal.

The poem concludes on a note of utter, even macabre finality:

Beauty's womb
Is now a tomb
For frozen worms.

I have placed these ice and snow poems in contiguity not merely for the sake of contrast but also to indicate how poems of completely irreconcilable states of feeling may germinate according to the mood and circumstance of any given moment in one's life.

Now I desire to return more faithfully to my subject which is the consideration of my snow poems and their variety.

The "earthiest" poem of the lot is called "Last Night It Snowed." It's the only one about snow in the city and most closely resembles "Deep in Wagon-Ruts" in that both derive primarily from sensation. In "Wagon-Ruts" the approach is through the eye; the city poem is based on sound and the sense impressions are recorded on and by the ear.

The situation presented in "Last Night It Snowed" is one with which I have been happily familiar ever since as a child I came from the country to live in New York. It too, like "Snow Toward Evening," is touched off by a quiet current of enchantment. The enchantment is created through the transition, while one is asleep, from one world to another. One goes to bed unprepared for any weather change, but is shaken out of sleep next morning by the delightful information, conveyed by the sound of shovels and picks, that there's a fresh fall of snow.

I know that a practical person will smile at my cheerful acceptance of the event. His reaction will most likely be to curse the elements for a state of affairs involving the need of galoshes, the breakdown of transportation service, and the threat of in-influenza. Eventually I too shall be coming down to earth, or rather to slush and sleet; indeed I have already disturbed the spell with the recognition that this heaven-sent purity will yield to corruption and turn into "wintry dregs." Meantime I shall

have enjoyed the flavor of my experience at awakening, with its other-world magic.

"Last Night It Snowed" was primarily an experiment with sound effects; I reproduce it here by way of illustration:

Dent! dent!
Hollow, blunt
Din of eager shovels, cracking
The warm husk of sleep, breaking
Open day.

Dent! dent!
Clipped chant
Of iron cuts
The knit air,
Chips a clear
Powdery way
In airy snow,
In earthy snow;
Hits
The case
Of ice at the base;
Splits
And severs, flesh from bone,
Ice from stone.

Dent! scrape!
Dent! scrape
Wintry dregs
From city flags.

From "Last Night It Snowed" I turn from a consideration of sound effects to an investigation of snow in motion. The question I asked myself was but incompletely answered in the next poem, "Hither and Thither"; it was whether, above the seeming fitfulness of falling snow, there existed an underlying

pattern, a basic order in control of these shifting particles drawn by changing winds.

I believe the conception originated in this fashion: I knew that each single flake formed a unit of crystal symmetry. From that premise my imagination began to play with the thought that these perfect units when assembled must constitute and create a perfect structure in the large. Obviously the conception could not be confirmed by scientific proof. It led me into the expanse of metaphysics. In short, the outer eye, observing the flight of flakes, could discover no general plan of operation, could take in only a scene of beauty without apparent purpose or meaning. But the inner eye, dissatisfied and seeking further, persisted in the conviction of an underlying design.

How this conviction developed to the point of concrete verbal expression one may discern in the poem as presented here.

HITHER AND THITHER

The way of snow is hither and thither,
The restless way of to and fro,
Impatient of the fixed, the mean,
Too accurate law, the strict machine.

The way of snow is hither and thither,
The twisting way of criss and cross;
Needles ply, the fluent threads
Gather and join; the wonder spreads.

The way of snow is hither and thither,
The fitful way of slant and stray;
It spins a cloth of powdery spume,
Wind's the shuttle, sky the loom.

The way of snow is hither and thither,
The floating way of drift and lift.
Perceive
The flaky weave!

Divine
The white design!

I have never felt that "Hither and Thither" did complete istice to the metaphysical conception; it lacks, I fear, the necesiry reach into the unknown, the transcendent imaginative retch. But it is an attempt, at least, to set forth the ocular exerience against its deeper implications.

It was one of the most difficult and obstinate compositions I /er undertook. Unfortunately since I failed to save the many 3ortive beginnings and discarded versions I am unable to irow much light on the obstacles. The essential problem, howler, was to present the wayward effects of wind-blown snow id at the same time by suggestion and inference to build up id make plausible the possibility of an underlying "white esign." Perhaps the most helpful factor was the choice of the ne, repeated at the beginning of each stanza,

The way of snow is hither and thither,

gainst the image of spinning and weaving a texture, a philo->phical fabric, as it were.

Whereas "Hither and Thither" sought to discover a genral, all-embracing pattern, "April Flurry" created out of a ibjective state of being an objective picture with emphasis ither on the separate flakes than on the mass.

APRIL FLURRY

This tardy April blast
Is winter's final thrust;
It cannot master
Or halt invincible spring,
But only bluster
And scatter and drive
Out of a cloudy hive
A swarm benign.

White bees,
Without hum, without sting,
Drift through boughs of pine.
Directionless they rove,
And unintentioned, these—
Freed
Of any
Flowery greed,
Incurious of honey.

My own physical and psychological condition at the time throws light on the quiet mood and gentle pace of "April Flurry." It was written in our home at Westport, Connecticut, where I was spending a brief convalescence after an operation. The break in my regular life necessitated by hospital confinement had induced a state of irresponsibility and removal from routine compulsion, a state which became increasingly acceptable with returning strength and the realization that I could for a few more days indulge myself in comfortable recuperation. This period was one of inward peace and unconcern.

One day, out of my bedroom window I beheld the first crocuses and a stirring of new green over the grass. And then, with no advance notice of weather change, a breeze blew up and let fall a loose load of snow. Quickly the wind ceased, the sun came out again while the casual flakes lingered—meandered, one might say—in and about the low pines. Their tempo and indifference, corresponding with my own sense of letting go, produced quite the opposite effect by arousing me to record the scene. It was the first return to the creative life, as almost without effort I set down the little poem, with technical pleasure in working out the combinations of near-rhymes, and in finding the image of the white bees, so mild and unthreatening.

"April Flurry" illustrates once more my earlier observation that for me the sight of snow is benign.

The only exception to this concept of benignity, an exception which vanishes as the poem progresses, is to be found in my other spring snow-song.

SNOW IN APRIL

Sun is young in the year,
April is tender,
Pink tips appear
On branches slender.
Brown earth, stiff with cold,
Loosens green and gold.

Silver shine in the sky
Darkens to leaden;
Snarling winds fly,
Shrivel and deaden.
Snow-armies crush
Bough and bud and bush.

Venturous spring!
And, for what reason
This sorrowful thing—
Throttling a season?
Chilling in birds their song,
Choking the song?

Perilous birth!
Too early hour!
Detain, under earth,
Each delicate flower.
Winter must lengthen
Spring to strengthen!

Cover with white;
Green blades whiten.
On jonquil-gold spread winter-white;
The opening soil tighten.
Shelter, restrain the spring!
Till sky and sod and robins sing.

Here near the outset and down through the first sections the aspect of snow is one of destruction and evil. My sympathies go out to the life and beauty of the awakening, flowery season, caught unawares and still too lacking in strength to resist the attack of a late and unexpected wintry enemy. The images are those of warfare and cruelty, "snow-armies," "throttling," "choking," "chilling" (the equivalent of killing). Accompanying winds are "snarling"; they "shrivel and deaden." No sun shines; skies are "leaden."

But once my anger over this violation, this infamy, has been spent, a new and contrary mood takes possession. Negation and death no longer prevail. I capture the enemy, as it were, and make him do my bidding. The crushing menace is transformed into an instrument of protective love, a sheltering blanket. So the poem closes with the unmistakable intimation that the battle for survival has been won.

Of all my snow-poems the one I regard as most imaginative is

PRESENCE OF SNOW

So rare, so mere,
You cannot hear
It brush against the stillness or impair
With faintest stir
The poised, suspended air.

So rare, so mere,
And yet imponderably clear;
You cannot see, yet see
The secret flow
Of immanent snow,
Although
The softest breath has yet to free,
The gentlest current yet to take
The first bewildered flake.

Paradoxically it is most imaginative despite the absence of a single concrete image until we encounter in the very last line

The first bewildered flake.

I find certain affinities between "Presence of Snow" and "Snow Toward Evening." In both the mood is one of hushed expectancy, of undetermined pendency. In both we are dealing with an atmospheric state which ultimately crystallizes in a definite form. In "Snow Toward Evening" we have the larger image, an "invisible blossoming tree" shedding its petals; in "Presence of Snow" the image is a single "bewildered flake."

The dominant note in both pieces is that of immanence; I use the word as an adjective in "Presence of Snow" to express this sense of indwelling. (When first published a well-meaning typesetter had changed "immanent" to "imminent," an unwelcome act of collaboration.)

"Presence of Snow," written many years later than "Snow Toward Evening," as I see the matter in retrospect, really issues out of the earlier poem as a more subtle development of the common theme. The choice of such adjectives as "rare" and "mere" in the first line, and repeated later, is intended to suggest a region of unearthliness, a climate of transcendent purity. The suggestion is heightened and carried forward more intricately than in "Snow Toward Evening" by the soft *r* sound in the rhymes of "hear," "impair," "stir," "air," "clear."

The intention is to create a pre-elemental condition, or perhaps an intimation in advance of the physical fact of actual snow. In seeking to produce the requisite suspense as well as to lead up to the denouement, I found that by using the open vowel sounds of "see" and "free," "flow," "snow," and "although," I was establishing phonetically an avenue of transmis-

sion from the immaterial to the material, culminating in a single apprehensible visible flake.

Such are the various poems that represent my feeling for snow. Others may still follow.

FIFTEEN

The Rat Image

❁

IN CHAPTER 14 I considered the insistent demands of the unconscious in forcing to the light buried but potent images of symbolic significance to the psyche. In that chapter I addressed myself to the impact of the snow image and to the frequency and variety of my poems dealing with snow. I concluded on rereading them that for me the thought of snow conjured up a feeling of its benign nature.

My venture with snow has led me to reflect on another image of which I was unaware when I wrote, but which runs through many of my poems and derives from quite another emotional state, at the opposite pole from benignity.

It is the rat image, and is invested with the odor of malignity.

How this image came to birth I cannot be sure but I can hazard a plausible guess. It grew I believe out of an episode which was thoughtlessly retold in my presence at an early impressionable age. This in brief is the story.

My parents lived in Plattsburg, New York, where my father was in a business requiring him to make long trips through the Adirondack villages. At such times my mother would be alone in the house, a prey to fears both real and imagined. A real-fear was that of rats which infested the place. On one such occasion, so the tale goes, a large rat worked its way into my

crib. Frantically my mother snatched me from the danger, but the rat, temporarily frustrated, pursued the attack and leaped on her as she held me high in her arms in ultimate safety. The experience was so shattering that it left a lasting imprint, and her only relief, however temporary, lay in frequently recounting the episode to her relatives and neighbors. It was on one such occasion that I chanced to be present and to receive the sharp communication of her terror. I must have been four or five years old at the time. I can only add that for the better part of my life I suffered from this childhood psychic wound.

Deeply locked in my unconscious, the image of the rat and the drama in which it played so lurid a role nevertheless struggled for release. Eventually as I turned to the writing of verse it began to appear in my poems and to allow for periods of intermittent freedom.

My first poem on this theme is one called

FEELINGS

The cat killed a rat.
Magnificent in conquest
It lay basking.
How splendid the cat!
How horrid, how venomous the rat!
I breathed heavy with exultation
Over my enemy
Stiff and ugly in the dust.

It was no rat;
It was a baby rabbit,
Warmness running out.
Tender, curving back!
Soft, pathetic fur!
Innocent, wondering eyes!

The proud cat crumples and slinks,
Wind rips the roses,
A cloud bags the sun.

Here in all its malignity and high emotional voltage is probably the strongest expression of my battle with the beast. I portray it as charged with venom and horror. I myself am in effect the cat who killed its enemy and mine. I share the cat's triumph and "breathe heavy with exultation" over the extermination of this baleful, evil thing.

As the incident turns out, the destroyed creature is not a rat but a rabbit, and on discovering this fact, my anger and hate become directed against the cat, no longer my ally, but a cruel adversary instead.

My next poem, written soon after "Feelings," is called

A RAT

There's a rat in the wall,
A rat in the wall,
At the side of the bed
Close to the head;
Gnawing a path
Through a thicket of lath,
Pawing a track
Through a forest of black.
Will it nibble and scratch
Till it loosens the latch
Of the portal of me?—
Will it scrape itself free?
Will it crumble and master
The wavering plaster
That leans between me and disaster?

Here the dread and loathing expressed in "Feelings" appear in less violent terms. The animal does not reveal itself visually but works hidden within a wall. The fear persists, it is true,

but is tempered, however faintly, by the possibility of escape. The rat conceivably may *not* destroy me, despite its cunning, relentless progress.

Years later, without realizing at the time the similarity in situation to that presented in "A Rat," I produced

DAWN HAS YET To RIPPLE IN

What is this that I have heard?
Scurrying rat or stirring bird?
Scratching in the wall of sleep?
Twitching on the eaves of sleep?
I can hear it working close
Through a space along the house,
Through a space obscure and thin.
Night is swiftly running out,
Dawn has yet to ripple in,
Dawn has yet to clear the doubt,
Rat within or bird without.

Again my enemy seems to lie in wait, unseen but disturbingly audible; again I ask the question posed in the earlier poem—will it break through to my ruin? But with this noteworthy difference: I have introduced as a foil to the rat the symbol of a bird, giving to the bird equal power, significance, and opportunity. My question then becomes twofold: I have arranged a contest between opposing forces—of evil against good. Thus, by the affirmative act of juxtaposition, I have correspondingly reduced the bestial menace. Its chances of success are no better than fifty-fifty, and although the scales have not been weighted in favor of the bird of hope, the living spirit, one feels, with the overtone of dawn rippling in to supplant night, that the rat may be destined to defeat.

These three pieces reflect in varying degrees the intensity of my antipathy. Traces still linger in other poems. For example,

in "Country-House: Midnight," where I contrast a room before and after the electric lights have been turned off—life and death—I end with these lines:

> High, where a clock companionably sat,
> A metal rat's-tooth
> Evenly nicks and nibbles.

In "For a Yellow Bird Dead on a City Roof' I say:

> Corruption eats away the feathery gold
> To rattish gray.

One hardly needs to be reminded that the power and fury of the rat symbol increases or diminishes according to one's subjective state at the time of creation. Indeed it is pleasant to reflect that in other poems, as the mood becomes gentler and even playful, the rat-dragon is transmuted and reduced into the diminutive and harmless mouse. In "Time To Return to Town," a poem about the first hint of winter, I have this stanza:

> Along in the night the northwind charged,
> Driving the moon to cover.
> Chill, like a mouse,
> Gnawed at the eaves,
> Scratched at the sills.

But in the earlier version I had written

> Chill, like a rat,

only to realize that the situation was not sufficiently ominous to justify an image that strong.

In "Lying in Grass," where I seek to present the kinetic quality of a natural scene, I lightly describe the human eyes as

Two field-mice,
Scurrying, scurrying
Through grass-tips
Sniffing shadows,
Nibbling sun-glints,
Darting back
Into sleep-holes.

In "Our Apartment in August," I hear

Scratch of a mouse in terror behind the pipes.

Finally, in "October Night—Westport," quite in contrast to the "metal rat's-tooth" of "Country-House: Midnight" I produce the following picture of tranquillity and peace.

OCTOBER NIGHT—WESTPORT

Out of doors a million gentle stars,
Winds of evening, strokes of tenderness,
Thud of fruit, dropping late.
Within the house
A quiet light in the lamp.
Strained boards relax.
Behind the plaster
Criss-cross mouse-play.
In the wing-chair shelter
You and a book,
Hand reaching toward the settle—
Slices of apple, slivers of nut, cider-jug.
On the rug,
Swelling, falling, swelling, falling,
Warm mass of drowsing cat.
On the mantel
Tick-tock, tick-tock.
Logs burn thin,
Sag to embers,
Crumbling orange embers.

The menacing rat in the wall of the poems "A Rat" and "Dawn Has Yet To Ripple In" has turned into a friendly mouse playing behind the plaster; the corrosive clockwork on the mantel of "Country-House: Midnight" has been converted into a symbol of rhythmic harmony. Time beats sturdily on.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

SIXTEEN

'The Fly' and Its Problems

❀

THE COMPOSITION of "The Fly," a deceptively simple poem, presented problems of whose nature I was unaware until they were pointedly called to my attention. The poem in its two versions offers a sharp illustration of the gap between what the poet may think he has written and what he has actually produced. In the present case it turned out that the significance of the poem in its earlier version and the inferences drawn by the reader were quite the opposite of what I had intended to convey.

At the moment, it will be sufficient to print the two versions together, without further comment. Should you be curious to compare them before going on with this account, you will probably discover the clue to my dilemma.

VERSION A

A big black buzzing fly,
So safe in the open sky,
Has blundered into the room
And begins its battle with doom.
With desperate dashes and loops
It bashes, recoils and swoops
And bangs again and again
At an obdurate window-pane.

I sit at my desk to write,
Entrapped in the creature's plight.
It has lost the power of sight;
It has missed the invisible crack,
The gate to the pathway back.

VERSION B

A big black buzzing fly,
So safe in the open sky,
Has blundered into the room
And begins its battle with doom.
With desperate dashes and loops
It bashes, recoils and swoops
And bangs again and again
At an obdurate window-pane.

I sit at my desk to write,
Entrapped in the creature's plight.
It has lost the power of sight;
It has missed the invisible crack.
Will it ever regain the track?
The gate to the pathway back?

First, however, I should like to tell how the poem got its start. As frequently happens with me, the genesis of "The Fly" emanated from a vacuum of emotion and of idea; it was born out of a state of exhaustion.

I had been poring over a manuscript sent by a publisher-client for my opinion whether it contained any libelous matter. This kind of investigation requires close, responsible scrutiny; one can't allow the mind to wander. But after two unrelieved hours or more over the task I found myself reading without taking in what was on the page. I had reached the saturation point, where it would be dangerous to proceed further and run the risk of missing some offensive sentence or phrase.

As I laid aside the proof-sheets, too weary to take up any other work on my desk, a big black fly happened to circle and buzz around my head.

Now a big black buzzing fly, you might think, is hardly fertile soil for a poem. A fly is uninteresting; it has no glamour, like a bird; if it arouses any emotion at all it is likely to be one of annoyance rather than of sympathy. A fly is something to get rid of, and if it grows persistently irritating by its unsolicited attentions, it deserves to be swatted to extinction.

But if a big black buzzing fly happens to venture into a room on the fourteenth floor of a mid-Manhattan office building it ceases to be commonplace. Only an exceptional fly would have adopted that unusual lane of travel. Had the room been alive with swarming flies I doubt whether I'd have noticed them. Most likely it was the unique phenomenon of this solo flight that caused me spontaneously to utter the words:

"A big, black, buzzing fly."

This simple statement, artless as a child's nursery jingle, lingered agreeably on my tongue. It was no more—and no less—than a pleasant verbal combination. What I found engaging was that the words had arranged themselves without forethought. Consciously, at least, I had no part in their selection, nor had I been guilty of any manipulation.

A word or a phrase or an image may come to me, as it were, out of the blue. If it carries a compulsive pressure to my senses, if it disturbs me sufficiently by its demands on my attention, I soon come to realize that a something beyond my control has issued a command that must be respected. This intangible something has thus ordered me to remove myself from the ordinary processes and concerns of the day, to submit to its promptings and to dedicate myself to its service. Only in such

fashion and in such atmosphere can that operation arise which may end in a poem.

This possibly sounds like a pretentious approach to the plain fact that I liked the sound of those few words and decided to do something about them. I hadn't the remotest idea of what the poem was going to be about, if it ever should accumulate enough momentum to reach the stage where meaning needed to be considered.

Here were three words, each beginning with the letter *b,* a pleasing labial. I doubt whether I experienced anything beyond this consciousness of satisfaction with mere sound. It stimulated me sufficiently, however, to move onward to a second line.

> So safe in the open sky.

Here consciousness indeed intervened to contrast the normal, carefree world of the fly with the scene of its present predicament. This second line therefore pointed the way, possibly, to some later philosophical or psychological observation on the experience as I saw it objectively—a fly out of its safe element, blundering into a situation of peril.

My fondness for the *b* sound received unexpected support by my choice of the word "blunder" to characterize the creature's waywardness, and I began toying with the idea of an improvisation on the note of *b.* My earliest version of lines third and fourth read:

> Has blundered into the room
> In a blind battle with doom.

On second thought I preferred a more active line, a verbal rather than an adjectival progression, and accordingly substituted:

> And begins its battle with doom.

Another reason for the change was that the use of "blind" seemed premature, even an interference with the poem's development. It assumed too much, implying inexorable defeat. The battle with doom would have been over before it had begun. So my substitute line accomplished the further advantage of setting in motion this mortal contest, and consequently of keeping the poem suspended and open to whatever turn the fates might decree.

Reading over these first four lines I found that my involvement with the letter *b* idea was more than a whimsical notion or a clever stunt; it seemed esthetically justifiable and capable of further development. Had my subject been a bee instead of a fly, this would have seemed fairly obvious. In fact this particular fly held for me distinct bee-like associations as to size, color, roving flight, and droning sound.

So, in proceeding to build the poem I deliberately ransacked my brain for relevant words beginning with the letter *b.* Soon I had collected:

baffled
bewildered
bangs
bashes
blank
bar

The next step was to turn to the fly itself as it sped about the room, and observe and record its frantic, hit-or-miss, futile spurts toward freedom. This involved noting each of the diverse, intricate, ever-changing movements without slowing down the dynamics or the tempo of the operation. I strove as always for objective accuracy, tightness of statement, avoidance of useless decoration, in order to make the effect-vivid in its graphic truthfulness.

To that end you will note that I not only picked two of my Swords, "bashes" and "bangs/' but snared a new one, "obdurate," in the process. It's a proved fact that when you start out with a notion like the *b-word* you attract similar words into the magnetic field.

The selection of "bashes" was a calculated choice on two counts; first, it seemed the most accurate verb to suggest a mounting, baffled recklessness; and second, it gave me a chance to implant an internal rhyme to go with "dashes" in the preceding line.

I favor the internal or interior rhyme as a valuable prosodic device, provided always that it be naturally and legitimately introduced. It has the great merit of adding a strand to tighten the texture of the line and to increase the poem's general strength and resilience. Here I feel it deepens and accelerates the flow of the verse.

A few lines later, to anticipate, I repeated the effect with the words "lost" and "missed," in the lines:

> It has lost the power of sight;
> It has missed the invisible crack.

This device is extremely tempting, often leading the unwary or unskilled into its too frequent, too blatant use. Thus it becomes a mere artifice which loses its effectiveness by overemphasis. Internal rhymes should be unobtrusive, discretely inserted; to be successful they must be subtly felt, below rather than above the level of consciousness.

Here then, were eight lines, assembled in a compact shape, tentatively, perhaps permanently congenial to me.

What to do next? What sort of structure to build on this base? Should the poem confine itself to the case of the fly?

Or should it aim at a wider significance, with general human implications?

The answer came quite unforced as I pondered. It arose out of my own quandary over the next step. Sitting at my desk, with eight lines on the paper before me, I felt stuck, powerless to proceed, yet unwilling to admit failure. And then suddenly it dawned on me that my sense of frustration was basically no different from the fly's; though the one was physical and the other psychological, we were both in the same boat. And with this flash of recognition came the decision to put myself briefly into the poem, exactly as I appeared to myself at the moment.

Accordingly, I merely recorded the actual prosaic fact that I was sitting at a desk, but couldn't go on writing because of my absorption in the fly's difficulties. Continuing in the meter and rhyme-pattern of the first stage of the poem, I introduced myself briefly in the two lines:

> I sit at my desk to write,
> Entrapped in the creature's plight.

By thus reaching out to the human and personal, the poem at once assumed a new aspect and moved to a larger area of speculation. These two lines had opened a second chapter; the nature of the chapter had now to be determined.

Here it should be remembered that this poem did not start from an idea or subject capable of logical development and with the end in constant view from the beginning; on the contrary it grew out of an initial phrase which moved waywardly, gathering accretions with growing concentration on the material. It represents a case where the material, as it develops and hardens, tends to determine or at least suggest what the poem may be about; thus the theme of the poem, the point of view, comes late.

Without appearing too positive, I suppose that having written the words "the creature's plight," I was prompted to ask myself what caused that plight. The answer that it had lost the power of sight came readily. And, going on, because of this loss of vision, it had missed the invisible crack, the available inch or so between the lowered window and the sill.

Surveying the accumulated twelve lines, I felt no need to amplify the picture. The fact that I had provided an avenue of escape through that invisible crack now forced me to a decision on what note to close.

For a moment or so my moralistic demon teased me with a suggestion both banal and sentimental: I was to be a good Boy Scout and gradually shoo the fly out to salvation! And as a corollary, if I did that, we'd both be free! I make this confession in the interest of truth and candor, but not without embarrassment, as an example of the traps that mine the road to creation. What probably happened was that having planted myself in the poem I felt I had to do something to justify the intrusion.

Some good did, however, come from this aberration; it determined for me that the fly, if it were to survive, would have to depend on its own efforts, rather than on outside aid. I had done enough by presenting it with a further chance via that crack, which if not visible, might still be apprehended in other nonvisual ways.

That crack, as I cast about for a concluding line, might conceivably become

The gate to the pathway back.

Thus the first version was rounded out. As I considered it, word .for word, and line for line, I saw nothing open for further revision. Transferred from penciled notes to the clarity of

single-space typing, it looked staunch and sea-worthy. It even ended, quite without design, on my letter *b* motif, with the word "back."

Before sending it to a magazine I decided on a cooling-off period and tried it out separately on two friends, both sensitive and candid critics. Each in turn_was unimpressed but too general in comment to show me in what respect the poem was deficient. The first one did say that "it comes down too fast to the end," but failed to particularize further. The other, even less specific, contented himself with the observation that it "wasn't up to the later Cane."

I blame myself for not having drawn them out, for the resultant give-and-take would surely have been profitable. As it was, the talks left me disturbed and unsettled and wondering how I'd missed out.

But with my third audience I had better luck.

"My, but that's gloomy!" she exclaimed, impulsively.

"Oh, not that gloomy," I protested defensively; "there's still a ray of hope there."

"Let me read it. I can never be sure from just hearing it read."

She must have read it several times, before saying:

"It's not just gloomy, it's hopeless. As I see it, there's no way out; it's a battle with doom and the fly is blinded. It's final and horrible, but it's completely satisfying for me if that's what you meant to express. Certainly you have every right, esthetically."

Her reaction was so sharp and honest that it penetrated my resistance. I could only say:

"But I didn't mean what you've gathered. The poem as you interpret it is plainly not the one I had in mind and thought I'd written. I didn't mean to shut off all possibility of escape,

however I might figure the odds against it. That's why I provided the crack.

"Besides, if the fates have already decreed, there's no drama, the cards are stacked, and from my point of view the thing isn't worth bothering about.

"Let me have it again," I continued; "I think you've opened my eyes to where I fell down. In aiming for a strong effect, I rushed too fast and left out an essential element. It isn't the first time I've done that either."

We were both silent for several minutes as I fingered the paper as if to re-feel the poem. Finally, I said:

"I think I've hit on something. What's needed is a line *between* the last two to indicate that the battle hasn't been lost, the struggle isn't over—a line that there's still a fighting chance. Not a Pollyanna line, of course.

"How about this simple question which leaves the issue open:

Will it ever regain the track?

and then end, with a further question instead of a period:

The gate to the pathway back?"

"If that's what you meant all along," she observed, "you've said it now for the first time."

In the days following this conversational exchange I enjoyed the contentment and compensation from having faced a difficulty and come through triumphant. But as the days wore on my self-satisfaction began to wear off. Nameless indefinable doubt would enter and disturb the comfortable assurance of success. Was I really through with the poem? Had I exhausted all possibilities for betterment? At odd moments I would take

the poem from my pocket, re-examine it, test it with an imaginary tuning-fork, find nothing to adjust or correct, and then return it to my pocket unchanged. Perhaps I was borrowing trouble. Perhaps I was overdoing my drive for perfection. Still, my uneasiness persisted.

It was in this state of irresolution that I showed the poem to still another friend, a man from whom I could expect candor at all times and a sound judgment as well.

"Take a look at this," I ventured self-consciously. "I've had a lot of trouble over it, and thought I'd finished it off. But now I'm not at all sure. I'm still bothered. What do you think?"

The pause seemed interminable until he came back bluntly with:

"It isn't good, it isn't right."

I waited for more, as he took out a pencil.

"Mind if I mutilate?

"What I mean," he went on, "is that the poem should speak for itself from first to last. There's too much *you* in it. The poet should not intrude his subjectivity, as you do, I think, with *desperate* dashes and an *obdurate* window-pane. There is almost a touch of the same in 'blundered,' since this suggests insight into the fly's mind and previous circumstances, whereas the poet is justified only in telling what he sees from his desk. So," as he proceeded into action, "I'd strike out 'desperate' before 'dashes,' 'obdurate' before 'window-pane,' maybe leave 'blundered' in, and end up, leaving out 'gate' as perhaps superfluous, with 'To the pathway back?'

"I hope I haven't been too savage," he concluded, with a smile.

On a fresh sheet of paper we set down the revision as, suggested. Here it is:

A big, black buzzing fly,
So safe in the open sky,
Has blundered into the room
And begins its battle with doom.
With dashes and loops
It bashes and swoops
And bangs again and again
At the window-pane.

I sit at my desk to write,
Entrapped in the creature's plight.
Has it lost the power of sight?
Has it missed the invisible crack?
To the pathway back?

(In the process I eliminated "recoils" to make a line equal in length with the one before it.)

"I really think you've got something there," I acknowledged. "At this moment I feel you've improved the poem immensely. But I don't know how well it will strike me on later reflection."

"After all," he replied, "what I've suggested is of course only tentative, a first reaction. The question still remains open: When is a poem ever finished?"

A Man from Porlock

IN THE MIDST of recording *Kubla Khan,* which had come to him complete in a dream, Coleridge was interrupted by a visitor, "a person on business from Porlock." The intrusion broke the spell; "all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast."

He dreams and breathes an ether rarer
Than natural air, of splendor fairer
Than planet-blaze, distilled of honey-dew,
Gilding the pleasure-dome of Xanadu;

And journeys on through fabulous dimensions
Of time and space, to measureless expansions,
Tracing the mystic venture of the soul
Along its bright and labyrinthine trail.

A blessed region, a celestial season,
A realm where magic rules and outlaws reason,
A poet's universe of song and sight,
Of ecstasy and radiance and delight;

An atmosphere too exquisite, too pure
To mix with cruder substance and endure.

Whether a man from Porlock, or our own
Unbidden daemon casts the crucial stone,
The end's the same: the most we can redeem
Is but a fragment of the dream.