

The Art of Revision

In poetry everything is permitted.

With only this condition, of course:

You have to improve on the blank page.

—Nicanor Parra

(Translated by Miller Williams)

It's true enough that some poems come quickly and that it's possible to get lucky and write a real one, a good one, at a single inspired sitting. On the other hand, it is much more common for a serious and accomplished poet to work for days, weeks or years before feeling that a particular poem is finished. If there is any "secret" to writing, it is rewriting—a process that can be every bit as exciting as getting that first draft down on paper.

Writers who consider their poems done as soon as the first draft is finished probably won't develop as quickly as those who are able to separate the delicious first flush of creative excitement from the knowledge that a poem is perfected. If you don't yet have any desire to rewrite, you probably haven't been able yet to take a cold, critical look at your poems and see where they go limp. Rewriting entails an ability to look at one's own work critically—to decide what is working and what needs to be rethought and revised. If, like most writers, you cannot look at your poem with objectivity immediately upon finishing a draft, you would do well to put the poem aside for a day or two and then go back to it. The less emotionally attached you are to what you have written (though not necessarily to the material about which you're writing), the easier it will be to see it objectively.

You will probably agree that "Tracks of the Wandering Mind," the

poem you were asked to critique in the previous chapter, is sorely in need of revision. Here it is again:

Tracks of the Wandering Mind

I want sometimes naught but to weep
As standing by the trestle deep
I long to follow that railroad train
To a realm of dream that's free of pain.
What an urge I have to stray somewhere
On a train that's bigger than a bear
which climbs up toward old mountain peaks
And watch the sea for days and weeks.
A train to some vast tropic isle
Where swaying beauty makes me smile.
But the trains of reality just skitter off
And my city home where pollution does cough
Doesn't let me see the pyramids
Or drink till dawn with memory's kids,
Or ride off to the Orient
To get away from this discontent.
But today something inside me went through a shift
And gave my spirits that needed lift,
And I bid adieu to my dreams of escape
while the train roared through like a ghostly shape.

As we have already suggested, the phrase “naught but to weep” in the first line is a mistake, indicating to the reader that the author is trying to sound poetic instead of trying to create music out of our real language. In the second line, “trestle deep” was probably stuck in only because the author needed a rhyme with “weep.” The inverted syntax—placing the adjective “deep” after the noun—probably sounded “poetic” to the original author, though to a reader it simply sounds artificial, “poetic” in the worst sense. That forced rhyme at the very beginning of the poem raises the question of whether or not we should look for better rhymes in the next draft or abandon end-rhyme altogether. A decision must be made early on in the revision: Is one going to work with *rhymed couplets* (two successive lines that rhyme), as in the first draft, with some other verse form, or with no conventional form at all?

Perhaps a particular poem you are working on seems to cry out for a formal structure. On the other hand, having tried rhyming with little success in a first draft, you might make an entirely different decision and rewrite it without rhyme. Let's try that, concentrating on what the poem really wants to say and how we can best say it.

Let's try a simple rewrite of that first sentence, using the real language of our time. We'll refrain from telling the reader that we want to weep, refrain from having the narrator standing by the trestle (a detail hardly realistic), and get rid of the platitudinous and generalized fourth line. Our revision might read something like this:

When the Amtrak hoots by in the morning
I sometimes want to be on it, heading to Tucson,
Austin, Oshkosh—anywhere but here in this
awful life I've been leading...

Well, that's going in a more interesting direction already. For one thing, we've gotten in some specific details and set a tone that's less sappy and more convincing. Naming the train the Amtrak makes it specific and gives it some color. Then too, naming those cities makes the train more real. "Hoots" also helps a bit. On the other hand, perhaps "here in this awful life" is a bit vague. And the phrase "I sometimes want to be on it," might need to be punched up, made more emotionally graphic. Perhaps placing the speaker in a specific location will help:

When I hear the Amtrak hoot by at 6:34 in the morning
I groan, still half asleep, and draw the sheet over my head,
and dream of what life might be like in Tucson, Austin,
Oshkosh—anywhere but here in this life with its bitter
coffee, and dusty streets and measly paychecks. Wherever
that train is going I want to go too!

Not bad—but too many words. We've lost some of the jaunty rhythm we just had. Here's another stab at it:

When the Amtrak hoots by at 6:34 I groan,
half-asleep, drawing the sheet over my head
in this city of dusty streets and lousy paychecks
and wish I was anywhere else—Tucson, Austin,
Oshkosh. Wherever that Amtrak is going
I want to be on it!

Better. But why mention Amtrak twice? Doesn't that seem redundant? And "half-asleep" might be assumed from the time of day and the sheet being pulled over the head. Let's keep at it:

When the 6:34 hoots by I groan,
drawing the sheet over my head,
and wish I was elsewhere—Tucson,
Austin, Oshkosh. Wherever that Am-
trak is going I want to go too!

Let's think about that "hoot" for a moment. It sets up a good sound-echo with "Tucson" and "too." But maybe we can expand on it a bit to get that train more vivid for the reader. Also, that coffee from the earlier draft seemed like a good move and might be worth putting back in:

When I hear the 6:34 hooting and clacking,
panting over the trestles like ~~an excited~~ a frantic
lover, I roll ~~on~~ to my other side, groan,
pull the sheet over my head—and wish
I was snuggled in one of her sleepers:
Carson City, Austin, Oshkosh...wherever
that Amtrak is going I want to go too!
To hell with ~~the~~ my bitter coffee at 7,
the bloodthirsty paper, the dusty streets
and the filthy traffic my life has become...
To hell with my landlord, my boss,
my measly and laughable paycheck:
I want to head for the ~~Painted~~ Desert, [white-
water country,] the Great Lakes, the Rockies....

Well, the "snuggled inside one of her sleepers" might justify that image of the train panting like an excited lover—though it could easily prove a false lead, a dead end. Or we can follow its lead and eroticize the poem's imagery more: after all it's about a fantasy while lying in bed! The opening still seems a bit weak, a bit too passive. Perhaps it's partially the fault of that "I hear the..." construction. That lovemaking image should at least give some pace and energy to the opening. "Carson City" seems a good move, the name has nice character, nice color, though "the filthy traffic my life has become" might be a bit much. But the voice is beginning to emerge now. Let's try it again:

When the 6:34 hoots up its head of steam
in the morning, screaming over the trestles...
panting like somebody's lover,
I roll over groaning, pull the sheet
over my head and wish
I were snuggled inside her—
Carson City, Austin, Oshkosh... To hell
with my coffee at 7, the bloodthirsty
morning *Gazette*, the godawful 8 am traffic.
I want to head for the Desert, whitewater
country, Tucson, Oshkosh—
Wherever that Amtrak is going I want to be on her!

The line break after "to hell" seems to be right, since it makes Hell one more place the narrator is willing to go (like Carson City, Austin and Oshkosh) until you move to the next line where its real meaning

becomes clear. It presents a nice little surprise there.

At this point it would probably be a good idea for the poet, who now has some sense of the poem's voice and movement, to move on to the next section. It's not that these opening lines have been perfected, but they are stable enough to let us move forward. Where does the poem go from here? That's up to the individual poet. No two people will compose the same poem. One might leave the piece just as it is and say: yes, that's it, that's the whole poem. Another might find that it's only beginning, and think of these lines as the opening section of a relatively long poem, while another might find it needs just one or two touches more, and resolve to bring the whole thing home within another half dozen lines.

If we look back at the first lines of that first draft, the one done in rhymed couplets, it should now be easy to see how banal and simple-minded they were. Although the rewriting might still be at an early stage, it should be clear that it is turning this into a real poem—full of passion, complexity, wit and the emotional energy that will keep a reader engaged. The polishing will take place after all the pieces of the puzzle are in place.

Rewriting in this case did not mean fiddling with a word or two here and there, but redrafting the poem from scratch, that is, actually *finding* the poem that was buried under that first ineffectual version. It is an act of discovery in which we find the language and the meaning at the same time.

Remember that this is simply one person's rewrite. You might decide that you want a loftier, more eloquent tone, that slang and casual phrases don't fit the mood that you want to establish for the piece. Or perhaps you want the movement to be slow and meditative, or you want to maintain the rhymed couplets, or some other more intricate and demanding rhyme pattern for the poem. Or perhaps you want a long-lined poem to emerge, or one that gets told in half the number of lines, or one intense with language, or lyrical and quiet. There is no one right way to write or rewrite a poem!

A Guided Rewriting Exercise

If you are not in the habit of doing extensive rewriting and revising, the following process might be a revelation for you. Take out one of your recent poems—one that is not yet as perfect as you'd like it to be—and follow these directions:

Read your poem over to yourself as objectively as you can. Then underline one passage, line or phrase that seems very good to you. Now