1964

Commencement address

Howard Nemerov

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

LAWRENCE COLLEGE

JUNE 14, 1964
PREFACE

It is customary for the address on so ceremonious an occasion to be itself somewhat ceremonious and conventional: the speaker is to mark one of the rites of passage of our society, one of its stages of initiation, and the convention in which he works at least suggests, if it does not prescribe, a style of address lofty, earnest, moralizing, and, in truth, a little dull.

There is some justice in that convention; certainly this is not an occasion for more specialized knowledge. If one of your teachers, for example, should come to the platform and urgently demand to be allowed to tell you something he had omitted from a lecture last February, you would not be wrong in feeling he was out of line.

But there is a particular danger for the speaker in this conventional approach. He is invited,
usually, because he is thought to know something, or do something, rather well; but he is not invited to talk about what he knows or does, he is invited to deal in what might be called wisdom, or general good, and to accept the invitation would be bad for his character. This has been said once and for all by the poet William Blake:

He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars:
General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite & flatterer,
For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars
And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power.

— Jerusalem, Plate 55

So I should like to make an exception to custom, and hope to do it by talking to you more or less in the terms of my trade, poetical and analogical terms, choosing for subject the idea itself of exceptions and the exceptional.

A simple-minded proverb, much heard of in my youth, said: The exception proves the rule. At least, it certainly looked simple-minded until I began to turn it over and around and take it apart, when I had to realize there were at least three ways of understanding it.

Some people read the word ‘proves’ as having the sense of ‘tests’ or ‘tries out,’ and if you read it that way (which I suspect was the original intention) the statement is plainly a scientific one. But I noticed in earlier days (back when there used to be proverbs) that people who used this statement in daily life commonly meant something quite different, even contrary; by a change in the meaning of ‘proves’ the proverb had come to mean to those people that an exception showed the rule to be right. In that sense the statement is non-scientific, or even anti-scientific, for to the scientist the exception would show either that the rule was not inclusive enough or that the rule was just wrong or wrongly applied.* In that sense, too, the statement is anti-poetic, because the poet has still a third meaning for ‘proves,’ and would say, as a fair statement of his belief, The exception turns out to be, or proves to be, the rule. I shall return to both the scientist’s and the poet’s reading of the proverb after a bit, but first I want to describe a little more carefully what I have taken to be the common acceptation of the proverb in

* Though in the world of microphysical phenomena, in transactions covered by the law of large numbers, ‘exceptions’ are assumed into rule, or cause, considered as statistical aggregate.
daily life, where the exception shows that the rule is right, and in that way is said to prove the rule.

Proverbs, which have a way of being anti-scientific and anti-poetic at the same time, nevertheless have a certain practical shrewdness to them, which we need not dignify with the name of wisdom, but which we ought to pay some attention to anyhow. My sense of this proverb is that it speaks with the voice of authority, as from elders to youngers, from a parent, say, who knows that life is not always explicable, to a child who still hopes it is always explicable. For instance, in autumn a father and son are standing under a tree. The son says, Daddy, what are all these leaves? Daddy says, correctly enough, that they are oak leaves. The son picks up a gingko leaf and says, Why is this oak leaf shaped so funny? At some nearby point in the ensuing discussion Daddy may say, rather heavily, that it is the exception that proves the rule. And indeed there is no disputing the rule that all those leaves came from the oak, except the one gingko leaf, which a passerby happened to have been looking at while out walking and carelessly dropped there when he tired of it, not knowing, or not caring, that he had deranged the order of the universe. You would not say, either scientifically or poetically, that the one gingko leaf proved the rest to be oak leaves; but as a way of getting around and through the complications of life in this vale of tears the proverb seems to have been a help.

As the proverb speaks with the voice of authority, so the sense of its somewhat complacent morality is that it is a ruling-class proverb, much concerned with keeping the status quo; no trifling discrepancy, it seems to say, is going to change my idea of the world. And the authority assumed is so well established that there is even a little humor to its assertion, as though to allow that you can't spend your life accounting for every last little item in the universe, you've got to stop somewhere, and so on. Its variously elaborated applications in politics and morality might concern us, though, in such forms as “the sinner testifies to the divine mercy,” “by his crime the criminal attests the majesty of the law,” or, drawing again on Blake, the magnificent assertion: “To be an Error & to be Cast out is a part of God’s design.”

An interlude. Just for the sake of the amusement of bewilderment it may be worth following to the end, which is not far away, the formal implications of the proverb.

The exception proves the rule.

But that statement is itself a rule, stating that the exception proves the rule; has that rule also an exception?

Let us assume that there exists a rule without exception. That rule without exception would be an exception to the rule that the exception proves the rule, and, as such, by being an exception, proves the rule that the exception proves the rule.

But, on the contrary, a rule without an exception cannot be proved, and if it cannot be proved it cannot be admitted to be an exception to the rule that the exception proves the rule, and if it is not an exception to that rule then it cannot be the exception that proves the rule that the exception proves the rule, and that rule in turn cannot be proved.

So much for that. The head, in testimony of its living in a round world, slowly begins to spin.
But I put in that piece of logical parody, or parodied logic, as a humbling reminder that all that we think we think depends upon language, language that already exists before we think, and in which we inherit, in the measure that we are capable, human wisdom and human folly at the same time.

You can see something of this, something of what language does for us and to us, from the circumstance that the one word 'proves,' in what looked to be a simple enough statement, turned out on inspection to have three different meanings making possible three quite different statements of the proposition that the exception proves the rule; but that through these transformations of meaning, which I have divided up as commonsensical, poetic, and scientific, the sentence itself remains formally coherent and grammatically the same.

The poetic form of the proverb asserts that the exception proves (to be) the rule. I found this out as a sort of inexpensive revelation that came to me when I was nearly run over by an ambulance; picking myself up out of the snow I said: Metaphor is an exception caught becoming a rule. For to be even nearly run over by an ambulance is a strikingly exceptional occurrence (though becoming less so), and yet it may be applied accurately enough to the dual nature of civilization, always ready with the instruments of compassion once the victim has been made helpless. Alternatively, the figure may be applied to the situation of the accused, who under our law has the right to be deemed innocent until he is proved guilty; but this right has no actual existence until someone has deemed him guilty by arresting him. Blake again sums it up:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;
And mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

To elaborate a little on this theme. I think many writers would agree with what I have experienced, that very often you are afraid or embarrassed to put down something because it comes directly from your own life, and hence appears to you as too intimate, too idiosyncratic, too aesthetically inert, ever to illustrate any general nature in things. But if you overcome your timidity or shame and put it down anyhow, you will very likely find that it puts out many filiations with the experience of others, the nature of life; it grows, in addition to its being, a meaning, or several meanings.
This is a mysterious business: how does the particular, in the course of being examined most particularly and for itself alone, as a unique fact existing in the world, become meaningful, become illustrative of general or even universal propositions? It is so mysterious, indeed, that nobody knows the answer, any more than anyone knows how it is that things become thoughts and thoughts things. But I may illustrate it as it happened by a curtal sonnet of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which illustrates the happening itself and at the same time asserts a theory about it.

PIED BEAUTY

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

The assertion of that poem is that only a religious guarantee is sufficient for the holding together of fact and meaning, unique and universal. But observe too that if you try to do it without the religious guarantee you don’t at all dispose of the problem; the relation itself doesn’t even become less mysterious: how can a finch’s wing convince you that there exists an All, an Everything, which is somehow the same (the ‘Nature’) in all things? A scientific guarantee, as for instance that number is the nature of all things, or that the elementary constituents of the universe perceived by the senses are invisible particles, is also not an overcoming of the same mystery, but a different way of asserting it.

For one more illustration, here are some lines in which my definition of metaphor is applied to some drawings by Saul Steinberg:

The enchanted line, defying gravity and death,
Brings into being and destroys its world
Of marvelous exceptions that prove rules,
Where a hand is taken drawing its own hand,
A man with a pen laboriously sketches
Himself into existence; world of the lost
Characters amazed in their own images:
The woman elided with her rocking-chair,
The person trapped behind his signature,
The man who has just crossed himself out.

All these instances, taken directly from the work of that marvelously ingenious artist, are exceptions, that is, strikingly unique phenomena—which yet express to us something of what we acknowledge to apply shrewdly to the conditions of our life in this world: with a man laboriously sketching himself into existence, for example, we might compare the saying of Ortega y Gasset: Man is the novelist of himself, where what Steinberg gives as a unique image is asserted as a general rule about the relation between imagination and reality.

So the poet would assert our proverb in the form: The exception turns out to be, or proves to be, the rule.
The third interpretation of the proverb is pre-eminently the scientist’s, and for him the word ‘proves’ means ‘tries out’ or ‘tests’; if the exception cannot be brought under the rule, so much the worse for the rule. And yet the scientist in formulating his hypothesis is not behaving so very differently from the poet in making his metaphor, though the rules and procedures for ‘proving’ are very different indeed. Here is a somewhat elaborated expression of our proverb, by Teilhard de Chardin, who says—

An irregularity in nature is only the sharp exacerbation, to the point of perceptible disclosure, of a property of things diffused throughout the universe, in a state which eludes our recognition of its presence.

That statement about exceptions and rules was made by a scientist who was also a priest. Hard to be certain whether he says this, in the course of his brilliant and speculative prophetic book about evolution, in his character as scientist or in his character as priest. If he said it as a priest, he might well have been defending the occurrence of miracle, which is defined in the great dictionary as follows: a miracle is “an event or effect in the physical world beyond or out of the original course of things, deviating from the known laws of nature, or transcending our knowledge of these laws. . . .”

But do notice that although the priest will indeed break with the scientist in any argument flowing from this statement, he has not broken yet, for the immensely rapid development of science has had a great deal to do with its concentration on ‘irregularities in nature,’ events ‘deviating from the known laws of nature, or transcending our knowl-
To sum up. Common sense tells you to neglect the exceptional and live within the known world. But art and science are for a moment one in the injunction, even the commandment, to look first, only, always, at the exception, at what doesn’t fit: because, one says, it will turn into the universal while you look; because, says the other, it will show you the way to a universal not yet known.

There is probably a moral in there somewhere, but I am in favor of leaving it in there where I found it. I never saw that people got better for being moralized at, especially by one of the wicked.