

**WTE column of May 23, 2015. Editor's headline: "Stop hinting and just say it."
CST of May 24: "Phrases that 'have something to say'."**

Each phrase ought to have "something to say," a guitarist friend advised. He was remarking on musical phrases and how to represent them, but the same holds for the sentences we speak and write. How often we squander the opportunity to convey that we care! Mostly our talk is like a teenager's noodling on a guitar in the pawnshop.

How do writers find ways of saying "I care"? The other day I returned to Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" to refresh my memory on the poet's rendering of the statue's genitalia. My recollection of vagueness proved correct: there is no description, only metaphor. The smile of loins curves toward "jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug."

Metaphors are a pain to translate. Robert Bly goes with "the place where the seeds are" while Stephen Mitchell opts for "that dark center where procreation flared." "That center" is "jener Mitte" rendered technically correct, but Bly may have settled for the nondescript "place" in homage to Rilke's own indirectness.

The lack of detail is significant for several reasons. 1) That long-ago Greek sculptor would have rendered explicit his youthful model's endowments. 2) Though much of his poetry is clothed in mourning, Rilke was not averse to robust prose. "The Panther" is a telling example; why, then, this vagueness, this evasion? 3) Astoundingly, the final stanza changes the sculpture-fragment's headless existence by rendering "Mitte" as the scrutinizing eye. We'll get to that reading in a moment.

In youth I took a dislike to Rilke; in mid-life, I was disabused of the pettiness by the poet Galway Kinnell. At a ritzy literary event in a Napa Valley vineyard he asked that I read a few lines in the original to acquaint his audience with Rilkean musicality. If as non-speaker you think of German as harsh and grating, Rilke performed with pertinent inflection will persuade you otherwise.

Not surprisingly, Kinnell chose a stanza from Sonnets to Orpheus that comes as close to song as spoken words can get. Nevertheless the lines, though elegiac, are off-putting, beginning with "Sei allem Abschied voran" — "Be ahead of all parting."

Unlike Shakespeare's Juliet, who willingly submits to the "sweet sorrow" of parting, Rilke contrives a preemptive strike. Parting is but the winter that's just now passing, he muses, why get worked up over it? Significantly, his many temporary winters mask "a more endless winter" — the desolation, presumably, of failed relationships.

Judging by his poetry, Rilke regularly fell in love. He married, produced a daughter, and later wrote long letters to the spouse he abandoned soon after the nuptials. Even so, he refused to attend his daughter's wedding, fearing that doing so would diminish his artistic sensibility.

That sunny California afternoon, Kinnell expressed his own Rilkean ambivalence. Sharing the spotlight with an attendee whose voice captured his imagination was his way of inviting intimate involvement; the material he selected implied his intention to "be ahead of" commitment.

To return to “Apollo” and its concluding stanza. The torso, Rilke’s first stanza revealed, glows like a candelabra; if it were otherwise, says the fourth and final stanza, the “stone” would be “defaced.” As it is, Mitte has become suffused with a light that shatters all boundaries; it “bursts forth like a star” and turns the spotlight on the observer, leaving him psychologically naked: “There is no place that does not see you.” The shock of self-scrutiny, felt and experienced as the other’s gaze, produces Rilke’s famous closing outcry: “You must change your life.”

Robert Hass, commenting on the Mitchell translation, observes that the poem, though seemingly a classic nineteenth-century sonnet on ideal perfection, is “an agonizingly personal one” for Rilke. The statue-fragment is more “real” than the living poet and is “as he (Rilke) sees it, sexually more alive than he is.” Standing transfixed in the light of the gaze, Rilke recognizes “the absence in himself” of what he perceives to be real in the other.

“I love this writer,” I recently said of the author of “Our Inner Ape.” I can’t say the same of Rilke, nor of “Your Inner Fish,” a (for me) strenuous stroll through “the 3.5-billion-year history of the human body.” Rilke might have been delighted, who rhapsodized on the human body—the male body, that is; he would have had no use for the “sweet swamp” of a Sandra Gilbert. Even his males, in typical gender-obfuscation, often appear as angels.

If this brings you to a close reading of the “Panther” and “Torso” poems, both of them brief yet intensely autobiographical, you’ll glean small insights into one poet’s conflicted duality and, by analogy, learn something about yourself. Close readings mitigate the ignorance that bedevils us, finally prompting us: “Have something to say.” We may even decide to say it with grace.