

## An Interview with Donald Hall\*

TIR: In “Poetry and Ambition” you said, “Nothing is learned once that does not need learning again.” There’s a nice aphoristic ring to that. Could you give an example or two?

Hall: I think that a writer’s strengths and weaknesses show early, and usually remain strengths and weaknesses no matter how thoroughly the style alters. If we start, say, with a talent for visual description and for a foot-tapping dance-like rhythm, we retain this ability. And the same, alas, with the ways of failure. I find myself in revision having to teach myself the old saws over and over again: Attend to the verbs; cut the adjectives; don’t say the same thing twice; show don’t tell. I need to remember: Don’t let sound drown sense. I need to remember: Don’t write the same poem over again.

Sometimes I learn the old lesson again by reading someone else’s poem, admiring it, and thinking: I would not have had the brains to do it that way. Recently I read a brief poem that starts out as the poet tells herself what is *not* to be feared: “A fly wounds the water but the wound / soon heals.” “. . . What looks like smoke / floating over the neighbor’s barn / is only apple blossoms.” Fine. Then she says: “But sometimes what looks like disaster *is* disaster: . . .” Now, after that colon, *I* would have tended to put something abstract and fierce, something about the agony of suffering doubtless. How much better it is the way she does it — to make a scene, like a quick camera shot: “The day comes at last, / and the men struggle with the casket, / just clearing the pews.” The poet pretends that the difficulty is maneuvering the coffin out of the church, as if the real difficulty were not: There is somebody inside that thing!

Peripheral vision is where the symbols are.

TIR: You’ve spoken against the notion of workshops. Their main weakness seems clear — a cultivation of haste and of the desire to be admired by one’s immediate circle of aspiring writers. What can you say in their favor?

Hall: There is one valid argument for workshops in this country. It’s a big

\* Editor’s Note: I interviewed Hall while visiting at Eagle Pond Farm in August, 1983; we then shaped the interview further through correspondence. D.H.

country. Suppose you're from northern Maine or west Texas. Poets need other poets to talk with, especially when they're young. They don't need teachers, grades, scholarships, grants, publications, praise, or institutions—but they need each other. In Europe there are capital cities, and a young Frenchman knows where to go. Neither New York nor San Francisco works as a capital, the way Paris or London does. Workshops are all provincial, by their nature, but they remain places where young poets meet and argue, which is good.

TIR: You often speak of exchanging your own work with Bly, Snodgrass, Simpson, Kinnell, Wright, perhaps a few others. You speak of going over each other's work line by line. What is the relation of your work to such a circle of friends?

Hall: Ideally a workshop should provide the disinterested, passionate criticism of one's peers. For me, the continual habit of tough criticism from my own generation . . . is the most important thing. With some real exceptions—Jane Kenyon, Gregory Orr, several others—younger poets are not so much use to me. I have known poets in my generation who have relied on the judgment of editors who studied them at college!

Judgment of new art is terribly difficult, always, and when you are impressed by someone older it is easy to kid yourself. But members of the same generation, who have been reading each other for twenty or thirty years, are neither dazzled nor impressed. I remember the note in *A Vision* where Yeats recollects Pound's response to a bundle of manuscripts: "These stink." Of course Pound *was* another generation—I made my own exceptions earlier—but it *was* inferior Yeats. We need people to tell us when things stink. At least I do.

When I begin a poem I work on it alone for at least a year. There is a long patch when I don't want or need anyone else's voice intruding. I can make the poem better on my own—whether it is good or not is another matter. The poem seems to have its own life; it keeps altering on me, moving, making adjustments, sliding in one direction or another, diminishing and enlarging. If I spoke to anyone else about it, the other voice might block some possible direction. The poem must remain loose and unencumbered by others' expectations, strategies, or presuppositions. (I need to rid myself of my own.)

Then the poem slows down, stops moving around on me. Even under the microscope, the bacterial cultures slow almost to stasis. At this point, I

show it to Jane; she points out some stupidity or bad habit: I repeat too many words; I fall into abstractions; I say the same thing three times over. Then perhaps I read it aloud at a reading, and discover a soft spot because I lower my voice: *I want to skip over that part*. Rarely, somebody points out an error at the party after the reading. I am grateful. *Resentful*, doubtless, but grateful. Then I make copies, mail the poem off to Bly, Kinnell, Simpson, Snodgrass.

Of course the return mail brings despair! Everything's wrong! Maybe some of them *like* it, but their reservations disassemble the whole thing. They contradict each other. Simpson says I've got a poem here if I just cut half of it. Bly says exactly the same thing, only he cuts the other half. So I decide to chuck the whole thing, to give up poetry and become a travel agent.

A few days later I get back to work. All of them are right, all of them wrong. I correct for the veer of each particular breeze. Bly dislikes this phrase for a reason that I don't accept; he *always* dislikes X or Y. Simpson does best on narrative; A and B are not his territory. I come up with a version, much influenced by my friends — by Kinnell's dexterous cutting; by Snodgrass's meticulous, Johnsonian questioning — and finally have something like "my own" version.

The example is merely typical. Once or twice someone has shown me the whole way. Occasionally someone likes a poem all the way through or, conversely, convinces me the whole thing is a mistake and I chuck the poem.

But I always need help. And I help back. There are phrases in my friends' poems which I wrote. And sometimes when I am reading a poem aloud I remember: I did not write that line.

I'm not going to try to list every one who has helped. Those you mentioned, of course. Jim Wright not so much. Jim was very sensitive to criticism — and nonetheless usually sought it out — to the point where it seemed difficult for him to be sufficiently negative about one's own poems. Not Bly. He is superb at taking criticism — and good at dishing it out. He and I started reading each other, and working over each other's poems, early in 1948.

TIR: Keats, Hardy, and Yeats; these names recur in your criticism and assorted commentary. To what extent do they indicate a tradition of poetry to which you attach yourself?

Hall: There's another circle! It is just as important—doubtless more important—to continue to consult the Old Ones, the original creators of the standards. You learn the Muse's requirements from reading the great poems, from loving them, from knowing them intimately. Of course they shame you—but if you love poetry enough, and if you retain the dumb optimism of ambition, they shame you into crossing out and trying again.

These poets I quote: Keats was early for me and recently came on strong again, one of the stars in the sky. Yeats was the love of my life from about eighteen to twenty-five. (I wrote a senior thesis about him at college, about his printed revisions of "The Rose" over his lifetime; it was before the *Variorum* came out, and I lived in Houghton Library making up my own *Variorum*.) At Michigan, I taught the *Collected Poems* for many years. Hardy came later; I recite him to anyone who will listen. Others I recite, and appeal to, are Wordsworth, Whitman, Frost, and Pound. Very much Ezra Pound. Andrew Marvell!

TIR: I know you taught Yeats and Joyce at Michigan. Did you also teach Pound? Can you expand on that "very much," in relation to the others?

Hall: Several times I taught Pound for a term in an undergraduate honors class. Very difficult. Maybe it would have been easier if I had taught graduate seminars but I taught only undergraduates. Once my Honors tutee (it was Tom Clark) wrote a Senior Thesis on the structure of the *Cantos*. This was in 1963! . . . Brilliant. But I never felt easy teaching him. I started reading him when I was fourteen or fifteen, coming to him after H.D. and Eliot; they showed the way. And he was, and is, the greatest craftsman of modern poetry, superb above all for his ear, but also remarkable for the range of his virtuosity. He invented not one but half a dozen styles worth giving a lifetime to. He's like one of his renaissance heroes. He can strike a medallion, carve or model a figure, engineer a dome, and construct fortifications.

One good thing about *teaching* literature: I taught the introduction to poetry for many years at Michigan, mostly to non-majors, and I kept going back to the old poets. Over seventeen years I wonder how many times I taught "Out of the Cradle" and "The Garden" . . . and each time I found new poems! Marvell is a touchstone. The "Coy Mistress" I read in 1958 is not the "Coy Mistress" I read in 1973.

When I quit teaching, I realized after a while: I have not read Yeats for two years! So I did something about it. Now I tend to read a poet all the

way through, finding poems I had forgotten or had never read, instead of re-reading the beautiful chestnuts that I used to teach.

TIR: Is “tradition” a useful word for those attachments?

Hall: It’s a bit professoried-over, but that’s exactly what it is. Except that I am not so interested in a continuity of literary history as I am in poems one at a time. Doubtless I know more literary history than I pretend to; doubtless it supplies help when I read poems one at a time . . . I worry that many young poets lack the background of older English poetry that my generation had forced on us.

American literature becomes separate and great—but the roots of its syntax and form *include* the great English poets. Nationhood is mysterious. You write American not because you decide to but because of the centuries that make you. Part of what makes the American language and American poetry is the English source. When Americans try to be what they are not—Anglophiles being proper Englishmen, others becoming amateur Navajos—they deny what is genuine in themselves. I think if you cultivate Americanness you may prevent the genuine Americanness from coming through.

Heaven knows, I don’t want to *sound* like Yeats, Hardy, or Keats—nor Whitman or Frost, for that matter. You learn from Yeats and company the possibilities of poetry, the notion that something extraordinary can be done, and what it feels and smells and tastes like when it’s done. You don’t learn—unless you are dumb or unlucky—to use the demonstrative the way Yeats does it. (There are a couple of early poems of mine in which I hear a brogue.) You learn vague things like *shapeliness*—but not how to become shapely in your *own* poems. That part you have to make up.

TIR: In *Remembering Poets*, you wrote of Thomas, Frost, Eliot, and Pound. Would it be possible to say which of those poets you learned the most from?

Hall: None of the above! I try to speak to this in *Remembering Poets*, and I don’t suppose I have much to add. None of them taught me anything about poetry beyond what I learned from reading their poems. All of them gave me examples of dedication and of shaping the life, for good or for ill, to the art’s demands.

For me the most important elder example, and one of the great sources, is not a poet but the sculptor Henry Moore. As I get older—approaching the age he was when I first met him; he was sixty-one, I am fifty-six—I

realize how important he was. Is. I started talking with him in 1959. A series of journalistic assignments kept me close—an interview for *Horizon*, a *New Yorker* Profile, later another book and another magazine piece. I watched him work, I talked with him; he and Irina came to dinner, he and I played pingpong. What a man! There he was: a coal miner's son, scholarship boy, decades of poverty as a sculptor, obscurity interrupted by ridicule—and then the immeasurable fame and riches beginning when he was almost fifty, when he won the Venice Biennale after the war. Despite everything he remained gregarious, affectionate, unaffected—and a devil for work. He stayed close to his family, to a few friends, and his eye never wavered from the real task. He worked twelve and fourteen hours a day, enraptured with his medium of shape, form, volume. He competed, magnificently, with the greatest of artists, with Michelangelo, Donatello, with the great primitive nameless carvers he discovered as a young man in the ethnographic exhibits of the British Museum.

I saw him most recently when he turned eighty. He had just managed to find a way to add an hour to his day's work. Just recently I had a letter from him—at eighty-five—telling me to come calling when I was in England. I would love to but I don't. I know he wants to be working even more than he wants to be talking.

His dedication—allowing no distraction, not even fame and riches, to keep him from the task he undertook as a young man—that's the model. A continuing desire to demand the best of himself, to tear down and build up again, never to be satisfied, never to allow discouragement to impede the labor. Or even *encouragement*.

Although my own eye for plastic form is nothing, I could glimpse through his eyes some of his vision—of a mute eloquence of shapes, which by some analogy points me in poetry to the wordless, the under-shape of *art* past words and discourse, the hidden continent . . .

TIR: Which in your case must have something to do with Eagle Pond and your memories of boyhood summers here.

Hall: All my life I've written about this place. Prose and poetry both. When I came up here from Connecticut, from the age of twelve when I started writing poems, this was the place of poetry. Although I worked on poems in the suburbs where I spent the school-time of the year, I always felt like a stranger there. Here I was away from other children—I didn't like other children—and with the old people, in a culture of much

greater diversity, among great story-tellers. My grandfather especially told stories and recited endlessly the poems he had memorized to speak at the Lyceum when he was young. Well, I've told about all that a thousand times: here I wandered through the fields by myself, I daydreamed, I let my soul loose from my body and floated in the air. I wrote poems.

The first summer I spent *away* was 1951, when I graduated from college and spent the summer in Europe before going to Oxford in the fall. For a few weeks at the end of summer I was alone in London, homesick, and I started the prose which became *String too Short to be Saved* ten years later. I had already written poetry about this place. The earliest poem I keep in print comes from when I was eighteen or nineteen, "Old Home Day," written about this place. At college Robert Bly used to call me "the cellar-hole poet." Then when I was at Oxford my grandfather died and I began the "Elegy for Wesley Wells" that was in my first book. The next year I spent in California, on a Fellowship to work with Yvor Winters at Stanford, and I worked more on *String*, and wrote more poems. When I returned to New England for three years I wrote less of it, but coming out to Michigan to teach, I again wrote about what was absent.

TIR: *String* could prove a pivotal book for you. You were about thirty when you published it and had already published two books of poems. Do you see it that way or is that just my suspicion?

Hall: A writer's life is such a strangeness! Perhaps it will seem to be the pivotal book. But at the time . . . I wrote most of it in England, in 1959–1960, where I spent a year writing in the village of Thaxted. At six in the morning I worked on my poems, for *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* (1963). In the afternoons I took a pad of paper up to a sitting room on the second floor of a 1465 house, and worked at *String* for an hour or two. I used to tell my prose writer friends that I worked on poetry early in the morning, when I felt sharp, and wrote prose in the afternoons, when I was tired. Maybe in the afternoons I was writing the real thing.

It had a history. It began, in a sense, when I was a student at Exeter, and wrote about the wild heifers for a free theme. (I don't suppose that theme exists.) Then in 1951 I spent that first summer away from my grandparents and the farm, but I could not write prose. When I went to the University of Michigan and began teaching, a number of things came together. I remembered Willa Muir saying proudly that she and Edwin "lived by our wits." The phrase thrilled me. I was at first discontented with teaching;

my desire to write for a living re-awakened, and was stimulated by Robert Graves visiting Ann Arbor. I remember sitting with him, having a cup of coffee in the Michigan Union, and telling him that I admired the way he earned his living by writing prose books; I wish I could do that, I told him. "Have you ever tried?" he asked me. I went home from that coffee determined to try, and specifically to try to write the book about the New Hampshire summers.

There was another ingredient. Doing a course in American Literature, I taught Henry James, Hemingway, other prose writers; I also taught freshman English, and began to look on prose as a series of alternatives, as I helped my students revise. Teaching prose literature came together with teaching composition, and for the first time in my life I became interested in prose style. When I was an adolescent I had tried to write stories, and finished two novels, but I wrote them out of contempt for prose, and therefore the prose was terrible. Now I admired the art of prose, the beautiful stylists. In the winter or spring of 1959, I began to write about the wild heifers again, what became the first chapter of *String too Short to be Saved*. As I remember, I wrote it a dozen times, revising extensively, learning to write this kind of prose—reminiscent, descriptive—by trying and failing and trying again. When I finished that chapter, I had learned a good bit. By the time I was writing the final chapters of the book, they came in three drafts.

I will never forget sitting in that room, upstairs at The Priory, the day I discovered the ruined locomotive in the woods. I had written about it before, in poetry, in the "Elegy for Wesley Wells."

It was always invented, but I know what it came from. My great-uncle Luther, who could remember the Civil War, told me once about walking in the woods—I think in rural Connecticut, where he had a parish—and feeling under his feet the rails of an abandoned railroad track. No locomotive, just the track. Also, in the woods of New Hampshire there were ruins everywhere—especially cellarholes, sometimes sheds, abandoned wells, the rusted machinery of a maple syrup operation, the debris of a sawmill . . . and my grandfather told me about the wreck of a railroad spur, up on Kearsarge, where there had been some mining. One afternoon as I was writing about picking blackberries with my grandfather, my hand took off with my pen, and I wrote about my grandfather showing me the old locomotive, and the trestle fraying over the gulch . . . I could not stop! My hand ached, but I could not stop.

When I moved here for good in 1975 I thought — believe it or not — that I would lose this subject. Living in the middle of it, I thought I would no longer write of it. Ha! It was here that I wrote most of the New Hampshire poems of *Kicking the Leaves*. Since that book there are a few more such poems — really, *Kicking the Leaves* poems — but I think that I’m coming to the end of that subject now — the past of the 1930s and 1940s. I continue to write out of the landscape I live in, day by day, but I doubt that I will write much more out of the remembered past; we’ll see. Sometimes I have thought I had finished with some familiar obsession, only to return to it.

TIR: Sometimes a poem of yours that seems quite set off from *String* really isn’t all that distant. I am thinking of “The Man and the Dead Machine” lost in the jungles of New Guinea. Isn’t he (and his plane) another version of the old rusted locomotive lost in the New Hampshire hills?

Hall: I noticed that parallel long after writing the poem. In my poems — and in other prose — there is much abandoned and ruined machinery. All my airplanes crash. There is a poem called “New Hampshire” which has a crashed airplane in it. (That poem came out of the prose of *String*, as I was working in England in 1959–1960, I wrote it in prose first, then made the poem.) These images continue. When they come into a poem of mine now, I am still not aware that I am repeating an old theme. Something protective in the mind keeps you from knowing it, until it is done.

TIR: And isn’t “Ox Cart Man” Washington Woodward mythologized?

Hall: I never made that connection! But, yes, it is the dream of self-sufficiency again, Robinson Crusoe and the Swiss Family Robinson. The children’s book version is the family and the poem the Crusoe. I eliminated the family from the poem (part of the story as I first heard it) for the sake of economy, trimming the narrative of any detail I could. But maybe I was aware of old Wash.

TIR: Your grandfather is the central figure of *String*, and he is a storyteller, reciter of verses, talker, and reader. More than once you praise the fibre of his words. To what extent do you find yourself writing “up to him”?

Hall: Probably a great deal. I admired his character, I loved his love and loved him back, and I did immensely admire his words. He was not literally a poet, so far as I know. He had memorized hundreds of poems — the calibre of “Casey at the Bat” and so forth — which he recited. When he

told his stories, or when he engaged in wit with his friends visiting, he played with language. This was an example always in front of me, and an example from someone I especially loved. But I do not think that I write *for* him, not literally. Maybe up to him, but not for him. I don't recall that I ever showed him what I wrote. I must have! But it must not have been a big thing, for either of us, because I have no recollections of it. For one thing, the kinds of things I wanted to write—from the earliest times when I can remember wanting to write—were unlike the poems he recited. I loved him reciting them . . . but I did not want to write that way. Why not?

There was a side of me, of course, which was alien to this place and to him. And it was not only Connecticut. I felt alien there myself. I suppose it had to do with learning. My grandmother had studied Latin and Greek in high school, but she didn't even read books anymore. The books my grandfather read were not books that I wanted to read: *David Harum*, Joe Lincoln's novels . . . Early on I found an ambition for learning. I was reading Tolstoy and Flaubert when I was twelve. Exeter and Harvard confirmed and encouraged that side. At the farm, I felt approved of; nobody was critical because I read Shakespeare rather than *David Harum*, or tried to write Shakespeare instead of James Whitcomb Riley.

But while the learning—if that is the right word for it—was something alien to Ragged Mountain, it is also true that Ragged Mountain was something alien to Harvard, and I cherished that difference and that separateness. While I enjoyed my friends on the *Advocate*, while I loved talking poetry all night . . . I had something that they did not have, something that they knew nothing about.

TIR: Here, among cousins, living in a community that gathers at church, for the Fourth of July, and so on, you must feel your own relation as a poet to your neighbors somewhat differently from the way you found things at a university.

Hall: Two responses, and the first touches on social things about the country. Being a writer around the university—although it's privileged in many ways—carries annoyances with it. I won't be exhaustive about these annoyances, but there's one that bears on this question. Promotion and eminence in the university derive mostly from publication; the writer at the university publishes, not to be promoted (let us hope!) but because he is a writer: That's what he *does*. But his bibliography is longer than any-

body else's; his name is always in print . . . and other professors defer to him and envy him. One gets fed up with ironic deference. It is not just Ann Arbor. After the seventh drink, somebody says, "And how is our famous poet today?"

Everybody wants to be admired and maybe if one wants praise very much (I suppose it's a motive, the desire to be loved, that supports artists through difficulties) one may find it especially unpleasant to hear praise when it is dense with ambivalence or when it is phoney.

Well, I found displeasure, socially speaking, in the *rôle* of the poet in Ann Arbor. Not unmixed; but much displeasure. But here . . . here it is entirely different. Here there's a convention of eccentricity, and the landscape is full of weird people. If it is weird to be a poet, it is also weird to raise Holstein oxen, or to wear a cowboy outfit to a town meeting, or whatever. People are amused by each other — by "characters," as they inevitably call each other. They are not impressed by each other, but amused. Nobody defers to me because I write books. That is just what I do. Some people are proud of me, as one of the sights of the town. "Fellow over there writes books for a living." One of the wonders is that I can bear to *sit down* all day long; people keep telling me it would drive them nuts . . . and they know I have a hard time driving a nail without breaking my thumb. That's all right. Activities are somehow equal, or they don't exist as a social pecking order. It seems sensible to understand that people do what they can do. And you have to realize, the countryside is full of people who do what they *want* to do. The suburbs are full of people doing what they hate to do, because they need to in order to maintain their debts.

My name's in the paper more than most of my neighbors. (The selectmen beat me out!) When there are interviews with pictures, I know always what people will say, without irony, with politeness: "Nice piece about you in the papuh." I can get back to work without the mosquito buzz of ironic deference around my ears.

I said I had two answers. I'm not certain about the second. Since I moved here, I haven't written a whole lot of surrealism, you might say. My language has been plainer. Someone in a letter suggested that I was writing for the neighbors. It's possible; I don't really *think* so. There might be good things about writing for the neighbors, but as I am writing or revising, it is not their voices I hear in my ears. It is the same old folks, mostly my peers. And I'm not sure it would be a good thing to write for

the neighbors. It might be too much of a limitation. We fall into self-limitation, by unconscious habit, and I want to keep an eye out for it. It would be a limitation to write only for Helen Vendler.

I should say also: Although I love this community and its characteristic spirit and ethic, and although I work within it, I am aware that I am not exactly *of* it. You are what you were in your first twenty years, and for me that is something mixed: New Hampshire, the farm and the old people, but also the suburbs, prep school, Harvard College. I am a little outside my community. Being outside, I choose it every day, I affirm it, I love it . . . I remain aware of it. It is never as simple as the air I breathe; it will always be more wonderful than that.

TIR: More than anyone else I can think of at the moment, you write criticism, textbooks, and journalism as well as poetry, fiction, and now a play, not to mention work as an editor. How do those many activities reinforce each other?

Hall: I take pride in supporting myself as a free-lance writer by journalism, Grub Street, without having to write anything that I don't want to write, living by my wits, as Willa Muir said.

While I write a great deal about literature, I write other prose also, for *Playboy*, *Inside Sports*, a biography of Dock Ellis. I write short stories, juveniles, textbooks, articles about living in the country. I love writing the informal essay. In this country we lack literary journalism. I wish more poets supported themselves this way—like Edwin Muir, like Robert Graves (mostly novels for Graves) or a good many English poets and novelists.

I worked toward this free-lancing—not knowing quite what I was doing—by trying first one thing and then another. The first prose I learned to write was reminiscent and descriptive (*String too Short to be Saved*). Later I learned a prose for book reviewing, then a more objective, *New Yorker* Profile prose. I learned something about writing fiction, something about writing for small children, only by trying and failing, while I was still teaching. I was curious to try all sorts of genres, and wound up learning some competence in a variety of them.

This lends variety to my working day. One kind of writing reinforces another. I cannot concentrate on poetry more than a couple of hours a day, but when I am working on other things—say, something as simple as the headnotes for a textbook—I still work with the medium of language, syn-

tax, rhythm. I take pleasure in simple tasks, where I can manipulate words and rhythms and enjoy *handling* language with small anxiety.

Then, too—I love to do the “same” thing in different forms. “Ox Cart Man” was first a poem, later a juvenile, still later a magazine essay which will be part of a prose book. I wrote it in lines another way, as a pseudo-folk song, when the composer William Bolcom set some of my things. Fascinating, all the differences in diction, sound, grammar—differences necessitated by the genres.

I’ve written about the old farm days in poems, in the essays of *String*, in fiction, and now in a play. It astonishes me, continually, how the same material alters itself.

TIR: You frequently mention the poems themselves going through draft after draft, two or three hundred sometimes. That’s another way in which the material alters itself. Is that standard?

Hall: It’s always taken me a long time to finish poems. I can remember two exceptions only, when the poem came *almost* right at one sitting, when I changed only a few words. One of them (“The Dump”) I still like. When I was in my twenties I found poems taking six months to a year, maybe fifty drafts or so. Now I am going over two hundred drafts regularly, working on things four and five years and longer. Too long! I wish I did not take so long.

Sometimes I wonder: Do I merely wish *not* to finish these poems? Do I want to keep them beside me? What isn’t finished is not yet a failure. Yet even after I “finish” these poems, I keep on changing them. I publish in a magazine, see the poem in print—and then I tinker with it some more. When the new book comes in the mail and I look through it, I pick up my pen and make changes in the text. Re-reading old poems aloud I discover a bad word, or a cut that enhances the poem; I change it again in the margin.

In the past few years, several times I have learned to cut a poem, not because I dislike a passage, but because something is wrong with a poem’s pace—there’s an argument between size and the scale; it will be better shorter, no matter what is cut.

The difficulty has increased almost steadily over my life. Not quite. Between the new poems in *The Alligator Bride* in 1969 and *The Town of Hill* in 1975—*The Yellow Room*, which came out in 1972 was mostly written by 1969—I had a strange patch. I floundered, I flipped and flopped. It

began with a bad patch in the personal life. I wrote steadily but slowly, with little satisfaction in what I did—trying prose poems, returning to metrics a little, returning to a style I had mostly used up (“The Town of Hill” was such an exercise). I kept writing, conscious that nothing I did was as good as some earlier poems.

Then in the autumn of 1974 “Kicking the Leaves” started something new for me. It was both that long line with pauses in it, a multiple caesura, and the longer poem using a thematic image. Of course when the poem started, I did not know it was a long poem or that I was using a thematic image; I knew I was using a longer line and that it felt right, righter than anything had felt in a long time. I wrote obsessively; everything that I looked at started talking poetry.

And in my excitement I wrote much more rapidly. “Kicking the Leaves” took months rather than years, and so did “Eating the Pig” and “Wolf Knife.” By the time I was working on the last two poems in that book—“Traffic” and “Stone Walls”—I had slowed down again; they took a couple of years each. Ever since I’ve been slowing down more and more. It feels as if growing older slows me down. Maybe not. Maybe if I make another breakthrough—like “Kicking the Leaves”—I will write quickly again.

TIR: Are you sometimes confident of having an exception, a poem working out much more quickly?

Hall: Yup. And I’m wrong! It can be embarrassing. A year or so ago I began a new long poem which was the meditation of an aged man, more or less mythical—I don’t want to say more about it; who knows what might happen with it?—and it went *swimmingly*, or so I thought. Lots of changes, getting stronger and firmer rather quickly. I read it aloud, then sent it off to friends. One fall in Austin I told Christopher Middleton, “Wait until you hear this new one!” Argh! Another case of self-deception; with the help of a couple of friends, Bly and Kinnell as I remember, I saw through it. Terrible. But something might come of it, someday. Now it’s brooding by itself in a dark drawer.

Most of my poems spend time in some dark drawer. One thing I’ve learned: if a poem is . . . if you think that a poem is going wrong, if you feel something fundamentally awry in it, you cannot cure it by changing the punctuation! You cannot bully it into excellence by staring at it every morning! You have to give it time to change itself deeply, which is accom-

plished only by not-looking at it. When a poem is in a drawer, that drawer is a kind of metaphor. You are putting the poem back into the sleep-place, so that dream and daydream can work it over. You are “forgetting” it, putting it in the *oubliette*. When I have successfully forgotten a poem, I may wake out of sound sleep with a clear notion of a change for it; I may discover lines for it, popping into my head, while I drive to the butcher’s.

TIR: Does a poem in a drawer for so long accept major changes?

Hall: Major changes are the rule not the exception. Then it seems, invariably, as if this were the poem I should have known enough to write in the first place.

Other people do not *have* to revise so much as I do, and some people revise even more—Donald Justice, W. D. Snodgrass. Of course others would be better if they would revise even ten per cent as much as I do. (When I edit I see poems dated with one day; once or twice with the clock-time recorded, like 2.10-2.42 A.M., July 2, 1983.) And on the other hand, reading biography, I must admit: Many great poems have come quickly, or with much less obvious effort than I put into my own. Many poets have had the experience, rare but true, of writing good work at one sitting.

The length of time I spend may reflect itself in the kind of poem I make now — and, if there is excellence in the poems, with the kind of excellence. My best work of the last decade is mostly middle-distance, the wonderful ode-length. “Among School Children” and Keats’s Odes and “The Garden” are the shortest. Then “Out of the Cradle,” “Sunday Morning,” the “Intimations Ode,” “Lycidas.” The work I have hopes for runs from two typed pages to ten or twelve, the product of years, and hundreds of drafts. I don’t write them I *accumulate* them, cell by cell; I grow my poems now the way a reef grows coral. I’m not *much* more conscious than a reef is, either . . . keeping them around in my head, not so much on the page, changing a word a day for six months, then looking away, then changing another word a day for another six months—I find that willy nilly the internal structure of sound and image builds up a density and interconnectedness; part meshes with part, words with words. I will add a weird word, not knowing why, and discover three weeks later (what other people might have known immediately) that the word picks up and develops another word earlier in the poem, perhaps something that has been

there from the first day. Often I discover the interconnectedness only when someone, a year or two later, asks me to explain—and the connection leaps into my head.

I hope that this coral-reef-growth interconnectedness makes a sort of undertone resonance in the poems.

My best lines used to be something else, an intimate resonance of word colliding with word in the lyrical instant. Mostly the best lines came in the first draft, in ecstasy and inspiration, with a rush of language . . . that magical *poetry*-thing. No more. The juices dry up as you get older. Imagination-juice, word-juice. It used to be that four or five poems would start in one day, maybe two days, lyrical messages from the mother ship; then I would have a year's work to get them right. Now, instead, I have five years' work . . . and the inspiration, if that is what to call it, comes at the end and not at the beginning.

TIR: That's not learning the same thing over again; that's learning something new! Could we close by speaking of one of these middle-distance, ode-length poems? Say "A Sister by the Pond," which we published in 13/3–4. I'm wondering about the effect of the *oubliette* on it. You didn't start with the war picture, did you, but more likely with the ice breaking up on the pond in April.

Hall: Yes, the scene around the pond—the ice breaking up after an open winter—becomes a thematic image.

TIR: When did the combination of the New Hampshire setting with the image of the war come together?

Hall: Early. But first I wrote about the photograph independently, as a poem by itself . . . Idly, not expecting much. I had seen the photograph as a child, in *Life* I believe, and remembered it when Paul Fussell reprinted it in a Harper's article. I worked on the photograph-poem as I began work on the pond-poem, and one day understood how the recollection of the photograph belonged with the pond-feelings, the deaths of children, history and dread . . . But I don't want to drift into self-interpretation!

Many people helped me with this poem. Dee Snodgrass helped greatly with the order—it was he who suggested starting with the photograph of the Germans—and with telling me what remained unclear. When I published the short version—intense, but it leaves out too much—Sam Hamill gave me hell. He had heard me read a more inclusive version in an early form; he had the earlier version on tape, listened to it again, and bawled

me out. I had cut the parts that were hardest to write . . . He sent me back to work.

TIR: I think I have manuscript evidence of changes in section 5, the shack sinking in water. That's one point where the verbal texture of the poem thickens.

Hall: Thickening is what it needed. Parts were thick early, and I cut the thin parts. This poem needed that slow coral-accumulation, by which the thin parts got thicker.

TIR: And the end; you mentioned earlier reading theology and some of your poetry taking up theological ideas. This is an instance?

Hall: Yup. In the last part I quote—*steal* that is—from Meister Eckhart, about what the soul desires, and the nature of that desire.

TIR: Thank you very much for speaking with us. And how about that poem? Is it under revision again?

Hall: Seeing it in *The Iowa Review* got me back to it. And also some further comments in letters from friends. I did a *lot* more to it but I didn't alter the big structure. The changes were all clarification and consistency, getting the words right. At this moment I think I've got it. But probably sometime, when I print it in a book or when I read it aloud—damn it—I will want to fiddle with it again.