

## Donald Hall's Poetry

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Ralph J. Mills, Jr.

*"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow"*

—Theodore Roethke

*"Je ferme les yeux simplement/pour mieux voir"*

—Philippe Soupault

The recent appearance of *The Alligator Bride*, a volume of new and selected poems, provides a good occasion for looking at the development in Donald Hall's writing, where his work began and the important alterations it has subsequently undergone. Of the poetic generation of the 1950's Hall is one of the most interesting and influential figures. As an editor, anthologist, and sometime critic, he has helped to shape a sense of current poetic history, its multiple ideas and aims, and he has been an open proponent of pluralism in contemporary poetry and opposed established critical theories and dogmas. Nowhere does he declare his attitudes more clearly and succinctly than in the admirable introduction to his anthology *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962). There he starts by noting the gradual downfall of the New Criticism as the "orthodoxy" dominating American poetry from "1925 to 1955," and then rightly observes that "typically the modern artist has allowed nothing to be beyond his consideration. He has acted as if restlessness were a conviction and has destroyed his own past in order to create a future. He has said to himself, like the policeman to the vagrant, 'Keep moving.'"

For present purposes I should like to shift attention from the general applicability of this statement and regard it instead as perfectly suitable to Hall's own career as a poet. Indeed, he has, in his own writing, and certainly in the life of imagination and feeling which lies behind it, charted the kind of course he detects in the work of many of his contemporaries, a course that demands at some crucial juncture radically decisive gestures, the destruction of a "past in order to create a future." That past in Hall's case becomes quite evident in his first two collections, *Exiles and Marriages* (1955) and *The Dark Houses* (1958), though the latter reveals tangible growth and the desire for change. The initial book, however, shows how closely he adhered to the then prevailing requirements of—in his own words—"symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit" derived from Eliot's criticism and the thought and practice of various modern critics. In a recent unpublished lecture, *The Inward Muse*, Hall remarks that he "grew up in the thick of the new criticism" and as he worked on his early poems "could sometimes hear the voice of Mr. Ransom" (whom he did not know) reminding him

to be appropriately ironic; he adds that "it took ten years to get rid of that voice."<sup>\*</sup> Doubtless, other poets of Hall's generation have known the same or similar experiences. In the later 1950's, however, the break with the critical establishment began, first with the arrival of Ginsberg and the Beats, but soon rejections came from every quarter. As it appears now, this movement has delivered poetry back into the hands of poets.

Hall's early poems, of which he wisely retains only a few—and these usually revised—in *The Alligator Bride*, are not wholly devoid of interest, especially since the reader can glimpse in them some of the areas of experience most meaningful to the poet and certain themes persisting in his work. But one can dismiss without regret, as Hall does, the slick, witty pieces such as "The Lone Ranger," "A Novelist," "Conduct and Work," "Apology," "Syllables of a Small Fig Tree," "Some Oddities," "Carol," "Cops and Robbers," "Nefas Tangerine," "Six Poets in Search of a Lawyer," "Lycanthropy Revisited," including the long poem "Exile" (winner of the Newdigate Prize at Oxford), which later reappears, only reduced from one hundred to five lines, and various others. Formal skills, dexterity, irony, and intelligence are all on view here, along with occasional echoes of mentors, but the best one can say for these poems is that they exhibit a gift for knowledgeable, polished versifying; today they seem dated and very slight.

More support can be mustered for several other poems which must have emerged from deeper sources in the poet and, correspondingly, touch profound, truly sensitive chords of feeling in the reader. Some of these are poems of New Hampshire, where Hall spent summers on his grandparents' farm from the time he was a small boy. The annual visits, the farm labors, his love for his grandparents and complex attachment to the slowly dying way of life they knew provide material for quite a few poems in his first book and after. It is also instructive, as well as pleasurable, to read the fine prose memoirs of these farm experiences, published in 1961 as *String Too Short To Be Saved*; from this book the background and many of the details in a poem such as the moving "Elegy for Wesley Wells" (his grandfather) become clear. That poem and "Old Home Day"—both of them shortened and revised—are the best of the early New Hampshire pieces and the only ones Hall has salvaged. In the first version the "Elegy" lost something of its force through lengthiness; in its present form it is still long, but the dead farmer, his past, and the history of the region he inhabited have become more intimately and vitally related. We realize soon after the poem's beginning that Hall is writing from England; and his distance from his home country not only increases the sense of loss but offers the perspective of exile which sharpens his vision of the contours of Wesley Wells' life and inheritance, finally confirming his solidarity with it. The opening effectively renders

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\* I am greatly indebted to Mr. Hall for allowing me to use unpublished lecture and broadcast materials, and for permitting me to see a manuscript version of his new book, *The Yellow Room Love Poems*.

the atmosphere of absence and deprivation death creates which has now descended upon the farm:

Against the clapboards and the window panes  
The loud March whines with rain and heavy wind,  
In dark New Hampshire where his widow wakes.  
She cannot sleep. The familiar length is gone.  
I think across the clamorous Atlantic  
To where the farm lies hard against the foot  
Of Ragged Mountain, underneath Kearsarge.  
I speak his name against the beating sea.

His dogs will whimper through the webby barn,  
Where spiders close his tools in a pale gauze  
And wait for flies. The nervous woodchuck now  
Will waddle plumply through the world of weeds  
Eating wild peas as if he owned the land,  
And the fat hedgehog rob the apple trees.  
When next October's frosts harden the ground  
And fasten in the year's catastrophe,  
The farm will lie like driftwood,  
The farmer dead, and deep in his carved earth.

Following this passage, Hall shifts to historical considerations, to the richness of this region before the Civil War, which "took off the hired men" who cultivated the fields, so that in time these lands returned to their original state "thick with ashy pine." The poem continues by recounting the steadily worsening fortunes of the inhabitants—those who remained—and through the bizarre, disturbing image of an abandoned railroad and locomotive evokes the departure of progress and prosperity. (A more detailed description of this engine and its setting occur in *String Too Short To Be Saved.*):

Deep in the forest now, half-covered up,  
The reddened track of an abandoned railroad  
Heaved in the frosts, in the roots of the tall pines;  
A locomotive stood  
Like a strange rock, red as the fallen needles.

Recalling the daily and seasonal routines of the farm that formed the basis for his grandfather's existence for so many years, the poet achieves an essential, durable picture of the man to be retained in memory, one which incorporates the honesty, stability, and unobtrusive heroism of that life:

I number out the virtues that are dead,  
Remembering his soft, consistent voice,  
His gentleness, and most,  
The bone that showed in each deliberate word.

The poem's closing portion shows Hall keeping a solitary vigil "on England's crowded shore" and realizing that his ties are to that "place and people" far off "in dark New Hampshire"; he ends envisaging his grandfather's body carried to the cemetery for burial.

"I cannot see the watch on my wrist/without knowing that I am dying," Hall writes in a poem from his second collection, *The Dark Houses*; and that acute sensitivity to time and mortality, acquired in part at least from his New Hampshire experiences, develops into a constant element of his work. The most accomplished of the early poems seem possessed by intimations of death, loss, isolation, and guilt. In the shortened, rearranged version of "Old Home Day" the initial stanza blends images of man and landscape in a condition of general decay:

Under the eyeless, staring lid,  
And in the pucker of a mouth,  
Gullied hayfields cave together  
And crumble in the August drouth.

And from the lengthy, rather tedious original text of "Exile," once a poem of four pages, Hall has extracted what were three parenthetical couplets set in the middle of different stanzas to make brief yet highly suggestive summaries of personal dilemmas. Each stanza designates a relationship valued by the poet which has now been violated, either through death, through the poet's own betrayal, or through the changing circumstances that influence an individual's life. None of the violations is elaborated in much detail; instead a simplicity of language and description stimulates the reader's imagination, permitting him to tease out the possibilities and to discover similarities in his own experience. The final couplet, while it depicts a particular moment of knowledge, the realization that a person grows away even from his deepest roots and that he will return to the place of his origins only to find it alien and strange because he has himself altered, should not be understood merely as a third instance of perplexing loss in the poem. For if we view the three stanzas in sequence we comprehend a certain kind of movement. In the first couplet death deprives the poet of a good friend, still in his boyhood; in the second, and most complex, he breaks off a relationship with a girl while he yet loves her—out of what hidden motives we are not sure—and suffers a period of remorse, then dismisses the incident from consciousness, though it obviously has not vanished since he must include it at the center of the poem (this experience turns up elsewhere in Hall's early poetry); finally, in the concluding stanza, he visits his birthplace and thinks it has changed completely. What appears of primary importance in the poem, I believe, is that all of these events cause alterations in the poet, and the last couplet with its rhyme of grew/new emphasizes the continuity of change in each life. The exile of the title denotes an unavoidable, recurrent aspect of existence: time and death exile us, and we even exile ourselves from others, yet we grow and mature from such experiences, always impelled forward by the promise of what is yet to come. Loss, then, creates the possibility of gain, and so, in this light, the third couplet slides ambiguously between estrangement and potentiality:

A boy who played and talked and read with me  
Fell from a maple tree.

I loved her, but I told her I did not,  
And wept, and then forgot.

I walked the streets where I was born and grew,  
And all the streets were new.

“Wedding Party,” a poem Hall uses to begin both *Exiles and Mariages* and *The Alligator Bride* (though in a shorter, improved form in the latter volume), takes up this theme of temporal change and erosion and treats it in a slightly fantastic manner, especially as the irrational elements are allowed to dominate in the new, condensed version with its total abandonment of verisimilitude. At the very start imaginative vision dictates the order of details, which are not given as we might expect, for the focus falls at once upon somewhat ominous figures rather than the bridal couple:

The pock-marked player of the accordion  
Empties and fills his squeeze box in the corner,  
Kin to the tiny man who pours champagne,  
Kin to the caterer. These solemn men,  
Amid the sounds of silk and popping corks,  
Stand like pillars.

This odd group, ruling over the occasion as it turns out, mutes and qualifies the conventional gaiety from the outset. The bride appears after these men, in the last line and a half of the stanza, in a bizarre analogy to the Virgin or some other female saint carried in effigy by a religious procession through a throng of worshippers:

And the white bride  
Moves through the crowd as a chaired relic moves.

Certainly, the phrase “chaired relic” induces a feeling of strangeness and also—quite importantly—first implies the ideas of time, aging, and death so central to the poem’s climactic vision. With the end of the initial stanza, then, unpleasant expectations, though as yet indefinite, have been established. In his original version Hall included a middle stanza which identified the poem’s speaker as a guest invited at the last moment, a “friend to the bride’s rejected suitor,” added further unnecessary filler, and finished with “summer twilight” and the threat of an approaching storm. This stanza merely dissipated the curious atmosphere generated by the preceding one and made concessions to ordinariness or normalcy which the reader, intent upon the irreality of the situation, couldn’t care about less. Now, with such externals removed, the last stanza immediately picks up and magnifies the disquieting details. The accordionist suddenly assumes the gigantic, terrifying proportions of a god or fate presiding over these ceremonies; and under his spell, as if in an hallucination, the bride’s marriage and future life are envisaged as already completed, transformed into a few faded memories, and, by implication, nearing death. (It is perhaps worth noting that

in neither version is the groom mentioned.) The storm which breaks, no longer related to the thunder shower of the omitted stanza, thus can be understood metaphorically as the tempest of time striking the bride and, I believe, her guests as well, ravaging their lives, while above them looms the accordionist-god, his instrument directing the rhythms of existence, of air in and out of lungs:

Now all at once the pock-marked player grows  
Immense and terrible beside the bride  
Whose marriage withers to a rind of years  
And curling photographs in a dry box;  
And in the storm that hurls upon the room  
Above the crowd he holds his breathing box  
That only empties, fills, empties, fills.

In *The Dark Houses* Hall's work develops along lines similar to those distinguishing the better pieces in his first book; there are fewer poems that seem all skill and fancy, and more that try to reach those concealed roots of experience on which imagination thrives. Once again, as with most of the superior poems from *Exiles and Marriages*, there is an obvious concern with death, time's passage, and with the missed opportunities for a full existence. In "Christmas Eve in Whitneyville," an elegy for his father, the poet reveals an incisive social awareness which draws ironic pictures of middle class isolationism on this feast day; each family is locked in its home as if it were a cell:

Each car is put away in each garage;  
Each husband home from work, to celebrate,  
Has closed his house around him like a cage,  
And wedged the tree until the tree stood straight.

Hall proceeds to summarize his father's business career, how after success he could afford trips to Europe where, unable to forget work, he "took the time to think how yearly gains,/Profit and volume made the business grow." Now, dying early at fifty-two, he has acquired money but has seen little of life or the world; his comment, recalled by the poet, discloses the regret and ambivalence he feels toward the close of his fatal illness:

"The things you had to miss," you said last week,  
"Or thought you had to, take your breath away."  
You propped yourself on pillows, where your cheek  
Was hollow, stubbled lightly with new gray.

Reflecting on this devotion to acquisitiveness, Hall comes again to the image of enclosure; the house which resembled a "cage" becomes synonymous with a mode of living that is itself a form of imprisonment. The poet looks elsewhere for liberation and reward:

This love is jail; another sets us free.

Without anger but in a mood of determination, Hall leaves his father buried

among the people who still pursue the same ends he has rejected; for the poet it is a moment of farewell and departure in search of a different, more abundant existence. The imagery of darkness links the town's sleeping inhabitants with the dead who lie in its cemetery: in different ways all of them are denied life:

The lights go out and it is Christmas Day.  
The stones are white, the grass is black and deep;  
I will go back and leave you here to stay,  
While the dark houses harden into sleep.

Certain other poems in this second collection also exhibit social interests and criticism;\* the best of these are "1934," which treats effects of the Depression in New Hampshire, and "The Foundations of American Industry," a sharp, ironic depiction of wasted life among auto workers whose fathers had labored in government projects during the 1930's; their jobs are mechanized by assembly line techniques, their leisure is aimless and empty:

In the Ford plant  
the generators  
move quickly on  
belts, a thousand now  
an hour. New men  
move to the belt when  
the shift comes.

For the most part  
the men are young, and  
go home to their  
Fords, and drive around,  
or watch TV,  
sleep, and then go work,  
towards payday;

when they walk home  
they walk on sidewalks  
marked W  
P A 38;  
their old men made  
them, and they walk on  
their fathers.

Notable here is the entirely successful adoption of a deliberately flat, conversational manner, coupled with the type of observation and rhythmical movement associated with William Carlos Williams and, later, David Ignatow. One senses

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\* For a perceptive discussion of the social dimensions of Hall's poetry, see "Crunk" [Robert Bly]: "The Poetry of Donald Hall," *The Fifties*, 3. 1959. pp. 32-46.

the attempt on Hall's part to "make it new," in Pound's phrase, to look beyond the formal confinements of most of his writing up to this point and reduce the margin between the poet and his material, or to put it in terms of the Imagists, again borrowing from Pound: "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective." While his later poems—with striking exceptions such as "Woolworth's" and "Crew-cuts" from *The Alligator Bride*—rarely venture into areas of social or political commentary, the present piece offers strong hints of the kind of freedom, economy, simplicity and directness of statement (even when the implications of the imagery are strange or oblique) Hall will arrive at six years afterwards with *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* (1964).

A few more poems in *The Dark Houses* are quite effective in their individual ways and prepare for further achievements. These include "Religious Articles" (shortened, revised, and called "I Come to the Garden Alone" in *The Alligator Bride*), "Three Poems from Edvard Munch," "The Three Movements," "Waiting on the Corners" (reduced to the first of seven sections in its later version), "The Presences of Death," and "Revelations, Contradictions" (the last two omitted from *The Alligator Bride*). In each of these poems Hall struggles toward a greater degree of self-knowledge or seeks a more penetrating intuition of the circumstances of human existence; gradually he is breaking away from the superficial intelligence that rules his previous writing. The conclusion of "Religious Articles," in which the poet visits an old church he attended in childhood and thinks about the dead members of his family lamenting the deprivation and loss of their lives, urges on him an agnostic, skeptical attitude, but one which will also force him to take up the burden of his own life. The voices of the dead, he realizes, are voices he lends them; as they speak all pretense is stripped away:

"We who do not exist make noises  
only in you. Your illusion says  
that we who are cheated and broken  
croon our words to the living again.  
You must not believe in anything;  
you who feel cheated are crooning."

And in "Revelations, Contradictions" Hall scrutinizes intently his alternating perceptions of order and disorder, of fragmentation and nothingness with symmetry and fullness of being; between them stands the perceiving self. At the end he is compelled to accept contrariety as a fundamental principle: "Things are their opposites. To understand/Today's solution makes tomorrow's lie."

Pressing further beyond the surfaces and the barriers of false appearance and convention with which experience is frequently masked, the poet confronts emptiness, cruelty and violence, metaphysical terror, and death in the poems inspired by Munch's three pictures, "The Scream," "Marat's Death," and "The Kiss" (the later, shortened versions are most satisfactory), and in "Waiting on the Corners." What Hall says in "The Scream" is true for all of these poems: "Existence is laid bare," and it is an existence turned back upon itself, without

spiritual appeal. "The blood not Christ's,/blood of death without resurrection,/winds flatly in the air," Hall observes of the surging background to Munch's agonized figure, and concludes that this picture has "not even the pause,/the repose of art that has distance." Distance. It is exactly such emotional and experiential spacing we have already seen Hall beginning to eliminate from his poetry. The third poem of the original sequence "Waiting on the Corners" brings a new lucidity and intimacy of vision to bear upon the poet himself. In keeping with one of the main themes of the sequence, the poem finishes on a level of psychological and spiritual vacancy, but prior to that conclusion it enters a highly subjective area of the speaker's life, probing and dramatizing vividly in pulsing rhythms a crisis of the self, an excruciating symbolic death and rebirth in the psyche which leaves its victim changed but also emptied out. In its own fashion this poem displays affinities with some of Theodore Roethke's work, "The Return," for example, and with the intense poetry of self-revelation written by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath; but it is chiefly significant in terms of Hall's efforts to increase the depth and authenticity of his poetic experience:

At least once before  
my skin has felt rough fingers  
pull my eyelids down,  
my body laid  
on the floor like clothes.  
I struggled against the pit  
like a bull in the yards.  
I tried  
to lift myself out by willing,  
for I knew  
what I hated the most.  
After I died, my eyes  
opened to find the colors  
as bright as knives.  
It was necessary to die,  
for a few moments only  
to give up  
whatever I owned, and all  
I might become, and the sight,  
taste, touch, and smell  
of the particular world.  
There, in the pit,  
all willing gone from me,  
no more an animal  
in hatred,  
"You" (I heard a voice)  
"who have lost everything  
want nothing."

The interior concentration of this poem and its reading of a barometer of hidden emotional stresses and dilemmas places it as prophetic of the deliberate turning Hall's work will soon take.

The final poem in *The Dark Houses* is "The Three Movements," and through irregular lines and phrasing, suggestive of the uncertain, searching efforts of the poet's mind, it also leads him toward the brink of anticipated changes in his writing. The poem involves a poetic or imaginative quest to replenish his art, but it cannot be achieved simply by looking to tradition, learning from others:

It is not in the books  
that he is looking, nor for  
a new book, nor  
documents of any kind . . .

The lack of desire for "a new book" indicates, I think, a wish to reach beyond the restrictions of literary convention; but what he seeks is not available to the poet effortlessly either, occurring like a sudden event in nature:

. . . nor  
does he expect it to be like the wind,  
that, when you touch it, tears  
without a sound of tearing, nor  
like the rain  
water  
that becomes  
grass in the sun.

The image that comes to him when he envisages his goal is that of a person, alert, sensitive, resolute, attentive to experience; and it is difficult not to see this figure as a re-creation of the poet's self, in the sense in which, say, Whitman, Yeats, Rilke, or Neruda make themselves over in their art to assimilate more life, more of reality into poetry. In short, Hall recognizes that he must make himself over in order to transform his writing; or as Robert Bly remarks, "Since the country [America] has no image of a poet as a poet, a poet to develop must learn to imagine himself":

He  
expects when he finds it,  
it will be  
like a man, visible, alive  
to what has happened and what  
will happen, with  
firmness in its face, seeing  
exactly what is, without  
measure of change, and not  
like documents,  
or rain in the grass.

In a second stanza he entertains his doubts and hesitations; perhaps what he requires “is not/for the finding,” and the previously dismissed alternatives must be accepted as the only possibilities after all. But in the last stanza he acknowledges that he has slighted “the movement/that intrigues/all thinking,” a process whereby the covert, the oblique, the unconscious aspects of the mind are drawn into focus; from this “movement” will emerge the startling, unexpected image of the poetic self whose identity is exact, unmistakable:

It is  
the movement which works through,  
which discovers itself  
in alleys, in  
sleep, not  
expected and not  
in the books of words and phrases  
nor the various paints and edges  
of scenery.  
It is, he says,  
familiar when come upon,  
glimpsed  
as in a mirror  
unpredicted,  
and it appears  
to understand. It is  
like himself, only visible.

With the awareness of new imaginative resources announced at the close of “The Three Movements” Hall’s poetry departs from past practices and sets out for unexplored territories of experience. The areas into which he moves after his own fashion are regions of inwardness, the preconscious, the peripheries of sleep, the moods of reverie and daydream, which is to say, wherever the energies of the interior life, the life of images and dreams rich with association, persist, and what Hall has termed “the vatic voice” can speak and be heard. In this endeavor he has some remarkably illustrious modern predecessors such as Whitman, Rilke, Lawrence, Breton, Trakl, Desnos, Neruda, Vallejo, Eluard, and Roethke, among others, and certain of his more immediate contemporaries—Robert Bly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin, for example—who began to create a poetry “which,” as Bly noted in an interview printed in *The Sullen Art* (1963), “simply disregards the conscious and the intellectual structure of the mind entirely and, by the use of images, tries to bring forward another reality from *inward* experience.” Meanwhile, several New York poets, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and the late Frank O’Hara, closely linked with the influential painting *avant garde* (and, oddly enough, originally students at Harvard at the same time as Hall and Bly) were introducing their own mode of irrationalism and surrealist techniques into poetry.

In various essays and lectures Hall discusses the creative process in himself and in the work of other poets (see, for instance, his introduction to *A Choice of Whitman's Verse*, 1968), and he observes that the critical and technical powers operate instinctively upon the flow of images, intuitions, and details which the mind offers in moments of inspiration; thus he rejects, in *The Inward Muse*, the "theoretical dualism of *creation* which provides material, and *criticism* which shapes it." But in a later lecture on *The Vatic Voice: Waiting and Listening* (printed in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 1969) he tries to describe the passive attendance on creativity, the coming of words and images in a sudden release, and the nature of this expression from far within ourselves. Hall begins by seeking a fundamental principle:

A premise: within every human being there is the vatic voice. *Vates* was the Greek word for the inspired bard, speaking the words of a god. To most people, this voice speaks only in dream, and only in unremembered dream. The voice may shout messages into the sleeping ear, but a guard at the horned gate prevents the waking mind from remembering, listening, interpreting. It is the vatic voice (which is not necessarily able to write good poetry, or even passable grammar) which rushes forth the words of excited recognition, which supplies what we call inspiration. And inspiration, a breathing-into, is a perfectly expressive metaphor: "Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!" as Lawrence says. Or Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." We are passive to the vatic voice, as the cloud or the tree is passive to the wind.

For the poet, indeed for any man, it is necessary in Hall's opinion to hear this voice, to listen for it, away from the strictures of logic or reasoning, the demands of practicality, the noise and distraction of our urbanized society, "not only to make poems, or to invent a new theory of linguistics, but because it feels good, because it is healing and therapeutic, because it helps us to understand ourselves and to be able to love other people." Attention to this voice revives and animates the imaginative life, the apprehension of the world, as Hall says, children know and the poet, among others, needs to rediscover if his work is to achieve depth, resonance, true poetic quality. A few paragraphs devoted to Hall's personal habits, deliberate reliance on dream and reverie as a means of stimulating the imagination and stirring the vatic voice to speech (he notes that the "Two characteristics that distinguish the vatic voice from normal discourse are that it is always original, and that we feel passive to it. We are surprised by it, and we may very well, having uttered its words, not know what we mean") are of particular interest for the light they cast on experiences in back of much of the poetry included in *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* and *The Alligator Bride*. Then too these disclosures may remind us, as Gaston Bachelard remarks, how in order to comprehend what a poet has formulated from his creative reverie we must join him in dreaming it as we read. One can likewise see resemblances between

Hall's intentions and the investigation and experimentation with sleep, dreams, and their imagery conducted by André Breton, Robert Desnos, and other Surrealists.

Sometimes I have tried to keep in touch with this vatic voice by sleeping a lot. Taking short naps can be a great means of keeping the channel open. There is that wonderful long, delicious slide or drift down heavy air to the bottom of sleep, which you touch for only a moment, and then there is the floating up again more swiftly, through an incredible world of images, sometimes in bright colors. I come out of these fifteen or twenty minute naps, not with phrases of poetry, but wholly refreshed with the experience of losing control and entering a world of apparent total freedom. I wake with great energy. On occasion, I remember phrases or scenes from dreams—either night dreams, or nap dreams, or waking fantasy dreams—and take these phrases or images directly into a poem. That happens, but it is not the only virtue of dream. Dream is the spirit dying into the underworld, and being born again.

There is also the deliberate farming of daydream. There is a way in which you can daydream quite loosely, but also observe yourself. You watch the strange associations, the movements. These associations are frequently trying to tell us something. The association is always there for some reason. Listen. When you hum a tune, remember the words that go with the tune and you will usually hear some part of your mind commenting on another part of your mind, or on some recent action.

There is something I want to call peripheral vision, and I don't mean anything optical. If you talk about a dream with an analyst, and there is an old battered table in the dream that you casually mention, he may well say, "What about this table? What did it look like?" Often these little details are so important. When I am listening to something passively speaking out of me, I don't attempt to choose what is most important, I try to listen to all of it. I never know what is going to be the most important message until I have lived with it for a while. Very frequently, the real subject matter is something only glimpsed, as it were out of the corner of the eye. Often the association which at first glance appears crazy and irrelevant ultimately leads to the understanding, and tells what we did not know before.

With these observations of Hall's before us we can better understand the nature of that "movement" of the mind in the act of discovering the materials of a poem. And these materials, whose sources lie in subterranean levels of the self, when gathered and shaped into the final form of the completed poem, will result in a poetry of dream and inward vision, a kind of surrealism already

familiar in modern European and Latin American literature, “ultimately a poetry of the deep mind all men share,” in Hall’s words about Whitman. Emphasis, then, shifts from the techniques of verse-making, the outside or external aspects of the poem, to “spirit” or vision, the force within the poet animating and relating his images. Obviously, this does not mean that formal considerations are dispensed with altogether; one still finds Hall employing various prosodic devices; but the general tendency is toward greater looseness or openness of form, away from iambics and rhyming. The strength of such poetry depends to a considerable degree on the phrasing, the rhythm and movement of lines as both imaginative *and* musical units within the whole, as well as on diction, imagery, and intensity or authenticity of vision. Its aim is finally, in a paradoxical phrase, to awaken the reader to dreams, which is to say, turn him away from the superficialities that consume his outward existence and indicate the immense hidden reservoirs of life within him. Poetry of this order rehabilitates the powers of imagination, of dreaming on the world, and may even be said to revive a sense of the sacred, as it certainly does in some poems of Hall’s, Merwin’s, Bly’s, Dick-ey’s, and Wright’s, though there is no specifically orthodox theological framework involved. The mysterious range of poetic possibilities disclosed to Hall through this transformation of his art is best described, however, by the poet himself briefly but evocatively in “The Poem,” placed in the first section of *A Roof of Tiger Lilies*:

It discovers by night  
what the day hid from it.  
Sometimes it turns itself  
into an animal.  
In summer it takes long walks  
by itself where meadows  
fold back from ditches.  
Once it stood still  
in a quiet row of machines.  
Who knows  
what it is thinking?

What this kind of poetry is thinking is a question readers coming upon it for the first time may well ask, for unlike, say, a Metaphysical poem of witty conceits and learned allusions, it yields little to rigorous logical analysis—a reason perhaps why Surrealism, Expressionism, the contemporary poets of France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Latin America, with a few exceptions such as Valéry and Rilke, never engaged most of our important critics of the past three decades, while European critics have long been studying them. If that situation in America is being revised now, it is chiefly due to the prose writings of poets themselves and to the extraordinary increase in the enterprise of translation. Hall’s “The Poem” stands both as a statement of the sources and procedures of his new work and as an example of it. We understand that this is so, yet at the same time we cannot translate the substance of the poem from its images into a more

rational and readily assimilable prose paraphrase—that is, to borrow a phrase of James Dickey's, *use up* the imaginative or creative matter which is the poem by the process of exegesis. Just as this type of poetry originates in the interior life and evokes that life, so the imagery and implications draw inward in the poem, and the reader must follow them toward the center rather than try to pull them away from the poem for inspection and explanation. Of course, I am not saying that the poem means nothing, but rather that the meaning is implicit, inherent in the particular arrangement of images and movement of lines bearing them. To be sure, this is true of virtually all poems, but we are dealing here with a kind of poem that is purposively irrational, within whose imaginative context meaning emerges only by suggestion, evocation, indirection, or obliquity. Only by living within the body of images, or floating on them, to use Hall's own description, do we approach a point of comprehension; then themes and motifs make themselves felt, patterns of emotion are revealed. As the opening lines of "The Poem" imply, the poetic imagination looks to the "night" world of dream, reverie, the preconscious and the unconscious in preference to the daylight world which demands lucidity, not mystery, rational coherence, not indefiniteness or suggestion. This poem also exhibits what might be called the infinite capacity of the poetic imagination for extending itself, for rejecting any kinds of restriction upon the realms of experience it can partake of—animals, summer meadows, machines: the strange evocativeness of these possibilities for the poem tells the reader something of how such poetry should be apprehended.

In correspondence with these remarks, the dominant mood or atmosphere of the majority of poems in *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* is that of reverie, day-dream, or the more enigmatic narrative of the night dream which displays characteristic qualities of ellipsis, condensation, and displacement. Frequently, a poem starts off with an external, objective situation or observation, then gradually, as the poet's mind loosens its narrow or rigid focus, barriers fall, and associations, memories, images begin to assert themselves: the poem thus slips inward, unfolding its interior drama. The themes of these poems remain close to those of Hall's earlier writing, but now they are explored from within, their roots in the psyche of the poet become essential material for his work. "Snow," the first poem in the collection, provides an introductory illustration. In the beginning stanzas the speaker watches snow falling outside his window; as it takes over his perceptions, memories are stirred, then hidden affective resonances until, at the close of the second stanza, his sight seems blurred, as if he were physically outside in a blinding snow, though he has really moved inside himself, to the border of his inner world and its vision:

Snow is in the oak.  
Behind the thick, whitening  
air which the wind drives,  
the weight of the sun  
presses the snow  
on the pane of my window.  
I remember snows and my walking

through their first fall in cities,  
asleep or drunk  
with the slow, desperate falling.  
The snow blurs in my eyes  
with other snows.

In his lecture, *The Inward Muse* (published in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Winter 1967), Hall notes:

Poems begin any number of ways, but here is a frequent way. It is snowing, the first snow of the year. I become sleepy with the snow, I relax, daydream, enter that sleepy and almost hallucinating state I recognize as preluding a poem; my spirit wanders out of myself into the snow, and phrases come into my head. Suddenly, I realize that snow does this to me, every year, especially first snow. I must write about it in order to understand it. Snow is, in psychoanalytic language, over-determined for me. It is burdened with affect, heavy with a nameless emotion. Being over-determined, it must have multiple sources. I try to keep my attention diffuse and responsive to suggestion, my pen moving, as one thing leads to another down the page. I am trying to reach, be true to, exploit—the multiple sources of this over-determination.

It must be added that Hall continues by denying that he is merely taking “dictation from [his] unconscious mind” here, for he insists that such dictation is too rapid and prolific to be recorded verbatim; instead, the trained critical instincts busily accept and reject words and images as they appear. But we recognize in Hall’s descriptive remarks the first stages of the poem: the initial direct statement (“Snow is in the oak.”), the details ending with the irrational perception that the “weight of the sun” is forcing the snow against the speaker’s window, and the drop away from perception into recollection, finally into an indistinct blend of memories unified by snow. The third stanza inaugurates a quest for the implications and associations in the interior or psychic life of the poet; this search leads back to the origins of existence before the poem concludes. At the outset, Hall sees snow as representative of the phase of decline to which all things are destined, and this significance discloses in turn a deep-seated obsession with mortality already evident, as we noted, in the earlier poetry:

Snow is what must  
come down, even if it struggles  
to stay in the air with the strength  
of the wind. Like an old man,  
whatever I touch I turn  
to the story of death.

Following this passage, snow is viewed as an agent of reversal and transformation, endowing everything it covers with “the substance of whiteness.” But the last three stanzas of the poem perform an analysis, after their own

fashion, of the poet's response to snow in the attempt to trace the origins of that response at the beginnings of his life. The inevitable fall of snow towards the earth, which previously aroused submerged associations and the fear of death, is now linked to a birth trauma; an individual resists birth as a fall into the world culminating at last in death in the same way as a sick and dying man fights against his end. Hall's method of analysis does not employ rationalistic or logical means, for again he proceeds by reverie, reaching back along connecting strands of emotions and memories to revive within himself the child's sense of reality:

So the watcher sleeps himself  
back to the baby's eyes.  
The tree, the breast, and the floor  
are limbs of him, and from  
his eyes he extends a skin  
which grows over the world.

The baby is what must  
have fallen, like snow. He resisted,  
the way the old man  
struggles inside the airy tent  
to keep on breathing.  
Birth is the fear of death.

The final stanza makes at once a flat assertion of perishability—the fate of man as well as of snow—and the poet declares his inability to find what amounts to a pattern that includes survival or revivification. The poem finishes with the removal of the sun and its life-giving rays, and the return of falling snow, accompanied in the last line by a general statement of descent that may recall Rilke's poem "Autumn," with its haunting lines, "We are all falling. This hand's falling too—/all have this falling-sickness none withstands," but the "One whose gentle hands/this universal falling can't fall through" (J. B. Leishman's translation) seems precisely the saving God whom Hall cannot discover behind the locked "door/to the cycles of water":

Snow is what melts.  
I cannot open the door  
to the cycles of water.  
The sun has withdrawn itself  
and the snow keeps falling,  
and something will always be falling.

"We want to regress in the service of the ego, we want to become as children," Hall affirms in *The Vatic Voice*, and it is exactly such a regression he undertakes in "The Snow" and a variety of other poems. "The Grass," a poem thematically allied with "The Snow," likewise starts with a visual perception which rapidly leads to a hidden chain of thoughts compelling the poet's imagination to merge with the essences of nature. Like Roethke in his greenhouse poems and his childhood sequences of *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!*

Hall wishes to uncover the identity and significant relation of things with himself in the intimacy of an imaginative or visionary union with them:

When I look at the grass  
out my window in rain,  
I know that it happens  
again. Under  
  
new grass,  
among stones and the downward  
probe of trees,  
everything builds  
  
or alters itself.  
I am led  
through a warm descent  
with my eyes covered,  
  
to hear the words  
of water. I listen, with  
roots of  
the moist grass.

The process of identification with the earth, grass, and roots of trees simultaneously initiates a fall towards sleep, the lapsing into a reverie or daydreaming state (“I am led/through a warm descent/with my eyes covered”) which successfully blocks the ordinary rational operations of the conscious mind and permits the poet to listen for a more fundamental voice within himself, a voice that will disclose his relationship with the natural world. The speech he wants to hear is formed from “the words/of water,” and when we recall the traditional associations of that liquid element with birth, purification, fertility, and renewal the character of Hall’s search in the poem becomes more obvious. “For things as for souls,” Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Reverie*, “the mystery is inside. A reverie of intimacy—of an intimacy which is always human—opens up for the man who enters into the mysteries of matter.” So the dream which engages the poet here draws him into a profound participation in the life of the elemental cosmos, where he may learn its secrets of rebirth for himself. In the poem’s final image he has felt himself to be a living part of nature, his nerves and sensibilities resemble the roots of grass vibrant with expectancy, waiting for the life-renewing voice of water to fill them. Unlike “The Snow,” then, “The Grass” pursues a course of descent which concludes without any definite resolution but hints strongly at the imminent arrival of animating energies, potentialities for existence.

Water, that element containing such affective stimulus for Hall, has some of its central attributes enumerated in “The Sea,” where, in this expanded form, it appears as the universal feminine, womb of life, image of serenity or repose, identified also with earth, and is a destroyer as well—in short, something possessing the qualities of the paradoxical figure of Shiva:

She is the mother of calms  
and the hot grasses;  
the mother of cliffs  
and of the grinding sand;  
she is the mother of the dead  
submarine, which rolls  
on a beach among gulls.

No wonder that in his poem "The Child" Hall envisages a boy whose inner ear waits for the whispers and stirrings—as the mature poet does in "The Grass"—of the primal waters. His recommendation in *The Vatic Voice* of the reanimation of childhood's uninhibited imaginative modes of perception and invention—a recommendation which has, of course, been made and put into practice by a considerable number of modern poets and painters—and the desire to accomplish it finally brings him to the persona of that boy, whose actual existence was long ago terminated in time and personal history but who has yet remained an inhabitant of the unconscious life of the adult. In "The Child" that lost figure of the poet's youth revives. Hall's interest, however, plainly does not consist in awakening particular memories, scenes, or incidents from his past; such details of recollection as one finds in the poem are generalized. The awakening here is an arousal of the latent sensibilities and imaginative powers of the child Hall was, recognizing them now for what they are and can offer. Suddenly, this boy's way of seeing and feeling the world, his essential but acutely sensitive solitude on which the impressions of experience register with purity, his primitive, unspoiled awareness of a proximity to the roots and origins of his being (in the image of the cave and the repeated image of the pool)—and I think to non-being too—are necessary to Hall as a poet; by delving into himself far enough to carry the child in him back from sleep, he has acquired the gift of that child's fresh mental and perceptual faculties:

He lives among a dog,  
a tricycle, and a friend.  
Nobody owns him.

He walks by himself, beside  
the black pool, in the cave  
where icicles of rock

rain hard water,  
and the walls are rough  
with the light of stone.

He hears some low talking  
without words.  
The hand of a wind touches him.

He walks until he is tired  
or somebody calls him.  
Then he leaves right away.

Later when he plays with his friend  
he stops suddenly  
to hear the black water.

From the discussion of these few pieces in *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* (“The Grass” and “The Child” are slightly revised in *The Alligator Bride*) we begin to notice recurrent motifs or thematic patterns that occupy Hall in a large proportion of the poems. Speaking abstractly—for each specific poem is a different, concrete realization the contours of which a statement of theme merely traces—the scheme visible in these poems is the familiar universal one of descent or death and rebirth or recovery. As I suggest, this symbolic scheme appears in a unique form in each poetic instance, nor is the entire pattern always in evidence in a single poem. We can credit the manifestation of such themes, I think, to the kind of poetry of psychic exploration which Hall starts to write with this book. And while the imagery of reverie or the unconscious as it is used in Hall’s poetry helps to create a sense of objectivity, of a general validity, the watchful reader also perceives the poet’s personal engagement with the themes and materials of his work—in other words, a subjective necessity which is already clear enough in “The Snow,” “The Grass,” and “The Child.”

Consequently, the figure of the self stands squarely at the center of this recurrent scheme, for the pattern of change or transformation involved in the poems results ultimately in an alteration of the speaker who has experienced the inner dramas they portray. We have observed in “The Child” how the poet has descended into himself to awaken the dormant childhood figure resident there. In such poems as “Cold Water,” “At Thirty-Five,” “Digging,” “Sleeping,” “Wells,” “Self-Portrait, as a Bear,” “The Days,” “The Tree and the Cloud,” and “The Stump” Hall also presents phases or versions of an inward journey, psychic crisis, or symbolic dying, all in the interest of attaining to a regenerated condition, a new mode of apprehending the realities of the world and the possibilities of his existence—in effect, gaining entrance to a new dimension of being. (His two elegies, “O Flodden Field” and “The Old Pilot’s Death,” project the vision of a new integration or wholeness beyond mortality but are not specifically religious.) While occasionally we are given a few details or incidental aspects of the outward portions of the poet’s experience, these poems largely focus on the interior processes and responses to his external life. “Sleeping” serves as a paradigmatic poem for these psychic ventures because it is both an embodiment of them and a comment on their character. In the poem’s second section Hall, napping briefly, is startled by a momentary vision of death and dissolution:

I was lying on the sofa to rest, to sleep  
a few minutes, perhaps.  
I felt my body sag into the hole of sleep.  
All at once I was awake and frightened.  
My own death was drifting near me  
in the middle of life. The strong body  
blurred and diminished into the dark waters.  
The flesh floated away.

As before, water has the aspect of a primal source and also of death. Here the threatening dream of personal destruction and annihilation prepares for Hall's convictions about the descent into the unconscious life of the self in the closing stanza:

The shadow is a tight passage  
that no one will be spared  
who goes down  
to the deep well.  
In sleep, something remembers.  
Three times since I woke  
from the first sleep,  
it has drunk that water.  
Awake, it is still sleeping.

These final lines disclose the poet's persistence in his explorations, and the waters which at first seemed to promise nothing but death have become waters to be drunk and suggest healing or renewal. The "shadow," in Jungian or analytical psychology, is an unconscious opposite of the ego or conscious self and contains qualities consciousness has repressed, "aspects," in the words of M.-L. von Franz from *Man and His Symbols* (ed. by Jung), "that mostly belong to the personal sphere and that could just as well be conscious. In some aspects, the shadow can also consist of collective factors that stem from a source outside the individual's personal life." In this poem it is clear that Hall continues his efforts to probe the recesses of his inner world so that an experience which appears initially both negative and terrifying may be turned to more positive account in the end. Confrontation with the shadow is an ordeal, a rite of passage within the self which must be undergone before the way of integration can open; and the last line of the poem implies that what the shadow concealed has been brought to consciousness, recognized, and assimilated.

Several poems locate changes in nature which inaugurate or promote changes in the self. In "The Tree and the Cloud" Hall remarks the differences between them: when the tree is cut down it becomes various other things, while the cloud goes through metamorphosis, "becomes other clouds," consequently, the tree teaches us the solidity of matter, but the elusive quality of the cloud taxes, and thus develops, our sensibilities—or so I understand the poem's conclusion:

The tree is hard to the hands.  
To touch the cloud  
hardens the touching.

"The Stump" and "Digging," more ambitious poems, exhibit an intimate relationship, a communion really, between the person of the poet and the life of nature; both pieces achieve visionary experience, though in quite separate ways, for in "The Stump" it is earned as the result of the poet's gradual approach to and contemplation of the object, while "Digging" starts almost immediately on the plane of dream or surrealist vision. Beginning descriptively in "The Stump," Hall offers details of the cutting down of a dead oak tree on his lawn

in mid-winter; nothing unusual occurs in this first section until the last stanza, where an odd mood of exultancy suddenly seizes the poet at the thought of the felled tree. This elation is, of course, indicative of the responses of the unconscious, affective being to a seemingly routine external event; in his inward self what is taking place assumes for the poet the preliminary stages of a symbolic drama:

Yet I was happy that it was coming down.  
“Let it come down!” I kept saying to myself  
with a joy that was strange to me.  
Though the oak was the shade of old summers,  
I loved the guttural saw.

With the second section the “nude trunk” is reduced by a man with a saw to the stump of the poem’s title; but, strangely perhaps, the stump is resistant to his attempts to plane it down to smooth wood, even with the ground, and at last he abandons the task, leaving in section three only the poet to observe, then draw near the stump, with his imagination dilating upon the latter’s properties:

Roots stiffen under the ground  
and the frozen street, coiled around pipes and wires.  
The stump is a platform of blond wood  
in the gray winter. It is nearly level  
with the snow that covers the little garden around it.  
It is a door into the underground of old summers,  
but if I bend down to it, I am lost  
in crags and buttes of a harsh landscape  
that goes on forever. When the snow melts  
the wood darkens into the ground;  
rain and thawed snow move deeply into the stump,  
backwards along the disused tunnels.

Now the stump’s altering appearances, whether viewed close-up as an infinitely extending and rugged topography or seen in the larger perspective of the effects of seasonal change, dominate the poet’s mind. The imagery of “rain and thawed snow” penetrating the wood “along the disused tunnels” can only recall Hall’s frequent employment of water symbolism with its cycle of recurrence and renewal. If the last section of the poem remains descriptive at the outset, certain phrases there prepare us, as does the reference to water, for the imaginative leap into another dimension of experience taken in the two closing stanzas. Weathering blackens the “edges of the trunk,” but at the center of the stump’s upper surface “there is a pale overlay,/like a wash of chalk on darkness.” Next we are told that “the desert of the winter/has moved inside” the stump. In the first passage the trace of chalky whiteness is set against the darkness in a manner highly suggestive of both purification from and resistance to the negative or deathly connotations of the encroaching dark. The second passage, which shows the sterility of winter passing far into the stump, implies its absorption by the tree—a step that precedes any possibility of rebirth.

At this point a radical break occurs in the poem's continuity; suddenly, we are witnesses not of the familiar stump in the yard but of an exotic visionary world, abundant with new life, rich with the magical promise of voyages like those of Baudelaire or St.-Jean Perse, filled with an exquisite dream detail reminiscent perhaps of parts of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. Only in the final lines does the stump emerge again but transformed forever by the vision of which it has been the focus:

There is a sailing ship  
beached in the cove of a small island  
where the warm water is turquoise.  
The hulk leans over, full of rain and sand,  
and shore flowers grow from it.  
Then it is under full sail in the Atlantic,  
on a blue day, heading for the island.

She has planted sweet alyssum  
in the holes where the wood was rotten.  
It grows thick, it bulges  
like flowers contending from a tight vase.  
Now the stump sinks downward into its roots  
with a cargo of rain  
and white blossoms that last into October.

In the terms of Hall's imaginative transfiguration the stump takes on the form of the crippled ship which, planted with flowers by the mysterious, anonymous fertility goddess of the concluding stanza whom we can best simply identify as a revitalizing principle of nature or existence, is rendered capable of making its voyage to an "island" of unknown character. What matters here, anyhow, is not an explanation of the voyage or its end but rather the transforming, life-giving energies that underlie the poet's dreamlike images. The entire pattern of descent and renewal is contained in the last three lines, where the stump, heavy with water, "sinks downward into its roots," and by doing so sends up durable "white blossoms." By recognizing this cyclical pattern of death and rebirth, the poet has uncovered the meaning of his own strange desire early in the poem to see the tree cut down; thus we comprehend that attention to these processes or events in nature has its correspondences in the "deep mind," where similar patterns are followed.

In "Digging" the poet imagines himself returned home in the middle of the night after a long day of ecstatically pleasurable work in his garden; the atmosphere of the day and the garden exude potentiality and fecundity: "when lilies/lift themselves out of the ground while you watch them." From here on the poem assumes the aspect of a symbolic dreaming which concentrates explicitly on the transformation of the speaker through his assimilation by and participation in the fundamental cycles of nature. Shrunken to the size of a seed, he is carried by a South wind until he falls "in cracked ground." Death, the way back into

water, and an awakening that partially reminds us of Adam's after Eve was created follow this imagery of sexuality and fertilization; the luxuriant blossoming consequent upon these separate stages is directly explained as the integration of the self, which might lead the reader to think of the "green shoot" rising from the poet's side in Jungian fashion as the Anima, the female principle within the male, which needs to be in harmonious balance with the Animus in order to achieve wholeness:

The dirt will be cool, rough to your clasped skin  
like a man you have never known.  
You will die into the ground  
in a dead sleep, surrendered to water.

You will wake suffering  
a widening pain in your side, a breach  
gapped in your tight ribs  
where a green shoot struggles to lift itself upwards  
through the tomb of your dead flesh

to the sun, to the air of your garden  
where you will blossom  
in the shape of your own self, thoughtless  
with flowers, speaking  
to bees, in the language of green and yellow, white and red.

"The well is an archetype, one of the gravest images of the human soul," Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Reverie*, and Hall's poem "Wells," with its obviously quite personal significance, certainly bears out the French philosopher's remark. In this poem, as in "At Thirty-Five" and "Cold Water," there is considerable evidence of private dilemmas—the implications are at once sexual, domestic, and spiritual—which cannot be circumvented (indeed, a situation of impasse seems indicated) but must be lived through, endured, and finally gone beyond in the effort to rescue the self from stultification or oblivion. "Wells" also shares with "The Stump" and "Digging" the imagery of nature's efflorescence as a means of expressing a new flowering of the self and re-established bonds with earth or the world. The initial stanzas create the impression of withdrawal, fear, and impotence; the ladder may be interpreted both as a phallus (as can the tree, partially, in "The Stump" and the head of the musk-ox and the boat in "The Long River," for example) and as the way of ascent from the self's isolation, of communication with external reality and the being of others:

I lived in a dry well  
under the rank grass of a meadow.

A white ladder leaned out of it  
but I was afraid of the sounds  
of animals grazing.

Help, when it comes, arrives in the form of sexual love and brings with it a blossoming of life, a revived fertility which draws the speaker out of his solitude into new relationships; he has found a well of sustaining waters that is not his alone:

I crouched by the wall ten years  
until the circle of a woman's darkness  
moved over mine like a mouth.  
  
The ladder broke out in leaves  
and fruit hung from the branches.  
  
I climbed to the meadow grass.  
I drink from the well of cattle.

(It is also possible to view the well in its first appearance as an image of entrapment in a domestic or sexual relationship which has deteriorated, become sterile, but from which the speaker hesitates to escape until another affection frees him.)

"At Thirty-Five" and "Cold Water" are the concluding poems in *A Roof of Tiger Lilies*; and they make sense of the poet's inner drama, the problems he must come to grips with in his private life, when read in sequence, though on the surface, except for the fact that they are both expressive of affective or psychic states, there is no close resemblance between them. With "At Thirty-Five" we find Hall in the middle of his life confronting his own dark wood of failures and losses, as well as the prospect of death; the imagery is harsh and violent, filled with overtones of sexual frustration, misdirection, and final destruction:

At the edge of the city the pickerel  
who has lost his way  
vomits and dies. The river  
with its white hair staggers to the sea.

My life lay open like a smashed car.

The movement or progression of this poem depends upon lightning-like flashes of thought and imagery, sudden jumps in association; it is the kind of poem, as Hall says in a recent essay (*Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 1969), that gives us "the expression without the song," where song is taken to signify "the old baggage of ostensible content which, as Eliot says, is never the true content" and so can be ignored. As a result, "images set free from realistic narrative or from logic grow out of each other by association, and poems move by an inward track of feeling." We have already noted such qualities in Hall's work, but it is worth recalling them as we look at this poem, which in its loose, associative arrangement, its "anti-narrative" story (Hall's term), anticipates later pieces such as "The Alligator Bride," "Apples," and "Swan."

The next phase of "At Thirty-Five" constitutes a shift backwards, so to speak, first into the decline and ruin of a domestic or amatory relationship, then

further back into images of past family life, all linked with the death and decay of relationships and households; finally, as in the instances of the destroyed auto above, a single line serves both to summarize and punctuate the preceding portion of the poem. If we are puzzled by the interposed, separate lines with their image of a Boeing 707 airliner submerged in the sea yet oddly “intact” after its crash, Hall remarks in his BBC broadcast comments that an image similar to this was so obsessive with him at one time in his life he believed it to be the memory of an actual scene. He adds: “My poetry’s full of crashed airplanes anyway, usually having to do with women somehow or other.” In the present instance the plane clearly refers to the anonymous woman whose countenance undergoes hideous metamorphoses in the nightmare of the opening stanza of this stage of the poem; the lucidity and calm of the plane’s setting suggest, I believe, that she has, after all, survived her agonies and disruptions:

Windows barred, ivy, square stone.  
Lines gather at her mouth and eyes  
like cracks in a membrane.  
While I watch, eyeballs and tongue  
spill on the tiled floor  
in a puddle of yolks and whites.

The intact 707  
under the clear wave, the sun shining.

The playhouse of my grandfather’s mother  
stands north of the shed; spiders  
and the dolls’ teacups of dead ruin.  
In Ohio the K-Mart shrugs;  
it knows it is going to die.

A stone, the closed eye of the dirt.

We then proceed to discover the poet freed from the confines of his house (so closely identified with the woman above that, as the concentrated imagery implies, the collapse of one is the collapse of the other), walking the streets “before dawn” and receiving unexpectedly a vision of possibilities, perhaps even of the patching of broken bonds, though the images point to an ambivalence, particularly since the resurrected houses are still designated as “wrecks”:

A door clicked; a light opened.  
Houses sailed up  
like wrecks from the bottom of the sea.

Musing on the nature of dreams—of which this vision of restored houses is perhaps one—he reminds himself that lechery, greed, and vulgarity must be counted parts of the world even “if the world is a dream”; and this chain of thought forces an abrupt, stark view of the existence of the single man, deprived of love and sexual companionship, living in a terrible futility and isolation comparable

to the situation evoked at the outset of "Wells." The stanza's importance is magnified once we realize that the poet can imagine this barren condition as his own potential future. Again, Hall follows his stanza with a single line, indicating here that the course of his thinking in this direction has reached termination:

There are poor bachelors  
who live in shacks made of oilcans  
and broken doors, who stitch their shirts  
until the cloth disappears under stitches,  
who collect nails in tin cans.

The wind is exhausted.

The poem has moved into a dead-end passage where hope and strength appear to be utterly abolished (the collecting of nails in cans is surely an image of complete sexual futility and despair); only some surge of vitality, a marked change in the perspective of life can salvage the poet. True to the patterns we have discerned in Hall's poetry, this revivification does occur, for the last stanza reverses the negativism, desperation, and deathward leaning of the first. The lost route of the dying pickerel and the river staggering towards the sea become, as the poet awakens from the horrendous dreams of his recent past, a visible path of his destiny on which he can proceed, aided by the surprising surrealist vehicle of the trolley car that carries him rapidly to the forest of "new pine" where another life awaits him (in "The Dump" from *The Alligator Bride* a similar trolley leads to a colony of old men like the bachelors above):

In the middle of the road of my life  
I wake walking in a field.  
A trolley car comes out of the elms,  
the tracks laid down through an acre of wheat stubble,  
slanting downhill. I board it,  
and cross the field into the new pine.

From its very opening, "Cold Water" may be read as a deliberate continuation of "At Thirty-Five," with its setting the forest of pine into which the poet disappears. It is a poem that in its early details, as well as in the startling turn it takes in the two closing stanzas, is devoted to a search for abandoned beginnings. Unlike its immediate predecessor, "Cold Water" follows a perfectly straightforward narrative line, broken only by the sudden appearance of the Iroquois elders and the realizations and decisions their coming generates in the poet. As we have seen so often in Hall's poems, however, and can observe equally in the work, say, of James Wright, Louis Simpson, W. S. Merwin, William Stafford, or Galway Kinnell, natural details, objects, or gestures accumulate a significance beyond themselves, become expressive or symbolic in terms of their poetic context, that is, but do so unobtrusively. In this instance the "dammed stream," the shoe full of "cold water," the "shade/of a thicket, a black pool,/a small circle of stunned drowsing air," when looked at within the structure of

the entire poem, seem necessary stages in the kind of initiatory ritual process thematically proposed there. That we find ourselves engaged more with some deep layer of the poet's thought than with a literal landscape becomes rather obvious in the second and third stanzas where the imagined act of fishing turns suddenly real:

I step around a gate of bushes  
in the mess  
and trickle of a dammed stream  
and my shoe fills with cold water. I  
enter the shade  
of a thicket, a black pool,  
a small circle of stunned drowsing air,

vaulted with birch which meets overhead  
as if smoke  
rose up and turned into leaves.  
I stand on the roots of a maple  
and imagine  
dropping a line. My wrist jumps  
with the pain of a live mouth hooked deep,

and I stare, and watch where the lithe stripe  
tears water.

Then it heaves on my hand: cold,  
squaretailed, flecked, revenant flesh  
of a Brook Trout.

The pine forests I walked through  
darken and cool a dead farmer's brook.

While it would be a mistake, I think, to insist too strenuously on the symbolic properties of various particulars in these stanzas, they still remain enormously suggestive, especially in view of what is yet to come. The dammed river, the unpleasant experience of the soaked shoe, the black pool, which, of course, evokes the other pools, wells, and subterranean waters in Hall's work, and the atmosphere of lassitude and stagnation surrounding the pool combine to create an impression of withdrawal to the vicinity of origins, the beginnings of existence, though at first it may appear to be a *cul de sac*, a place of stultification. But if we remember that at the finish of "At Thirty-Five" the poet went off into the forest, presumably to begin his life anew, then the situation described above can be understood as the regression required if an individual is to reach the starting point of self-transformation; this sort of journey backwards which precedes the self's purification and integration recalls familiar instances in such poems as Frost's "Directive" and Roethke's "The Lost Son." Strangely enough, too, the forest clearing in Hall's rendering has something of the shape and character of a cathedral, but not a man-made one, a cathedral formed by nature

(“vaulted with birch which meets overhead”) and thus the appropriate location for the consecration of the self to its true destiny.

The imagined gesture of casting a line which quickly and enigmatically turns into the physical act of catching a fish can perhaps best be comprehended as the initiatory movement by the poet that breaks the spell of torpor dominating the forest clearing and, more pointedly, his inner being. Certainly, this effort and its success calls forth the Indian elders; having satisfied a preliminary requirement, the poet has readied himself to be led by them, in spite of hardships, to the heart of “the mystery,” and so to a confrontation of the possibilities of achievement or defeat in the struggle to win rebirth:

I look up and see the Iroquois  
coming back  
standing among the birches  
on the other side of the black pool.  
The five elders  
have come for me, I am young,  
my naked body whitens with cold  
  
in the snow, blisters in the bare sun,  
the ice cuts  
me, the thorns of blackberries:  
I am ready for the mystery.  
I follow them  
over the speechless needles  
of pines which are dead or born again.

We may ask why Hall chooses an American Indian initiation ritual, which introduces a boy into men's tribal activities and their religious significance, as the means for presenting aspects of his own psychic procedures. A primary answer would probably be that he did not choose it in the sense of a rationally calculated selection, but that such images originally came unbidden and recommended themselves for their imaginative implications. We can obtain a further answer from Hall's comment on two passages from poems by Robert Bly and Louis Simpson in the introduction to his *Contemporary American Poetry*; he could as easily be talking of his own poem as of theirs when he says, “This new imagination reveals through images a subjective life which is *general*, and which corresponds to an old objective life of shared experience and knowledge.” The mythic and religious attitude towards life, which was once (with Indians and medieval Christians alike) a common property of the outward existence of the community, and thus had all its members as participants, has been abolished from the external world of modern man by science, technology, urbanization, and widespread agnosticism; but since this attitude corresponds with and reflects the fundamental nature of the self it cannot be completely vanquished, instead it goes underground to become an active part of a person's unconscious mind and dream life. The conclusion of Hall's poem acquires strength and conviction as a result of these images of trial and rite of passage, for we can

feel that he is engaged, in an inner way, with a progression of the self which is not merely his alone but a central feature of the larger life shared by humans in all times and places.

The twenty-five recent poems gathered in *The Alligator Bride* continue in the vein of the work we have examined in *A Roof of Tiger Lilies*; indeed, as we might expect, certain themes and imaginative preoccupations, because they are charged with personal meaning for Hall, declare themselves again. "The Blue Wing," for example, links the relationship with women to the crash of a plane; and the final stanza with its wreckage and residue of bones implies a symbolic dying which is survived through the parabolic arc of death and re-birth the last three lines describe:

The tiny skeleton inside  
remembers the falter of engines, the  
cry without  
answer, the long dying  
into  
and out of the sea.

Similarly, "The Dump" and "The Train," using the imagery of trolley lines and railways, are poems of movement away from the past. The first of these, mentioned previously, terminates sombrely in a "graveyard of trolleys," populated by old men, "in narrow houses full of rugs, in this last place," where quite obviously they wither into death. In "The Train" memory presents itself as "a long shape/of darkness, tunnel/huddled with voices, hunger/of dead trees, angels" from which a train emerges gliding off into the distance; a woman's head and arm, growing less and less discernible, extend from a window in gestures of farewell:

The train curves tightening  
the light hair to itself  
and diminishes  
on a Sunday morning down  
the track forever,  
into memory, the tunnel  
of dead trees.

Death, metamorphosis, the abolition of or escape from the past, and renewal or ascent into a fresh, hitherto unknown dimension of being form the thematic concerns of most of Hall's new poems, so that they constitute a distinct extension of the preceding work, sometimes overlapping it but also breaking into further territories. Close in feeling to the poems of departure, division, and the death of relationships which entails the abandonment of a whole segment of life is the negative continuation of these experiences of severance into static situations, terrible in their desolation and lack of promise for any future, and so for any hope of fulfilling the poet's sense of self-identity and destiny. "The Dump" with its crowd of wasted lives qualifies as a poem of this type as well as a poem of escape from the past; in effect, it is a record of failed

deliverance. The figures of "Make Up," originally depicted in details recalling their bodily, even erotic natures, drift away from living and harden into "Ghost/stone, and the stone/daughter" at the end. The woman of "Sew" busily stitches from her "church of scraps" an image of a man suited to her ideals and in her myopic fashion endows it with life, "until it stands up like a person/made out of whole cloth"; but the short closing stanza, spoken by the poet, reveals how far she has missed knowing what he is. Frustrated from rising into the amplitude of existence, he remains solitary, neglected if unharmed, among the untested possibilities of his dreams:

Still, I lie folded  
on the bolt in the dark warehouse,  
dreaming my shapes.

Like Roethke's "Dolor" and Karl Shapiro's "Office love . . ." from *The Bourgeois Poet*, poems of the same bleak but oddly humorous spirit, "The Repeated Shapes" focuses on the emotional depression Hall associates with modern technical efficiency, in this case, the shiny emptiness of public sanitation. The line-up of urinals, to Hall's slightly hallucinated eye, appears as a uniform row of old men with whom, in his own despairing mood, he acknowledges family ties; here, as elsewhere in these poems, the awareness of waste and futility is nearly overwhelming:

They are my uncles,  
these old men  
who are only plumbing,  
who throb with tears all night  
and doze in the morning.

On a note of historical authenticity the smashed airplane returns in "The Man in the Dead Machine," this time as a Grumman Hellcat fighter plane "High on a slope in New Guinea," where its pilot brought it to rest undiscovered "among bright vines/as thick as arms." While the human remains in "The Blue Wing" seem plainly those of a woman, these are, of course, as indicated by both title and details, a man's, and Hall devotes an entire stanza of close description to "the helmeted/skeleton" still strapped rigidly upright in the pilot's seat decades later. Then, as we have had occasion to note before, the poet without warning completes the poem in a stanza that changes direction and casts on the figure of the pilot and his fate quite different meanings:

Or say that the shrapnel  
missed him, he flew  
back to the carrier, and every  
morning takes his chair, his pale  
hands on the black arms, and sits  
upright, held  
by the firm webbing.

The first two-thirds of the poem simply provides a grim, matter-of-fact piece of reportage from which there can be no issue but the unvarnished account of what is observed; but with the reversal of actual death and the assertion of a daily reenactment of another sort of death, we are no longer in the realm of inanimate external objects like fallen airplanes and skeletal figures; instead, a monstrous ritual of inner existence, confined by the structure of its habitual gear, has been disclosed. The reader cannot help but feel that, in some ways, this fate is far worse than the one of the poem's opening, for the living pilot of the last stanza does not really live but each day endures a death, while life itself waits . . . elsewhere, beyond. Not surprisingly, Hall's most frighteningly graphic poem of imprisonment, self-torment, and utter despair, "The Corner," is printed immediately after "The Man in the Dead Machine." In this piece the self has succumbed to anonymity and descended to the condition of a maddened animal, but in the manner in which only a human can. The horror of the situation is compounded by the concluding revelation of the impossibility of relief, even through death:

It does not know  
its name. It sits  
in a damp corner,  
spit hanging  
from its chin, odor of urine  
puddled around.  
Huge, hairless, grunting,  
it plays with itself,  
sleeps, stares for hours,  
and leaps  
to smash itself on the wall.  
Limping, bloody, falling back  
into the corner, it  
will not die.

"The Alligator Bride" shares with the poems we have been discussing manifest elements of guilt, separation, destructive energy, and death, but it weaves more completely the fabric of an irrational or surrealist fable, with a group of characters which includes a sinister cat, the bride herself, and the speaker. Hall's BBC notes disclose how the poem began as "fragments" he had written down which finally were drawn together by the introduction of "the strange figure of a dead stuffed alligator in a bride costume," and it developed until it became "a macabre little story," containing, as he realizes, materials from his own life. Knowledge of his biography is not, however, of importance; for, as he says,

The story, and the characters, are there, and the story is one that, if you leave yourself open to the language of dreams, is available to everyone. That is, it has the same sort of general availability that a

story like *Beauty and the Beast* has. You have to listen to a poem like this, or read it, as if you were dreaming but keeping your eyes wide open. You have to be alert, but you mustn't be inquisitive. You may not *translate* anything in the poem, you have to *float* on it. At the same time you have to receive every detail. Perhaps this is more demanding than any other kind of poem.

With this advice and admonition in mind we can try to approach the poem on its own terms and stay within the range of allusiveness it establishes. The initial lines of the first two stanzas are connected by a preoccupation with the passage of time, thus reminding us of the poet's obsessive linking of temporal perceptions with his constant awareness of mortality:

The clock of my days winds down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now the beard on my clock turns white.

In the stanzas these lines respectively begin Hall creates a domestic scene, a relationship between the speaker and his cat, who "eats sparrows outside" the window, that leads toward intimacy through the latter's seemingly generous impulse; but at the moment of their communion the cat is losing an enigmatic object she cherishes:

Once, she brought me a small rabbit  
which we devoured together, under  
the Empire Table  
while the men shrieked  
repossessing the gold umbrella.

We cannot gauge much of the significance of this umbrella beyond the most obvious reasons for its value: it is gold and provides shade, hence perhaps a circle of comfort and security. It appears to be valued as well by the anonymous men who in "repossessing" it are presumably claiming what once was theirs. In any event, this action disrupts the commerce between speaker and cat in the second stanza, where the image of the snowy-bearded clock indicates a rapid flow of time and existence. Now the cat, to all appearances estranged from the speaker (though he can refer to her as "My cat"), continues in a despondent state, not only over her lost umbrella but for love of the Alligator Bride, who enters the poem in the next stanza, a grotesque, mocking figure that would do credit to a child's nightmare:

Ah, the tiny fine white  
teeth! The Bride, propped on her tail  
in white lace  
stares from the holes  
of her eyes. Her stuck-open mouth  
laughs at minister and people.

Following a catalogue of food and wine—which also includes the cat and Bride—assembled for the wedding festivities, there comes a swift change of direction as the poem turns towards the speaker as its focal point of interest and as the source of subsequent events. The speaker begins a disclosure of his own malice, in which the cat enjoys a voluntary complicity—apparently as her love shifts into hatred—finding release and termination only in the death of the Alligator Bride. This will to harm or destroy shows itself in images of two very different artificial products of a highly technical age:

The color of bubble gum,  
the consistency of petroleum jelly,  
wickedness oozes  
from the palm of my left hand.  
My cat licks it.  
I watch the Alligator Bride.

And the stanza after, in its own puzzling fashion, starts off with similar details of imagery, though now they are more widely applied. The odd, inert houses sealed together in “gelatin”—and the speaker’s house we learn from the closing stanza is one of these—suggest the same confinement and exclusion of the world we observed in Hall’s criticism of middle class living in the early poem “Christmas Eve in Whitneyville.” In the present instance as well the restrictive conditions of “Big houses like shabby boulders” that “hold themselves tight in gelatin” seem to exert unendurable pressures on those inhabitants who, like the speaker, refuse to be imprisoned in this manner and desire a freedom which is associated with the powers of imagination. The speaker’s declaration that he is “unable to daydream,” then, makes sufficiently obvious how claustrophobic the atmosphere of this life has become. Need we add what should here be plain: that the cause of this decidedly unpleasant condition is the Alligator Bride, or better perhaps, that it results from the relationship between the Bride and the speaker, who is, after all, the Groom. The inability to “daydream” under these circumstances leads to the violent climax of the poem and to the unsettling aftermath which brings no particular relief:

The sky is a gun aimed at me.  
I pull the trigger.  
The skull of my promises  
leans in a black closet, gapes  
with its good mouth  
for a teat to suck.

A bird flies back and forth  
in my house that is covered by gelatin  
and the cat leaps at it  
missing. Under the Empire Table  
the Alligator Bride  
lies in her bridal shroud.  
My left hand  
leaks on the Chinese carpet.

However confusing and distressing these events may be, and difficult to unravel with any degree of certainty (and it is in this very respect that their riddling irrationality closely reflects the inextricable mass of motives, thoughts, and acts involved in much more ordinary occurrences), we can readily comprehend how the speaker in pulling the trigger has destroyed himself, or some aspect of his existence, at the same time that he has murdered the Bride. The poem's end does not, however, see him liberated; but in a setting which might even be taken as a dream parody of a murder scene in some Agatha Christie or Ellery Queen detective novel we discover the ravenous cat in vain pursuit of a new prey, the corpse of the Bride, and the guilty speaker, whose "wickedness" (with sexual suggestion?) flows like an open wound to stain the exotic carpet. The air of this situation is one of bewilderment and irresolution; and any final impression of the poem's conclusion must also incorporate the fact that the trio of cat, Bride, and speaker remain imprisoned in the latter's "house that is covered by gelatin." Whatever the underlying problems might be, the speaker's impulsive course of action has left damages but no satisfactory achievements, except the release of violent energy. The poem itself, carefully and subtly composed, effective in its resonances and its use of detail, is satisfying and stages an intricate drama of relationships which proves endlessly engaging to the reader's imagination.

"Swan," "Apples," and "This Room" share elements of dream, fantasy, and narrative with "The Alligator Bride," though the incidents are apt to seem more disjunct, to comprise less of what could be termed a "story" of any sort than the latter poem contains; in addition, these three poems point in affirmative ways, especially through their associations with the world of nature, towards a new level of life, which is gained, at least momentarily, in certain love poems such as "The Coal Fire," "Lovers in Middle Age," and "Gold." Two other poems, "The Table" and "Mount Kearsarge," deserve mention here because both of them return to the New Hampshire farm of Hall's youthful experience and manage to accomplish, in distinctive and quite moving ways, a recovery of the past which confirms it as an essential ingredient of the poet's existence in the present. The last lines of "Mount Kearsarge" reveal that Hall no longer needs to live on his grandparents' farm to be aware of the haunting spectral shape of the mountain; its form has been absorbed in consciousness and cannot be lost:

I will not rock on this porch  
when I am old. I turn my back on you,  
Kearsarge, I close  
my eyes, and you rise inside me,  
blue ghost.

Similarly, in "The Table" Hall spends almost the entire poem on recollections of days shared with his grandfather on the farm, and each detail is lovingly recalled; the finish of the poem, however, is in the present, where the poet revisits the farm house. In an instant of strange, Proustian communication the life which he knew and is now past, the life which the previous part of the poem has re-

created, comes suddenly alive to his mind and senses as he touches a table in the familiar bedroom and receives a startling perception of his grandfather's dead horse and the busy, humming summer landscape, long gone but existing unchanged; through the agency of this old piece of furniture, in which it mysteriously resides, a time that was lived and felt to the fullest extent has been resurrected in the poet:

This morning  
I walk to the shaded bedroom and lean  
on the drop-leaf table.

The table hums  
a song to itself without sense  
and I hear the voice of the heaving  
ribs of Riley  
and grasshoppers  
haying the fields of the air.

Divided into five separate sections, though apparently concentrated on scenes and events within one geographical area, "Swan" explores relationships between man and the earth or nature's hidden energies; it also renders the absence or dissolution of such relationships. In its theme, then, the poem has close ties with many of Hall's pieces from *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* discussed previously. At the outset it is winter, a darkening afternoon, as the poet, climbing "Mill Hill," observes a fire in the fields burning off the stubble in preparation for another season's planting:

Smoke blows  
from the orange edges of fire  
working the wheat  
stubble. "Putting  
the goodness back  
into the soil."

These details complete the first section and set the precedent for the whole poem: each part, of varying length, is devoted to an individual experience, whether it is almost pure, immediate observation, as in sections one, two, and five; an amalgam of perceivings and inward vision, as in part three; or a mingling of desire and memory into quite specific description, as in part four. Whatever differences exist among these distinct moments of experience, in one way or another each touches the thematic currents we have mentioned, and the reader must draw them together by allowing them to move freely together in his mind. In the passage above the setting at once lends itself to a capacious sense of nature in its entirety, of its cycles, and so of its preparations for renewed fertility to which man contributes here. Such regenerative powers of nature, and the feeling of fundamental, enduring realities that proximity to earth can arouse in a person lead Hall through this poem toward his own physical contact and discovery in the natural realm.

The account of a separate incident, strange and dramatic in character, constitutes the second section and contains one of the two specific references to the bird which gives the poem its title:

Driving; the fog  
matted around the headlights;  
suddenly, a thudding  
white shape in the whiteness,  
running huge and frightened, lost  
from its slow stream . . .

Seemingly, these lines give us the entire experience, and the stanza trails off inconclusively. The passage recalls perhaps two famous swans in exile in French Symbolist poetry: the swan escaped from its cage and bathing its wings in the dust of Parisian streets in Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" and the swan trapped in ice but desirous of the infinite azure of the skies in Mallarmé's sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui." In both poems the bird is, to one degree or another, emblematic of the poet tormented by exile and unfulfillment. While I do not wish to imply that Hall had these previous poetic instances in mind, he certainly knows the poems in question, and the present passage may be illuminated somewhat by recalling them. Here, too, it is difficult not to view the significance of the incident, the sudden appearance of a swan out of the thick fog—in which the poet must likewise find it troublesome to make his way—and the details selected to describe it ("running huge and frightened, lost/from its slow stream . . ."), as somehow related to the poet's own condition, a condition that can only be called one of uprootedness, for he is portrayed throughout the poem as always in movement, a kind of wanderer. The stanza's indecisive ending leaves open the possibilities still available for the swan to discover the route back to the stream; and the poet is left, like the bird, to maneuver as best he can through the fog toward an unspecified—and probably as yet unknown—destination.

The third section not only stands in the middle of the poem but holds the thematic center as well, tying together important particulars of imagery and providing in its use of the windmill image a focus of the poet's quest for an existence in harmony with nature's rhythms and energies. The mill appears as if seen in reverie or dream; like an agency of nature it channels and lifts the hidden forces of the subterranean world, transforming them in the process. The "dark" on which it draws as a source again recollects the black waters and pools of earlier poems also associated with primal forces or the covert origins of life. Beneath the mill, the network of "tunnels" it taps embraces the world, reaching "to the poles/and down to the center of the earth"; and so this queer edifice seems almost a temple of natural religion through the activity of which great chthonic powers achieve release. The next stanza, of merely two lines, returns to the fire of section one, only then to disclose the mill halted in its operations:

Fire breaks out in the fields.  
The wheel of the mill does not turn.

The sterility of winter is implied here, for the fire in the initial stanza was witnessed by the poet in December burning “the wheat/stubble”; the mill, too, must remain idle during this period. Now the fog reappears as well, and unexpectedly, the section closes with a startling flourish of surrealist images:

The windmill  
flies, clattering its huge wings, to the swamp.  
I make out cliffs of the Church,  
houses drifting like glaciers.

Surely, though the poet does not specify it, the swan somehow merges with the mill as it takes flight—enigmatically, not towards the stream but a swamp. It is difficult to determine all this journey may suggest, but in any event it prepares the way for the desolate, frozen, infertile images of church and houses, which replace the natural life and energy symbolized by the windmill with the supernaturalism or abstract theology represented by the church and, following the pejorative connotations of the dwellings in “Christmas Eve in Whitneyville” and “The Alligator Bride,” the seclusion from full existence of the bourgeois. The movement of this section traces the abdication of natural modes of being and their replacement by artificial and ideological ones.

The dreamlike qualities of the third part vanish entirely in the next section, to be exchanged for the poet’s open declaration of desire for an existence lived in proximity to earth, drawing sustenance of both a spiritual and physical kind from a close working relationship with the soil. He envisages in the daily and seasonal routines of another, ideal individual the life he wishes for himself:

I envy the man hedging and ditching,  
trimming the hawthorn, burning branches  
while wasps circle in the smoke of their nest,  
clearing a mile of lane, patches of soot  
like closed holes to a cave of fire,  
the man in his cottage  
who smokes his pipe in the winter, in summer  
digging his garden in ten o’clock light,  
the man grafted entirely to rain and air,  
stained dark  
by years of hedging and ditching.

These lines terminate the feeling of restless movement that pervades previous sections, and, of course, the type of living presented here contrasts decisively with what was observed at the close of part three with its glacial houses and clifflike church, thus marking a return to harmony with creation. The “cave of fire” may hint at buried forms of natural energy, not unlike those the mill reaches, to which the anonymous man, who has blended with his environment, has access. His identification with nature is so complete that, in addition to fire, he is associated with the other elements of water, air, and earth as well: “grafted entirely to rain and air,/stained dark/by years of hedging and ditching.”

The final section, like the second, is brief and inconclusive, but where the latter offered the desolate, helpless image of the swan lost from its stream in the fog, this stanza evokes the swan by analogy and now in an affirmative way:

The close-packed surface of the roots  
of a root-bound plant  
when I break the pot away,  
the edges white  
and sleek as a swan . . .

By some means, in the transition from the fourth part of the poem to this last one, the poet has progressed from “envy” of the man whose life revolves about contact with the soil and what grows there to his own direct physical relationship with nature or natural process, suggested quite plainly by his handling of the plant. In thematic and symbolic terms the breaking of the pot surrounding the plant and the discovery of “the edges white/and sleek as a swan . . .” is comparable to a moment of rebirth for the poet, who is, as we noticed, linked to the figure of this bird. The fact that Hall refuses to complete his poem with a period can only be understood to reinforce the idea of potentiality which the experience has made manifest. In like fashion “This Room,” which is simultaneously the actual dwelling of the poet, his body, and the metaphorical space of the self’s living context, concludes on an ecstatic note of acceptance by the natural cosmos in the form of flowers; the sexual overtones of the imagery broaden the implications here and also look toward the love poems mentioned before and to a volume of love poetry, *The Yellow Room Love Poems*, unpublished at the time of this writing:

Climbing the brown stairs  
of the air, I enter  
my place. I am welcomed  
by pots of geraniums, green stems  
thick as a thumb, uprushing  
leaves! I live  
in your exhalations, sweet  
tongued flowers!

Of the poem “Apples” Hall says in his BBC remarks, “When I started it, I thought it was about old dead poets. A number of friends of mine who were poets had died all in a year or so, and I wanted to make up a place for them to be. By the time I’d finished the poem, I saw that it was really about other things.” The poem is certainly about death, entrance into the underworld or kingdom of the dead, and the beginning of a new paradisaical form of being which consists largely of earthly delights; but poets are not specified as participants, the dead might be anybody. Though ritual elements appear in the circular movement of the dancers at the poem’s end, no religious intentions except those implied by the subjective fantasy of acceptance by and habitation within the earth itself can be discerned. The recurrent and resonant image of the apple, together with other particulars drawn from nature, such as grapes, grass, a mari-

gold, and a peacock's feather, keep this poem consistent with those pieces which, like "Swan," seek out an order of harmony with creation; that kind of natural correspondence Hall projects in a vision of the conditions of life after death:

They have gone  
into the green hill, by doors without hinges,  
or lifting city  
manhole covers to tunnels  
lined with grass,  
their skin soft as grapes, their faces like apples.

The disappearing dead who, in fairy-tale fashion, vanish into the verdant passageways of earth already possess the aspect of renewal, as the analogy between their skin and faces and the fruit specifies. By means of the magical transformations of sight which the "round eye" of a peacock feather—introduced in the second stanza—permits, giving the "curved spot" on the apple's surface the appearance of a "fat camel" and synesthetically changing a "fly's shadow" into "the cry of a marigold," the poet approaches, "looking hard," the world the dead have entered, then swiftly moves into it himself:

I am caught in the web of a gray apple,  
I struggle inside  
an immense apple of blowing sand,  
I blossom  
quietly from a window-box of apples.

Proceeding through conditions of storm and turbulence seems necessary as a preparation for entrance into the underworld, and the journey is followed by the unmistakable imagery of rebirth within the precincts of this natural paradise, the activities and pleasures of which occupy the last two stanzas of the poem. "Seven beautiful ladies" are provided "each man" and serve him "whiskey"; mysteriously, stories are told by the "rungs of a ladder"; and, not surprisingly, the analogy with apples is announced once more, leading the poem towards its climactic dance about the hill, whose shape derives from that fruit but whose qualities are likewise those of the powerful peacock feather. Within the boundaries of reverie, the poet participates in this ideal cosmos of his imagining:

Their voices like apples brighten in the wind.  
Now they are dancing  
with fiddles and ladies and trumpets  
in the round  
hill of the peacock, in the resounding hill.

Another note of intense revitalization is struck by the love poems in *The Alligator Bride*, which include "The Coal Fire," "Lovers in Middle Age," and "Gold." The last two poems, together with "Waters," which carries oblique hints of sexual fulfillment, and "The Dump," discussed previously, Hall places, with

minor changes, in the context of his new book *The Yellow Room*, a sequence of “poems and fragments” that chronicle a love affair, its complexities and complications, the depths of emotion and awareness it reveals, its rhythm of communion, withdrawal, and reunion, and its painful conclusion in a final separation. The poems of this sequence vary considerably in style, tone, and feeling; certainly they demonstrate a further development in Hall’s work, a new delicacy and fineness in many instances that brings his art close in quality to Chinese poetry—or at least to what we apprehend of such poetry in the versions, say, of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth. And, of course, these poems form a unity among themselves, plotting points along the route of an extraordinarily intimate relationship which, even though it must conclude unhappily, impels the poet to a self-renewal that, one imagines, cannot be destroyed entirely even with the final parting of the persons involved. Obviously then, the poems from *The Alligator Bride* which Hall also uses in the sequence will assume different implications in accord with their various positions there; so, for example, “Waters” becomes much more explicitly sexual in terms of its changed context. “Gold” continues the spatial metaphors noted before in “This Room” and apparent in *The Yellow Room*, but its color symbolism, effective enough in isolation in this beautiful poem, is enlarged by the extension of that symbolism throughout the sequence. In “Red, Orange, Yellow,” which appears near the close of *The Yellow Room*, we discover some important explanations:

For five years of my life, or ten,  
I lived no-color.  
In a beige room I talked  
clipped whispers  
with a lady who faded while I looked at her.  
Even our voices were oyster-white.

This opening easily reminds us of earlier poems of domestic disharmony, but a second stanza provides explicit statements of the warm, vibrant colors the poet associates with the woman he does love and now has lost:

I looked for the color yellow.  
I drank yellow for breakfast,  
orange at lunch, gold for dinner.  
Red was the color of pain.  
Now I eat red  
all day. The sky is her yellow.  
Sometimes no-color years  
rise in slow motion,  
like Mozart on drums. Their name is Chumble.  
They smile  
like pale grass, looking downward.  
But red sticks  
needles in my eyes.  
Yellow

dozes on the beach at Big Sur  
or in the center of my new room  
like a cactus  
that lives without water, for a year.

Even the rending agony of loss receives a bright, burning color and thus takes its share in a momentous revivification of the self that promises to leave behind certain negative phases of the past. Undoubtedly, torment and despair will recur, but the experience which a poem like "Gold" realizes must, as its brief and stunning last stanza proclaims, inaugurate enduring alterations in the inner life of the psyche and the emotions of both lover and beloved:

Pale gold of the walls, gold  
of the centers of daisies, yellow roses  
pressing from a clear bowl. All day  
we lay on the huge bed, my hand  
stroking the deep  
gold of your thighs and your back.  
We slept and woke  
entering the golden room together,  
lay down in it breathing  
quickly, then  
slowly again,  
caressing and dozing, your hand sleepily  
touching my hair now.

We made in those days  
tiny identical rooms inside our bodies  
which the men who uncover our graves  
will find in a thousand years  
shining and whole.

Without entering into further detail about an as yet unpublished book, which may undergo considerable revision, we can still affirm that the fundamental patterns of descent and ascent, death and rebirth, positive and negative polarities are perceptible in these love poems. They also, as previous poems do, find completion in images of stoical suffering and harsh conditions of solitude; one may, however, await beyond them another stage of growth, a new opening out to the possibilities of existence. As the reader looks back over Donald Hall's career, the remarkable strides of his development which follow upon his abandonment of the supposedly correct poetic modes of the 1950's and his subsequent freedom to explore his experience honestly, to say what he needed to say in a voice tested and found to be truly his own, rather than one imposed from without and legislated by alien theoretical criteria, become quite evident. From *A Roof of Tiger Lilies* through *The Yellow Room* his work displays that high level of imaginative power and technical accomplishment which has secured him an enviable place among the American poets of his generation.