

The Energy of Revision

The energy of revision is the energy of creation and change,
which is also the energy of destruction.

—Maggie Anderson

Revision is the poet's most difficult, demanding, and dangerous work. Difficult because it's hard to let go of our original inspirations or ideas or our best lines, as we may have to do in the service of the poem. Demanding because it calls for us to reach deeper or further than we may want to, or feel we know how to. Dangerous because we feel we might, in the act of trying to make a good poem better, lose touch with the raw energy that drove the poem into its fullness to begin with and destroy what we have so joyously created. But revision is necessary work for poets who care about their craft. Richard Tillinghast, in an essay titled "Notes on Revision," says, "The willingness, the ardent desire even, to revise, separates the poet from the person who sees poetry as therapy or self-expression." Ardent desire may be a bit more than we can hope for, but certainly willingness is important.

A student once asked us why critique workshops are so "amputatory" in nature, why they seem interested only in cutting away from the poem. Editing is one of the easiest and fastest routes to rewriting, simply because it's often much easier to identify something that doesn't belong: a cliché, an unnecessary adjective, a confusing or misplaced

word, line, stanza or image. It's more expedient to get rid of what's not working than to figure out how to make it work. Similarly, a poem often opens with unnecessary lines—a kind of “throat-clearing,” as one of our students called it—before the true poem begins. Another problem is that of going on long after your poem has ended. A good workshop can help point these things out to the writer.

It's much more difficult to see where or how a poem might be opened up, where a wrong turn has been taken, what's missing. A workshop should focus on these things, too, and try to illuminate as many possible avenues of development as its members can think of, so that the poet has a variety of options. Sometimes workshops are limited in that they may not always have quite enough time for a thorough examination and contemplation of the poem. A workshop should be considered a starting point for revision, a place where you can begin to gather ideas about what you need to do to make the poem what it wants to be.

True revision is just that: a re-visioning of the poem's potential and the strategies it has used so far. In an early draft, the language on the page should be considered temporary language, ripe with possibilities, with the gifts your subconscious mind has offered up. In the act of getting down a first or second or fourth draft, you're likely to have tapped into not only some raw, pure, evocative language but also a lot of received language and attitudes— clichés, easy solutions, awkward phrasing, habitual ways of articulation, vague generalities. Sometimes your ego or your editor has gotten in the way, and tried to make things too pretty, or too petty; maybe irony has stepped in where sincerity was needed, or vice-versa. Maybe you've been melodramatic in an attempt to be powerful, or sentimental when you wanted deep feeling. Maybe the poem is unfocused, with too many incidents, too confused a sense of what it's about, or no sense at all. The true poem, in other words—the one you wanted to write, the inspiration that got you feverishly tapping out lines on the computer at three a.m.—may not yet have found its realization on the page.

If you consider what you've written in the early stages as pointing toward the true poem, rather than being the poem itself, it will be easier for you to be open to what still needs to happen for it to succeed.

The more willing you are to let go of your own words, to demand more of your language and push your limits to get to something better, the more likely it is that you will eventually produce a worthwhile poem. There's nothing wrong with "shitty first drafts," as Anne Lamott calls them in her book on writing, *Bird by Bird*. Every writer produces garbage—stupid, embarrassing, awful stuff. If you truly want to write well, you have to be willing to see when you've written badly, and keep trying to improve on what you've done.

Another question we are often asked is: How do I know when my poem is finished? Three drafts? Ten? Fifty? We can't give you a number. Some poems arrive fairly whole and need little work, others may come to you in fragments over a period of time, others may need reworking for months before you even begin to see results. The famous formulation is that a work of art is never finished, merely abandoned. One of the ways to abandon a poem is to send it out for publication. If it's published, is it finished? Maybe, though sometimes just the act of typing up the final draft to send out, seeing the poem objectively for a moment, through the eyes of a possible publisher, may lead to a last-minute revision. Even poems that are published may be in need of further work. We've seen several in magazines that we wish the writer had given one more critical pass. The painter Bonnard would actually go to museums and galleries where his paintings hung, sneak in, and rework his canvases. Revision is a process that has no clear ending point. A poem is like a child; at some point we have to let it go and trust that it will make its own way in the world.

Can you revise a poem too much? How much is too much? Sometimes, in our fervor to revise, to get it right, we can end up editing the life out of a poem. We know we're on dangerous ground here to tell you that poems can be overrevised, because in fact, what's more common is an unwillingness to revise enough. However, it can and does happen. If you find yourself losing interest in a poem, if it begins to look pale and wan, corpse-like, it's time to bury it for a while; throw it into a drawer, along with each draft, and leave it alone. Return to it in a week, a month, a year. Come back to it with new eyes, new knowledge. When you do, it may be easier to see

what's working and what isn't. (If you still find it difficult to part with those "golden lines" you know are brilliant but have no place in the poem, save them in a box labeled "great stuff.")

If you keep a journal like we do, chances are that most of what can be found there is pure junk: notes, diatribes, meanderings. But once in a while something begs to be let out of the journal and onto the printed page, saying *I think I could be a poem*. The simple process of transferring the journal entry onto the typewriter or computer is often the beginning stage of revision; that's when line breaks are usually begun, when you might add or delete a section, reconstruct an image or phrase, play with the music of a hastily written line. See, you've already begun and it wasn't that painful. However, once the "poem" is arranged into some sort of agreeable shape, the real work begins. Since it's hard to be objective about your own work, it's helpful, when you feel you've taken the poem as far as you can on your own, to get further reactions from a teacher or workshop or trusted reader—one who knows something about poetry. Ideally, such a reader, or readers, will send you back to the poem with fresh ideas for developing it.

Sometimes, though, you get to a point where you're stuck. You know the poem isn't working, but you can't seem to get anywhere with it. Maybe you've had some contradictory suggestions—one person loves a stanza, another person has drawn a big "x" over it and handed it back. Feeling confused, demoralized, ready to burn your poem, or perhaps your critics—these are common reactions at this stage. As we said, it usually helps to leave the poem alone, let the dust settle, and come back to it after some time has passed. If you're still stuck, here are some tips on how to tackle the poem again.

1. *Turn the poem over and start again.* Rewrite it in lines or a freewrite, but cover the same experience/event/idea. Feel free to change, add to, or go in a different direction from the original.

2. *Change the way your poem looks on the page;* you won't be able to help changing some language as well. You might alter line length, stanza breaks, flush-left margins, poem length, punctuation, capitals.

3. Take any problematic line in your poem and *rewrite it at least*

five ways. Don't just substitute one word for another—i.e., “skin” for “flesh”—though that might be part of it. But change, as well, the syntax of the line.

4. Some poems start out well, but then veer off on the wrong track. *Find your wrong turn* and go in a completely different direction—even the opposite one. Rewrite the poem from that point on, ignoring where you ended up before.

5. *If the poem has a controlling metaphor, try changing it.* If you've written a poem about falling in love as drowning in an ocean, try reimagining the experience as climbing a mountain or taking a train ride or finding a twenty on the sidewalk.

6. *Write a question word*—How, Why, When, What, Where, Who—in the margin where *answering* that question will help you develop further.

7. *Try surgery*—the “amputatory” method. You can also think of it as weeding the garden of your poem. Lop off the beginning and/or the end. Or, cut 3–5 lines to see if you really need them.

8. Shake up the poem and *break whatever pattern you've developed.* Look at: point of view; syntax; imagery; adjectives; and anything else you can think of.

9. *Radical surgery:* Find the heart, the core of your poem—whether it's one line, or an image, or a statement—that is the essence of what the poem wants to be about. (If you can't find such a line, try writing one.) Now forget the rest of the poem: use that one great statement/image/line and write a new poem that lives up to it.

10. If nothing seems to be working, and you've really tried, put the poem away in a folder that says “In Process.” Then—yes, we'll say it a third time—*leave it alone.* Every so often, go back and try again.

Poet Jane Hirshfield has thought a lot about the more existential aspects of revision. Reprinted here is a worksheet she handed out to her students at the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.

Some Possible Questions to Ask of Your Poem in Revision

- What is being said?
- Is there joy, depth, muscle, in the music of its saying?
- Is there more that wants to be said?
- Does it want a more deeply living body of sound?
- Is it true?
- Is it ethical?
- Does it feel?
- Does it follow its own deepest impulses, not necessarily the initial idea?
- Does it know more than you did when you started it?
- Are there things in it that don't belong?
- Are whatever digressions it takes in its own best service?
- Are there things in it that are confusing?
- Are there things in it that are clichéd or sentimental?
- Is it self-satisfied?
- Is it predictable?
- Does it go deep enough? far enough?
- Is it particular?
- Is the grammar correct?
- If the syntax is unusual, is it for a purpose?
- Are the transitions accurate?
- Is it in the right voice?
- Is it in the right order?
- Does the diction fit?
- Could any of its words be more interesting? more surprising? more alive?
- Do its rhythms work? (i.e., both seem right and accomplish meaning and feeling)
- Does the music work?
- Does the shape/form work? (line breaks, stanzas, etc.)
- Does each image work? each statement?
- Does it allow strangeness?
- Does each of its moments actively move the poem toward its full realization?

Should it go out into the world?
Is it a seed for something else?
Is it finished?
Six months later, is it still finished?
Six years later, is it still finished?

Some of these questions may never get answered to your satisfaction. But they can provide a useful starting point for rewriting. Not all your revisions will become successful poems, but that doesn't matter; you'll have learned more about language, and your own process, and that knowledge will carry over into other poems and help you solve their particular problems. So don't despair, however hard it may seem to go back to that poem one more time. Finally getting it right will be worth everything it took to get there.