Criticism and the Artist: The Writings of Randall Jarrell

Elizabeth J. Browne
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1973 Elizabeth J. Browne
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

CRITICISM AND THE ARTIST:
THE WRITINGS OF
RANDALL JARRELL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
ELIZABETH J. BROWNE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS                      | iii |
| INTRODUCTION                         | 1  |
| PART I. THE CRITICISM OF RANDALL JARRELL | 4  |

Chapter

I. ON CRITICISM IN GENERAL ............... 9
   1. "The Obscurity of the Poet"
   2. "Poets, Critics, and Readers"
   3. "The Age of Criticism"
   4. Jarrell as Critic

II. ON FROST AND WHITMAN ................. 43
   1. "The Other Frost"
   2. "To the Laodiceans"
   3. "Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'"
   4. "Some Lines from Whitman"

III. ON THE MODERN AMERICAN POETS ........ 83
     "Fifty Years of American Poetry"

IV. ON THE AMERICAN SOCIETY .............. 109
    1. "The Intellectual in America"
    2. "The Taste of the Age"
    3. "The Schools of Yesteryear"
    4. "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket"

V. ON PROSE FICTION ..................... 129
   1. The Short Story
   2. Kipling
   3. The Novel
## PART II. THE PROSE FICTION OF RANDALL JARRELL

### Chapter

#### VI. ON PICTURES FROM AN INSTITUTION

1. "The President, Mrs., and Derek Robbins"
2. "The Whitakers and Gertrude"
3. "Miss Batterson and Benton"
4. "Constance and the Rosenbaums"
5. "Gertrude and Sidney"
6. "Art Night"
7. "They All Go"

#### VII. ONCE UPON A TIME

1. The Gingerbread Rabbit
2. The Bat-Poet
3. The Animal Family

### PART III. THE POETRY OF RANDALL JARRELL

#### VIII. ON THE MATURE POETRY

1. The Dimensions of Anxiety
2. The Lonely Warrior
3. A Tartarus of Maids
4. You Can't Go Home Again
5. The Orestes Myth
6. Recapitulations on a Theme

### APPENDIX I

- "A Conversation with the Devil"
- "Stalag Luft"
- "The End of the Rainbow"
- "The Woman at the Washington Zoo"
- "Cinderella"
- "Thinking of the Lost World"
- "The Player Piano"
- "Orestes"
- "Gleaning"

### APPENDIX II

Biographical Note—Randall Jarrell

### BIBLIOGRAPHY
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to express my sincere appreciation for the encouragement and interest of my dissertation committee—to Dr. James D. Barry for his concern and guidance in the initial research and preparation of the thesis topic; to Dr. Agnes McNeil Donohue for the inspiration which led to this critical study; and, most especially, to Dr. Martin J. Svaglic for his patient supervision of its final preparation. Above all, I should like to remember in my acknowledgments Father Carl J. Stratman, C.S.V., whose affection and dedication have sustained me unfailingly in my academic efforts. I would also like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the members of the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation for the generous scholarship which has enabled me to concentrate on research and writing over the past academic year.

I would also wish to express my gratitude to all of my friends and associates who have assisted me in this endeavor by their generosity and interest and by the many hours of meticulous review and proofreading they have contributed; and to my husband for his patient and expert care in preparing texts for my use, for his assistance in library research, and for the unwavering encouragement which has made this work possible.
INTRODUCTION

My purpose in preparing this study is to demonstrate that a sense of alienation uniquely appropriate to man's situation in the mid-century American experience is central to an understanding of Randall Jarrell's literary achievement. In thirty-three years of artistic endeavor Jarrell produced six collections of poetry, a formidable corpus of critical writings, an excellent novel, and four children's books, as well as translations of several poems of Rilke, Corbière and Mörike, of Chekhov's The Three Sisters, and of Goethe's Faust, Part I. He was widely known as a public speaker and teacher, and in later years prepared several anthologies of short fiction and one of poetry.

A poet-critic like Eliot, Jarrell played a major role in the shaping of contemporary poetic taste—significantly with regard to Whitman and Frost. It was, as I will show, his firm critical conviction, like Wordsworth's, that the poetry of our generation should reflect the reality underlying man's experience and should be cast in the idioms of common language. Jarrell had hoped that success in both these endeavors would enable the poet to re-establish his rightful position as the intermediary between the American everyman and the world in which he lives. However, it is in Jarrell's sensitive development of themes of the essential alienation of man and artist that he
shows himself preeminently a man of his age—bereft of faith, dismayed by the very success of science and technology, and discouraged by the burgeoning of that cultureless prosperity which has come to represent the American dream.

My study is arranged in three parts: Part I considers Jarrell's critical effort as set forth in the three volumes of his collected essays. After a general examination of the bases of his critical stance, I have undertaken a detailed examination of his critical evaluation of Frost and Whitman, of his overview of twentieth-century American poetry, of his ventures into social criticism, and of his criticism of prose fiction. In Part II I have developed the relationship between his critical theories and his artistic accomplishment in his single novel *Pictures from an Institution*, and in his three published children's stories. In Part III, devoted to Jarrell's mature poetry, I have chosen for extended analysis a significant poem from each of the two sections of *Selected Poems*, a long poem taken from *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*, the final poem of his last published collection, *The Lost World*, and one of the seven "New Poems." The study concludes with an analysis of Jarrell's unique recension of the Orestes myth, an early poem included here to demonstrate the consistency of Jarrell's artistic preoccupations throughout a long and very active career. I have included an appendix containing the full text of all poems discussed at length in the body of the study.
This thesis is intended, in brief, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the total achievement of Randall Jarrell. It is not intended to establish any relationships between the poet's literary effort and the biographical information that is available, but rather to explore the coherence of his thought and of his poetic insight in their several literary manifestations.
PART I

THE CRITICISM OF RANDALL JARRELL

There is something essentially ridiculous about critics, anyway: what is good is good without our saying so, and beneath all our majesty we know this. 1

Randall Jarrell's three volumes of collected prose, Poetry and the Age (1953), A Sad Heart at the Supermarket (1962), and The Third Book of Criticism (1969), contain approximately thirty-five of the most significant of the many critical essays which he prepared as articles or book reviews, delivered as lectures, or presented as prefaces. They originally appeared in publications as varied as The Nation, of which he was literary editor in 1946-47, The Partisan Review, The Kenyon Review, Prairie Schooner, The Saturday Evening Post, and Madamoiselle, over a period extending from 1941 until shortly before his untimely death in 1965.

Jarrell had been writing and lecturing for over ten years and had gained considerable reputation as a critic of originality, broad knowledge, and a refreshingly witty style when the first of these volumes was published. Poetry and the Age contains fourteen articles written for the most part between 1946

and 1952. It was warmly received and recognized for its brilliant analyses of working poets, including two seminal essays on the tragic aspects of Robert Frost's poetry, which had been almost completely unrecognized until that time. It also includes a brief article on Whitman, presaging a resurgence of serious interest in that poet, and the first of several articles on Wallace Stevens. Although Jarrell also included two mordant attacks on the entire literary and critical establishment, the collection is positive in tone and has an exciting freshness of insight.

The second volume of his collected essays, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*, published nearly nine years later, had a far less favorable reception. The tone of the essays, written between 1953 and 1962, seems to indicate some yielding to the pressures of his sensitive nature. A bitter, almost strident note recurs throughout the volume. The same attitudes that are expressed poetically in "A Conversation with the Devil" (1951)² have come to dominate Jarrell's thinking, and he abandons himself to scathing but somewhat ineffectual attacks on society as a whole, on education, and on other areas of life upon which he was clearly less qualified to speak than on poetry or criticism. Four of the ten essays in *A Sad Heart* are concerned with differ-

---

As poet or critic, as teacher, and as a human being, he has come to feel more and more alienated. He is perhaps seeking by this denunciation of the literary community, and of the broader society it serves, to somehow convert it once again to the service of the "readers," who may be forever lost. Alfred Kazin calls them "brilliant but simpliste essays in the poet's pathos," and can understand the "philistine derision" they provoked. Kazin regrets that

by taking on so many large social issues in explanation, [Jarrell] assumed a responsibility for their 'minute particulars' which he did not fulfill.\(^3\)

The balance of the volume contains general essays, criticism of prose fiction, and one critical article on poetry—an introduction to a selection of poems by Eleanor Taylor, a minor poet and close friend.

The Third Book of Criticism, published posthumously in 1969, was based on a list of essays Jarrell prepared not long before his death. It includes four articles on prose fiction written after 1962, two very early (1942 and 1945) articles on Auden, articles on Graves and Stevens from 1955, and one article on Frost, written in 1962. Thus, while The Third Book does not represent any single phase of Jarrell's career, we note that he

has included no social criticism at all, and that the trend
toward an emphasis on prose fiction continues. It is as though
Jarrell, who had earlier remarked our generation's preference
for prose, had decided to follow his public, at least in his
critical work.

Jarrell never attempted to reduce his critical thought
to a system of theories or principles; to do so would in fact
have violated his principles. However, these essays contain, in
the random fashion inevitable in an author whose critical publi­
cations were more journalistic and polemic than scholarly and
discursive, Jarrell's basic convictions as to the nature of
poetry and how it ought to be judged. I have therefore chosen
to approach the essays under four broad headings that will serve
to demonstrate that Jarrell practiced the art of criticism,
whether of poetry, of fiction, or of society, with a very clear­ly defined, unique, and relatively unchanging set of values, and
that a growing sense of the failure of these values led to his
gradual alienation from our society. In our first chapter, we
will consider those essays in which he adopts a general view­point, examining the nature of poetry, the role of the poet in
our modern society, the relationship of the critic to poetry and
to the poet, and the nature of the audience to whom the poet
directs his effort. In the second chapter, we shall consider
his criticism of the work of Frost and Whitman, in the third
his treatment of the development of modern American poetry.
Since Jarrell was, by temperament and by conscious decision, a practical rather than a theoretical critic, his genius is most clearly revealed when he is actively engaged with the poem and with the poet. It is in these essays that he most clearly defines himself as a qualitative critic, in the tradition of Longinus and T. S. Eliot, with moral overtones as pronounced as those of Johnson and Arnold. I have, therefore, devoted two full chapters to these specific criticisms.

In Chapter Four we shall examine Jarrell's forays into the area of social criticism, and in Chapter Five his later work in the criticism of prose fiction.
CHAPTER I
ON CRITICISM IN GENERAL

When I was asked to talk about the Obscurity of the Modern Poet I was delighted, for I have suffered from this obscurity all my life.4

1. "The Obscurity of the Poet"

The essay "The Obscurity of the Poet," published in 1951, presents Randall Jarrell at his delightful and sardonic best.5 The ease with which he allows the meanings of words to turn upon themselves characterizes his prose as well as his poetry. Poets and artists, he says, are certainly not among the most highly esteemed citizens in the American society. A convocation in "defense" of poetry is perhaps more aptly assembled in our generation than ever before, Jarrell says, for the members of the poetry establishment itself have called upon him to speak to them, not of the exclusion of the poet from the public consciousness, a true obscurity, but about the difficulty of modern poetic language, a false obscurity. They concern themselves with words, he feels, and ignore the neglect of contemporary poetry. The poets have accepted the fallacious arguments of

4Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," Poetry and the Age, p. 3.

men who hate poetry—that they are neglected because they are difficult—whereas Jarrell will insist that they have become difficult because no public exists which is willing and prepared to read them. Jarrell, the accomplished lecturer, jestingly projects such a reader weighing Paradise Lost in his hand, pondering it, and finally adding it to his list of "the ten dullest books he has read." He caustically remarks that just such a list had recently been prepared, not by "the Public," but by "the educated reader."

Most people do find the modern poet difficult to understand, see that he is neglected, and assume a causal relationship between the two phenomena, concluding "that he is unread because he is difficult." But is there no alternative argument? The poet is not read and has therefore become difficult. No one is able to read him simply because no one is able to read poetry at all. We must accept this as part of "that long-continued world-overturning cultural and social revolution" which has reached its most advanced stage in our own American society. We have grown out of the poetic tradition; our poetic muscle has atrophied.

If we were in the habit of reading poets, their obscurity would not matter; and once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help.6

Indeed, Jarrell does not hesitate to insist that obscurity, even difficulty in poetic language and allusion, is

6Ibid., p. 4.
part of the poetic tradition, citing the "elaborate descriptive epithets—periphrases, kennings" which characterize the poetry of primitive peoples. This is as it should be, is of the nature of things, and is unchanging. That the reader no longer sees poetry as a challenge to his imagination, to his wit, to his very humanity, is a tragedy. When he will no longer submit his mind to be stretched to accommodate the rich difficulties of Shakespeare or Milton, he denies his humanity.

"The Obscurity of the Poet" does not present us with anything that could be called a logical argument, unless we are willing to allow that term to cover an appeal to common judgment, a plea addressed to someone who may yet prove to be rational, who may even hear what one is saying. Jarrell says things which are intended to startle. He fashions parables intended to bring reality into focus without depending on rational procedures. In other words, he writes a lecture or an article as if it were a poem. His approach is not discursive, leading his reader carefully down the paths of reason to an unavoidable conclusion he is forced to accept. It is, rather, imaginative and startling, depending a great deal on verbal felicity, on turns of phrase, which occasionally degenerate into mere cleverness. "If I can only get you to look at it," he says, "you will see it too!"

Jarrell could scarcely maintain that a proper estimation of poetry is the answer to all man's hideous problems. But he will say, here and elsewhere, that men in the past did have a
far greater regard for the poet and for poetry, and were, therefore, more fully human. Social conditions were deplorable, even by our standards. The men who lived in those distant days were clearly barbarians. Yet, they understood poetry; they appreciated poetry; they did not patronizingly condescend to its obscurity. Their imaginations were alive to the allusion, to the paraphrase, to the epithet. Thus, the obscurity of the poet is not a modern phenomenon; only our reaction to it is modern. A few phrases from Marvell or Shakespeare will demonstrate the complexity and difficulty of their work. Poetry is and should be more "difficult" than prose, and should have many levels of meaning—as many as the reader can find in it. But only an audience driven by a desire to read poetry, to be taught by poetry, can give poetry its true role. The modern poet is not the first to consciously obscure his significance so that it has virtually to be decoded, but he has perhaps the best excuse. He is retaliating for the obscurity that has been visited upon him, taking a fitting revenge on those that prefer the pre-digested pap of the digests. The poet says to us, with righteous indignation, "Since you won't read me, I'll make sure you can't."7

Jarrell does not himself, as poet or critic, favor this sort of obscurity in poetry of and for our times. Indeed, in this very essay he remarks with some gratification that most

7Ibid., p. 12.
modern poets have escaped the "canvas whale" of modernism and "made a penitent return, back to rhyme and metre and plain broad statement." But he can plainly understand the urge to be obscure.

There are, however, anomalies in our estimate of poets. We say we do not like modern poetry because it is difficult—that the poetry of an earlier age is clearer and easier to understand—but we lionize Dylan Thomas, a singularly obscure poet, whose "magical poems have corrupted a whole generation of English poets." Again, we tend to be more entranced with those wonderful things, "poets," than with those other wonderful things, "poems." But a poet is only a man, of the race of Adam and Eve, a human being through whom there come to us the poems that are what really matter. Goethe answered critics who questioned the authorship of poems to which he and Schiller had both contributed that these questions were irrelevant—that it was only the existence of the poem that mattered. 8 Time was when a person, upon achieving wealth and fortune, was expected to turn to culture, which Jarrell sees, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, as "a study of perfection" born "of the moral and social passion for doing good." Now such a person turns to tennis, perhaps, or the newest dance step, for he knows that a knowledge of those other things is not an essential requirement of the society of which he is a part. We live in

an age where men hold that "it is reaction or snobbishness or Fascism" to consider that one man may have something to teach another, with the result that one American in two has read, during the year, no book at all. Jarrell, accepting this perhaps optimistic observation, recounts that

a sort of dream-situation often occurs to me in which I call to this imaginary figure, 'Why don't you read books?' -- and he always answers, after looking at me steadily for a long time: 'Huh?'

Jarrell sees other art forms, in all save their most banal manifestations, adopting obscurity of expression in retaliation for the apathy of the public. Music without melody, like Schönberg, and painting without representation, like Pollock, are accorded about the same reception as a poem lacking the superb clarity of the rhyme on a greeting card. But these questions of form are transient, for the poetry and the art by which an age will be known will be its best poetry and art. What survives will survive because it is good, and not because it is obscure. Indeed, it will not be obscure to the future. At this time Jarrell was certain that art would yet prevail:

Art matters not merely because it is the most magnificent ornament and the most nearly unfail- ing occupation of our lives, but because it is life itself.

To further illustrate the horror of the situation,

9Jarrell, Poetry and the Age, p. 17.
10Ibid., p. 21.
Jarrell adds a fable from E. M. Forster in which a degenerate inhabitant of a future, totally without tradition, and even without contact with nature as we know it, is drawn to superimpose upon a random cluster of fixed stars the classic figure of Orion, the Hunter. As long as man possesses even this much imagination, "the poet will have his public."

Jarrell sees poetry as a means to a better life for man. For him, to live devoid of literature, of poetry, is as unnatural, as inhuman, as to live confined to habitats under the prison of earth. Man was meant to behold the stars, to penetrate the depths of heaven through the art of poetry. If the world should ever come to be totally without this vision, human existence would be hideously abnormal. Jarrell is, then, a moral as well as qualitative critic. He also sees a Platonic order which lies beyond the world known to us through our senses. But, unlike Plato, he feels that poetry corresponds to this order as does no other human activity. A poet writes a poem "for its own sake, for the sake of that order of things in which the poem takes the place that has awaited it." The poet sees, as Marcel Proust observed, that the life we know is so arranged that it is "as though we entered it carrying the burden of obligations contracted in a former life." This is his burden and his glory to speak to us of these obligations, and of that life.

11 Ibid., p. 24.
2. "Poets, Critics, and Readers"

The article "Poets, Critics, and Readers," first published in 1960, eight years after "The Obscurity of the Poet," takes up what must be seen as an ongoing discussion. Jarrell opens abruptly, for his spirit has worn thin over the years. The poet cannot earn his keep, he complains, because the public which is both "rich and generous," is also oblivious to his existence. If it knew about him, "it would pay him for being there," but with as little true understanding as it presently accords him. Jarrell's concept of the trinity formed by poet, critic, and reader, subsumed under that title here, forms a sort of substratum to all his criticism and to much of his poetry and prose fiction. Generalizing very loosely on this situation, Jarrell maintains that poets have, since ancient times, been amply supported (a contention not borne out by history!), and that ours is the first generation to find them employed as obstetricians, as insurance executives, or as publishers. God, he says, has in His kindness made most poets teachers. He has

given us poets students. But what He gives with one hand He takes away with the other: He has taken away our readers.13

13 Ibid., p. 90.
Jarrell, with a deepening sense of alienation, warns us that in this essay he will continue to lament the fate of the poet in the modern age. But the optimistic note upon which "The Obscurity of the Poet" ended has gone. In spite of the harshness of his opening remarks, he finds that he cannot be comforted by the friends that gather about him. It is not just a question of a livelihood—the poet needs readers—but of life itself for the poet. He is grateful for his students, but they are not enough. Jarrell is longing for that earlier time when poets were widely read—when kings bestowed golden rings upon them. He reflects, "with a rueful smile," Wordsworth's observation:

Few persons will deny, that of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once.14

Similarly, Pope used verse in philosophical works such as An Essay on Man, so that the reader could better understand and remember his teaching. Thus, an incontrovertible fact of human experience, attested by literate witnesses throughout recorded history, from Aristotle through Sidney and Pope to Wordsworth—that verse was the medium of choice among literate men—is simply no longer true. Verse has become so uncongenial, "so exhaustively artificial," that Jarrell sees a monumental profit in reducing all literature to the most unexciting sort of prose.

14Ibid., p. 91.
Here, as so frequently, Jarrell enforces his key points with anecdote and with irony. He suggests a version of Mother Goose which would modernize the sentiment and content even as it eliminates the rhyme and rhythm. (Whether it would appeal to children is another matter!) He speculates that versifying, as an art, is disappearing more rapidly than buggy-making, and advances as proof that he has read somewhere that there are at present "twice as many blacksmith shops in the United States as there are bookstores." This preposterous overstatement is the poet's only response to the misery we have caused "because we have made him feel that he no longer has the right to make a demand on us."\(^{15}\) The "we" here refers to readers and lovers of poetry, among whom Jarrell will always insist that he belongs, rather than among the critics.

Poets do not yearn to be read by critics with pencil in hand, but by readers. The critic labors; the reader loves. The critic regards the poem as "a means to an end," usually his own, while the true reader "listens like a three years' child." The reader must, in the beginning, be converted and become as a little child so that he may enter into the kingdom of art, of poetry in its broadest sense. Jarrell believes that each of us possesses an innocence which he never entirely loses, and that poetry alone will enable us to retain or to recapture it.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 93.
Poetry has an effect that is more than moral—that is, in fact, salvific. Jarrell rejects the notion of an esoteric, "eccentric public," such as Yeats cultivated, in favor of a public that is, quite simply, the reading public. He is not an elitist—he wants to regain for poetry that ordinary reading public which once made Tennyson and Longfellow and Byron its heroes, and their poems its standard fare. Richard the Lion Hearted, Henry the Eighth, and Elizabeth I wrote good poetry and read better. If these lofty personages did not actually possess the ability to think sublimely, they at least recognized the existence and the desirability of such imaginative power. Our age is absolutely deluded in that it lacks even the desire for sublimity. Jarrell recalls a scene from a novel describing the honors bestowed upon a poet in a Viking court. He was rewarded and praised and given a gold ring, not primarily for his rather obscure effort in the most stylish medium of the day, but because "any man who could not understand poetry would be regarded as a poor specimen of a warrior."

Such, alas, is not the case today. Jarrell imagines a brilliantly ironic modern parallel:

If Auden, when he next visits the University of your state, makes up an incomprehensible poem, in a difficult new meter, in honor of the President of the University, will all its football players pretend they understand the poem, so as not to be thought poor specimens of football players? and will the President give Auden a gold ring?\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{16}\)ibid., p. 96.
The fundamental changes in our times in public attitudes toward poetry and toward the poet are only intensified and compounded by our distance from him. We no longer meet him face to face in the meadhall and give him a gold ring. This is the age of criticism, not of poetry. In fact, we don't read him at all—we read about him in the New York Times a year later, or nine years later in the Sewanee Review. This is not an encounter with the poet, but with the critics' reaction to the poet's effort. Jarrell complains that we spend all our time talking about the critics instead of about the poets.

The artist wants praise, even blame, but he does not need the niggling analyses of the critics. Jarrell's scathing attack on criticism as it exists today seems to place much of the responsibility for the poet's alienation on the critic, and on the role that the poet and the reader have allowed the critic to usurp. (In other contexts, Jarrell tends to place responsibility for the poet's alienation on broader social patterns. See Chapter Four below.) No one, he says, ever thought to demand of the critic the "negative capability" which we expect of the poet. Yet the critic has become the poet's competitor, and flourishes by showing his own deeper understanding of what it is that the artist is about. There is no quality of the artist's work about which critics will not disagree, or about which one or the other will not speak unpleasantly. "Critics are like bees: one sting lasts longer than a dozen jars of
honey." Critics are victims of the syndrome Goethe speaks of when he observes that "great excellence" will most often be re-presented because of a "strongly felt inferiority" revealed in the spectator. Mediocrity is usually acceptable, and frequently gives "unqualified pleasure" because it "rather encourages us with the thought that we are as good as another." Goethe's conclusion, that critics aren't of much use, meets Jarrell's total approbation.

Finally, as Jarrell begins to develop his conclusions, he reflects on his own role as critic and as poet:

Have critics hurt me so that I want to pull down the temple upon their heads, even if I too perish in the ruins?—for I too am a critic.17

On the contrary, he feels that the critics have been good to him. His continuing attack on them is not personally motivated, nor are all critics unworthy. There are very estimable critics, who joyfully serve in their ancillary role as guides to the splendors of art. Jarrell salutes these noble critics and offers a sort of readers' guide to, if not a definition of the good critic, who does not "set up rigid standards to which a true work of art must conform," but lets "the many true works of art . . . set up the general expectations to which his criticism of art conforms."18

Critics can only validly criticize those works of art into which they have themselves entered, and so are as much the

17Bid., p. 101. 18Bid., p. 102.
creatures of their inspiration as is the artist. For the critic who is not a poet, the role is uniquely hazardous:

We all realize that writers are inspired, but helpless and fallible beings, who know not what they write; readers, we know from personal experience, are less inspired but no less helpless and fallible beings, who half the time don't know what they're reading. Now, a critic is half writer, half reader: just as the vices of men and horses met in centaurs, the weaknesses of readers and writers meet in critics. 19

History shows us that critics and their opinions are normally discarded with last year's calendar. We see that they have been more often wrong than right in their estimates of their contemporaries; that there is a clearly defined inclination on the part of critics to reject originality; and that when criticism does survive, it is usually because the work criticized has served as the critic's muse, and carried him out of himself.

Jarrell would therefore maintain with Proust and with Wordsworth, that it is the task of the truly original artist to create the "taste" by which he is to be enjoyed. Thus Eliot, in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," written as an introduction to Grierson's collection of metaphysical poetry, prepared the taste of our age for what he and his contemporaries were to write. The critic can only follow. Jarrell suggests that the term "imaginative judgment," instead of the term "taste," would give us a clear notion of the difficulty and the challenge

19 Ibid., p. 103.
that falls to us as readers, and as critics. Neither the reader nor the poet can afford to be governed by the critic when he is wrong, nor even when he is right. Critics are not less deeply neurotic than poets, simply less imaginative. It is easy to distrust Eliot, who because he is a poet is quite possibly erratic, but we instinctively trust someone as dull as Babbitt. "Surely," we feel, "a man with so little imagination wouldn't be making up something--couldn't be inspired." But it is in this, says Jarrell, that we underestimate the peril of criticism.

Criticism is the poetry of prosaic natures (and even, in our time, of some poetic ones): there is a divinity that inspires the most sheeplike of scholars, the most tabular of critics. In fact, the very notion of criticism exposes us to a malevolence so insidious that Jarrell devoutly prays that the critic will "secede from Literature, and set up some metaliterary kingdom of his own!"

The poet does what he has to. He would write poetry even if there were no one to read it. But he is also driven to seek a public to read him, and to praise or blame him. The poem itself, whatever the poet's other needs may be, is essentially "a love affair between the poet and his subject, and readers come in only a long time later, as witnesses at the wedding . . ." But the act of witnessing is very important.

20 Ibid., pp. 108-09.
and an ideal public will

just read the poet; read him with a certain willingness and interest; read him imaginatively and perceptively. It needs him, even if it doesn't know that. It and he are like people in one army, one prison, one world: their interests are great and common, and deserve a kind of declaration of dependence.21

Thus, if the poet needs to be a member of a community, the community in its turn needs the poet. The reader, for the preservation of his own dignity, should be familiar with the literature of the ages, should read poetry "easily and naturally and joyfully," lest he be "cut off from much of the great literature of the past, some of the good literature of the present."

There is, Jarrell says, "an unusually humane and intelligent critic," whose life is totally "busy" and "artless" save for what reading he is constrained to do as a part of his writing or teaching. This man has, in Jarrell's eyes, sold his birthright as a reader, as a human being, to become a critic. Once a year, however, he reads Kim, not to teach, not to criticize, just for love, and in this alone lies his hope of redemption. Jarrell is quite serious when he speaks of art and of poetry in terms of love and redemption. He is an aesthetic evangelist, pleading with us to open ourselves to art as to grace. He says with Rilke, "You must change your life," and this notion of "change," of metamorphosis, of the striving to

21 Ibid., p. 110.
become other and nobler than we are, is recurrent in Jarrell's thought. Poetry, art in all its forms, is the catalyst, so that his final words are, as it were, a pastoral exhortation: "Read at whim! read at whim!"

The poet, then, is not a member of some race set apart, but a unique member of the human race, to whom it is given to see and feel the world around him more truly and more deeply than most men. It is his duty and his gift to mirror this world to his fellows, as he sees it. The reader is that other member of the human community, not himself a poet, who seeks understanding of his world through the words and the insights of the poet. There is, however, a baleful influence in our fallen nature that transforms persons who are not poets, though they might have been excellent readers, into a generally destructive mutant known as critics. We shall spend the next two chapters exploring Jarrell's notions on the poet, and by implication, the reader. The remainder of this first chapter will complete our survey of his critical demonology.

3. "The Age of Criticism"

"The Age of Criticism," an earlier article first published in 1952, attempts to relate Jarrell's unrelenting analysis of our society-as-literate to the role that the critic

has established for himself in it. It is a subject to which he admits he cannot do justice. All that he can do is make his "complaint," in the classic sense. If it is "more false than true--partial and full of exaggerations," he still feels that it must be made. Jarrell questions the need for and the validity of the mass of critical publications that has drawn him to label this "the age of criticism." The audience to whom the essay is directed is, of necessity, composed primarily of those who read the literary quarterlies, and who contribute most of the erudite content, the existence of which Jarrell laments. He limns his own version of Dante's Purgatorio, in which he sees the world as a peak rising out of the "warm, dark depths" of semi-literacy, into the world of the "common" reader, who allows himself to be governed by the best-seller lists and the dictates of the book clubs to which he belongs. But the tragedy is that as one ascends the mount of literacy in what Jarrell the fabulist has called, in a tangle of ambiguous metaphor, the country of King Log, he finds an increasing preoccupation, not with literature, but with criticism for its own sake.

Highest of all, in crevices of the naked rock, cowering beneath the keen bills of the industrious storks, dwell our most conscious and, perhaps, most troubled readers; and for these--cultivated or academic folk, intellectuals, 'serious readers,' the leaven of our queer half-risen loaf--this is truly an age of criticism.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 64.
Jarrell speaks "as a reader of the criticism of the last few years to other readers of it." The critical journals are excellent in their kind, and much of the criticism they provide is adequate. But there is too much, and too much of what there is is turned in upon itself so that it serves the ends of criticism and ignores the primary function of the critic, which is to serve as intermediary between the work of art and the reader. But if there is too much good criticism, there is even more that is not good,

more that 'might just as well have been written by a syndicate of encyclopedias for an audience of International Business Machines.'

Indeed, it is the sheer dullness rather than the queer, ingrown quality of the criticism that drives Jarrell to Rabelaisian excess:

It is, often, an astonishingly graceless, joyless, humorless, long-winded, niggling, blinkered, methodical, self-important, cliché-ridden, prestige-obsessed, almost-autonomous criticism.

Each adjective, as it falls into place, hammers into our minds the full horror of the situation Jarrell deplores.

In our time, "the act of criticism . . . has become the representative or Archetypal act of the intellectual"—neither the creation of the sublime, nor the contemplation of it, only an endless quibble. "Brothers," he says to his fellow

\[24\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 65.}\]  
\[25\text{Ibid.}\]
critics, "do we want to sound like the Publications of the Modern Language Association, only worse?" Literary critics have come to treat the artist as an idiot savant. He speaks of a writer friend who went to a writers' convention, and was ignored by all the critics there, and of the critics who patronize "poor Wordsworth," whose critical positions are remembered, when they are remembered at all, only because he was a successful poet. It is as if, he says, we were to expel a pig from a bacon judging contest with, "Go away, pig! What do you know about bacon?"

However, since the typical literary journal has about thirteen pages of original prose or poetry to approximately one hundred and thirty-four pages of criticism, the ambitious young intellectual, rather than risk all to gain modest fame as a minor artist, becomes a critic. "Me for the 134!" Without ever putting his own talent to the test, he can live familiarly among the greats, the Shakespeares and the Tolstoys, and "some of the greatness comes off on him." They become critics without ever having failed as artists, without ever realizing that "to have failed as an artist may be a respectable and valuable thing." 26

It is not surprising, though, that we have become used to reading criticism for its own sake. Its influence is

26 Ibid., p. 69.
strangely insidious. Long after we can only vaguely recall our own reading of *Moby Dick*, we still find ourselves reading articles about it. Our own reaction to the work of art is progressively replaced by the reactions of the critics we have read. Even the critic's legitimate function of protecting us from "bad and unimportant" work becomes skewed. Jarrell foresees, "in grey hours," a generation in which the critic will have succeeded so well that only those works legitimately called masterpieces will be allowed to exist—a few masterpieces and an endless line of criticisms, "readings," and guides. The critic no longer sees himself as the Baptist but as Christ Himself, and the syndrome is already in effect in the intellectual community. One need only mention an artist or a book not "immediately fashionable," or "important," and he will very probably be politely ignored. "Your hearer's eyes," Jarrell says, in unforgettable metaphor, "begin to tap their feet almost before you had finished a sentence." But if one mentions a critic, any critic, he will be heard with respect. There is, perhaps, some relationship between this pattern and the fact that in our age almost all of the important literature is prose, not poetry.

The American critic and the American reader of our time both tend to treat poetry almost as an aberration, and precisely because of this attitude we have lost touch with the great and lasting human themes that have been celebrated
and preserved for us only in poetry. Jarrell recalls a highly specialized Ph.D. candidate, familiar with the story of Ulysses in Tennyson (because he had taken a course in Tennyson), but not with the Ulysses of Homer, nor of Dante. He is the younger version of the seasoned scholar-critic to whom reading is a chore, to be performed pencil-in-hand, not for pleasure but for the sake of the article, the lecture, or the conversational ploy. In such a context, Jarrell, a modern renaissance man, can but feel out of place, alienated, alone.

This abuse of criticism has actually led to a decline in the number of "real" readers, who are "almost as wild a species as writers." Real readers of lesser courage have become unsure of themselves, and hesitate to approach a work of art without the crutch provided by the critic—without the ubiquitous "reader's guide."

Jarrell sees criticism growing into an institution unto itself, sustaining its own vast and complex biosphere with a minimum input of imaginative literature. He marvels that this pretension can survive the sad lessons of literary history. Our own critics must know that they, like the greatest of their predecessors, will inevitably be shown to have been foolish. As the fin de siècle poet delegated the mere living to his servants, so the fin de siècle critic may exclaim, "As for poetry, our servants will write that for us." We have already come to the point where much of our criticism is about
criticism—"talk about talk about books!"

Again, although Jarrell does not feel that a person can adequately judge the quality of the work he is criticizing if he cannot himself write well, he regrets that some critics have become influential, chiefly because of their own skills as writers. He would have critics known more for their reading than for their style, though even this creates its own dilemma.

To be able to tell which critics are reliable guides to literature, you must know enough about literature not to need guides. . . . It is easier for the ordinary reader to judge among poems or stories or plays than it is for him to judge among pieces of criticism.27

We seem to have been overwhelmed by the self-importance of the critic. But we can strip off the "institutional magnificence" and reveal the "naked human beings who do the judging." Jarrell asks us to remember that in the last analysis the critic, like the artist, is "a man sitting alone in a room before a sheet of paper." Despite the elaboration of critical theories and systems, and the application of statistical methods, no critic can ever prove that the Iliad is better than Trees; the critic can only state his belief persuasively, and hope that the reader of the poem will agree—but persuasively covers everything from a sneer to statistics.28

Acceptance of the critic's viewpoint depends, in the last

27Ibid., p. 78.  
28Ibid., p. 80.
analysis, on the esteem in which he is held, perhaps even on his own self-confidence. Thus, Jarrell remarks Malraux's use of the phrases, "Who can fail to see that," or "Regardless of what everyone says," when he wants to convince his reader of "a proposition about which he, alone among mortals, feels no doubts."

Again, one becomes a critic by reading poems and stories not by reading criticism, and most emphatically not by setting up or adopting any sort of critical method. This total openness to the poetic experience, which is in reality a critical method, is a central principle of Jarrell's procedure:

Everybody understands that poems and stories are written by memory and desire, love and hatred, daydreams and nightmares—by a being, not a brain. But they are read just so, judged just so; and some great lack in human qualities is as fatal to the critic as it is to the novelist.²⁹

Eliot has said that the critic must be "very intelligent," but Jarrell sees intelligence only as a necessary accident. There are many intelligent persons, many good artists, but "few good critics . . . as any history of the arts will tell you."

Principles and standards are at best useless, at worst harmful. The critic has, in the end, only "his experience as a human being and a reader," and must never wander far from his empirical roots. He must be possessed of the humility to understand

²⁹Ibid., p. 81.
that he, like the artist, may do well, but only some of the time. It is only by casting aside the critic's affectation of infallibility that he will come to possess the almost "inhuman disinterestedness" that his vocation requires.

He can never forget that all he has to go by, finally, is his own response, the self that makes and is made up of such responses—and yet he must regard that self as no more than the instrument through which the work of art is seen, so that the work of art will seem everything to him and his own self nothing.30

A critic, such as he describes here is, as Jarrell recognizes, an ideal. He will willingly concede that the unusual human qualities he demands, and the even more unusual combination and application of them, may never have been seen "on land or sea." It therefore remains to us to choose our critics among the many "good ordinary ones—viable ones" that we do have. But we must insist that the critic in whom we place our trust be "an extremely good reader—one who has learned to show to others what he saw in what he read." This criterion satisfied, Jarrell would allow us to indulge our whim for the accidental—the critic's style, or wit. There is also, he notes, a curious emotional attachment that literate people form for a critic—such as his own for William Empson—even when they know he is mistaken.

But these reflections on the "good" critic do not miti—

30Ibid., p. 82.
gate Jarrell's basic attack on this age of criticism. Critics are, on balance, the bane of the age, because they have made us a generation of specialists—have convinced us that the work of art is unattainable save through them. They have assumed roles that only "religion, love, and great works of art" can legitimately fulfill. He would have us reflect that "around the throne of God, where all the angels read perfectly, there are no critics." Thus, if we are to avoid "their 'Lear,' their 'Confidence Man,' their 'Turn of the Screw,'" it behooves us to learn to read ourselves, "to read more widely, more independently, and more joyfully." We must say to our critics, "Write so as to be of some use to a reader—a reader, that is, of poems and stories, not of criticism."31

4. Jarrell as Critic

So we must ask ourselves how Jarrell could so roundly denounce our "age of criticism," yet write criticism himself of such impact that he is held by many to have been the most influential critic of his period. What sort of critic do we find reflected in our observations above, and reflected in the eyes of his contemporaries? We realize that he achieved his intellectual maturity during the dominance of the "New Criticism," and we must suppose that his mind was to some extent influenced

31 Ibid., pp. 85-86.
by its orientations, despite his strong repudiation of many of its fundamental precepts. He felt, for example, that the New Critics were clearly guilty of setting up criteria to which they demanded that the work of art conform, and that they tended to interpose the critic between the artist and his audience.

Nowhere do we find Jarrell accused of either of these critical offenses. Among his contemporaries and competitors, it is his "taste" and his integrity that are most often singled out for comment. Alfred Kazin, who identifies himself as a "professional" critic, attributes Jarrell's unique successes to his dual role as poet and critic. He says that he was at first provoked at and even envious of the "overwhelming, inexpressible importance that Randall attached to taste, to his own taste, to right reading and to right thinking about what one has read."

He later came to realize that it is precisely this extra dimension that will make the poet-critic, if he is successful, not necessarily a superior critic but very possibly a prophetic one. It allows the poet-critic to adopt positions of advocacy based purely on his own poetic sense of what is right and true;

that is, he has to make the vital choices, in advance of everybody else, that get people to see differently, to hear differently, to read the new people and in a sense to be new people themselves.\(^{32}\)

Eliot played this role in his generation; Jarrell, in ours. The poet-critic's own work as a poet is dependent upon the

\(^{32}\)Kazin, "Randall: His Kingdom," p. 88.
soundness of his understanding of poetry and of the other poet's work. The professional critic does not, indeed cannot identify with the poet in this manner, nor does his success in his own profession depend on his so doing.

Leslie A. Fiedler, critic and novelist, agrees that Jarrell's approach is "resolutely unsystematic," and notes his total dependence on his own "unfailing taste." He sees Jarrell's stance as revolutionary, calling him a critic, a reader bent on freeing himself and his readers from the literary canons of his own time, the rigid set of all-right books compiled and certified by his mentors, those New Critics, whom he loved (especially John Crowe Ransom) short of idolatry.33

The term "taste" is, of course, elusive of definition. Jarrell himself preferred the term "imaginative judgment." John Berryman, while he does not attempt to define "taste," does provide some ground rules toward its proper use:

What really matters in Jarrell are a rare attention, devotion to and respect for poetry. These, with a natural taste in poetry hardly inferior to Tate's, restless incessant self-training, strong general intelligence, make up an equipment that would seem to be minimal but in fact is unique.34

He feels that William Empson was Jarrell's master, but finds Jarrell's prose "not so manly as Empson's; it giggles on

occasion, and nervous overemphasis abounds." With Kazin, Berryman regrets Jarrell's forays into areas of social concern where this "nervous overemphasis" was not restrained by his poetic and artistic taste.

Thus Jarrell, although an admirer and friend of several of the "Agrarian" or "Refugee" group, steadfastly refused to be associated with them or with their Southern regionalism. Allen Tate remarks that "from the beginning he was his own man."

Similarly, in criticism, his concentration on the matter of a poem, on its faithfulness to reality, and on the significance of its insight with regard to the human condition runs counter to the critical tendencies of his mentors. He refuses to consider the poem as a thing in itself, as "art for art's sake." He insists that the poem is an act of human communication, and centers his attention on content, on drama, and on language, in that order of subordination. As in Longinus, "sublimity" of thought is primal to the poet's success, and language adequate to its expression is a necessary accident. Thus, where he finds validity of insight, he will call the work "good" no matter which poetic idiom is used to express it. But where he finds such insight lacking, as in the poems of E. E. Cummings, or of Wallace Stevens' middle period, he withholds approval in spite of superb proficiency of expression. So, as regards the nature of poetry, Jarrell must be classified as a qualitative critic, to borrow the terminology of the "Chicago School" of criticism.
We shall explore his own practice of the art, as well as his notions of sublimity and validity, at more leisure in the following chapters. As regards the end of poetry, of all art, Jarrell is clearly a moral critic; that is, he feels that the basic function of art is to convey to human beings a full awareness of the human condition, and that such understanding cannot but help them become more fully human.

As regards his relationship to the New Critics, it would, of course, be a serious mistake to assume that all the many individuals subsumed under that heading hold identical principles, have the same goals, or use an absolutely standard methodology. But there are certain underlying assumptions and approaches that form their positions and identify them. We generally accept T. E. Hulme as the first of the New Critics and T. S. Eliot as their major prophet. Their methodology, distinguished by the introduction of the insights of psychoanalysis, analytical psychology and cultural anthropology, has demonstrated the enormous potential that these sciences have in deepening our understanding of the work of art. However, this approach, with its emphasis on symbolism and archetype, is only too easily transformed into an emphasis on esoteric understandings of the work of art as a thing in itself. The human act associated with the poem becomes an "aesthetic" experience, rather than a widely available intellectual and emotional experience. This shift in emphasis is very much in
accord with Robert Stallman's contention:

There is one basic theme in modern criticism; it is the dissociation of modern sensibility. The loss of a spiritual order and of integrity in the modern consciousness is T. S. Eliot's major premise.\(^{35}\)

As poet or as critic Jarrell must concur that this "dissociation" actually exists, and is the chief problem that faces man today. However, his response will be diametrically opposed to the withdrawal into an aesthetic ultramontanism. To withdraw is to deny man's dignity. His aim is nothing less than the full restoration of the poet to his proper role as teacher, as priest, as myth maker to all of mankind, and the restoration of the poem to its true function as an insight-laden, meaningful act of human communication.

This fundamental difference in orientation is exacerbated by the fact that the New Criticism had, by the thirties, elevated itself to the Only Criticism. Its adherents had taken commanding positions within the world of scholarship and criticism. Its emphasis on the work of art itself, in isolation from the artist and from the world, had nurtured the critic's all too human tendency to substitute himself for the artist, to substitute his own mediated interpretation of the work of art for the reader's own experience of it. Thus

we find that the very structure that had promised to free us from the sentimental romanticism of the nineteenth century had created a cerebral romanticism of its own, with a rigid, self-perpetuating establishment, fixed in its principles and methods.

Jarrell was not alone in his rejection of the New Criticism and its establishment. R. S. Crane, in his introduction to a collection of essays by the Chicago Critics, says that the "New Establishment in Criticism" was characterized by a "rather narrow set of ideas and interests ... derived from Eliot, Hulme, and Richards," by set routines, by "unscholarly improvisations," and a "spirit of unexamined confidence in what they were doing." J. Donald Adams, like Jarrell a practical critic, a working reviewer of books, says that he and his kind came to be dismissed as "mere journalists," that literary criticism has been preempted by

'a group of impenetrably insulated bookworms,' who exercise a corrupting influence because many of them are in a position to foist their ideas upon unformed, immature minds.

Yet, despite a common ground of opposition to the New Critics, Jarrell would have no part in the setting up of factions or countermovements. He has no quarrel with Aristotle,


with whom he has, temperamentally much in common. Many of his critical ideas are parallel to those of the "Chicago Critics." But we know that he would find unacceptable their goal as stated by Crane of achieving a situation in which criticism can be viewed from a "critical point of view"—approximately the last point of view that Jarrell himself would adopt.

Again, the Chicago critics feel that there are many valid critical methods, each of which exhibits the literary object in a different light, and each of which has its characteristic powers and limitations. One may, Crane says, "compare the results obtained in a given method . . . with the results obtained in another." But this "pluralistic" approach may well prove only a more complex system of doing what Jarrell wished to avoid—"setting up rigid standards to which a true work of art must conform." Jarrell cannot legitimately be called a pluralistic critic, nor even an eclectic critic. To do so would indicate that he picked and chose among theories and methods as they suited his needs and as he found them valid. He does not consider any critical method valid, but at best a rationalization of, or perhaps a persuasive argument for, an imaginative judgment that is true.

---


39 Ibid., p. iv.
or untrue on its own merits alone. "The many true works of art," he insists, must be allowed "to set up the general expectations to which one's criticism of art conforms." Critical judgments are not formed through the application of critical method, nor can these judgments be proven or disproven by method. As a critic, Jarrell appeals to no system, no method, no principles. He identifies what is good by his own good taste, by the exercise of his imaginative judgment, and presents it to his reader in the optimistic expectation that he too will recognize its goodness and its truth. There are patterns in Jarrell's judgment, but he does not appeal to the pattern to validate the judgment.

In this way, Jarrell stands outside and above the internecine squabbling of the schools and calls down a pox upon all their houses. As Delmore Schwartz observes, Jarrell does not find it necessary, as Eliot did,

to condemn Wordsworth and Keats in order to praise Dryden and Marvell. Jarrell has achieved—and with great richness and fulness of perception—a point of view from which it is possible to admire all these poets and to admire Whitman and Frost as well as Donne and Mallarmé.40

A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times, and he is great.\(^1\)

In four of his most provocative and definitive essays, "The Other Frost," "To the Laodiceans," "Robert Frost's Home Burial," and "Some Lines from Whitman," Jarrell treats of the work of two of the poets he most admires. It is precisely in the moment of encounter with the poem itself that we glimpse the critic, this "prince of reviewers," at his engaging best—at work, employing his considerable powers toward assisting the reader to a deeper, more profound understanding of what is intrinsically good in the work of the poet, and of what is not.

When the critic is also a poet and sees in the work of the other poet preeminent examples of qualities to which he aspires in his own poetry, he becomes an enthusiast. When he feels that the poet is widely popular, but for all the wrong reasons, he becomes an advocate. All of these considerations enter into Jarrell's presentation of the poetry of Robert Frost

---

(upon whom he wrote more extensively than on any other poet except Auden), and into his equally exciting, though briefer comments on Walt Whitman. It is to Jarrell's essays on Frost, and to those of Lionel Trilling, that critical and scholarly recognition of the "other" Frost is usually attributed. Jarrell also anticipated Allen Ginsberg's reinvention of Walt Whitman in 1955. He can thus claim some success in the poet's ultimate task of creating the taste of the age.

Each of the three essays Jarrell prepared on the work of Robert Frost presents a slightly different aspect of the poet as critic. In the brief essay "The Other Frost," published in 1947, Jarrell considers only the single thesis that the Frost of popular legend has been allowed to obscure the poet, the real but less known and greater Frost. He simply sketches in certain basic considerations upon which he feels a total reassessment of Frost must be made. In "To the Laodiceans," published in 1952, Jarrell frankly abandons himself to rhapsodic appreciation of Frost. "I want to exclaim," he says, "not only over his best work, but even over some of the lesser, but delightful places where all of Frost and all of what is being described are married and indistinguishable in

---


one line." In "Robert Frost's 'Home Burial,'" published in 1962, Jarrell considers a poem which was relatively unfamiliar at the time, explicates it at great length, praises it in his own unique manner, and relates it to his own basic beliefs as to what poetry ought to be. He does not dissect it—leave it etherized upon the table—but treats it with the love and respect of a fellow poet. Although he deals with the poem in great detail, he never allows his analysis to obscure the poem's intense dramatic patterns.

1. "The Other Frost"

We must first realize, Jarrell feels, that although Frost has somehow escaped the limbo of obscurity reserved for the poet in our prosaic age, his own fostering of an inappropriate image has helped to obscure his real poetic achievement. It is in large part due to Frost's presentation of himself as the conservative editorialist and self-made apothegm-joiner, full of dry wisdom and free, complacent, Yankee enterprise: the Farmer-Poet, that his best poems are largely unheralded and unknown. One could scarcely make, he says, a novel list of Eliot's ten best poems. Eliot's work, in its meager entirety, is too well known—too exhaustively analyzed. Then, as is his delight,


Jarrell lists fourteen poems of Frost's that seem totally new to most readers. The critic, he says, cannot tell us what these poems are about or what they are like, but "if you read them you will see."

He then proceeds to tell us as much as he can about what they are like, but never that we may substitute his understanding of the poems for our own experience of them—only that we may be led to taste and see that the work is good.

Frost's clear and unblinking recognition of the evil in the world, and of man's responsibility for it, form a good part of the basis of Jarrell's regard for him. Unlike Auden, whom Jarrell found at the end to be vain, solipsistic and morally shallow, Frost wrote poems which are not "obvious, optimistic, orthodox," but rather "subtle and strange." They are poems which "make pessimism seem a hopeful evasion." Frost speaks of the evil in the world and questions our ability and our willingness to do anything about it. He speaks, "with bare composure," of the limits "to which existence approaches and falls back from." In the passages which follow, Jarrell, in specifying those characteristics which have led him to place Frost among the very greatest of American poets, also posits a precise summary of his own basic critical principles and of his poetic goals.

Frost's chief virtues are that he writes well about the actions of ordinary men; that his poems, which are fundamentally
dramatic, come out of a knowledge of men that few poets have had; and that Frost captures in his verse "the rhythms of actual speech." These are the three parameters within which Jarrell himself chose to write his own poetry, and within which he most readily recognizes excellence in the work of other modern poets. The artist must recreate, not some strange, esoteric aesthetic experience, but the real world in which men live, bringing to this world, through his depth of insight and his wisdom and his power of expression, the sublimity that man's life does possess, but that man cannot know except through the poet. Frost, he says, possesses each of these virtues in such measure that his best work may well stand as a paradigm.

It seems clear, then, that Jarrell's own level of performance in those same elements he finds paramount in his estimate of Frost will determine his own place in the pantheon of American poetry. Jarrell, too, speaks with a great restraint of "things merely put down and left to speak for themselves." He too creates dramatic scenes that all too accurately establish the presence of evil in the world, and the fact that we neither can nor will do anything about it. In the earlier war poems, for which Jarrell is perhaps best known, he presents the soldier in his dual role of agent and victim—carrying out the functions of his newly learned trade without full responsibility, yet not without guilt. He does not show any great compunction as he bombs cities "he learned about in school."
He accepts the training he receives in the skills of death, and inflicts and suffers crippling wounds that make him aware of the real world only after he has tasted his own blood. He dies quietly, unobtrusively, always alone, and submits his flesh to the cleansing waters of the hose that erases all traces of his existence from the ball turret. Life, as Jarrell experienced it in his young adulthood, was war. He shows us the evil, and says with Frost, "It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would you ever do it?"6

Jarrell's later poems are peopled with small and lonely children, many of them ill, some of them dead—with the lonely nameless women who seek love, or simply recognition, from the boy who puts their groceries in the car or from a beast in the zoo—with those who seek in the world of fairy-tale, the land of märchen, a sense of belonging that the real world does not offer. Jarrell's dramas are of aging women, not, for the most part, caught up in the intensely dramatic situations that characterize so many of Frost's poems, but quietly and desperately living out empty and discontented lives. His "Cinderella"7 is doomed to celebrate her discontent at a fireside in hell, not just in time but through eternity.

6Ibid., p. 28.
These are the actions of Jarrell's ordinary men, upon whom he centers his attention in his essays and in his fiction, as well as in his poetry, writing of men and of their world in the rhythms of ordinary speech—in "plain American that dogs and cats can understand"—elevated to the level of poetic diction by an exquisite sense of the rhythms and harmonies inherent in it. With Ezra Pound, he insisted that poetry "be as simple and direct as prose." Without in any way derogating the grandeur and majesty and complexity of the great poets of other times—of Shakespeare, of Homer, of Dante—Jarrell insisted that in our age, and in our culture, poetry must eschew such luxuries. If the poem is to achieve its total aesthetic, moral and didactic ends, the language of ordinary men elevated to poetic diction by the genius of the poet is the only appropriate medium. (One critic, Philip Booth, feels that "even Frost was less flexible than Jarrell in finding, shaping, and informing the various rhythms of individual experience."

Jarrell's own poems read simply, enough like prose to cause another critic, James Dickey, to find his diction "dull beyond all dullness of stupefaction or petrifaction."

Jarrell can only answer, in the words he used of Frost,

---


that it is "easy to underestimate the effect of this exact, spaced-out, prosaic rhythm," until the poems are read aloud, carefully. Only then do we find "the tremendous strength ... of things merely put down and left to speak for themselves."¹⁰

In "The Player Piano,"¹¹ for example, Jarrell narrates, in his own voice, the reflections of an aging but not yet elderly person eating pancakes in a Pancake House, exchanging meaningless reminiscences with the waitress:

I felt that I had met someone from home.
No, not Pasadena, Fatty Arbuckle.
Who's that? O, something that we had in common
Like--like--the false armistice. Piano rolls.

The poet continues to reflect on the passage of time and the dissipation of human ties by separation and death, until the last three lines when suddenly, in the person now of a small child mortally wounded in her parents' separation, he brings the entire poem into excruciating focus:

If only, somehow, I had learned to live!
The three of us sit watching, as my waltz Plays itself out a half-inch from my fingers.

The poem passes as easily as some homely sketch of daily life, until we read these final lines, when what had seemed an unobtrusive reminiscence is revealed as a cry of anguish and despair. It is as bleak and simple as Frost's "Provide, Provide," and leaves the same aftertaste of ashes. Frost has

the power to make

the reader feel that he is not in a book but
in a world, and a world that has in common with
his own some of the things that are most im­
portant in both.12

Jarrell's own world, as he depicts the alienation of modern
man from God, from the world, and from himself, is sometimes
bleaker, less hopeful even than Frost's.

Jarrell speaks of Frost's classical understatement
and restraint. His own work is characterized by a similar
restraint. Like Frost, he deals in "greyed or unsaturated
shades," which are "often more satisfying to a thoughtful
rhetorician than some dazzling arrangements of prismatic col­
ors." But, unlike Frost, Jarrell is more concerned with the
destruction of the individual than with the destruction of
mankind. In Frost's "Directive," we see his

understanding that each life is pathetic because it
wears away into the death that it at last half­welcomes--that even its salvation, far back at the
cold root of things, is make-believe, drunk from a
child's broken and stolen goblet, a plaything hidden
among the ruins of the lost cultures.13

Jarrell expresses an almost identical understanding
in his poem "The Lost World,"14 where the adult poet, reflect­
ing on gestures of affection that he might have made as a

13 Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," Poetry and the Age,
p. 48.
14 Jarrell, Complete Poems, pp. 283-93.
child, realizes the total inefficacy of mature regret:

If only I could play you one more game,
See you all one more time! I think of you dying
Forgiving me—or not, it is all the same
To the forgiven.

At the end of his brief life Jarrell is still alienated. The obscurity that our culture visits upon every poet is no more than the reflection of the alienation that the world has visited upon this poet. Jarrell had come to live almost in seclusion, away from the city, away from the age, yet found that the fulfillment he sought still eluded him. It is described, he says, in the World's "Lost and Found" as follows:

LOST--NOTHING. STRAYED FROM NOWHERE.
NO REWARD.
I hold in my own hands, in happiness,
Nothing: the nothing for which there's no reward.15

Frost, despite his great genius, is not, Jarrell says, an "alienated artist, cut off from anyone who is not." He is a normal person, in the "less common but most important sense of that term." Frost, despite the bleakness of his vision, has somehow come to terms with himself and with the world he creates in his poetry. He is one of those who have provided. Jarrell cannot accept such an accommodation, so that we can discern here, I believe, the cry of the more vulnerable artist whom the world will not allow such normalcy. Jarrell remains alienated, unsure of his own community, his own audience, and,

in the end, of his own past. In his criticism of Frost we find the same lamentation that we find in his beautiful and tender children's books, in the bitter poem "A Conversation with the Devil," and in his later poetry. The same thread runs through his critical essays, and is most clearly developed in his novel, Pictures from an Institution. The roots of his insecurity seem to be found in the world's mistrust of the true poet, and in its ready acceptance of all that is meretricious.

Frost's ability to accept the world as it is, the tough-mindedness that has permitted him to confront the world on his own unrelenting terms, yet win its acceptance as a "sensible, tender, humorous poet who knows all about trees and farms and folks in New England," is related essentially to that part of Frost's work that Jarrell finds to be marked by "an appalling conceit, an indifference to everything but himself." Jarrell, for example, disputes Frost's self-serving estimate of his own radicalism: "I never dared be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old."16

Jarrell finds in the younger Frost a "very odd and very radical radical, a much more interesting sort than the standard New Republic brand," but in the older Frost, an elder statesman, full of "complacent wisdom and cast-iron

whimsy." These elements of callousness or unimaginative conservatism had always been there, and only grew with the official role that Frost created for himself. As he came to feel more easy in that role, Frost made only minimal demands upon his formidable talents to produce poems that are "not bad, but not good enough to matter either."

However, even the derelictions of age and complacency do not enable the poet to escape the muse. All those attributes that Jarrell had valued so highly in the poet are gone. Frost's characters, those "living beings he has known or created," have left him. Yet, Jarrell says, "it is this loneliness that is responsible for the cold finality of poems like "Neither Out Far nor In Deep," or "Design." But Jarrell, who is no respecter of persons, is as merciless with inferior work as he is excited by good work, even in poets whom he admires. Thus he says that Frost's latest work is undeserving of our attention.

Most of the poems merely remind you, by their persistence in the mannerisms of what was genius, that they are the productions of someone who once, and somewhere else, was a great poet.17

The two later long poems, A Masque of Mercy and A Masque of Reason, are persistently marred by self-indulgence, reflecting a contempt for the reader, and an aridity of content that is only occasionally lightened by insights of no particular

17Ibid., p. 31.
significance.

But these aberrations of Frost, the public figure, the old man who had "long ago divorced reason for commonsense, and is basking complacently in his bargain," must now be allowed to obscure that other Frost who can show us a thorough skepticism about that tame revenge, justice, and a cold certainty that nothing but mercy will do for us.\(^1\)8

2. "To the Laodiceans"

Jarrell's second epistle on Frost, published in 1952, is addressed "To the Laodiceans," in memory of those citizens of Asia Minor who were neither hot nor cold and have therefore become to us a watchword. The article was published just five years after "The Other Frost," and treats of his work at greater length and from a somewhat different perspective. After a brief resumé of his earlier comment on those who consider Frost a second-class citizen, Jarrell asks, assuming the mantle of prophecy, what posterity will make of a generation that dismissed The Waste Land as a "hoax," and Frost as a nice old man. But how have we fallen into this state of error? into these "grotesque simplifications, distortions, falsifications?" It is because, Jarrell says, reaffirming his basic critical thesis, we simply do not know his work. If we knew it better, we would see "what he really is," and be freed from any "humble and agreeable cant" that we are presenting "only one's own 'view'\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 32.
or 'interpretation' of him." 19 Jarrell, as poet and as critic, is fiercely impatient of equivocation. A valid poem is true to reality. If it is not, it is not poetry. A valid criticism shows how the poem is true to reality. If it does not, it is not good criticism.

Jarrell sets aside all consideration of the defects that mar Frost's later works, and of those failures of character in Frost that offend his fastidious sensibilities. Instead, he concentrates on arousing the fervor of the Laodiceans by the excitement of his own appreciation of all that is truly great in Frost—the "complication, sophistication, and ambiguity of Frost's thought;" his understanding of "isolation;" his "obsession" with the possibility of "the wiping out of man, his replacement by the nature out of which he arose." 20 Jarrell quite possibly recalls, as the world has forgotten, that the Laodiceans are also the community to whom the Amen of the Apocalypse addressed His plea:

Behold, I stand at the gate and knock. If any man shall hear my voice and open to me the door, I will come into him and will sup with him: and he with me. 21

Jarrell does not feel that he can accomplish so much in a single article, but he insists that what can be done is best

19 Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," p. 35.
20 Ibid., p. 36.
21 Apocalypse 4:20.
done by a straightforward presentation of the works themselves. First, Jarrell says, we rid ourselves of the "Skeleton on the doorstep," and get the taste of 'Birches,' ... a little brassy, a little sugary," out of our mouths. We may then turn, not to such good and familiar poems as "Mending Wall" or "After Apple-Picking," but to some of Frost's "best and least familiar poems." (Typically, Jarrell says he will deal with five or six poems, and actually covers more than twenty.)

He begins with a consideration of "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," which he compares to Housman's "Stars I Have Seen Them Fall." Frost's vision is bleaker, more terrible than Housman's, which carries with it "the consolation of rhetoric and exaggeration," where Frost offers only a faint scriptural echo in the phrase "any watch they keep." Jarrell has a clear-cut preference for Frost's "word magic." He had said in "The Other Frost" that it was "of a quiet, sober, bewitching sort," rarely rising to those levels of rhetoric and romance that create a "hypnotic verbal excitement." Frost has his "dazzling passages," but it is generally his "greyed or unsaturated shades," that the thoughtful rhetorician in Jarrell finds more satisfying. Frost tells us without adornment that we don't

---

care about what we can know, the land, but are preoccupied by
the infinite which we cannot know—but "when did that ever
bother us?" In his best poetry Frost simply puts down man's
limitations with total frankness, and accepts them "with flat
ease, . . . with something harder than contempt, more passive
than acceptance."\(^{23}\)

The poem "Provide Provide," Jarrell says, is "to put
it as crudely as possible, an immortal masterpiece." He calls
it a **reductio ad absurdum** of the expediency that is the clever
man's first instinct—the same instinct that Christ remarks
when he advises men to make unto themselves friends of the
mammon of iniquity. Frost's case for morality is minimal, and
he makes a minimal recommendation of it, but the poem "has a
beauty and conclusiveness that are not minimal."\(^{24}\)

The poem "Design," the "most awful of Frost's small
poems," simply describes a white "heal-all" weed upon which the
poet sees a white spider flourishing a dead white moth. So
simple a vision, yet Frost has woven into it a deep sense of
evil and malice, making of it a nightmare in which one senses
the evil primordial in the universe—an evil that evidences it-
self not only in the protean malevolence that Melville symbol-
izes in the whiteness of the whale, but in these tiny, orderly
things as well. The spider is "dimpled, fat and white," but


\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 42.
these attributes of babyhood and innocence are skewed in this pattern of evil. Any one of these "assorted characters of death and blight" would not of itself bring terror; it is in their contiguity that Frost shows us a "design of darkness to appall."

Explicating "Design" in detail, Jarrell shows how the language, the exactness of word and phrase and structure, work toward an exact and poetic expression of this vision of our world that is necessary to our understanding of ourselves and our place in it. It is the traditional argument from design "with a vengeance." This little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental. 25

However, while Jarrell as critic fully appreciates Frost's achievement, his own poetic evocation of the malice in the world is not cast in symbolism so impersonal as Frost's. In an early poem, "Lady Bates" 26 (which Jarrell selected to record for the Library of Congress in 1959), he echoes Frost's preoccupation with the isolation of the individual in the face of death. Lady Bates, a small black child killed accidentally, has been buried in the same place where she had played while still alive. The newly dug grave is the first and only bed prepared especially for her, a bed from which she is never to rise. The poet, in the person of Death, speaks to her in accents that are soothing, yet taunting and ironic:

25 Ibid.
26 Jarrell, Complete Poems, pp. 25-27.
Reach, move your hand a little, try to move—
You can't move, can you?
You can't move... You're fast asleep, you're fast asleep.

For Jarrell, the malevolence is usually more clearly seen in the anguish of the individual, or in his death, than in the abstract irony of Frost's configuration in white.

In much the same view, Jarrell presents the poem "The Most of It" almost without comment, remarking that in it Frost conveys all that man has wondered of the universe and its ultimate meaning. Like Melville, like Hawthorne, like Jarrell himself, man has demanded of the universe an explanation, and "its inhuman not-answer exceeds any answer that we human beings could have thought of or wished for." 27 Man is isolated, an alien within the only existence which he has known or of which he can conceive.

Jarrell next turns to "Directive," calling it "one of the strangest and most characteristic, most dismaying and most gratifying" poems ever written. In it Frost has brought together three of the themes with which he is obsessed: "those of isolation, of extinction, and of the final limitations of man." Jarrell does not attempt to treat of the poem in detail, preferring to present the full text as if to demonstrate the truth of his axiom, "If you read them, you will see." The poem

27 Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," p. 45.
is, Jarrell concludes, "hard to understand but easy to love."

Thus, as critic, Jarrell finds in Frost a vision of man and of the universe that is more true and more truly stated than he finds in any other poetry, including his own, yet he is uniquely able to help us to understand Frost because his poetic genius is similar to Frost's. He is taken out of himself, and exegesis becomes as penetrating, as exciting and as meaningful as the poem itself. We read it with him, and his vision deepens our own without ever obscuring or replacing our experience of Frost. His concern is only that we see, as he has seen, the greatness of Frost's achievement.

We go on, finding in poem after poem further revelations of Frost's insight and of his extraordinary command of language. The last three lines of "The Gift Outright" are "themselves realized with absolute finality." When we think that we have come to understand why the lines are as good as they are, Frost will surprise us with some unexpected felicity--

an unlooked-for intensity and elevation of emotion, that have a conclusiveness and magnificence we are hardly able to explain.28

Jarrell does not hesitate to place Frost in the company of Eliot, of Yeats, and even of Dante. Demonstrating the "historical sense" of which Eliot spoke, which includes "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its

28 Ibid., p. 51.
presence," he says that Frost creates in us

the thrill of authentic creation, the thrill of
witnessing something that goes back farther than
Homer and goes forward farther than any future we
are able to imagine: . . . an instant of grace . . .
that underlying style that great poets so often
have in common beneath their own style!29

Dante, he says, would have read with pleasure Frost's
"Acquainted with the Night," cast in Dante's own terza rima.

But, while Jarrell shares with Arnold and Longinus a due regard
for such touchstones, he sees, again with Eliot, that the
"ideal order" formed by the existing monuments of art "is modi-

died by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of
art among them. To ask if a Frost poem is classical in form,
becomes "ignominious" when we are confronted by the poem it-
self, for the poem does not "abide . . . our questions or our
categories." The poet is the teacher and we are free, free
"to look and not to disregard." Frost sings of death, of time,
of the fatal alienation of human nature, but he also sings of
love, with tenderness, and of passion. He is, of course, well
aware of the "sinister, condemning, tender" aspects of human
sexuality, which he develops in "The Subverted Flower," but
Jarrell particularly admires this passage at the conclusion of
"The Pauper Witch of Grafton:"

Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,
I made him gather me wet snow berries
On slippery rocks beside a waterfall.

29 Ibid., p. 52.
I made him do it for me in the dark. And he liked everything I made him do. 30

There is here, Jarrell says, more sexuality and love "than in several hothouses full of Dylan Thomas."

Many superb poems are too long to include in their entirety, and Jarrell hesitates to deal with them in absentia, as it were. However, he says, he shouldn't have to. At the mere mention of "The Witch of Coos," "Home Burial," or "A Servant to Servants," "Pharisee and Philistine alike would tiptoe off hand in hand, their shamed eyes starry." Any critical article is not relatively but absolutely inadequate to a body of poetry as great as Frost's, and can serve at very best only as a "kind of breathless signboard." Jarrell then goes on to quote line after line of what he calls slight things, in which Frost "is so characteristic and delightful"—in which there is so much wisdom and insight—that he is "left helpless to say whether this is slight or not." Jarrell's own talent in the fashioning of witty and penetrating apothegms and aphorisms is formidable. He admires Frost's depiction of "age in one couplet":

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup. 31

But his own tersely ironic commentary on "A War" is of the same order.

30 Ibid., p. 56. 31 Ibid., p. 58.
There set out, slowly, for a Different World, at four, on winter mornings, different legs...
You can't break eggs without making an omelette.
—That's what they tell the eggs.32

The article concludes with a lengthy paragraph on "how much use Frost's poems are to one," by which Jarrell means how completely they reveal to us the world, "as it seemed to one man," who was able to comprehend and set down "the great Gestalt that each of us makes from himself." Frost's treatment of the grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things" is just, but not more just than his demonstration of "tenderness and love and delight." If the poet is primarily a seer, he must also be an able reporter—not to a cult or coterie, but to anyone who has ears to hear. He is a great poet when he can "make humanly understandable so much" that we experience "a joy strong enough to make us say . . . that many things in this world are wonderful, but of all these the most wonderful is man."33

In his critical analyses, Jarrell is not primarily concerned with structure or form. His interests center on insight and on the truth of the poetic utterance. His manner of presentation relies heavily on a communicated enthusiasm. As a critic and as a poet, he relays his experience of the artist and of life to the reader with such intensity that we are powerfully

32Jarrell, Complete Poems, p. 208.
drawn to read and reread the poem in question. The demand for structure, for form, for a manner of expression adequate to the poet's thought is, however, latent in Jarrell's imaginative judgment. He does not dwell on technique. He simply repeats a line, two lines, assuming that his reader will share with him his enthusiasm over their excellence.

However, although there are striking parallels between what Jarrell finds to admire in the work of Frost and his own dramatic poetry, there are also significant patterns of divergence. Frost's "The Gift Outright," which Jarrell calls the "best 'patriotic' poem" he has seen, strikes an affirmative note that Jarrell rarely celebrates. His poems of the Second World War are, if not specifically anti-patriotic, some of the most effective anti-war poems ever written. In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Everyman drops from the womb of the mother into the State, where he lives briefly a nightmare of destruction, still hunched fetally in the belly of the machine, till he is aborted into eternity, never having lived. "Eighth Air Force," with its many levels of meaning and allusion, explores the significance not of glory, but of guilt, in the individual and in society.

Again, Jarrell insists that the most effective poetry is dramatic, but his own approach to the dramatic is quite different from Frost's. Frost structures a scene from the out-
side, as it were, demonstrating sympathy, even bias for one character or the other, but rarely enters the scene in his own person—rarely becomes personally involved. Jarrell, on the other hand, is drawn so strongly to identify with each of his characters that his dialogues become a monologue in two voices. Frost achieves a universality and dramatic distance even in the first-person love poem "Meeting and Passing," whereas Jarrell, in "A Man Meets a Woman in the Street," is himself the man, and the occurrence remains specific. In "The Player Piano," "A Woman at the Washington Zoo," or "Cinderella," where the central character in the drama is a woman, it is still the poet himself who speaks in her voice. Frost demonstrates a rare sympathy for his feminine characters; Jarrell identifies with them. The full extent of Jarrell's admiration for Frost's dramatic powers will be examined more fully in our consideration of his extended analysis of Frost's "Home Burial."

3. "Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'"

"Robert Frost's 'Home Burial,'" published in 1962, is an extended explication of a poem which Jarrell ranks with "The Witch of Coos" and "A Servant to Servants" as Frost's three best dramatic poems. Each deals with a woman caught up in a situation of remorseless tension and stress. Jarrell feels that Frost possessed a rare empathy toward women, and that the power of these poems lies chiefly in his ability to develop
the character of the woman who is, in each case, central.

He first reproduces the full text of the poem, then enters upon a precise and detailed analysis, exploring the subtlest nuances of word and phrase, of rhythm and meter, so as to demonstrate just how Frost created the exact dramatic effect he was seeking. We have remarked that Jarrell was, by temperament and instinct, a teacher. In this article we find most clearly demonstrated the great teacher's infinite regard both for the student and for the matter at hand. He guides us through our experience of the poem, pausing at this line to point out a certain vowel sound, at that to show how the masterful separation of a phrase emphasizes the power of a verb, or demonstrates the dominance of the dull but unrelenting force of the male protagonist. But more than a teacher, Jarrell is a poet showing us what the poet can be--what the poet can do when he is, as Frost is, a great poet. Thus the critical, didactic Jarrell yields in the end to Jarrell the poet, whose first goal is to help us become, whether through his own poetry or through the poetry he helps us to understand, somehow more human than we were. He is, in Yeats's words, "A man in love, and that is all that matters. What more is there to say?"

Jarrell feels that Frost's development of "Home Burial" is an almost perfect exercise in dramatic objectivity. The

---

poet, as observer and as narrator, develops the vision of reality that he intends entirely through the interaction and the personalities of the characters he has created. Most of the lines are dialogue. Those that are not are extraordinarily subtle physical descriptions of the actions of one or the other of the protagonists. No where does Frost speak in his own voice, nor does he allow one character or the other to speak for him.

"Home Burial" is a study of alienation, of guilt, and of the impossibility of sympathy among men. It is drawn, as Jarrell, with Goethe, insists that great poetry must be drawn, from the poet's observation of the "actions of ordinary men." The characters depict the tragedy of life as it is lived rather than the unique subjective experience of the poet.

Thus, the opening sentences of the poem establish the patterns that define the dramatic situation:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.35

The two characters act guardedly, masks firmly in place, when in the presence of the other. But, though this alienation is a dramatic constant, the woman's chief preoccupation is not with the man but with "some fear" to which he is alien and from which he must be excluded. We may only conjecture at this point how long she has thus guarded herself so that he may not see the

direction of her glance. In developing Frost's techniques, Jarrell shows how he employs the unexpected word to achieve the dramatic effect, and how the exact placement of words, with a superb exploitation of meaning and shades of meaning, whether in the dialogue or in Frost's descriptions of the action of the drama, reveal the characters in their inmost thoughts and motivations. The line "mounting till she cowered under him," for example, expresses in one phrase the crux of the relationship between the man and the woman. What comes after will deepen, but not modify in any substantial way, the insight given here. Frost's choice of verbs to describe the man's actions ("mounting," "advanced"), his faithful reproduction of the man's tautological, vaguely threatening manner, quickly establish the brutality of his dealings with the woman.

Jarrell admires such verbal felicity, however, only when it is employed in the development of a valid poetic insight. In another context, Jarrell demonstrates at some length E. E. Cummings' total mastery of linguistic performance—his ability to use words in the wrong places and in the wrong way to achieve totally unique effects—yet pointedly avoids characterizing Cummings' poetry as good because he lacked the insight and the high seriousness of intent that Jarrell demands of the poet.

Not so Frost! Jarrell can only admire a "queerly stressed line a foot too long" that perfectly reproduces the
awkward, mindless assurance that lies at the root of the man's inability to communicate with his wife—the man's paralleling of the noun "man" with the frankly pejorative "womenfolk"—Frost's juxtaposition of the two words "mounting" and "cowering." He points out that the identity of the vowel sounds imply that his mounting is the cause of her cowering. He remarks that Frost's line "She, in her place, refused him any help," serves to establish "with economical brilliance, both her physical and spiritual lack of outgoingness, forthcomingness." Her subsistence, at this stage, lies in her refusal to submit. Where the poet has seen deeply, such economy of phrase speaks more eloquently and even more precisely of the situation depicted than paragraphs of explanation. Where the poet's insights are true, these niceties of style add that "magic" of which Arnold spoke.

Jarrell speaks eloquently, unforgottably, of the lightly musical sounds of the vowels in the line "Making the gravel leap and leap in air, / Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly." They reproduce, he says, "with terrible life and accuracy," the motion of the dirt as the husband quickly and skillfully digs his son's grave, and at the same time re-create the sustained hysteria she began to experience as she compared its motion to the deadening reality of the small body. This is

36 Ibid., p. 198.
contrasted with the heavy vowels of the following line which "make almost crudely actual the abyss of death": "And roll back down the mound beside the hole." Even the juxtaposition of the two words "home" and "burial" in the title help Frost to carry the irony of the poem. Home is not a place where we dwell in unity and love; it is where we bury other persons, physically and spiritually, and with them our own happiness as well. The soil the man brings into the house, on his hands and on his tools, will always be for her the soil he moved to bury the child.

In "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," Jarrell focuses our attention upon the anguish of a woman's loss. He uses the same open vowel sounds to express grief in the line, "O bars of my own body, open, open!" though here the sounds represent the more total desolation of a person unidentified even by grief. Her cry, "You know what I was, You see what I am: change me, change me!" reflects the verbal irony of Jarrell's title. She is not "the woman," but "a woman"--not Everyman, but just anyone, or no one. She is ineluctably, what she was, and what she will always be--lost and alone. She seeks not return, but metamorphosis. Belloc speaks of the passing of human affection as the worst thing in the world. The act of the callous onlooker, peering with cold indifference into the

heart of another, is, for Hawthorne, the unforgivable sin. But the woman at the zoo experiences a loneliness more desolate, for she has never existed as the object of anyone's love or hatred.

There had been, in Frost's poem a real though now evanescent community of husband and wife. There had been, if only briefly, a group of three—the domestic trinity of the family. That they have become estranged, enemies, is perhaps evidence that they were never suited one to the other, or to life. If an end to their estrangement seems unlikely, their tragedy still remains comprehensible. But the woman at the zoo has always stood alone, and is forever doomed to the isolation of her solitary vigil. She is a symbol of the alienation of the soul: "The saris go by me from the embassies. Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet." In Albee's Zoo Story the protagonist finds salvation at the moment the knife plunges into his flesh, but such a moment is not for her. Not for her is the taste of ordinary human grief over something once possessed, now lost. Her situation is more barren than that of the grieving mother who has had a child and knows where his body lies. She will never have a child, will never have a husband.

Frost's woman reacts strongly to the death of the child and to her husband's callousness. She threatens further action, but whether she will actually leave the house, carry her grief
to others or be restrained by the torpid male is immaterial. Their lives will continue, albeit in hostility and grief. For the woman at the zoo, life has stopped, or has never begun. She envies the animals in their cages, and even the rotting morsels of uneaten food, because they attract things to themselves, if only scavengers. Where Frost's small tragedy centers upon action and the interplay of character, Jarrell's concerns a totally static situation from which the only escape is an impossible and obscene metamorphosis:

Vulture,
When you come for the white rat that the foxes left,
Take off the red helmet of your head, the black
Wings that have shadowed me, and step to me as man:
The wild brother at whose feet the white wolves fawn,
To whose hand of power the great lioness
Stalks, purring.

You know what I was,
You see what I am: change me, change me!

Where Frost's woman could conceivably demand of the fates the return of her child, an understanding spouse, the desire of the woman at the zoo for human contact has become debased, bestialized beyond any nightmare that Frost has devised, so that her very torment precludes any possible fulfillment. She sees herself, reflected in the eyes of caged animals who are happier than she because they do not know that they are trapped.

Frost's poem has captured the dramatic moment, but for Jarrell the moment has captured the poem so that it speaks
not of the actions of men, but of a stasis born of tensions so excruciating that emotion has been immobilized into a form of hysteria. The woman whose child has been buried has been fully realized as a character in a drama. The woman at the Washington zoo is a mask through which the poet expresses his own anguish. Thus, in spite of his great critical emphasis on the objective in poetry, and his oft-avowed preference for the drama of human existence over emanations of the internalized anguish of the poet, we have here, I believe, a strong indication that Jarrell found such distancing easier to admire than to achieve.

4. "Some Lines from Whitman"

In "Some Lines from Whitman," published in 1952, Jarrell first proposes that Melville, Dickinson, and Whitman are the three best poets that the nineteenth century produced in America, and that all of them are misunderstood. Melville, whose verse was at that time just beginning to receive critical attention, is "a great poet only in the prose of Moby Dick." The poetry of Emily Dickinson, though it is well known and indiscriminately admired, has been obscured by her personality and by her curious personal history. Whitman was rapidly acquiring a public of

people who are not particularly interested in poetry, people who say that they read a poem for what it says, not for how it says it.

---

But serious lovers of poetry, put off by all the bad poetry that there is in Whitman, do not regard him as a major figure in spite of enthusiastic acclaim by such influential personages as Hopkins and Henry James.

The critical assessment of Whitman as a sort of original or primitive, whose "every part is crude but whose whole is somehow great," is wholly unacceptable. Jarrell insists that Whitman's poetry, like Pope's spider, "lives along the line." He will show that Whitman is a truly great and original poet by a close examination of the lines. The tactic of enthusiasm which has served Jarrell so well in his presentations of the many poets whose praises he sings, is nowhere more appropriately applied than to this poet, who himself asks neither more nor less:

I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes,
We convince by our presence.\textsuperscript{40}

Line after line is then presented to show us that Whitman was no sweeping rhetorician, but a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity, so far as words are concerned. \textsuperscript{41} Jarrell finds him "beautifully witty," but even more "far-fetched" than witty. \textsuperscript{42} Whitman's language is either uniquely

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., p. 103. \hfill \textsuperscript{41}Ibid. \hfill \textsuperscript{42}Leslie Fiedler emphasizes this point. "Especially he minded us of the wit everywhere at play in lines we had long persuaded ourselves in our dullness were themselves as dull as our perceptions. It is Whitman the comic poet whom he gave back to us, perhaps gave to us for the first time." "Jarrell's Criticism: A Footnote," p. 67.
good or "ingeniously bad." His "worst messes"—"a habitan of Vienna," the verb "enclaircise"—are so closely related to his successes in the imaginative use of language that Jarrell finds them amusing rather than offensive. He sees in them the effort of the charlatan to capture the attention of idlers, but behind them the mind and language of a poet whose contact with reality is sure and true. Jarrell prefers, in principle, a commoner language, but can praise the more exotic passages in Whitman because their success lies beyond the merely rhetorical perfection that he finds in E. E. Cummings.

Thus Whitman's famous lists, like those of Wolfe and Fitzgerald, reflect not a quirk of language but a mind so overflowing with enthusiasm and with intelligence of men that it finds the bonds of the sentence too confining to contain what Hopkins calls

all this juice and all this joy.
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning.
In Eden Garden.43

Whitman's lists are not compilations of related items, but elaborate rhetorical constructs whose transitions are "managed" in accordance with the classical norms of "likeness and opposition and continuation and climax and anti-climax."

Speaking here as an enthusiast rather than as a disinterested critic, Jarrell makes the less than dispassionate observation that anyone that would call them "mere lists" would "boil his babies up for soap."

We must not regard Whitman's gift as a gift of language only. Though his insights are not at first glance in any way similar to Frost's, we find in Jarrell's praises of the one many parallels to his praises of the other. Thus, he says of a passage in which Whitman comes to grips with a sort of existential experience of the transience of that "puzzle of puzzles . . . that we call being":

Whitman has something difficult to express, something that there are many formulas, all bad, for expressing; he expresses it with complete success, in language of the most dazzling originality.44

However, like Frost and like Jarrell, Whitman has also "at his command a language of the calmest and most prosaic reality, one that seems to do no more than present," and with it he performs that other sort of magic, placing his reader in another world, more real because more clearly realized.

Whitman was good and bad, wise and foolish, and everything else and its opposite, but on balance Jarrell must call him a great poet because of his language, and because

there is in him almost everything in the world, so that one responds to him, willingly or un­willingly, almost as one does to the world, that world which makes the hairs of one's flesh stand up, which seems both evil beyond any rejection and wonderful beyond any acceptance.45

Reading the poetry, the critic soon comes to realize that Whitman has achieved a level of artistry that makes criticism "not only unnecessary but absurd."

In comparing Whitman to "that very beautiful poet Alfred Tennyson, the most skillful of all Whitman's con­temporaries," Jarrell returns to a recurrent axiom of his critical and poetic theory—that Whitman's poems are superior to Tennyson's because they "represent his world and himself much more satisfactorily than Tennyson's do his." This is at least in part due to Whitman's refusal to accept the restric­tions of that "form" that limited Tennyson's verse, just as Jarrell has refused to make form in any way central to his imaginative judgment. The critic's reaction to poetry and to the reality that poetry represents must be as free and as personal as the poet's.

Jarrell's touchstones remain truth and language and imagination:

Having wonderful dreams, telling wonderful lies, was a temptation Whitman could never resist; but telling the truth was a temptation he could never resist either.46

Whitman is not so faithful to order or to logic as to "Reality As It Is—whatever that is." Thus, unencumbered, this wholly unique poet is free to be epic in his manner—"grand, and elevated, and comprehensive, and real with an astonishing reality."

So the pendulum has come full swing. The same society which began with the Puritans, walking with downcast eyes, uncertain of salvation or election, living under the shadow of a stern God and a sterner state, has now brought forth Walt Whitman, exultant, jubilant, gay, yet so very true, so very American, that Jarrell imagines a tourist finding among the ruins of New York City a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, and exclaiming that if Whitman and America had not existed, "it would have been impossible to imagine them." Any critic can tell us all that is wrong with Whitman's poetry, but the true function of criticism is to demonstrate, as Jarrell has done in this essay, the true significance of the poet and of his poetry in revealing to us our own world. Only in this manner can the critic escape the "essentially ridiculous" aspects of his sorry trade.

Although Jarrell does not remark Whitman's poetic response to his experiences in the Civil War, we note that his own relationship to conflict is similarly peripheral. Both were deeply involved with the men who served in combat, but neither experienced combat at first hand. Jarrell had enlisted
in the Air Force early in World War II, but soon washed out of pilot training and spent the balance of his service teaching celestial navigation. Whitman served as a medical orderly. Their remarks on wars and on the men who fight in them present an attitude that is engaged but somehow more dispassionate than that of the good but not great poets like Owen and Sassoon, who had perhaps been too close to the horror of which they wrote to achieve that objectivity which great poetry demands. Jarrell's reputation as the most perceptive of the poets of World War II rests specifically on this proximity, combined with poetic distance, that he shares with Whitman.47

He is also very like to Whitman in the intensely personal nature of his poetry. Whitman sings, quite frankly, a song of himself. Even where he is most objective—simply showing us things he has seen—he himself remains palpably present, watching with us. Jarrell creates characters in his poems who ostensibly speak in their own persons, but the difference is only superficial. For Jarrell is unable to attain the objectivity he so admires in Frost, and his characters are never more than the many masks through which the poet himself speaks. He is so thoroughly identified with each of them that his song is also a song of himself, and the critical question

becomes whether he, like Whitman, or like Eliot, is a man so 
magnanimous that a song of himself is a song of the world.

In these essays Jarrell reveals himself as a qualita-
tive critic and as a moral critic. Art is seen as primarily 
salvific—the reader's experience of the poem should bring 
him to fuller humanity. To achieve this end it is first neces-
sary that the poem faithfully represent the world as it is; and 
second, that it be imaginative. If the poet's insight is valid 
and unique it will reproduce reality in such a way that the 
reader will know his world differently than if he had not 
experienced the poem.

Considerations of language are also of primary import-
ance. If the poet is unable to achieve mastery in expression, 
the depth of his insight and the power of his moral suasion are 
in vain. Jarrell, while he specifically disavows the improviso-
tional formlessness advocated by some modern poets and critics, 
would not have the poet bound by any artificialities of form. 
The poet, if he is a good poet, will in going beyond accepted 
forms, instinctively create new forms more adequate to his 
poetic expression. The critic, if he is a good critic, will 
recognize the poet's achievement.

Jarrell prefers poetry which is dramatic, dealing with 
the actions of ordinary persons and expressed in the common 
language they speak. He does not, however, allow his imagina-
tive judgment to be determined by these accidents. He is governed by his own axiom: That the critic is, in the end, no more than "an extremely good reader—one who has learned to show others what he saw in what he read."\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{48} Jarrell, "The Age of Criticism," p. 83.
CHAPTER III
ON THE MODERN AMERICAN POETS

When we read the poems of these poets and of the Irishman Yeats, we realize that the whole center of gravity of poetry in English had shifted west of England.¹

The lecture "Fifty Years of American Poetry," delivered at the National Poetry Festival in 1962, presents a comprehensive survey of the course of American poetry, and of the American poets, in the period between 1910 and 1960.² Here Jarrell applies his imaginative judgment to the sweep of history quite as surely as to the individual poet—and with a refreshingly non-sectarian catholicity of taste. The year 1910 found America a poetic waste land. Whitman and Dickinson, in all their originality and eccentricity, were far in the past, as were Melville, Emerson and Thoreau. There had been little if any good poetry written in this country since the 1870's. But in the period since 1912, such poets as Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Williams, Marianne Moore and Ransom have brought about a resurgence in American poetry, making it "the best and most influential in the English language," and establishing "once and for all the style and tone of American poetry."

In demonstrating this thesis, Jarrell promises to "stick to the poets and the poems," to the phenomena, eliminating any sort of theorizing as a mockery of the poet and of the reader. Jarrell believes, with Goethe, that theories are as a rule impulsive reactions of an over-hasty understanding which would like to have done with phenomena and therefore substitutes for them images, concepts, or often even just words.\(^3\) He offers, then, not theory but "the opinions of a devoted reader of this poetry"—opinions on over forty poets, with each of whom he seems thoroughly familiar. Some are delivered in a few brief and exact observations; others developed at greater length and in more detail. Certain less important poets are discussed as a group or a movement. Each judgment is characterized by a felt balance, a niceness in estimation so that we are drawn to respond affirmatively—even enthusiastically.

Thus, Jarrell says that the humanness of Edwin Arlington Robinson's characters, as opposed to the inhumaness of the world they have made for themselves, emphasizes that "steady human sympathy" that he has made a touchstone of his estimate of a poem's worth. Robinson's verse, like that of Edgar Lee Masters, achieves a vivid image of the America of the turn of the century. Neither poet has a sound grasp of "poetic rhetoric," however, so that both are at their best when most prosaic.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 296.
Carl Sandburg is no more than a colorful and appealing fraud, who is himself a more fully realized work of art than are his poems. In fact, the only really capable poet among this small group of precursors was Vachel Lindsay, so that he alone among them produced some few poems that Jarrell finds "perfected." Ironically, in what were virtually frontier days, Lindsay enjoyed an enormous personal popularity that is not available to the poet of today.

But the giants of the first half of the century, Frost and Eliot and Stevens, had yet to appear. Jarrell's remarks on Frost, repeated almost verbatim from the articles discussed in Chapter Two, here gain an added dimension in an orderly comparison with his judgment of the other poets to whom he sets the same measures as he set for Frost—as he sets for himself. The criteria remain constant: the poem must reflect reality; the poet should develop, out of a deep understanding and knowledge, the drama in the actions of ordinary men; he is normally best advised to employ the rhythms of actual speech; he is serious, honest, and sorrowful in accepting things as they are; he is subtle and exact in all his observations, and empathetic with all things, including himself; he possesses imagination, wit, humor, and a lively power of expression. In speaking of Frost, Jarrell presents an orderly and succinct summation of the standards against which he measures the poetry of his contemporaries.
The years 1912 to 1922 were dominated by two figures—Yeats in poetry and Pound in criticism. Pound's poetic advice is clear and simple: "Write like speech—and read French poetry!" But Pound's own poetry is far more complex than that, and a good deal less satisfying. He progresses from an earlier romanticism to dealing in his own words, with a "world of moving energies . . . the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror"—phrases that somehow bring to mind certain of Jarrell's own earlier poems, especially his war poems. Pound's best work, however, comes to us mostly in "beautiful fragments or adaptations." It is surprising, Jarrell says, "that a poet of Pound's extraordinary talents should have written so few good poems all his own." He later refers to The Cantos as an extraordinary misuse of extraordinary powers, but insists that all Pound's eccentricities fail to prevent his writing some good poetry. Pound does not strike at the heart of things but "makes notes on the margin of the universe," sometimes valid, but more often they are a "moral and intellectual disaster and make us ashamed for him." Jarrell concludes that "what is worst in Pound and what is worst in the age have conspired to ruin The Cantos and have not succeeded."4

The observations on Wallace Stevens presented in the present article are drawn for the most part from an Introduction

4Ibid., p. 305.
to The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, published in 1955,\(^5\) and reflect a reconsideration of certain positions taken in an even earlier article, "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," published in 1951.\(^6\) Taken together, the articles demonstrate the consistency of Jarrell's critical principles and the flexibility with which he applied them.

In the earlier article, a review of Stevens' Auroras of Autumn, Jarrell had treated Stevens quite harshly. He said that Stevens was a poet who had seen his best days. The poet is "somebody who has prepared himself to be visited by a daemon," and Jarrell clearly implies that the daemon is not in the habit of visiting the elderly. Jarrell found that Stevens had become set in his ways and was no longer "possessed by subject," or "shaken out of himself," as he had been in the earlier Harmonium. He was "a fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself—the best marble but, still, marble." He has other harsh words for Stevens' "mannered, manufactured, individual, uninteresting little sound-inventions," and his use of foreign words. He finds Stevens' "myths" stiff and rationalistic, his verse "contrived." He speaks of the stuff of poetry as being "processed"


in "passagework . . . so usual that we can't believe past the form to the matter." 7

Stevens' earlier work had contained several of what Jarrell deems "the most beautiful poems an American has written." The later work, though it retains "the easy virtuosity of the master," fails to bring to life the monotonous abstractions that had come to characterize Stevens' thought. Jarrell believes that poetry should deal with reality, with the concrete, and Stevens had chosen to philosophize in verse, leading Jarrell to a generalization that he will later be forced to modify:

Poetry is a bad medium for philosophy. Everything in the philosophical poem has to satisfy irreconcilable requirements: for instance, the last demand that we should make of philosophy (that it be interesting) is the first we make of a poem. 8

For the poet, the generalization should exist on a derivative level, and only for the sake of the concrete. But Stevens had come to think of "particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects, simply there to be contemplated." Also, and as a sort of corollary, he notes that Stevens has no dramatic gift, and that it is "the lack of immediate contact with lives that hurts his poetry more than anything else."

8 Ibid., p. 127.
This is the sort of unrelenting analysis that earned Jarrell his many enemies. His high praise of Stevens' earlier work does little to mitigate his crushing dismissal of the later. His final, intemperate remarks on the aging genius are detached, dispassionate, and well calculated to engender a wholesome rage in the breast of almost anyone over forty.

In the Introduction to Stevens' Collected Poems Jarrell finds occasion to modify, or at least to admit an exception to, his generalizations on the aging artist. After a few opening remarks, somewhat deprecatory of the pretensions of the critic who writes introductions to collected poems, he turns almost immediately to the group of poems entitled "The Rock." These poems perfectly express reality but from an entirely unique perspective. They are marked by, and mark reality with, "the largening presence of death." They are the poems of a man who sees the world in a manner that we cannot—that we never shall—and is able to show it to us.

The poetry of Stevens' last years makes us feel "what it is to be human" in a different way. Jarrell had condemned Stevens' verse as undramatic, abstract, indifferent, and so it remains. But something else has happened, so that his latest poetry is truly great in spite of its lack of those characteristics which are Jarrell's touchstones. Stevens has achieved "a calm, serious certainty, an easiness of rightness, like
well-being." Jarrell had condemned all philosophizing in verse because he had never seen it successfully done. He is now forced to concede that philosophizing has produced good poetry in this one instance. Moreover, under the influence of "The Rock" he has reconsidered the *Auroras of Autumn* but found nothing to cause him to withdraw his earlier unfavorable judgments. Nor does he feel that his generalizations on age and the muse are weakened by this totally unique exception.

However, he does draw from Stevens' experience a clear-cut affirmation of another fixed opinion—that a good poet will write continuously. He will not always write good poetry, but out of quantity can come practice, naturalness, accustomed mastery, adaptations and elaborations and reversals of old ways, new ways even—so that the poet can put into the poems, at the end of a lifetime, what the end of a lifetime brings him.9

Stevens, unlike Eliot, had learned to write at will, so that while he waits for the fire from heaven, he "waits writing." Because of this technical mastery, Jarrell feels that in generations to come, long after the influence of Eliot and Pound has been forgotten, the young poet will turn for inspiration to the "generalizing, masterful, scannable verse of Stevens."

A poet of a very different sort is William Carlos Williams, who writes as much like a good novelist as like a poet. He is observant, mimetic, dealing in detail and form and

"the spirit moving behind the letters." The most pragmatic, the most "American" of poets, he prefers a clear, active representation of each aspect of the ambiguities the world offers to any sort of obscure reconciliation of them. His "imagist-objectivist" background has aided him immensely in achieving the realism for which he aims, but has left him somewhat weak in organization, in logic, and in "narrative generalization." However, Jarrell does not, generally, admire the intellectual as poet. In many poems, he will maintain, Williams achieves just barely enough organization of the raw material of life to capture in the poem the very essence he is after—the "Nature of the edge of the American city."

Several of Jarrell's contemporaries feel that he vastly overrated Williams, but whatever the validity of his assessment of Williams' place in American poetry, his touchstones and his ideals are clearly stated. He appreciates, if he does not share, Williams' ability to rest (or at least to thrash happily about) in contradiction, doubts, and general guesswork, without ever climbing aboard any of the monumental certainties that go perpetually by, perpetually on time.10

He feels that Williams is a good poet because he has expressed the world as it is in his poems. Moreover, he feels that Williams has expressed himself in the language of ordinary men,

---

elevated to a poetic diction by methods which "permit (indeed encourage) him to say anything at all without worrying."

It is superlative craftsmanship, however, rather than depth of insight that fixes John Crowe Ransom's place in American poetry. His "feel for the exact convention of a particular poem, the exact demands of a particular situation," make his contribution entirely unique. He sees the world as it is and is filled with "an affection that cannot help itself for an innocence that cannot help itself." His poems pretend to no more than they are, but are what they intend so perfectly that he will continue to be read along with Wyatt and with Mother Goose.  

Jarrell opens his discussion of his fellow poet-critic, Eliot (the only poet to whom he refers by the patronymic alone), with a ritual apology for adding to the mass of Eliot criticism already existing. He then adroitly demolishes the bulk of it as "a deluge of exegesis, explication, source listing, scholarship, and criticism" that overwhelms and obscures the poetry. The future, he proclaims, will clearly discern that even Eliot's own criticism—"all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition—" had little if anything to do with his poetry. He was, Jarrell feels

one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived, the victim and helpless beneficiary of his own inexorable compulsions, obsessions.  

---

11 Ibid., p. 314.  
12 Ibid.
Jarrell is certain that the poetry will survive the criticism, and that future ages will understand the "magical rightness of 'Prufrock,'" and will not be led astray by that mesmeric subjective correlative, The Waste Land, which Eliot would have written about the Garden of Eden, but which your age thought its own realistic photograph.13

Eliot is, moreover, the only poet of our age, save Yeats, capable of a good play, or "a long poem that compares with the best of their short poems."

As a critic, however, Eliot shows a curious inability to shadow forth the merits of his own poetry. Jarrell is gently deprecatory of such notions as the "objective correlative" and "the tradition," and places Eliot among the foremost of those who have made our generation one which all too frequently admires "the right poems and the right poet," but for all the wrong reasons.

But if Jarrell's critical stance is clearly opposed to the New Criticism, of which Eliot was a major prophet, his attitude toward Eliot as poet is more ambivalent. Eliot is clearly not the sort of poet, as Frost is, with whom Jarrell feels most comfortable. We may surmise that he found Eliot's intensely orthodox religious viewpoint at variance with his own predilection for poets like Williams who did not find it necessary to impose the patterns of understanding upon a

13Ibid., p. 315.
chaotic reality. Eliot wrote too little, too carefully, perhaps too introspectively. But these things are peripheral. Jarrell's imaginative judgment will not permit him to estimate the Four Quartets as less than

a long poem by a good poet that . . . brings an intelligent man's own world view into an organized and thoughtful whole.14

It is, again, this fidelity to things as they are, and their perfect expression in verse, that remain Jarrell's ultimate criteria.

Similarly, Jarrell's first comment on Marianne Moore concerns her faithfulness to things. She has "as careful and acute an eye as anybody alive, and almost as good a tongue." An eccentric, she shows us more poetry in the world than we had thought was there. But she has also found much evil in the world, so that she, like Jarrell in his children's books and in his later poetry, most particularly in his poem "Thinking of the Lost World," uses art as a form of protection. Thus, she has transformed the totally amoral world of the animals into a realm of good. But, if Marianne Moore made herself armor, "armor hammered out of fern seed, woven from the silk of invisible cloaks," so also did Jarrell wear armor of his own making—his beard, his laughter, his sharp biting manner—armor more delicate than fern seed.

14Ibid.
He had longed to spend his life in the midst of all the throngs of the world, made readers by the magic of his verse, but was always very much alone. In the end he had failed to achieve the success that he finds in Marianne Moore's work at its best. In her own words, "It 'comes into and steadies the soul,' so that the reader feels himself 'a life prisoner, but reconciled.'" Her withdrawal from the world is an "aristocratic absention," born of a revulsion which Jarrell shares for a world in which "feeling, affection, charity are so entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of the flesh." But it is in overcoming the limitations inherent in such a withdrawal that the poet's art is proven. Her triumph lies in her exercise of "the poet's immemorial power to make the things of this world seen and felt and living in words."\(^{15}\)

The extraordinary personality of E. E. Cummings brought into being those strange, "avant-garde, experimental" poems that brought him, alone among the poets of his generation, the sort of wide popularity that Vachel Lindsay enjoyed—that Jarrell never mentions without a tinge of envy and regret. Cummings' work, however, is idiosyncratic and self-indulgent. He was able to spend his life putting words into "all the places they didn't belong," creating a formulaic poetry which Jarrell finds wearisome. His manner of expression does not in any way reflect

\(^{15}\)Jarrell, "Her Shield," *Poetry and the Age*, p. 168.
the rhythms of actual speech. He has learned to create extraordinary and original effects, without, however, producing any poem that Jarrell can call "good."

With Emerson, Jarrell thinks of language as a world of signs and prescribed relations between the signs, that stand for the things in the natural world and their relations. He finds that Cummings celebrates instead a "disorder or meta-order in the world to which ordered words are inadequate." The disorder is certainly there in the world, but to dedicate one's total poetic effort toward that one aspect of reality can only be seen as a grave limitation. Thus, although Jarrell readily concedes that Cummings distills the intoxicating "clear liquor" of poetry, he fails to show the world as it really is, and is not, therefore, a good poet. One approaches Cummings for entertainment rather than for enlightenment.

Similarly, Conrad Aiken has written no single poem that Jarrell can call "good," but he finds it very difficult to say exactly what is lacking in Aiken's work. Jarrell suspects that the very persistence which rewarded Stevens so magnificently has somehow worked against Aiken. Paraphrasing an aphorism which maintains that style lies in an almost invisible turn of phrase, he remarks that Aiken turns every phrase, over and over and over. He too "waited writing," but succeeded only in

---

creating poetry that is "moderately interesting, because almost entirely predictable."17

The treatment accorded Allen Tate is curiosly terse. In a brief ten lines Jarrell concedes that Tate has written more than several very good poems, but immediately introduces a series of pejorative criteria which have not been noted before. Tate, he says, suffers from a lack of "charm, of human appeal, of human sympathy," and writes with a "tone of somewhat forbidding authority." One may surmise that the paragraph is colored by the coolness that had existed between Jarrell and his fellow poet-critic, and one-time mentor, for over twenty years. Tate mentions Jarrell's coolness toward him in a brief article prepared for the memorial volume, Randall Jarrell: 1914-1965, tracing it to a difference of opinion over the order of the poems in Jarrell's first book of poetry, Blood for a Stranger, published in 1940.18

Robinson Jeffers and Archibald MacLeish get short shrift: Jeffers, as a poet whose work suffers from exaggeration in style, in temperament, and, fatally, in his "whole world-view;" MacLeish, as guilty of seriously overextending what is only a "delicate lyric gift." Jarrell compares the rhetoric of the play J.B. to that of "the most cultivated

---

17Ibid., p. 322.
and effective television program. MacLeish, an authentic "public figure," had the mass audience that Jarrell wanted for the poet, but was interested only in controlling its responses by catering to its whims.

The failure of Hart Crane's *The Bridge* is attributed to a betrayal of experience as well as to Crane's failures in technique. He felt that Crane attempted to impose a sentimental, positive image upon a basically sound "understanding of, feeling for, the worst changes in the United States." The poetry is flawed by overblown rhetoric and vocabulary, but there are enough wonderful passages in it to establish Crane as a major American poet.

Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* is, Jarrell says, one of the few good long poems of our century. However, he feels that Warren's gifts are narrative and dramatic rather than lyric, and clearly rejects the world-view that Warren advances. He might accept, in his worst moments, Warren's stripping away of "the consoling veil of religion and art and philosophy," but he must reject as inadequate the "saving grace, the shaky grace, of custom" that Warren leaves us. He also finds it difficult to accept Warren's "wrenching historical understanding, his rhetoric, and his moralizing." But

Brother to Dragons is a good poem because there is

a wonderful amount of life in the poem—of human
beings who, in the end, are free both of Warren's
rhetoric and moralizing and of our own.20

In Theodore Roethke we find a poet who "began under
glass, . . . and whose marshlike unconscious is continually
celebrating its marriage with the whole wet dark underside of
things." Jarrell finds him surprisingly varied in style, but
true only to a very strictly defined aspect of reality. He
lists several poems which demonstrate Roethke's virtuosity, and
concludes that, despite a certain "rhetorical insincerity" and
the heavy influence of Eliot and Yeats, he is "a forceful, deli-
cate, and original poet whose poetry is still changing."

At this point, Jarrell concludes that American poets,
when they are good, have an individuality and independence that
enables them to avoid the literary establishmentarianism of the
British or European poet. But to retain their freedom, they
must avoid affiliation with American "doctrinaire groups with
immutable principles." The beatniks, for example, with their
"iron spontaneity," produce good poetry only accidentally.
Their disdain for the selection, exclusion, and concentration
that are necessary to an effective poetic technique, prevents
them from achieving the "indirectness" of a true work of art.
Despite this avowed spontaneity, their method does not allow

20 Ibid., p. 326.
the artist's unconscious to operate "as it normally does in the process of producing a work of art."

On the reactionary side, the same "doctrinaire directness" characterizes the followers of Yvor Winters. It is as though these poets have

met an enchanter who has said to them: 'You have all met an enchanter who has transformed you into obscure romantic animals, but you can become clear and classical and human again if you will only swallow these rules.'

Whereupon all such poets are turned into waxen Longfellows—victims of a "learned imbecility, a foolishness of the schools," a malady which can be cured only by a thorough application of "Johnson's 'Clear your mind of cant.'"

Another larger group of poets who "come out of Richard Wilbur's overcoat, . . . creative writing class poets," do not practice any form of art but a form of social behavior calculated to please those who control the publishing of poetry. All of them, beatniks, reactionaries, and academics have foregone the true vocation of the poet for cultist exercises in verse. They have abandoned any attempt to capture reality in their poems or to reach the great mass of readers. They are content to write for an ingrown elite. The lightning will strike but rarely, if at all, in these parts.

Jarrell then considers several related but subsidiary

\[21\text{Ibid.}, p. 328.\]
aspects of the American poetic scene. He speaks of the great popularity of the "feminine" verse, in the tradition of Elizabeth Barret Browning, that flourished early in the century—favoring romantic themes, love, and nature. He remarks with some chagrin on the real popularity of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and observes that neither Frost nor Stevens nor Eliot will ever be read in a canoe. The popularity of this school has not survived, but the tradition has, and still produces poetry of unpretentious, delicate beauty. We note that Jarrell is careful to exclude from this feminine tradition those few female poets, such as Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, whom he has given a place in the mainstream of American poetry.

Jarrell next mentions some seventeen contemporary poets, carefully designated as "interesting and intelligent," "charming individual, or forceful," and, simply, "respected," of whose work we ought to take note. Among this group he singles out Karl Shapiro, whose poems are "fresh and young and rash and live," whose style is highly individual, though derivative—from Auden, then from Rilke, and finally from Whitman. His poems "have a real precision, a memorable exactness of realization," and are taken from life, but they are too frequently exaggerated, out of indignation or mischief, so that he is always crying: 'but he hasn't any clothes on!' about an emperor who is half the time surprisingly
well dressed. 22

Richard Wilbur, apparently somewhat more worthy of serious attention than those others who come out of his overcoat, is possessed of an "impersonal, exactly accomplished, faintly sententious skill." Ironically, Jarrell maintains, as in the case of Eliot, that it is an unwilled "compulsion" rather than any craftsmanship that has enabled Wilbur to write those few poems that Jarrell finds good, and one, "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra," that he calls "marvelously beautiful, one of the most nearly perfect poems any American has written."

Finally, and at some length, Jarrell treats lovingly of the work of Robert Lowell. Some fifteen years earlier, Jarrell had greeted with enthusiasm the publication of Lowell's Lord Weary's Castle, finding that the poetry had beneath it a common story, a common theme. 23 Lowell had come to see the world as a realm of conflict between the forces of repression and the human drive for liberation, and had made this the ruling principle of his work. His values, like Jarrell's, transcend the accidents of time and place so that he is able to assimilate the past because he thinks as the past thought—he "contains the past . . . as an operative skeleton just under the

---

22 Ibid., p. 331.

23 "From the Kingdom of Necessity," Nation, CLXIV (January 18, 1947), 74, 76. Poetry and the Age, pp. 188-99.
Long an advocate of Lowell's, Jarrell is now the critic triumphant, boasting that the publication of Lord Weary's Castle made him feel "like a rain-maker who predicts rain and gets a flood which drowns everyone in the country."

In the present article, Jarrell contrasts Lowell's work with that of Wilbur. Lowell is a "poet of shock," creating his poetry out of life itself rather than out of the things of life as Wilbur does. Where Wilbur is "impersonal and anonymous," Lowell is so personally present in each of his poems that we come to know him almost too well. Lowell writes of

the awful depths, the plain absurdities of his own actual existence in the prosperous, developed, disastrous world he and we inhabit.24

He sees his own life as an integral and intensely experienced part of a world he finds "terrible," but refuses to "forsake the headlined world for the refuge of one's private joys and decencies, the shaky garden of the heart." Tracing the development of Lowell's career from his earliest work, which he "bullied," to the later poems of "great originality and power," Jarrell finds that he has continued to develop, and is rarely found to have repeated himself. "You feel before reading any new poem of his the uneasy expectation of perhaps encountering a masterpiece."25

---


25 Ibid., p. 334.
Jarrell thus appears as a totally pragmatic critic—a totally honest critic. His focus is on the poem itself, and not on "those other wonderful things, poets," except insofar as their lives or activities directly impinge upon the poetry. Thus, he never fails to remark, with admiration and with envy, those fortunate few who have enjoyed a wide audience and even made a living at their chosen profession. He notes the deleterious effect of Frost's cultivation of his public image on his poetry, and the failure of advanced age to dim Stevens' "fresh clear blue eyes." But to the poets' private lives, their political, social or moral peccadillos, he pays no heed at all. He is concerned only with the phenomenon, the poem as it exists, and regards not man.

He is, however, convinced that poets do not spring full-fledged from poetry seminars, from writing classes, not even from the mind of Jove. Those to whom the gift is given are still bound over to interminable effort, in countless thunderstorms, so that they may be prepared when lightning strikes. Poetry is a matter of purely gratuitous inspiration and hard-won craftsmanship. The standing out in the storm is the patient development of the talents and skills necessary for the realization of the poem when the lightning does strike, but will, in itself produce no more than adequate verse, never the "perfectly realized poems" that are Jarrell's ideal.
His only fixed and immutable critical principle is that the poem perfectly express some humanly important aspect of the real world as the poet sees it. He has some very definite opinions as to how this is best accomplished, expressed most succinctly, as we saw above, in his appreciations of the poetry of Robert Frost. But he does not hesitate to bestow the laurel on those who have successfully traveled some other road. He hails Eliot as the greatest of the American poets although his poems reflect, not the actions of ordinary men, but the reactions of a very extraordinary man, and are scarcely cast in the rhythms of common speech. He does not think that poetry should approach reality from an abstract, philosophical point of view, yet concedes that the poetry of Stevens' last years succeeded in achieving a transcendent but very accurate vision of reality. He believes that the poet must be master of language, but does not feel that Cummings' poetry, for all its mastery, achieved real greatness.

To successfully practice so thoroughly pragmatic and so totally honest an imaginative judgment, the critic needs the impeccable taste that Jarrell possessed, based on a wide and well-considered experience, so as to recognize the truly "good" poem when he sees it; the formidable persuasive talent, and the enthusiasm he displays in showing us just why the poem is "good;" and the humility that enables him to avoid interposing himself
between the reader and the poem, like the wall between Pyramus and Thisbe. His vision is of the critic as teacher, guiding the reader to what is good, and showing him how to appreciate it—to be the telescope through which the reader sees the stars.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{26}\) Jarrell, "The Age of Criticism," *Poetry and the Age*, p. 86.
CHAPTER IV
ON THE AMERICAN SOCIETY

The tide goes in and the tide goes out, but the
beach stays sand and the sea stays salt--
and it is the sand and the salt that I am writing about. ¹

In 1962, Jarrell's second volume of collected essays
A Sad Heart at the Supermarket, was published. The first four
of its ten essays are concerned not with the criticism of litera­
ture but with the failures of contemporary American society.
The tone has become more bitter; the attacks broader. The irony
and humor of Poetry and the Age have given way to cynicism.
Jarrell has passed beyond moral criticism to a direct attack on
the society that refuses to be improved by literature. He has
almost completely abandoned the criticism of poetry, turning in­
stead to a consideration of cultural patterns, of prose fiction,
and a generalized concern with the wider aspects of art. Only
the final article, "A Wilderness of Ladies," recalls his earlier
preoccupation. However, as Jarrell's critical activity lessened,
his own literary output increased. During the sixties, the
final period of his activity, Jarrell was to publish two of his

¹Randall Jarrell, A Sad Heart at the Supermarket (New
York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 5. (Hereinafter referred to as
A Sad Heart.)
finest volumes of poetry, to write four excellent children's books (of which only three have been published), and to translate several fairy tales and plays.

If, in the articles discussed in Chapter I, Jarrell laid most of the ills that beset American literature and poetry at the doorstep of the inept and arrogant critic, he now considers the possibility that the American reader has been granted the critical establishment he deserves. As our society has prospered and grown powerful, our bread of life—our food for the intellect and for the imagination—has softened and begun to decay. As a society, we are physically undernourished; as a community, we rank among the world's illiterates. We have, in reaching out for all things, relinquished our hold on the essential human values which distinguish man from his fellow creatures.

The title of the collection is taken from a soap-opera subtitled, "The Story of a Woman Who Had Everything," and sets an unfortunately bathetic tone. Jarrell attempts, and often fails, to overwhelm the reader with an antagonistic ridicule which tends to obscure the important things that he had to say. He uses as epigraph an aphorism of Martin Luther: "And even if the world should end tomorrow, I still would plant my little apple-tree." Jarrell intended these essays as his final attempt to shock the American meta-reader back into literary consciousness: "Here, reader, is my little apple-tree."
1. "The Intellectual in America"

The first of these social essays, "The Intellectual in America," published in 1955, opens with the fable of Diogenes, which Jarrell will retailor to reflect the condition of the intellectual in our materialistic, impersonal society. 2 The Diogenes of old, a wise man and an ascetic of sorts, had whittled away at the superfluities of life to bring his existence down to barest essentials. He had once kept a cup, but when he saw a man drinking out of his hands, he threw it away. He was, withal, greatly respected and famous. The Great Alexander, King of Macedon and conqueror of all the known world, is drawn to do him homage but finds that all he can do for Diogenes is to step aside and let the sun shine in. Diogenes has learned what is real in the world—what Jarrell has been trying, with anguish, to tell us. Man can do with surprisingly little if only he will come to understand what it is that makes him truly human—his intellect, his creative imagination, a true knowledge of the world and of himself.

But our generation can no longer understand the fable. We wonder what Alexander was doing there. We, as a people, have come to distrust intellectuals as abnormal. The phenomenon has been noted by more than one responsible authority and many of

2 Mademoiselle, XXXX (January, 1955), 121-23 and Jarrell, A Sad Heart, pp. 3-15.
its possibilities had been explored by Senator Joseph McCarthy only a few years before this article was published. Jarrell's complaint is hardly a voice in the wilderness, but we all recall how very few such voices were heard when McCarthy was in full cry, and how little has been done for those in academic and political and entertainment circles whose careers were destroyed in the witch hunts.

In 1955, when this article was written, a man could be ridiculed simply for going to Harvard, and a derisive definition of the intellectual was attributed to the President of the United States. In a footnote added in 1962, Jarrell concedes that it is no longer politically inexpedient to have gone to Harvard but does not feel that there is any basic alteration in the situation:

The tide goes in and the tide goes out, but the beach stays sand and the sea stays salt—and it is the sand and the salt that I am writing about.³

Jarrell then begins to extrapolate on the legend of Diogenes. In this new version, Diogenes goes to see Alexander and is unable to gain an audience. Moreover, when he returns to his tub, he finds that he has also lost the tolerant, though indifferent, good will of his fellow citizens. He hears a voice, "like the voice of God," but which is actually more a sort of vox populi, which utters the classic egalitarian state-

³Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 5.
ment: "If some are wise, then others must be foolish: therefore I will have no one wise." As Goethe affirms, to be in the presence of anything that one cannot deny is great, is felt to somehow lessen the self. We, therefore, denigrate the intellectual, the artist, insisting that if he acted as we do, spoke as we do, thought as we do, we would respect him more. But we really won't. We will only despise him as we despise ourselves. However, the voice got through to Diogenes, and some say that he changed—became successful and popular and powerful in the media and was sought out by Alexander. Others say he did not change and gradually became a figure of derision, slightly suspect but not dangerous, available if someone were needed to blame something on.

But the voice he had heard was still active, offering Diogenes a third choice—to live on as an intellectual but at the price of a virtual exclusion from the human community, and the loss of friends and associates. In other words, he could exist, but only at the expense of entering that same obscurity that hides the poet. This is not a new situation, says Jarrell, quoting a bleak excerpt from Alexis de Tocqueville which ends with America telling its intellectuals, "I have given you your life, but it is an existence worse than death."  

De Tocqueville's position may be overstated, but he

\[4\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 8.\]
has touched upon something which our reality approaches as a limit. The intellectual is tolerated in many places—even treated as a celebrity. He may come to be regarded as a good intellectual (not like those other intellectuals), and he always has the cold comfort of knowing that only in America are intellectuals treated in this way. Unfortunately, like every other minority, he soon begins to betray the very ghetto characteristics that the great world says are the reasons it has set him apart.

Jarrell concludes the article with a plea, vaguely pathetic, rather than a castigation, as was perhaps dictated by its initial publication in Madamoiselle. Confusing, for the nonce, the intellectual with the expert, he first includes everyone among the ranks of the intellectuals, from the general to the alley mechanic, and then asks their acceptance of their old friend, the poet. Shifting ground, he says that the intellectual is really fond of Americans, despite what de Tocqueville said about them, and only wishes that they were "willing to labor to be wise, ... even willing to be wise." We need to let the world know that there is more to American culture than money grubbing and tasteless expenditure. There is a greatness in the American tradition, in the founding fathers, in Abraham Lincoln, and it is the task of the intellectual, the poet, to show it to all the world, and even to his fellow citizens.
2. "The Taste of the Age"

If it is the role of the intellectual, the poet, to thus live in obscurity, what are we to say of the audience that visits this fate upon him—the audience, whose life style is so impervious to the poet's influence that they look down upon him as somehow unaware. In "The Taste of the Age," published in 1958, Jarrell gives himself over to serious consideration of the potential American audience for the arts, and the education that has made them what they are. The salt has lost its savor, so that the taste of our age is flat. Of course, every age bewails its own time. Every age looks back to some golden state, back to the garden of Eden, and will in its turn be looked back upon as somehow better than some future age. In terms of numbers, our age pays a great deal of attention to the arts. The opera and ballet are well attended. More recordings of classical music and fine art reproductions are sold than ever before. The arts flourish like the green bay tree, or like weeds.

But this great spirit of ours accepts and tolerates the mediocre with the good, the ostentatious with the sublime. This spirit of total willingness to accept all things is ultimately more detrimental than the rejection that was once visited upon

---

the artist who deviated from established norms. In our day we see truly great artists put to the service of advertising and faddism, along with everyone else, so that any sense of differentiation is lost. Unfortunately, so is Jarrell's argument. He has come to the point of damning society for ignoring the artist and also for putting him to work. What he wants of society is unclear, and what he sees happening to the successful artist is shown far more successfully in the satire of Pictures from an Institution.

After voicing discouragement at modern trends in music, architecture, and interior design, Jarrell turns to "the arts that use words." Here a not-so-gentle reader breaks in to ask if Jarrell's remarks concern the hundreds of thousands who are literate and sophisticated, or the hundreds of millions who are not. He retorts that it is to the patterned degradation of the great masses of potential readers that he directs his attention. To help us understand our situation, Jarrell takes us back to the age of Victoria—the age of Matthew Arnold. Although the Queen had never seen television, penicillin, or the electric refrigerator, she had seen the beginnings of the industrial revolution, railroads, electric lights, the telegraph. It was, after all, during her reign that the great world began to "spin forever down the ringing grooves of change." But, she had not experienced that other, more frightening technological revolu-
ution that has since come to dominate society. She had not heard of public relations or advertising, of press-agentry or the modern press, of ghost-writers or book digests, nor had she been exposed to the spiritually overwhelming effects of a movie, or television, or a soap-opera. If she had, as we have, she would have been a totally different person.

Jarrell calls this barrage of propaganda a "Revolution of the Word," and if he is hostile to much of what we middle Americans are proud to call American civilization, he is particularly hostile to the debasement of the word. We employ millions of people just to drown us in words. Whether they lie to us or tell us the truth is immaterial. The inevitable consequence is that words get processed, like baby food, in a standard manner for a standard market. Where the poet would "teach us to sit still," the word merchants would control our reactions to make us all creatures of common likes and dislikes. "They fool me to the top of my bent." He rails against the tasteless bread of a breadless world—a culture of instant coffee, instant literature. His condemnation has become a satirical diatribe, almost without humor, like Jonathan Swift in his rage at what society had done to his people.

Jarrell scorns not to name and specify those persons and those institutions that have kindled his wrath—those publishers and hacks who have made bold to rewrite and simplify the greatest human classics, translating them into their own
simple-minded patois and reducing their thought to the lowest common denominator. As a result, the body of common knowledge—myth, folk tales, scripture and literature—that once bound men together and formed a common ground for human conversation has been destroyed. An entire universe of converse based on allusive references to the classics has been erased from the human experience. Yet these are the very associations which enable us to "understand things, feel about things, as human beings and not as human animals." 6

Jarrell lays much of the blame for this situation on our schools, particularly the primary and secondary schools. When students arrive at college, their minds are already committed to the low level of literacy established by our culture and administered by our culture's schools. Among college professors he has been accustomed to speak of "The Things Their Students Don't Know," and a limited exposure to younger students has served to amply confirm his suspicion that not only were children not exposed to such characters as Jonah, Arthur, and Charlemagne, but that no one except a small and quite probably eccentric coterie of college professors seems to be concerned with the situation.

The goal of the schools is normalcy, social adjustment, and the acquisition of living skills. Literature that is

6Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 32.
thought to be too difficult for a certain grade level is dropped, but it is never restored at some higher level where we might presume that reading skills, however stunted by the competition of movies and the radio, might be assumed to have caught up.

In other words, the reading experiences that might have brought the young person to the level we call literate have been permanently eliminated. Nor does Jarrell feel that this is mere oversight. There is abroad in our culture an active hostility to any level of literacy that would tend to stretch or expand the mind. This hostility is evidenced in a letter Jarrell saw in *The Saturday Review*, in which the writer hoped "that fifty years from now nobody will remember that Joyce or Stein or James or Proust or Mann ever lived." Jarrell feels that we have already come to such a pass that the writer of the letter will soon have his wish.

But to attack an educational system that reflects accurately the values of the community it serves is pointless. Jarrell realizes that his quarrel is with society itself, "and our quarrels with the world are like quarrels with God: No matter how right we are, we are wrong."  

Employing exactly the same rationale that he used in "The Obscurity of the Poet," Jarrell reverses the argument that people do not read because the books are difficult, retorting

---

that they do not really want to read—to live "as human beings and not as human animals," and that the alleged difficulty is an excuse. Jarrell suspects that what the polls indicate—that the United States, with the highest level of literacy in the world, has fewer readers than any other democracy—is not simply a fortuitous circumstance. He asserts that it is clearly an anti-intellectual culture pattern that has been adopted by the classes that have come to dominate our society, and that this pattern is being consciously and effectively reinforced, not only by our public relations and political establishments, but by our publishing and educational establishments as well.

3. "The Schools of Yesteryear"

"The Schools of Yesteryear," a not entirely successful dramatization of deterioration in education, compares the literary curriculum of generations past to what we find suitable today. A brash youth named Alvin, bred on the scanty fruit of diluted education, debates the issue with his elderly Uncle Wadsworth. The burden of this slender playlet lies in the progressive humiliation of Alvin as he learns that he is painfully ill-equipped to handle as a college student what was once standard fare at the primary level. Jarrell compares the contents of

8 New Republic, CXXXV (November 19, 1956), 13-17 and Jarrell, A Sad Heart, pp. 43-63.
the Appleton Readers of the 1870's, which had fifth-graders reading Milton and Gray, to a current text entitled Days and Deeds, which has them reading Fletcher D. Slater, Norma Berglon, and Sanford Tousey. Alvin is eventually convinced that Uncle Wadsworth's preferences are sound.

In this essay, as in the others, the mood is somber, the humor corrosive. Jarrell feels a desperate need to make clear to anyone who will listen the terrible condition which he prophetically laments. He has become an unwelcome prophet in a waste land flowing with milk and honey but dismally barren of human growth. Like every prophet, he knows that he is a voice crying in the wilderness, pronouncing his portents of doom to resentful and deafened ears. The level of his anxiety is made evident by the depths to which he has descended to attract our attention.

"The Schools of Yesteryear," as drama, must be rated somewhat below the average soap-opera. Of its characters, one is perhaps as two-dimensional and uncongenial as the other, and the argument is overblown and simplistic. That the textbooks of generations past contained materials more suited to the education of a literate, mature human being seems evident. Jarrell's corollary assumption that the pupils of generations past profited to the same extent is unfortunately gratuitous.

A quick survey of several primary level readers at hand in my own household reveals the dismal accuracy of Jarrell's
description. In well administered and imaginative schools and homes these materials are, of course, supplemented, either informally or formally, as in the Junior Great Books Programs. But while this may solve the problems for one's own children or within one's own community, it does not solve the larger problem of which the school textbook is only a symbol—that our society is fundamentally anti-literate. However, this analysis of textbook content, a task for which Jarrell is preeminently suited by training and by temperament, plunges him almost immediately into areas of political and social commentary where, although we may agree with him in our hearts, we must at the same time realize that he is but ill-equipped to function effectively.

4. "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket"

The last of Jarrell's social essays, "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," published in 1960, is also the most thoroughly anthologized.9 In it he returns to the mode of the poet's complaint, to which his style and his understandings are better suited. He knows that he speaks

as a fool, a suffering, complaining, helplessly non-conforming poet-or-artist-of-a-sort, far off at the obsolescent rear of things; what I say will indicate the depth of my feelings and the shallowness and one-sidedness of my thoughts.10

9Daedalus, CXXXIX (Spring, 1960), 359-72. Jarrell, A Sad Heart, pp. 64-89.
10Ibid., p. 64.
But if he and his sort are to become obsolescent in a world in which there is to be bread aplenty for the mindless masses, he wants at least to tell us of his pain. He quotes, "The toad beneath the harrow knows / Exactly where each tooth-point goes." If his complaint is one-sided, he suggests that it may have a documentary interest of sorts as the study of a poet going mad within the mass culture.

This essay is Jarrell's De Profundis, and the depths from which he cries are the depths of what our new culture leaders call simply "the media." They have created for us a culture in which we ourselves are cultivated, like a crop of bacteria, in that middle condition or degree which we call medium, or mediocre. The purpose is to make us into what society needs most—buyers and consumers. Yesterday's luxury routinely becomes today's staple. We live in an ambience of physical media that function as a mystical body of the Antichrist, enabling him to live in the world and to do his work through human hands and minds and hearts. Satan too offers ways of doing things that no man has ever known. The Protestant ethic of frugal industry has vanished. We now realize our humanity, Jarrell asserts, only in "the great chain of buying."

Moreover, we are called, at the highest levels of our vocation, not merely to consume, but to consume graciously and intelligently. A knowledgeable consumer is someone who, when he
comes to Weimar, knows how to buy a Weimaraner, but very probably doesn't know that it was the home of Goethe. One sees the need for development in consumerism when traveling with children. They will turn blithely away from nature's most magnificent spectacles to the nearest souvenir stand, for they have already been conditioned to respond to the urge to purchase rather than to the outburst of wonder. Industry has simply become a prelude to consumption. We have come to such a pass that a local firm that rents billboard space suggests that their display areas are especially desirable because frequent long traffic jams on adjacent highways gave their clients a captive audience, which has nowhere else to look and nothing else to think about.

Any better quality magazine, like Daisy's voice, sounds like money. Our only felt need is to buy something or to go somewhere. We have allowed those who control the media to make the act of buying a part of our most intimate emotional life. We have exchanged man's ancient bondage for a new and voluntary one. We are trained to want things we have never even heard of. Jarrell himself was so impressed by an advertisement for a stand-by generator, though he wasn't really sure what it was, that he can reproduce the feeling and texture of the ad in all its vibrant immediacy. Pope said that "man wants but little here below / Nor wants that little long," but he was wrong! Our values have come to be based on a success ethic—a morality which
says that if it sells, if it shows a profit, it is good. All values are readily convertible into hard currency, and even persons of the highest standards trade freely in this market.

Adlai Stevenson's account of a trip to Russia is sold to Look magazine, and his son's amateur snapshots of the same trip bring an extra $20,000.11

Our age concentrates on a present which it finds wonderful, and looks forward to a future which will be even better. In this world of commercial and scientific progress, the past has no significance. But the world of the artist is based on a common and continuing body of standards, and the future grows out of the past as its continuation and modification, not its "contradiction or irrelevant replacement." What the great artists of the past have achieved is responsible for the way that we understand and judge our world today. This is the heart of Jarrell's philosophy of human existence. The person of culture, whether artist or reader, lives in a present that is understandable only in terms of all that is past, where our society sees only the last ring on the trunk of the tree, disregarding all the rings that lie beneath as irrelevant. For the artist, as Northrop Frye explains, faces the past: "It may be shadowy, but it is all that is there,"12 In this art

11 Ibid., p. 72. 12 Ibid., p. 74.
finds itself in direct opposition to the media, which are concerned only with the present or with a past "so recent, so quick-changing, so soon-disappearing, that it might be called the specious present." Art is concerned with that body of common knowledge, of common beliefs and moral attitudes that are embodied in those classics that we have relegated to the category of esoterica. Once man's struggle to sustain himself or to defend his honor was material for drama, for tragedy; today, man's struggle to procure a stand-by generator can only provide material for a very limited sort of farce. In Tragedy and Comedy, Walter Kerr argues that our generation is quite as incapable of true comedy as it is of tragedy because of its loss of touch with the eternal verities. It writes only the lightest of farces, and "serious drama" in place of tragedy. In the same vein, Jarrell argues that the artist depends on a complex of shared understandings and feelings. Where these are lacking, where "so much has become contingent, superficial, ephemeral," he cannot function.

The media have created a phantasy world wherein the the existence of the individual depends upon his being perceived by the media. If he is not perceived—if he is very poor, or mentally deficient, or last year's candidate—he

he simply does not exist. But in the real world thus constituted, in which nature imitates art to a degree we had never dreamed possible, parody is obsolete.

In mediating between us and raw reality, the media concentrate on providing us with facts. Poetry is out of favor, even among intellectuals, and fiction grows less and less important. We live in an age where facts, unmitigated by any art, serve only to create a sort of chimeric existence that is half life and half art, and competes with both life and art. It spoils its audience for both; spoils both for its audience.  

The medium creates a safe world where everything is reduced to the little that is known and to the less that matters. We have eliminated, to the extent possible, all contingencies—both those which reality affords and those that occur in the world as recreated by the artist. Art, which lies to us to tell us the truth, is too difficult, too novel. But life unrelieved by art is not distracting enough, so the media provide relief in the form of a pseudo-art that reflects, not reality, but the intention of entertaining the reader. After this diet, the simple bread and wine that life or art offers is neither reassuring enough, nor does it have the impact to which we have become accustomed.

Those who work for the media are not permitted to function as individuals but only as hirelings, supplying a standardized product. From them, unlike the true artist, you know what you will get. Thus the artist and society have been separated so that society no longer knows it needs the artist. It has been stunned by the knock-out drops of the media, which create a vacuum both for the artist and for his potential audience. While it is true that the work of art is frequently created away from, or even in opposition to society, it is for society that the artist works, and he needs society to give his effort meaning. He needs recognition in order to establish communication and is therefore tempted to give his audience what it wants or temporize and give it works which seem independent or contradictory, but which are actually "works of the Medium."

Modern society does not reject the artist, but it wants him to lecture, to be interviewed, to take trips for the state department, to function as a public figure or monument. It pays well for the performance of these functions, but not for his art. Jarrell, expressing a depth of dejection far beyond any that we have seen till now, is tempted to respond: "As long as they pay you, what do you care?" But he knows that artists do care and that he himself cares. "He died," Karl Shapiro asserts, "because his heart was in the right place and his heart
was even stronger than his intellect." Like Socrates, Jarrell was convinced that society needs a gadfly, for "where there is no enemy the people perish." The only effect of the belief that the artist should remain apart from politics and from social issues—that art and politics don't mix—is that effective social criticism is silenced and disarmed.

The pace of change in our culture is accelerating, has become so rapid that

our awareness of the extent of the changes has been repressed, and we regard as ordinary what is extraordinary—ominous perhaps—both for us and for the rest of the world.¹⁶

Thus, America is fast approaching a "Roman future," and is leading the rest of the world with it. We no longer have any notion of the good life but only "miscellaneous prospects of jobs and joyless hedonism." Our culture lacks the "elevation and beauty" that Matthew Arnold found essential to an interesting life.

Jarrell knows that America is too successful to need his advice, or to accept it. But he promises that if she should ever fail, "It is there waiting for you, the advice or consolation of all the other failures."¹⁷

¹⁶Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 86.
¹⁷Ibid., p. 89.
These fulminations against the American society, our cultureless age, the mass media, display the many moods of the artist turned social commentator. He seems at one time a latter day John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness of his own isolation "Make straight the way of the Lord." At other times he seems strangely pathetic, repeating his deep concern with the coldness of the generation which has brought society to cast aside all that he, as poet, as artist, considers sacred. He has prophesied, threatening his audience in somber words of doom. Yet, throughout the essays, lectures and poems, he consistently reveals a desperate and unfounded hope that we will respond to him. He had had "A Conversation with the Devil," in which he proposed to those few who listened, "So whisper, when I die, We was too few."
CHAPTER V  
ON PROSE FICTION  

A novel is a prose narrative of some length  
that has something wrong with it.  

In the period between 1958 and 1965, Jarrell wrote critical introductions to one general anthology of short stories, three collections of Kipling's short stories, a collection of six Russian short novels, and a new edition of Christina Stead's novel, The Man Who Loved Children. The criteria upon which he bases his imaginative judgment of prose fiction prove identical to those employed in the criticism of poetry. He displays the same penchant for praising the great but unheralded authors, as in the case of Christina Stead, and for setting the record straight on authors widely heralded but for the wrong reasons, as in the case of Rudyard Kipling.  

1. The Short Story  

In an article entitled "Stories" published in 1958, Jarrell's first concern is the definition of the genre as a work of the imagination.  

Elaborating upon the dictionary description of the use of the word "story" to refer to an  

---  

1Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism, p. 50.  


129
account of events that have occurred, to a fictitious narrative, or even, colloquially, to an outright falsehood, he elaborates his own definition of the story as something which "tells the truth or a lie—is a wish, or a truth, or a wish modified by truth." His first concern, as always, is with the exact relationship between the work of art and reality. Children always ask whether a story is "true," but their real concern is that the story will satisfy their hopes and desires. Stories are as much a part of our dream life as an accounting of the facts of our physical life. Their realm is only as real as the realm of the daily existence of a "doubly- or triply- natured creature, whose needs, understandings, and ideals ... contradict one another." 3 Truth and fantasy hold the same relationship in fiction as in the world of human life.

The story may balance these contradictions in many ways. The artist may present fantasy as fact, or as a dream that places the hero in opposition to fact and leads to his downfall, or as a higher reality of which fact is the merest shadow, or, most often, as some balance between all three of these. All polarities meet in fiction because every story is rooted in the truths that lie in the heart of man—in "the tears of things, the truth of things." The genesis of every story can be found in the tales of the Brothers Grimm which beautifully illustrate

3Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 141.
Freud's theory that stories, poems, and myths are, like dreams, man's way of achieving some sort of compromise between the expression of his unconscious emotions and his defense against the dangers they portend.

These things are true whether the artist chooses to tell his story in the form of verse, of prose, of epigram, of epitaph, or in a simple statement of fact. Only the instinct of the artist can tell him which form will enable him to strike the balance that art requires. Jarrell cites the story of the relationship between David and Abishag the Shunnamite as one that could only be spoiled by elaboration. The form that we call the short story is simply a somewhat different, recently developed modality of the urge of the artist to capture some part of the reality of the world and of the actions and reactions of men in the form of a work of art which will communicate truly to other men the wonders he has seen.

A good part of our knowledge of the world comes from reading, or writing, stories in which we experience events or emotions of which we would otherwise never have known. In teaching writing we sometimes emphasize the notion that our whole existence is comprised of stories, if only we could bring to life the vision and organization that art requires. Stories are simply people remembering what happened and making these incidents meaningful. Stories are as old, or older, than
poetry itself, and can flow either from the artist's total openness to the world around him, or from his complete withdrawal within himself. They can vary "from a more-than-Kantian disinterestedness, . . . to an insensate, protoplasmic egotism to which the self is the final fact."  

Events will never provide more than the skeleton of the story—the sketch from which the artist will create the work of art. When he tries to fashion his poem as concisely as the experience life provides, he will normally resort to verse. But, "the poems one selects for a book of stories have more of the flesh of ordinary fiction."

The book of stories that Jarrell would edit, if he could, would be monumental. Lamenting the impossibility of such a venture leads him to a lyric incantation of all the marvelous authors and epics and tales and poems that might be included—not because the list will add to the knowledge of the reader of the book at hand, but, one suspects, for a merely Jarrellian pleasure in the list itself. It is dangerous to allow a compulsive reader the liberty of the printed page. He is like a dedicated gourmand writing his own menu. Fortunately, he is far more enjoyable in his moments of corroscating praise of the poets and of the poems that he loves and understands so well, than in his always acidulous complaints

\[4\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 144}.\]
against culture and society. Perhaps the very fact that Jarrell had been chosen to edit Anchor Books for the mass audience bodes well.

Jarrell's message remains evangelistic—art is grace, the only grace through which mankind achieves existence and salvation. Billions have lived, have suffered and have died, and it is as if they had never existed because they are not part of any story—they participate not in the immortality of art. In the symbiosis of life and art, life depends more on art than art on life.

2. Kipling

The article "On Preparing to Read Kipling," published in 1961, like the seminal essay on Frost, first dispels all those well established myths which identify Kipling with his most immature self—with the crude exponent of imperialism and the white man's burden who occasionally wrote lines so memorable that they have passed into cliché. The world once deemed him its foremost author, but has now consigned him to oblivion. So it is time for Jarrell to begin to show us the other side of an author who, in James's estimation, was "more of a Shakespeare" than anyone else in that generation, and an artist "feeding the public on his own bleeding insides." The artist's

---

contemporaries (as with Byron) deify him—frequently for the wrong reasons. It is only after he has been cast into the dust by the following generation—also for the wrong reasons—that posterity can begin to form a proper perspective. Thus, Kipling's disrepute in 1962 is exactly concomitant with the fame and adulation he had enjoyed only a few years earlier. Jarrell accurately prophesied that Hemingway, who was then enjoying the same sort of glory, would within a few years be on his way "into the dust," and that reassessment of Kipling's genius would be under way.

It is really quite simple, Jarrell asserts, to anticipate the assessment that the future will make of any author. All we have to do is read him, stripped of all pre-knowledge of his work and of his reputation, "as if one were setting out, naked, to see something that is there naked"—for works of art are in themselves "a way of doing without clothes." The Kipling we all know is the one who began as a reporter and gained immediate fame and intense popularity upon the basis of his very earliest fiction. He then wrote, and wrote prolifically, for a full fifty years. A writer after Jarrell's heart, a genius, a neurotic, but thoroughly professional, he made himself "one of the most skillful writers who have ever existed."6

Jarrell is fond of epitaphs and suggests for Kipling's

6Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 119.
stone in Westminster Abbey the awed (and usually surprised) exclamation of Kipling's fellow professionals when they take a second look: "Well, I've got to admit it really is written." Kipling's aim was not realism, but that supra-reality that lies at the heart of Jarrell's critical mystique. The artist shows us, not how things are, or how they happen, but "the way it really should happen." The reality which the artist thus achieves is more real than the paltry reality of fact that the media provide—the only fare the world can offer without the mediation of the artist. Jarrell uses the basic imagery of one of Kipling's most poignant tales, "They," in his own poem "The Lost Children."

Kipling's sheer virtuosity is demonstrated in his dependence "for so long, on short stories alone." Within this limited context, his "variety of realization" is dazzling. His works are a balanced mix of explanation and dialogue and description that "the child reads with a grown-up's ease, and the grown-up with a child's wonder." As in the case of Frost, I am quite certain that we see here a clear statement of Jarrell's own goals as well as of his estimate of Kipling's talent. These are precisely the qualities that we find in Jarrell's marvelous stories for children, though it is preeminently in The Bat-Poet that Jarrell captures Kipling's magic. Like other artists, Kipling has many faults that he might have eliminated if he had used "good sense." But our first concern
is with what is right, not what is wrong for, as Ruskin affirms, "The person who wants perfection knows nothing about art."

Then, just as if Kipling were a poet, Jarrell begins to quote lines and phrases that illustrate the qualities that he finds admirable. Kipling's words range from "gaudy effectiveness to perfection." He is a consummate craftsman in all that he does, and also believed that

it is the speakers of the vernacular and not the sahibs who tell the truth; that there are many truths that, to be told at all, take the vernacular.

He therefore became master of all the vernaculars of his world—those of class as well as those of language—and thus fully satisfies Jarrell's preference for the artist's use of "the rhythms of ordinary speech." For much the same reasons, Kipling writes well and easily about animals. Yet Jarrell does not see Kipling as a "citizen of the world." He is, rather, "an uncomfortable stranger," who has learned to accommodate himself to all the contradictory ways the world offers of being at home.

Yet, despite this total professionalism, consciously cultivated, Kipling spoke of himself as one possessed by a daemon which produced through him the best things that he did. He advises, "When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, obey." This is neither more nor less

7Ibid., p. 123.
than Jarrell's vision of the artist standing out in the thunderstorm, waiting. However, although Jarrell admires Kipling's professionalism, as well as his frankness in recognizing influences beyond himself, he would give total credit neither to the professionalism nor to the daemon, but to the miraculous confluence of the two that precipitates the perfectly realized work.

Kipling's childhood, Jarrell notes, was unbelievably forlorn, and it is to his subsequent sublimation of his childhood experiences that he attributes many of the great strengths and also the greatest weaknesses of Kipling's career. Thus, although he has written more than fifty stories that Jarrell can call "good," as he calls a poem "good," signifying that they capture reality and the action of men in a manner more true than life, he sees one enormous and ineradicable flaw in Kipling's moral vision. Perhaps as a result of his own refusal or inability to blame his parents or his masters for the abandonment and humiliation of his own childhood, Kipling is in later life unable to lay the responsibility for any of the world's ills at any feet save those of the sufferer. Any form of fascism—a parent's, a school's, a society's, God's—is acceptable, because it is seen as a potentially salutary experience for the victim under the rod. But for all this great gap in his moral perception, the stories Kipling wrote possess the serenity of that
which is "completely realized."

Moreover, Kipling, like Wallace Stevens, produced his best work at the end of a long life. Although his name has become synonymous with tales of India, it is in the stories of Kipling's "old age or late middle age," stories that Jarrell has entitled "The English in England," that he finds evidence of an "easy and decisive mastery that was the result of a lifetime of imaginative realization." The list of subjects is surprisingly varied and unusual, yet the stories do not depend on striking incident, but, like lyric verse, on imaginative presentation.

Jarrell lovingly traces the development of the stories he presents, an admixture of autobiography and pure fancy, and of reason and fantasy. Demonstrating that truth will not be satisfied with the critic's judgment but must be shown from the work of the artist himself, he reveals to us in Kipling's tales visions that have "the harshly satisfactory reality that they have in one of Frost's country stories." He says of them, as he said of Frost's poems, "If you read them, you will see."

3. The Novel

In the essay, "Six Russian Short Novels," published in 1963, Jarrell once again centers upon the transmogrification of

---

life into art. Turgenev's assessment of life as "petty, uninteresting—and insipid to beggary," applies only to life without art. It is the function of the artist, whether novelist or poet, to charge the "trivial details of life" with a 'fantastic imaginative intensity,' so as to create a work which will have "an infinite plausibility, an unimaginable and inexplicable significance." We take pleasure in the Russian novella because we find that the artist has made it possible for us to identify with the persons in it, and thereby to increase our capacity as human beings.

We know that it is only through such art, in poetry or in prose, in the graphic arts or in sculpture, that man truly fulfills himself and becomes able to identify with other men—only thus achieving the universality essential to his well being. Through the artist, Akaky Akakyevitch captures our interest, or Ivan Ilych—the one showing us "the possible success in everybody's failure," and the other, "the necessary failure in everybody's success." We ask, with the Psalmist, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" The answer comes to us, normally, through the poet, for it is he alone who sees in man that which makes God mindful of him.

In a more extended study of a single novel, an intro-

---


duction to a reissue of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, Jarrell once again champions the cause of the unjustly neglected artist. He praises the novel with the same lavish enthusiasm that marked his treatment of Walt Whitman. *The Man Who Loved Children* concerns a peculiar, uniquely memorable family which is unhappy "in a way almost unbelievably its own." It is too easy to suggest that Jarrell is profoundly moved by this novel because he saw in it reflections of the family situation of his own childhood. Even if this were true, it would constitute only a special application of his basic critical tenet that the work of art must reflect a heightened reality perfectly. However, he was sufficiently impressed with certain passages to incorporate them intact into his later poetry. In the novel, the mother, Henny, would faint, and the "accustomed children," to whom everything Henny did was right "because of all her sufferings," would run and get pillows and keep watch over her. In the poem "Hope," Jarrell speaks of "a scene called Mother Has Fainted," as an experience that cripples the children exposed to it:

It was as if God were taking a nap.

We waited for the world to be the world
And looked out, shyly, into the little lanes

That went off from the great dark highway, Mother's highway,
And wondered whether we would ever take them—
And she came back to life, and we never took them.\textsuperscript{12}

As we see, this novel by a relatively unknown author ensnared Jarrell's emotions. He finds the characters initially plausible, but as their violent interaction unfolds they become, in their roles of mother, father, children—in isolation—most implausible. It is only as a family that they remain comprehensible.

There in that warm, dark, second womb, the bosom of the family, everything is carried far past plausibility: a family private life is as immoderate and insensate, compared to its public life, as our thoughts are, compared to our speech.\textsuperscript{13}

Jarrell's last, best argument, however, is to ask us, simply and in accordance with his most fundamental critical tenets, to "remember," to reflect, and then to affirm the truth of Christina Stead's work. In our heart of hearts we recognize that we never understand the normal better than when it has been allowed to reach its full growth and become the abnormal.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Jarrell, Complete Poems, pp. 305-12. Mrs. Mary Jarrell associates the scene with Randall's childhood situation. "We talked a lot about the reception room my father shared with another doctor, Dr. von W., who was treating Mrs. Jarrell for that recurrent / Scene from my childhood, / A scene called Mother Has Fainted." Jarrell, "The Group of Two," Lowell, Taylor, Warren, p. 283.

\textsuperscript{13} Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 5.
The force of the oppositions that lie at the heart of good fiction, of good poetry, permeate this story. Jarrell has but to pass through it, as a man inspired, picking out bits and marvelous fragments that satisfy his sense of drama, his sense of poetry, his feeling for the apt phrase. He can empathize with each of the many characters because they are all real. Like Louie, the ugly duckling of the family, Jarrell is himself a compulsive reader, and can surely appreciate her writing poems and stories and a play, in a new language, simply because Euripides did not write in English.

But the novel's chief excellence is its evocation of life itself. It is totally original, yet offers what Aristotle calls "the pleasure of recognition," and this not only to those to whom certain aspects of the story may prove peculiarly appropriate. Jarrell says that each of us will be able to say, "Yes, that's the way it is; ... I didn't know anybody knew that." The fact that Christina Stead's way of seeing the world is "so plainly different from anyone else's" has enabled her to create a new world we all recognize.

There is also clearly evident in her work a rare gift for structure. Each part is placed just where it should be, mingling the concrete and the abstract elements. Her dramatic development is accurate and sound. She lays the groundwork

---

15 Ibid., p. 27.
for Henny's suicide with abundant, even repetitious hints that make the inevitability of Henny's self-destruction apparent. Jarrell's own long poem, "Orestes at Tauris," is as intricately structured. There, Orestes' every action portends his immolation at the hands of his sister. Jarrell asserts that Henny is never more herself than when she destroys herself. For her, as for Jarrell's Orestes, there is only one legitimate dramatic resolution of the course to which she and fate are committed.

The weaknesses in The Man Who Loved Children include a natural excess and a failure to eliminate the superfluous. Many passages have not undergone the imaginative process that transforms the raw materials of life into art. But if we are not to expect perfection of a short story, we must expect it even less of a novel, which Jarrell defines here as "a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it."

If looking at the masterpieces of the past which were unrecognized by the critics of the time gives us a feeling of superiority, Jarrell suggests that we test our own critical sense against a book like this. It was only mildly successful upon initial publication in 1940, and there was no great expectation that its reissue in 1965 would lead to wide popular acclaim. But it is, Jarrell says, a solidly good book, if not a great book, for "it has one quality that, ordinarily, only a great book has."

It creates a sense of reality so strong that the reader will actually become, during the hours he reads it, a member of the Pollit family:

It will take you many years to get the sound of the Pollits out of your ears, the sight of the Pollits out of your eyes, the smell of the Pollits out of your nostrils.17

In the foregoing, I have attempted to demonstrate the essentially moral thrust of Randall Jarrell's critical achievement. Underlying and supporting every aspect of his work is a deep and compassionate concern with the role of art, specifically the role of poetry in the enrichment of human existence. He sees the role of the poet as prophetic, and it is in the American public's failure to heed the poet, to heed Jarrell, that I find the roots of his alienation from society and from himself.

In his refreshing and perceptive treatment of the individual artist, Jarrell clearly reveals himself to be a qualitative critic. In his brilliant analyses of the noble concepts and heightened passions captured in verse by the poets whom he enthusiastically admired, and of the techniques necessary for its successful achievement, he attempts to recapture for art the sheep that have gone astray. He is totally democratic in his efforts to bring the message of poetry to all men. He was uniquely successful in demonstrating the "other" side of popu-

lar poets such as Robert Frost and Rudyard Kipling, and in bringing forward writers of less renown such as Christina Stead. Jarrell wants all men to rediscover the enjoyment of poetry and insists upon an equal opportunity for all writers to be heard and judged, not by the critic, but by the audience for whom the poet has written.

In pursuit of these goals, Jarrell turned his attention to the culture within which the American poet must find his audience. His essays on social inadequacies, traceable to the omnipresent media and to a superficial educational system—essays that called down upon his head an unwarranted wrath—represent another aspect of his life's goal of saving through art potential readers who would otherwise surely starve in the midst of the material plenty that our society provides.

In the poem "A Game at Salzburg," Jarrell tells of an Austrian version of hide-and-seek in which the child announces, "Hier bin i'," and then waits for the grown-up to pronounce the godlike confirmation, "Da bist du."18 May I suggest that Jarrell has entered this game, as the child, at play with the modern American mass culture, his audience. He has announced, "Here I am," and there has been no reply.

18Jarrell, Complete Poems., pp. 67-68.
PART II

THE PROSE FICTION OF RANDALL JARRELL

A story may present fantasy as fact, as the sin of hubris that the fact of things punishes, or as a reality superior to fact. And, often, it presents it as a mixture of the three: all opposites meet in fiction.¹

The prose fiction of Randall Jarrell is comprised of one novel, Pictures from an Institution (1952), and four children's books, The Gingerbread Rabbit (1964), The Bat-Poet (1964), The Animal Family (1965), and Fly By Night (edition in preparation). Pictures from an Institution appeared at the height of Jarrell's literary career, when his reputation had been firmly established by five published collections of verse, by Poetry and the Age, and by innumerable book reviews and critical articles. It was well received, some critics going so far as to proclaim Jarrell a prose master as well as a poet.²

The four children's books come from a much later time, [1]

¹Jarrell, A Sad Heart, p. 145.

²Anne Freemantle complains that a poet has no right to know so much "about individuals and their hidden springs." Commonweal, LX (July 9, 1954), 347. Francis Steegmuller, however, felt that the novel's "kaleidoscopic brilliance" involved the sacrifice of "staying power and coherence." New York Times (May 2, 1954), p. 4. L. O. Coxe dismisses the novel as a "roman à clef" and says that Jarrell misses no "trick" that can reveal his characters as "grotesque, heartless, inhuman." New Republic, CCCXXX (May 10, 1954), 19.
after the period of dejection reflected in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*, and after he had ceased to occupy so prominent a position in the world of letters.

The novel presents an academic microcosm in which Jarrell, drawing upon his own brief experience of just such an educational hothouse, successfully assembles in fictional form most of the themes, both literary and social, that had come to characterize his thought at that time. Although sharply satirical, even remorseless in its treatment of several types and individuals, *Pictures from an Institution* is chiefly notable for an air of exuberance and good humor that permeates every page. Its atmosphere of lightness, of self-confidence and even of joy is perhaps a reflection of his own professional success at a point in his career at which he had achieved wide if not universal recognition and appreciation as poet, critic, essayist, and now novelist.

However, the themes of disillusionment that would bring Jarrell to the more somber mood that we have noted in his later essays are implicit in *Pictures from an Institution*. By the early sixties, these portents of alienation, of a certain consternation at the disparities between appearance and reality,

---

and of the felt need for meaningful community had assumed a central position. Thus, in _The Gingerbread Rabbit_, the first of his children's books, he creates a fairy tale atmosphere from traditional materials—a surface tranquility overlaying a reality that contemplates terror and death as simple matters of fact. In _The Bat-Poet_, more successfully than in his essays, Jarrell expresses his sense of the alienation of the artist—of his own alienation—within our modern society. _The Bat-Poet_, with its element of concern for the human condition shaping and giving form to a totally delightful story centering upon a bat who is a poet, also provides generous samples of Jarrell's sensitive verse. It is a masterpiece that should be ranked with "Hansel and Gretel," with "The Red Shoes," and with _The Little Prince_, among the finer examples of children's fiction for grownups. _The Bat-Poet_ himself is one of Jarrell's most fully realized fictional characters.

But if Jarrell's attempt to express man's isolation in _The Bat-Poet_ is eminently successful, his attempt to depict the growth of human community and love in _The Animal Family_... 

---

4 Concerning Jarrell's subsequent teaching career in "his little-known Southern college for girls in Greensboro, North Carolina," Robert Lowell comments: "There his own community gave him a compact, tangible, personal reverence that was incomparably more substantial and poignant than the empty, numerical long-distance blaze of national publicity." Lowell, "Randall Jarrell," Lowell, Taylor, and Warren, p. 105.
is not. A hunter, alone and alienated as were the bat poet and the gingerbread rabbit, fails in his efforts to conquer the loneliness and the invisibility that his vocation visits upon the poet.
CHAPTER VI

ON PICTURES FROM AN INSTITUTION

This earth carries aboard it many ordinary passengers; and it carries, also, a few very important ones. It is hard to know which people are, or were, or will be which.5

Jarrell's satire on the world as mirrored in the microcosm of Benton, an exclusive, avant-garde women's college, seems at times a mosaic of the themes and even of the characters with which we have become familiar in his poetry and in his criticism.6 It is assembled into seven groups of sketches, as it were, which cumulate to provide exquisitely detailed portraits of the central characters, splendid glimpses of several subsidiary characters, and to demonstrate a broadly sardonic understanding both of the institution that has brought them together and of the world of men that gave birth to the institution.

We may surmise that Jarrell has patterned his title as much after Moussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition as after O'Casey's Pictures in the Hallway, for it combines the patterns


of musical composition with the techniques of the autobiographer to create "a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it." The seven parts into which the novel is divided, each of which is a self-contained unit, are woven into an integrated texture by recurrence of character and of theme, as well as by the presence throughout the novel of Gertrude Johnson, novelist extraordinary, who appears to be a projection of Jarrell's worse self, and a narrator, who appears to be Jarrell as he would prefer to be seen—gently sardonic, brilliantly witty, and always urbane.7 Numbered subsections are used, in the manner of drama, to indicate change of scene, of mood, or of viewpoint—each adding its hue or form to the richly textured design.

During the novel's brief span—less than a full academic year—the narrator goes to and fro in Benton and walks up and down in it, privy to all the persons and to all the motivations from which he fashions what Ransom called "one of the

7 Several contemporary reviewers, dealing with the novel simply as a roman à clef, felt that they could identify the original of each of its characters—specifically Gertrude Johnson as Mary McCarthy and her projected novel as The Groves of Academe, published two years earlier. Mrs. Mary Jarrell, however, in conversation at Greensboro, North Carolina on March 16, 1973, recalled that the author felt that the characters of Pictures represented human types rather than individuals, and that Gertrude was, as suggested here, a representation of what he discerned to be the harsher aspects of his own personality.
funniest American novels in three decades." A first person, limited point of view allows the narrator the luxury (which he sometimes abuses) of lengthy ruminations on the world and on life in America, as well as on the manners and mores of his characters. In mirroring a real world he knew so well, and in charging it with the peculiar and creative clarity that the poet brings to his vision of it, Jarrell has given us a work that reveals a world more vital and more significant than our own experience might ever have provided.

Although his focus is on Gertrude Johnson's passage through Benton (she figures largely in each of its seven parts), Jarrell maintains a strict hierarchy of academic rank in his introduction of the various persons of Benton. Part One introduces to us the most important, the President of Benton, Dwight Robbins, his wife Pamela, and their son Derek—the president, a one-time Olympic diver; his wife, a misanthropic South African colonialist; Derek, a totally unique child growing toward a very ordinary maturity. Next, he presents the Whittakers, Jerrold and Flo—Jerrold, a sociologist, the most prestigious of Benton's professors by right of salary and worldly fame; she, an enthusiast whose own personality has been lost in the pursuit of liberal causes. By the end of the first two parts we have also become thoroughly familiar with Gertrude Johnson, hired in mid-semester as a teacher of creative writing.
Part Three is given over to Miss Camille Turner Batter-son, a former teacher and a lady of the old school. She is not herself involved in Gertrude's passage, and Jarrell takes this opportunity to indulge us with a creative deluge of imaginative if sometimes extraneous incident.

The first three parts represent the mind of the novel, with aberrations as noted, but Part Four represents its heart—presenting for our edification the most truly distinguished, though clearly not the most important member of the faculty, Gottfried Rosenbaum, composer in residence, his wife Irene, an aged diva, and the lovely Constance, assistant to President Robbins' secretary, and therefore of no importance at all. These three represent Jarrell's vision of the real substance of human life, cleaving by instinct and by tradition to that complex of values that he developed so powerfully in his essays on art and on culture.

In Part Five, leaving the heartland behind, our narrator brings us closer to Gertrude as a person, as revealed in her relationship with Sidney Bacon, her third husband. In these pages, this brilliant, sadistic, and pathetically warped individual is revealed in her private world, in her own turbulent misgivings, as is no other member of the institution.

The cast of characters now assembled and fully delineated in all their complexity, Jarrell is ready to return to the development of his plot. In Part Two, we had seen Gertrude
in action at her own dinner and had report of her activities at other social functions. Now, in Part Six, "Art Night," Jarrell presents the capstone of Gertrude's term at Benton. Accompanied by Rosenbaum and the narrator, she shines on the just and on the unjust; like the Grim Reaper, she harvests the fruits of the talent of the art students of Benton. It is at the end of this Part that the narrator begins to experience that change of inner self that gives substance to the novel.

In his own thoughts, and more explicitly in the harsh and unrelenting criticism he was to write over the next several years, Jarrell approves of and agrees with the strongest criticisms of America's cultureless society that he places on Gertrude's lips, and with the less barbed but equally negative remarks of Gottfried Rosenbaum. As critic, Jarrell found the same combination of aggressiveness and mediocrity rampant in society at large. We must conclude, then, that it is his own view of Benton--of the American literary and cultural establishment--that Gertrude expresses. However, at this stage of his developing alienation, he experiences feelings of disenchantment and even remorse at the harshness of his own judgments, and at the end signs a "separate peace" with Benton and with the world. Unfortunately, such an agreement is not compatible with the role of literary and cultural savior in which Jarrell would later cast himself, and the "separate peace" proved all too fleeting. Karl Shapiro attests that he was not alone in
this crusade:

But all of us felt the rot of institutionalism in our bones. Jarrell got it down in a novel, the kind of novel the age demanded, the exposé of sensibility. Jarrell's novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, is so brilliant that it defeats itself as a fiction; it becomes a hornbook of avant-gardism, sophisticated to the point of philistinism.

1. "The President, Mrs., and Derek Robbins"

It is the last day of Constance's employment at Benton, whose campus looks as if it were designed half "by Bottom the Weaver, half by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe," and she is listening to the President and Gertrude bidding each other a falsely hearty farewell in an inner office. The novel is then presented as one long flashback to their original meeting, at which, after quickly settling financial arrangements and the schedule of Gertrude's modest duties and obligations at Benton, they had been able to achieve a superficial cordiality. The President knew that they were fortunate to have a novelist as prominent as Gertrude Johnson on their staff, and she was pleased at the President's frankness in acknowledging that fact.

It was, however, only a short time afterwards that a faculty party, with copious drinking and "almost unavoidable intimacies," destroyed their short-lived amity.

---

George looked at the dragon and thought, 'Why, that woman's a dragon;' and the dragon looked at George and thought, 'That's no man, that's an institution.'

Gertrude suddenly realized "that she was no longer between novels."

In speaking of Benton, Jarrell often employs Eden symbolism in which the President is cast as Adam. He is a boyish man, once an Olympic diver, who stays remarkably fit through daily practice in the college pool and through an un-deviating regard for his own eminence. He has risen to his lofty academic pinnacle at an early age, not through inherited wealth or influence but from the less fortunate classes of men and by his own efforts. Upon occasion, we are told, he may say or do something that reveals that he is not "quality folks"—but he will never repeat the indiscretion. At Benton, he is the liberated president of a liberated college, lying asleep among the branches of The Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil, "his parted lips smelling pleasantly of apples." His success is almost entirely attributable to his instinctive understanding of the expedient—

President Robbins was so well adjusted to his environment that sometimes you could not tell which was the environment and which was President Robbins.

---

9Jarrell, Pictures, p. 7.

10Ibid., p. 11.
Everything in his life was explicable except his marriage to the haughty, superior Pamela, who had, as he did not, "her Ph.D." Pamela was, as Gertrude said, "the Black Man's Burden." The narrator is hard pressed for symbol and for metaphor adequate to her reality. He recalls that she "poured tea as industrial chemists pour hydrofluoric acid from carboys," and avers that "to hear her was to be beginning to despair," for "as you listened plants withered, landscapes grew lunar... her voice said that there is nothing." Like Lavinia and Edward, in Eliot's Cocktail Party, she and the President are well suited to one another in that neither loves nor is either lovable.

The President's rise had been delayed by his Olympic career, and his appointment at Benton came at the ripe age, "for a boy wonder," of thirty-four. We others, the unselected, will never understand the process whereby those who have it within their power to bestow such advancement know whom to select. We only know that the Presidents of this world are duly elevated by some arcane process of natural selection to the positions of power to which they have been born. This President excels in sincerity of communication. Hearing him speak on Founder's Day, the narrator is almost willing to forgive him everything. He does not so much speak as croon his words, and his audience reciprocates with appropriate Pavlovian responses to the tolling of his bell. He does his appointed job superbly,
gathering grants and endowments for Benton—cajoling all manner of pseudo-people for whatever advantage they can bring to him or to his position. However, his humanity is sacrificed to that pattern of compromise which necessarily attends upon those who would rise within the institutions of the world—a pattern to which Robbins has perfectly accommodated himself in his scrambling for higher positions because of an unquestioning belief in the rightness of the structure within which he serves, and its wisdom. He has, in a word, provided.

If it were not for men like President Robbins, how could this world go on? Everything would be different. And yet one must admit that such men are in long supply. 11

The President is in his inmost self inaccessible, even to Gertrude. To give vent to her malice, she is reduced to inventing gothic tales which are totally preposterous yet rivet the attention and forever after affect her audiences' attitude toward the President. One does not easily forget the reasons she gave for his being expelled from the nudist colony, nor her story that his first wife had turned the gas on herself and her babies when he ran off with another man.

To President Robbins there have also accrued two magnificent afghan hounds, beautiful to see but without discipline and without intelligence, symbolic of their master. He exclaims,

11 Ibid., p. 28.
in exasperation at their stupidity, "They're all overbred. You can see their portraits in Egyptian tombs." His son Derek, who had not spoken at the age of 19 months, used to growl winningly at people, so that "unless you had a heart of stone you growled back," and came once again to believe "in the golden age." But Derek has outgrown his growl and, despite a lingering preoccupation with snakes, is learning the lessons of the institution and will, in all likelihood, become a very ordinary adult. "Poor little boy! poor little boy!"

Jarrell uses Derek and the two Whittaker children, John and Fern, as a counterpoint to his primary theme of human inadequacy within the institution. Children, for Jarrell, are frequently tragic in their reflection of and suffering from adult ineptitude and malice, and in that we realize that they will inevitably grow to adulthood and lose whatever innocence childhood confers. Derek is plagued as are so many of the children in Jarrell's poems by nightmares and by vague but terrifying specters.

In Part Two the narrator will speak of John Whittaker, a "future saint of science," who like Derek, is a fancier of snakes, leading the narrator to surmise that there was in the strange world of Benton an atmosphere so suppressive of true emotion and of true maturity that even childhood does not provide escape from oddity.
2. "The Whittakers and Gertrude"

Assembled like elands lured to the bait by the wily hunter, we find Jerrold Whittaker and his wife Flo, who appears to be made out of tinkertoys, with President and Mrs. Robbins, the narrator, his wife, and Constance, at a dinner party given by Gertrude. Jerrold is the total scholar, so unbelievably perfect in his type that Gertrude discovers she cannot use him in her novel. Flo is a lover of early American furniture, folk music, and liberal causes. Jarrell displays little sympathy for these typical academic liberals, and we are treated to a humorously satirical description of their way of life in a cluttered and bulletin-boarded house. While they are not key figures in the elaboration of the novel's plot, they constitute an important segment of the panoramic portrait of man lost in the groves of academe that Jarrell is assembling. They have been invited, with the other persons of Benton whom Gertrude has decided to use in her novel, so that after sparsely feeding them, she may devour them at leisure.

The conversation at Gertrude's table is, in Jarrell's eyes, something less than banal. A prototypical exchange on the mixing of the martini is followed by an evening of endless and alternating monologue in which Gertrude alone does not participate—she is collecting. The narrator, his wife, and Constance watch and listen, their senses drugged with boredom
and hunger. Jarrell has already described the appalling conglomeration of furniture among which Gertrude lives, and the alarmingly meager and tasteless meal she has prepared. Such things are meaningless to Gertrude, but intolerable to those who reflect that

outside, the long evening was drawing to its close. Owls caught mice, and fish, and rabbits, and brought them home to their babies. . . .

But inside, the party continued. "There was very little of Gertrude's dinner, but what there was, was awful." There is a great deal of conversation, and it is of the same quality. It is simply presented, without comment, but the impact is carefully developed within a symbolism of fatigue and hunger.

During the endless evening, we become very keenly aware of the narrator himself and of the high demands he imposes upon the world in terms of food, of art, of furniture, and of the nuances of human behavior and human conversation. Peter Taylor, after pointing out that Jarrell personally detested gossip and idle chatter and steadfastly refused to be drawn into it, remarks that

the whole method of Pictures from an Institution is that of letting us hear what the characters in the book have to say about each other.13

12 Ibid., p. 60.
Jarrell himself, in the person of Gertrude, characterizes "general conversation" as "the only vacuum that reproduces its kind backward."

At any other time, Gertrude herself would have been seeking an audience rather than conversation—a weakness shared with all present, with all mankind. Jarrell discusses the President's "Field Theory of Conversation," which involved his talking to you about your field and giving you the benefit of all his thoughts on the subject. "He would have liked to hear what you thought about it, too, if there had been time." Gertrude, to whom the President spoke at great length on the novel, would at any other time "have let a sentence or two fall on him, look out over his squashed shape and passed on."

The dinner party over, the narrator and his wife, with Constance, repair to the nearest hamburger stand for needed sustenance. Benton's academic year is well on its way, all of the major characters have been introduced and the patterns that give the novel its structure and its plot have been established.

However, only the first five subsections of Part Two are concerned with Gertrude's party and the victims there assembled. In the last three subsections, Jarrell explores Gertrude's personal intentions with regard to the projected novel and her relationship with Gottfried Rosenbaum, who had not been invited to her party. He alone calls her Mrs. Bacon rather than Miss Johnson, and her attempts to humiliate him have ended in
disaster, both because of his serene self-confidence, and because of a certain disdain, rooted in a fundamental humility, for any game that she can understand. Her consequent abomination of Rosenbaum leads her, as with President Robbins, to fantastic extremes of calumny, constantly escalated in her futile attempts to breach his defenses. She is also enraged by an awareness that Gottfried moves in a world of music to which she has no access, despite a vast store of information on the subject. To Gertrude, a piece of music is ultimately an exercise in pure duration and should last no more than 45 seconds. Only the fact that Rosenbaum was a Jew precluded her from accusing him of being a Nazi spy. This latter fancy, indeed, became so strong that it led to one of the two dreams which she had experienced in her lifetime—that of Rosenbaum being slipped into the United States from a hidden submarine. He, however, remains beyond her wrath as the angels in heaven are beyond the ragings of the fiends below.

Gertrude, like Jarrell, preferred to draw from life. "The novelist's greatest temptation," she said, "is to create." But she has in the present instance decided to ignore that axiom. Her best inspirations came early in the semester, and she invented lavishly, at first intending to verify her data, but later realizing that it really did not matter. She had invented so many incidents about President Robbins that when she
met him in the flesh, out walking his afghans, she thought of her own creation with awe. However, Jarrell insists that Robbins was not the hypocrite that Gertrude depicted—that he had not evolved far enough along the evolutionary chain to have achieved that level of true moral responsibility. "He had," Jarrell maintains, "the morals of a State; had, almost, the morals of an Army."¹⁴

Yet, despite the fact that she understands the President and he does not understand but only fears her, they are in many respects alike. Few among men, like these thrice-blessed twain, can sincerely exult in their own ineffable existence. Just as he rejoices, "I'm President of Benton," she is anxious to finish her novel so that she can read it and cry out, "My God, what a genius I was when I wrote that book!"

At the end of Part Two, Jarrell begins to develop the complex relationship that binds Gertrude to her third husband, Sidney Bacon, whom she had married neither for his intelligence nor for his money. Sidney, on his side, genuinely respects and admires Gertrude, and she in her turn does not treat him with condescension. His "That's good, Gertrude! That's really good" is neither forced nor grudging, and his palpable sincerity enables him to avoid even the appearance of sycophancy. Sidney alone has found a secure niche within Gertrude's loveless life. This private aspect of their lives will be more fully explored

¹⁴Jarrell, Pictures, p. 72.
in Part Five, "Gertrude and Sidney."

Karl Shapiro, discussing *Pictures from an Institution*, questions whether anyone could be as hateful as Jarrell has made Gertrude Johnson—"One wonders what Gertrude thought when she read her portrait." However, I do not find the depth of destructive analysis here that Shapiro implies. Clearly, Jarrell has depicted Gertrude Johnson as a savage, self-centered Southern female novelist, with seven books already strung to her belt. But she is a creature of the imagination, and no matter how many individual lady novelists may have been taken aback by Jarrell's depiction of their type, it is he who actually wrote *Pictures from an Institution* and, as Shapiro himself indicates, immolated "President Robbins and all his kinfolk in the way Gertrude might." 15

Thus, even if Jarrell did base his character on some specific person or type of author, Gertrude Johnson represents in great part a projection of the harsher substrate of Jarrell's own literary personality. The basic intention of the novel is not to attack any individual, any group, any condition of life, but rather to expose man's common failures grown to full maturity in the force-fed atmosphere of Benton.

3. "Miss Batterson and Benton"

Miss Camille Batterson had been the oldest and the best-

---

loved member of Benton's faculty. The section dedicated to her memory expands our understandings of Benton and our appreciation of Jarrell's talents as a teller of tales, but contains little that is directly associated with the central theme. First, he accounts for Miss Batterson herself, a faded but undiminished Southern gentlewoman who had been for many years Benton's teacher of creative writing—the position that Gertrude now occupies. The narrator uses her primarily as an occasion to show us the sort of lady's seminary that Benton had been before education had become so sophisticated that
girls who had read Wittgenstein as high school baby-sitters were rejected because the school's quota of abnormally intelligent students had already been filled that year.16

Secondly, in accounting for Miss Batterson the narrator finds occasion to introduce several lengthy stories he needed to tell that could simply not be placed within the narrowly defined enclave of Benton.

Miss Batterson wore soft tweeds and sprigs of fresh flowers in her clothing. She believed in ladies and gentlemen and had never wed—"neither had her mother, her grandmother, any of the Battersons—one felt that." Her motto was, "If in doubt, do what your grandmother would have done." Dr. Rosenbaum

16 Jarrell, Pictures, p. 80.
admired Miss Batterson, not because of her wisdom, for she knew nothing of art or of life, but because she was herself a genuine person and a kind lady. Her remark, "There is no book that all my students have read," brought home, he felt, the twilight of the Western World better than all the pages of Spengler.

Jarrell also uses Miss Batterson as an occasion to expatiate at some length on the type of modern education that Benton now offered—based on the theory that there is no profit in studying Spinoza unless one understands "life." Thus, if the reading and conversation of the college experience are of more value than what occurs in the classroom, one would logically make reading and discussion central to the curriculum and relegate classroom work to a subsidiary status. Everything boring had been eliminated at Benton; yet intellectual freedom had not been thereby achieved. The faculty

felt that the mind was a delicate plant which, carefully nurtured, judiciously left alone, must inevitably adopt for itself even the slightest of their own beliefs.17

The faculty at Benton were dedicated. In addition to preparing individual analyses instead of grades,

they were expected to enter into the political and social and cultural life of the community, all the group activities of the school; and there were reports, studies, reorganizations, plays, lectures,

17Ibid., p. 82.
Gertrude was so awed by the endless intimacies of Benton that she vowed that she would get an excuse from her psychoanalyst on the grounds that she was allergic to big families. As President Robbins said, "We like to think that we educate each other."

Miss Batterson, although she had spoken before the MLA and had co-authored at least one textbook, had always felt that the less talented students had most to gain from education:

Her point of view about student work was that of a social worker teaching finger-painting to children or the insane.¹⁹

She taught others to live not by their intellectual lights so much as by an inherited tradition of gentility which was uniquely hers. Shortly after accepting the far better position that took her away from Benton, she died.

In subsection five of Part Three, Jarrell turns from his discussion of Miss Batterson and Benton's educational patterns to an aspect of his own relationship with Gertrude and her novel that had been only hinted at before. Secure in her belief that a poet—"a maker of stone axes"—in no way threatens her position, she shamelessly exploits his familiar relationships with all of the people of Benton and is soon openly

¹⁸Ibid., p. 86. ¹⁹Ibid., p. 81.
discussing and even arguing the novel with him almost as with a collaborator. She appeals to Aristotle on probability to defend her inability to use Jerrold Whittaker as a character, leading to a curious dialogue in which each ultimately questions the other's ability to deal with reality. Gertrude, in genuine pique, challenges the narrator—

'Living around colleges the way you do, you've just lost your sense of what's probable. If you believe in Jerrold Whittaker you'd believe in anything.' I could have said defensively, 'I don't believe in you.'

Of all the characters involved in *Pictures from an Institution*, the narrator penetrates most deeply into the mind and heart of Gertrude Johnson. Although he frequents the homes of the Rosenbaums and of the other faculty members on a more social basis, he probes the inmost thoughts of Gertrude alone. It is as though he said to her, "Let us go then, you and I," reflecting an interchange within a divided personality rather than between two discrete individuals. These indications, taken together with his willingness to cooperate so freely in her endeavor despite his clear understanding of its intent, lends credence to the conjecture that Gertrude and the narrator are the you and I of Randall Jarrell.

May we speculate as to the artist's intention in fashioning so unlikely a rib out of his own side—a creature of

---

flesh and blood with whom he can speak as with a familiar spirit? Perhaps it is only through imagining a Gertrude that Jarrell can confront the curiosity and the cold calculation required in the close observation and dispassionate display of the persons and the motivations of men. Gertrude is exploitative, malicious and callous and she travels a route too ruthless for Jarrell to travel except in the person of a surrogate. But we must recall that it is he, not Gertrude, who wrote *Pictures from an Institution*. In his fictional role as narrator betraying his fellows into Gertrude's hands, he compares his relationship to her with that of Sidney.

Then, after a brief indication of the fascination that Miss Batterson exerts over Gertrude, Jarrell permits himself another disquisition upon the hypocrisy of the Institution. Although Benton does not recognize the normal status indicators of the American society, it has replaced them with others even more insidious. Social position, wealth, ambition are meaningless at Benton. Its faculty members prefer the inconvenience of poverty to the guilt of acquisition—a guilt that rests comfortably on the capable diver's shoulders of President Robbins. In a school whose students are drawn from among the very rich, who are certainly different from you and me—students who spoke of oil wells and private airplanes and the Matisse in their homes—these attitudes are made possible
only by an overwhelming self-righteousness. But all, rich and poor, token students (black and brown and Tierra del Fuegoan) lived together in such amity and peace that Jarrell, the dis-sident, attests:

They made you feel alone venomous among the beasts of the field, or like a spy on the Ark, and you argued helplessly and uselessly—there is no argument against righteousness—or held your peace and went off outside to the Waters of the World, content to drown there.  

Benton is contented; yet, despite its rejection of all those media-values that Jarrell detests, there is no flowering of the intellect or of the soul at Benton—there is no understanding of art or of life.

The people who weren't contented got jobs elsewhere—as did, usually, any very exceptional people—and the others stayed.

Curiously, Jarrell's attack on what Shapiro called "the rot of institutionalism" is never quite as clearly stated in his interlocutory asides as it is in the novel as a whole. He is also curiously unable to create a truly significant metaphor for Benton. Part One opened on a Garden of Eden presided over by a fallen but self-satisfied Adam. It has been compared to Gatsby's gaudy, meretricious construct, and is now designated an Ark, a safe haven against the Waters of the World. In other passages we feel that Jarrell sees it as a waste land, or as Fitzgerald's

\[Ibid., p. 103.\]  \[Ibid., p. 105.\]
valley of ashes.

But the righteousness of Benton is of an order alien to ordinary people. Gertrude, the narrator avers, saw it and did not believe it. She was impelled by her own inexperience to reduce the phenomenon to terms she found conceivable.

Sex, greed, envy, power, money: Gertrude knew that these were working away at Benton—though in sublimated form, sometimes—exactly as they work away everywhere else. Though in sublimated form, sometimes: The interest of the judgment lies there.23

Jarrell would insist that Benton's motivations were not higher but simply other than these, and to her insistence that Benton was a place "like any other," he replies that, "like so many places, it wasn't."

But why had Miss Batterson left Benton? President Robbins inherited her with the Institution and could only anxiously hope that some opportunity would relieve him of this thorn in his side. That his wishes were granted was due not to any clever action of his own, but to the fortunes of yet another administrator with whose history and personality the narrator would have us be acquainted. He is the Head of the English Department of a Midwestern University, an authority on Cowper who has parlayed a modest natural talent, a wife's ambition, and a tendency for people, even educated people, to mistake him for an authority on Cooper (which is pronounced like Cowper),

23 Ibid., p. 106.
into rapid and substantial academic advancement. We suspect that the Head is introduced as much to permit Jarrell to satirize a type of human power and authority more genial yet as purely fortuitous as President Robbins, as to explain why this man would, to placate his wife, have hired her old friend Miss Batterson away from Benton. It is in his alien service that Miss Batterson ends her earthly sojourn, victim of "a corpuscular deficiency."

Only Gottfried Rosenbaum attended Miss Batterson's funeral in Virginia. "It is a long time since I have done something as foolish as I can. It is hard to be foolish here." He is appalled and angered that Benton should feel that her physical death was of no consequence because she had already passed beyond "real" life when she left Benton. Thus in every circumstance Gottfried Rosenbaum demonstrates the tradition of culture that Jarrell so admired, for of all the people of Benton his was the sole appropriate response to the fact of the death of a friend.

But Jarrell also uses Rosenbaum's trip to Miss Batterson's ancestral home in Virginia to draw an amusing and tender contrast in the meeting between the ancient European culture of Dr. Rosenbaum and the younger but almost equally matured culture of the Old Dominion, whose "manners were more formal than their statement." Dr. Rosenbaum cannot understand the "peasant dialects," nor they his Austrian accent, but
there is a mutual recognition and mutual respect. Upon his return to his own unique household near Benton, he and Irene discuss Miss Batterson and mourn her passing,

rather sadly, and rather dryly, and rather absently; and if, as in a pastoral, the nature around them had mourned, it would have mourned as they did, with a dry and absent sadness.24

Then, speaking of the Rosenbaums more generally, Jarrell recounts their passionate disagreements in purely aesthetic matters, in which

you saw that they walked among, called upon to witness, no cities and mountains and rivers of yours, but had brought along with them, when they had had to cross the Atlantic, Europe.25

This notion that the European and the American cultures are totally disparate is a recurring theme. In his poem "To the New World," Jarrell addresses the refugee:

Far off, inside you, a conclusive face
Watches in accusation, in acceptance. It is He.
You escaped from nothing: the westering soul
Finds Europe waiting for it over every sea.26

Part Three concludes with a civil war story about a southern boy who is forced to lie hidden in a great tree watching Union soldiers butcher and cook and eat his pet cow, Elfie. The story is introduced, without apology, by the simple identification of the small boy as Miss Batterson's father, and of

24 Ibid., p. 125.  
25 Ibid., p. 126.  
26 Jarrell, Complete Poems, p. 80.
Miss Batterson with the tradition of persistence and courage that the story represents.

4. "Constance and the Rosenbaums"

If we take the earlier Parts to represent the mind of the novel, Part Four represents its heart. For as Miss Batterson epitomizes the spirit of an older, simpler Benton, no longer, alas, sojourning with us, Constance and the Rosenbaums represent all that Jarrell the narrator finds truly worthy of admiration. They are treated lightly and with humor but are never satirized as are Gertrude and the President. Despite external eccentricities, the Rosenbaums embody the subtle and slightly world-weary wisdom and beauty of our European past. Constance, on the other hand, represents the beauty of youth, tempered but not hardened by sorrow, and presenting a total openness to and unerring instinct for the good, the true and the beautiful that the Rosenbaums represent. These three may also be seen as idealized projections of the author's own spirit and own personality. The atmosphere of peace and wisdom which he evokes in the scenes involving his own relationships with Constance and the Rosenbaums is, though different in kind, quite as memorable as the atmosphere of caustic wit that characterizes the earlier scenes. That Constance should in the end be adopted into the Rosenbaums' group of two is a fairy tale ending totally consonant with their fairy tale charm. That they
live happily ever after is implied in Constance's reflection, on her last day at Benton, on St. Augustine's prayer, "I want you to be."

Gottfried Rosenbaum is Gertrude's nemesis. Jarrell has already compared Gertrude to Satan:

One day I said to her through the window, silently: Whence comest thou? and she answered, silently—so I pretended—From going to and fro in Benton, and from walking up and down in it.27

It was in just this way that she, like Jarrell himself, had come to possess so vast and specific a command of detail upon the most varied of phenomena. However, because Gertrude did not understand the human truths about human beings, she was unable to prevail over or even to cope with the massive self-awareness of Gottfried Rosenbaum.

She was always able to fail the clever for being bad, the good for being stupid; and if somebody was both clever and good, Gertrude stopped grading.28

Thus, to the imagined question, "Hast thou considered my servant Gottfried Rosenbaum, that there is none like him in Benton, a kind and clever man?" her reply could only be that she had stopped grading. "I can't stand that Gottfried Rosenbaum."

What marvelous strokes Jarrell employs to depict Gottfried! He has lived and studied in the remote exotic places

27Jarrell, Pictures, p. 131.
28Ibid., p. 134.
of the world, so that the only melodic lines in his compositions are memories of Papuan folk songs. He had escaped at the eleventh hour from the Nazis.

His first American work, a secular cantata that used 'The Witch of Coos' as its text, had in it the most idiomatic writing for skeleton that I've ever heard. 29

Similarly brilliant imaginative details create an unforgettable portrait, uniquely winning and uniquely Jarrell's. Gottfried's compositions required "hitherto-unthought-of, thereafter-unthinkable combinations of instruments." A composition celebrating the memory of Johann Sebastian Bach "had a tone-row composed of the notes B, A, C, and H," and its first movement was played only on instruments that began with the letter b, the second, with instruments beginning with a, etc.

Irene Rosenbaum, some years older than her husband, is remote and self-contained. Her air of antique foreignness, her clothing and furs of like singularity, made her look like the Queen Mother of some tribe of Northern Canadian Indians--one left behind in the snow to die, gaunt but upright, calm, unrepentant. 30

She had once been a well-known singer and had made recordings under her own name, Irene Letscheskinskaya. Jarrell's treatment of Irene is more overtly humorous than his treatment of Gottfried; yet the sketches of her quaint person, of her odd

29 Ibid., p. 135.  
30 Ibid., p. 139.
household, breathe forth the peace and wisdom that the Rosenbaums share—the only offspring of the love they bear each other. Settled now as the wife of a fairly ill-known composer, she and Gottfried constitute a "dual monarchy." Their cook, Else, the witch from Hansel and Gretel, completes their household.

Constance, like Gertrude a pre-Benton associate of the narrator and his wife, is a recent college graduate who prefers the company of older people. Her father had said of her when she was twelve or thirteen, "She doesn't want to grow up," and the narrator had thought, "Why should she?" Her developing relationship with the Rosenbaums permits her to live in and out of their house, "filled with the works of man," where she is in the greater world, and at peace.

They were wonderful to her: a real Russian, a real Austrian, a real opera-singer, a real composer, a woman who had really sung with Chaliapin, a man who had really been a friend of Alban Berg's—Constance could scarcely see the Rosenbaums past so much reality.31

Pondering the disparity between appearance and reality—or rather between reality as it first appears and as it comes to appear as the fullness of its complexity is revealed—the narrator expresses his concern that Constance will be disillusioned when she begins to see the many faults and foibles that the Rosenbaums actually possess. He then continues to develop this notion by means of a perceptive simile:

31 Ibid., p. 144.
They were, in the first place, what they seemed to be, just as a beautiful woman in an evening dress is first of all what she seems to be. But underneath her dress, on one side of her stomach, is the scar of an operation for appendicitis; some of the skin below it, of the skin along her thighs, has a grained or marbled look—this came from the strain of childbirth.\textsuperscript{32}

Like Jarrell, Constance begins to learn German so as to place herself in closer touch with the culture that the Rosenbaums represent, serving, in a sense, as a mirror in which Jarrell can freely display his ever-youthful awe of the European mystique. She is also, of course, young and beautiful in her own right, and although she was of no importance, and people—usually without meaning to—showed her that they knew this; it did not bother her, since she herself felt that she was of no importance. (Later on, she felt, who knows?)\textsuperscript{33}

Constance, although she had studied music all her life, had never become the concert pianist she set out to become. She has composed "a little," and since meeting the Rosenbaums has become an advocate of the twelve-tone school.

When you looked at Constance you wanted change and chance and choice to leave her alone; you were angry at existence, that could think of this, and then temper it into wisdom with time, and then destroy it.\textsuperscript{34}

The narrator also reflects on his own visits to the Rosenbaums, from whose company one does not "go home sounder and a little subdued." In their extraordinary household life attains another

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 177. \textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 146. \textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 147.
dimension. The phonograph plays a twelve-tone composition that the narrator mentally entitles *Pages from a Dentist's Life*. Irene is withdrawn, but Gottfried is effusive and reveals in the course of the evening his ambition to be adopted by creatures from another planet. The narrator said thoughtfully, trying to do justice to his revelation: "You're big for a pet. But it's hard on you, being cleverer than other people— it is your turn to be stupider, I suppose."\(^{35}\)

They also discuss Gertrude's plans to write a book about Benton and speculate as to her real nature. Gottfried feels that she "is just like everybody else, only more so," and Irene adds indifferently: "She is a principle of things, one of the naked ones."

These strangers have broached Gertrude's impenetrable facade, and Irene, from the depths of her understanding, remarks that Sidney is "Saint Jerome's lion's lion." Gertrude, she says, does not distrust Sidney because "he is hers as a baby is its mother's." A phenomenon such as Gertrude, she says, could not exist in Europe but would be "hidden, or distributed among several, or a man, there. This is because it is a society dominated by men."

Gottfried had surrounded himself with symbols of the buffalo and of the bull which have for him some complex signifi-

ficance—on the one hand proving, as he explains how American
he had become, and on the other symbolizing for him a medieval
legend about the siege of his native Salzburg. The Rosenbaums'
conversation flows easily from one subject to another—from the
musical *South Pacific* to sex in American advertising. "Here in
your country Art and Commerce and Life are a bitter—no, a sweet
pill, covered all over with sex. Why should I buy a bridge be-
cause in the advertisement a girl walks over it without her
clothes?" Returning to the subject of Gertrude and her relation-
ship to Sidney, which will be more fully explored in the follow-
ing section, they all agree that Rilke's lines, clumsily trans-
lated by Gottfried, are a perfect evocation of Gertrude's need
and Sidney's function: "Needs not the moon, in order that it
may be reflected in village ponds—does not the moon need the
strange star's great apparition?"36

Karl Shapiro suggests we regard *Pictures from an Insti-
tution* as a negative of Jarrell's poetic utterance, and we note
that in this key section there is no idea, no sense of value, no
matter of primary significance to Jarrell that is not reflected
in some poem or in the essays we have already examined. He uses
his reflections on the Rosenbaums to create a sort of treasure
hoard, a veritable "kitchen midden" of his aesthetic theory.
Serene in her new relationship, Constance goes about her daily

task in a prelapsarian bliss of being without wishes. Like a wild bird, she prays only that things will remain as they are—will not become other. She is even emboldened to censure Gertrude Johnson because of her calumnious attacks on Gottfried Rosenbaum and herself. Gertrude, inexplicably, does not destroy Constance in the rashness of her youth.

Somewhere in Gertrude too, neglected and frustrated and despised, there was a shred of this primitive kindness—a little shame, a little guilt, a little grief.37

The Rosenbaum household was pan-European, with the Russian Irene, the Austrian Gottfried, the Persian Tanya, the Bavarian Else, and the French Simca—the old world carried intact into the midst of the new. Jarrell, like James and Fitzgerald, finds beauty and charm as well as a truer sense of value in the ancient and multileveled traditions of Europe. In Austria, during his participation in the Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization, Jarrell felt that he had come into contact with taproots of existence which our newer, less mature culture had yet to attain. The ancient actualities have far greater significance for his dramatic imagination than the still largely potential values that one can only hope will arise with the maturation in American culture. It is because of this patina that the Rosenbaums, like so many things in life, are not

37Ibid., p. 167.
subject to Gertrude's notion of "definition by ostentation," in which one merely points. For Gertrude,

the world was one of those stupid riddles whose only point is that they have no point. It was a knot she could not untie; and she was not willing, as many people are, to pretend that she could, but wanted to cut it or, better still, give up and throw it down and stamp on it.38

The Rosenbaums accept all--say "Yes" to the world, to life--and have thereby overcome life and the world, but Gertrude rejects life--is nauseated by it and its prospects.

'The whole thing is impossible.' 'Yoh, the whole thing is impossible,' Gottfried would have replied, ... 'But what has that got to do with it? It is and I am; here I am!'39

The world is not as the Rosenbaums might have wished it either. They are ending their lives amid an alien culture in which the very name Irene--"pronounced i-RA-ne, more or less over most of Europe,"--has become "I-REEN." This has become for her a "little mocking symbol" of their dissatisfaction with American culture, even as Irene becomes, in the end, Jarrell's own symbol of the pastness of the past and of the bleakness of a future severed from any roots from which it might have drawn meaning and sustenance:

She found, now, nothing by which she could be possessed. But she still looked; some days she spent looking--looking silently, seeing nothing except what she did not see. She was a bow waiting, in dust and cobwebs, for someone to come along

38 Ibid., p. 178. 39 Ibid., p. 179.
and string it; and no one came, no one would ever come.40

5. "Gertrude and Sidney"

Now the narrator, privy to Gertrude's intentions as well as to many aspects of her professional and private life carefully concealed from her other colleagues, permits several hitherto unnoted aspects of Gertrude's character to be revealed. We have seen her only as a callous, loveless person, treating everyone with an eye of greed or with a venomous tongue. The exploitation of other human beings seems to fulfill all her appetites. She does not enjoy food or sex, but the absorption of human beings into the fictive imagination has become for her a sensual act. Upon first meeting President Robbins, she walked round and round him, "rubbing up and down against his legs, looking affectionately into the dish of nice fresh mackerel he wore instead of a face."

Accordingly, when Spring came to Benton, Gertrude had openly quarreled with or otherwise alienated almost everyone on the faculty. Only the narrator remains close enough to her to discern, almost before she sees it herself, the one chink in her impervious shell—her realization that she truly needs Sidney, her colorless but dedicated spouse. Coming face to face with her own blurred image in the bathroom mirror, after a night

40Ibid., p. 183.
spent caring for him, she comes to realize that she could not
get along without Sidney—that Sidney, alone among mortals,
truly matters.

As a writer, Gertrude was a perfectly conventional
stylist. The wonder of her fiction lay in her total disregard
of the fundamental decencies. She sought in her penetration of
the world to leave nothing obscure or implied, which only meant
that she was impelled to reduce the world to concepts she could
understand. Thus, since there was no human situation which
could call forth within her breast the emotions giving rise to
a blush, she could only describe that phenomenon as

a monomolecular film of giant levorotatory protein
molecules, and the bonds that join them are the
bonds of self-interest.41

Gertrude understood only the worst impulses and the
worst motivations and found no evidence that any others existed.
She was able so successfully to search out and destroy the
phariseeism that would claim other motivations that her gen-
eralizations on mankind came to seem reasonable. Moreover,
adds Jarrell, there is something in this line of thought that
appeals to deep-seated animosities that exist in the hearts
even of good men. Thus Gertrude seemed
to most people a writer of extraordinary penetration.
... People who were affectionate, cheerful, and
brave—and human too, all too human—felt in their

41 Ibid., p. 188.
veins the piercing joy of Understanding, of pure disinterested insight, as they read Gertrude’s demonstration that they did everything because of greed, lust, and middle-class hypocrisy.42

Gertrude was popular precisely because, unlike many writers, she put nothing of herself into her books.

She was able to explain everything; everything was clear to her but for one thing—Sidney and her concern for him. Fortunately, no one suspected that she had an Achilles heel, for they realized that behind her other faults lay a total ignorance of honest human emotions. In those qualities she fell as far below ordinary people as she was superior to them in intelligence, in courage, in her powers of description and in her tremendous memory. Thus, even the revelation of her need for Sidney does not work any marked change in her behavior, and her instinctive reaction is to protect her position by keeping Sidney unaware. She deceives herself as she deceives her readers who, when they allow their focus to be narrowed to her perspective, somehow come to feel that they have revenged themselves upon a world they otherwise fear.

They did for a while all that fear and pity had ordinary human feeling kept them from doing ordinarily, and they were grateful for it: if Gertrude had had sweep and sex (her method was microscopic, her sex statistical) she might have been considered a Great American Novelist.43

For the same reasons, Gertrude is ill at ease with children. "The double standard that people employ for children

42 Ibid., pp. 188-89. 43 Ibid., p. 191.
and grown-ups seemed to her a grotesquely disproportionate one."
Yet, upon meeting Derek and the afghan Yin out walking, even she cannot but be shaken by the child's unflinchingly Frostian acceptance of evil in his account of Fern Whittaker's mutilation and burial of a Christmas doll—because "she wanted Santa Claus to bring her a baby, with real wax in its ears." After Derek had lifted her heart with praise of Sidney—"He's a nice man, I believe"—he says, "You look like my mother," and Gertrude "walked away feeling almost miserable, she didn't know why. It had been a depressing conversation." Gertrude's distaste for food, which imposed a meager and unbalanced diet on Sidney as well, was part of her life's pattern of rejection. Except for sweets, most food displeased her, most people displeased her—

She looked at the world, and saw, and cried out, her voice rising at the end of the sentence into falsetto: 'Why, it wouldn't fool a child!' 44

Sleepless nights were spent raging at all of existence, so that she is driven to ask, "Why am I so angry?" She was right to be angry; and yet, why was she so angry?" On the day of Sidney's illness, the narrator enters her starkly chaotic apartment to find Gertrude plunged into an unusual state of emotional perturbation. Speaking of Sidney, her face "softened, as your face softens when you look at a cat and her kittens, in a box in a closet." His own thoughts are "mostly a mother's

44Ibid., p. 197.
thoughts, as I looked at him." He notes that as she goes about
preparing a glass of cold lemonade for Sidney,

her voice wasn't grudging, really, but gracious,
and she said to me in an undertone, as she squeezed
the lemon: 'The least I can do is give him some
lemonade. There's so little you can do for someone
when he's sick. . . .'\textsuperscript{45}

The depth of Gertrude's agitation is based on this un-
expected perception of vulnerability to individual betrayal—
"What would I do if something happened to Sidney?"—and to the
ultimate betrayal of temporal existence—"How long will Sidney
go on being Sidney?" For the first time in her adult life things
and forces outside herself have become necessary to continued
existence. Gertrude finds the perception of death and change,
so casually accepted and shared by Irene and Gottfried, alarm-
ing and outrageous. Her first determination is to regird her-
self against the effects of the revelation, but it is too late.
As Jarrell explains, in mixed but vivid metaphor:

From the black steel of Gertrude's armored side there
opened a kind of door, and from it a hand emerged and
held out to Sidney a glass of lemonade—cold, and with
sugar in it, even if it was bad for him—and the hand,
seriously and with interest, watched Sidney drink the
lemonade. Then the door closed; but still, it had
been opened for that long: for that long there had
been nothing between the world and Gertrude but a
hand holding a glass of lemonade.\textsuperscript{46}

The remaining two subsections of Part Five are charac-
terized by a certain confusion of incident and obscurity of

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 204. \textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 206.
symbol with regard to Gertrude's relationship to Benton and to the world. Addressing Benton's "Committee on Aims," Gertrude's remarks are inexplicably laudatory and couched in almost extravagant turns of phrase. The Committee's expressions of its appreciation bring Gertrude relief from a chronic pain that seems to symbolize her alienation—a pain that she has come to accept as "part of the price of being Gertrude." However, since there is no further development of this symbolism, the significance of this "heart of pain," through which the world "got its own back from her when they were apart," remains essentially unclear.

So also Jarrell's comparison of Gertrude's sexual frigidity to the tenderly erotic legend of King David and Abishag the Shunammite is incomprehensible save in terms of Jarrell's own fondness for that story. There is no other correlative that would justify its inclusion here. Moreover, to this point there has been every indication that the accuracy and balance of Gertrude's insights and observation are leading toward a novel that would be much like *Pictures from an Institution*. Thus, when we suddenly discover that the novel had "a Real Plot"—more of a plot than Gertrude had ever used before—and that the plot was wildly inappropriate to the persons and setting of Benton, we discern that there are certain ambiguities with regard to the action at this point that Jarrell, in this first novel,
had failed to resolve. A later, similarly inexplicable refer-
ence—to the President's appearance in Gertrude's projected
ovel as a "curly-headed English sailor"—can only serve to
reinforce this judgment.

The narrator's role has also become highly ambivalent. He is Gertrude's willing collaborator—close enough to her to
argue, albeit unsuccessfully, the validity of her plot; yet, in the presence of the Rosenbaums, apparently undeterred by
that clandestine relationship he argues that Gertrude is uniquely evil and beyond salvation. The Rosenbaums, on the other
hand, see her as "no different from the rest of mankind," and feel that the anticipated success of her novel will improve
her personality.

Jarrell has, with a keen sense of drama, delayed these
considerations of Gertrude's inner, personal image until Part
Five and has now, despite the aberrations noted here, success-
fully developed certain less obvious and more complex aspects
of her character so as to modify the harsh judgments we had
made of this harsh woman. She, meanwhile, continues her career
of character assassination and affront. (Jerrold Whittaker is
driven to call her "an uncomfortable bedfellow.")

Jarrell, returning to his reflections on the now familiar themes of provinciality and righteousness, asks and answers
his own question:
Is an institution always a man's shadow shortened in the sun, the lowest common denominator of everybody in it? Benton was: the soldiers, as always, were better than the army in which they served, the superficial consenting nexus of their lives that was Benton.47

6. "Art Night"

As though intent upon developing through juxtaposition of light and shadow the studies from which his pictures are taken, particularly in this attempt to delineate his most complex character, Jarrell turns sharply from the consideration of the subtler, greyed hues of her private life to the coruscating splendor of Gertrude's public personality. She is to attend Benton's "Art Night" in the company of the narrator and Dr. Rosenbaum. This coupling of two such strongly polarized personalities was in itself an achievement. The fates, through the fortuitous absence of the respective spouses, have decreed that the narrator find himself instructing a Gertrude suffused with the inner glow of Jack Daniels, "Gertrude, say hello to Dr. Rosenbaum." They drive away to the accompaniment of Gertrude's phonograph blaring into the night through the open windows of her apartment.

The first target of Gertrude's spectacular wit is a display of polished wooden sculpture, created under the direction of Sona Rasmussen,

47Ibid., p. 222.
a fat, tiny, shiny woman: with a different paint job and feelers, she would have looked exactly like a potato-­bug.  

On the sculpture itself, the narrator comments,

Some of the statues looked like improbably polished objets trouvés, others looked as if the class had divided a piece of furniture among themselves, lovingly finished the fragments, and mounted the results as a term's work.

Miss Rasmussen soon "found Gertrude's voluble admiration for their works offensive," and the narrator is tempted to mutter, "I wish wood didn't have any grain." But Gertrude's comments are delivered with a cheerful laugh—

She was enjoying herself, and if people didn't know enough to get out of the way, they would have to suffer for their ignorance.

The metals section of the sculpture, however, with statues "made, apparently, of iron twine, with queer undigested knots or lumps or nodules every few inches," occasions such sharp attacks on Miss Rasmussen that both the narrator and Rosenbaum are compelled to give succour:

'I love your statues, Miss Rasmussen,' not even crossing my fingers as I said it; and Gottfried said that dey madt him feel goodt ven he lookedt at dem.

This last brings from Gertrude a "placing laugh," and the wry quotation, "Kind hearts are more than coronets, / And simple faith than Norman blood."

---

48 Ibid., p. 227.
49 Ibid., p. 229.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 230.
As Jarrell, in the several persons of the narrator, Gottfried, and Gertrude, continues his progress through the exhibition, we recall that his defense of the principles of non-representational art and of atonal music has always been coupled, as in "The Taste of the Age," with crushing criticism of almost every form of modern art as it is practiced. So in the novel we learn that it is only through the earnest and unrelenting efforts of Constance that the narrator has been brought to accept the twelve-tone music that inundates the home of the Rosenbaums. His tastes, like Jarrell's, are more surely satisfied in realms less experimental. Thus, he does not regard the artifacts of Benton as failures in a valid attempt toward the creation of beauty, but as the end result of a conscious conspiracy to destroy the root concepts of art in the impressionable minds of the students. Miss Rasmussen's remarks on welding, he says, were comprehensible only to another welder; her remarks on art, to an imbecile.

The students had learned all the new ways to paint something (an old way, to them, was a way not to paint something) but they had not had anything to paint.52

They had been taught to explore the possibilities of their medium rather than to produce a work of art. Jarrell, despite his theoretical defense of abstraction, is reluctant to abandon his critical instinct that art should represent reality in such

52Ibid., p. 231.
a manner that it remains recognizable although it has become more significant.

As the tour continues we observe that the subcurrent of the narrator's descriptions of the scenes upon which Gertrude comments are frequently more damning than the lancing thrusts of her sharp tongue. The two are one in spirit. Although Jarrell has for the nonce garbed his earthly Venus in a female novelist's tweeds and filled her with Jack Daniels, the barbs she flings are as truly his own as the taut wit with which she darts them. He has not always been so filled with "simple faith." Alfred Kazin, for example, recalls Jarrell's witty handling of "the unwisely confessional lady who set for one poem the impossible task (for her) of describing sexual transport." Jarrell, says Kazin,

in his review, quoted the lines back to her in mockery of her innocent self-congratulation. Randall could be cruel as a child is cruel—but he was wittily so.53

Meanwhile, having failed to engage the painting instructor in an argument about his work, Gertrude has turned to direct personal affront when the narrator and Gottfried drag her off at last to the auditorium for the musical and dramatic portions of the evening's entertainment. Trying to remember whether they too had once been hushed by more responsible fellows, they now sit

like unleavened Sunday School superintendents, and Gertrude sparkled to the rows around; unsuspecting children would come up to talk and we would tense ourselves, making ready to push them away before Gertrude could go off in their hands.\textsuperscript{54}

The crowded auditorium provides a glimpse of the President looking, Gertrude said, as if he were about to get his thirty-seventh merit badge, and of Mrs. Robbins carefully stepping on each person as she literally made her way down the crowded central aisle: "It was a pity to leave unused for even an hour a \textit{Sorry} so superior as hers." Gertrude's running comment on the evening's first dramatic offering, Benton's adaptation of Strindberg's \textit{The Spook Sonata}, kept that part of the audience "helpless with laughter," and brought from Dr. Rosenbaum the "almost loving" accolade—"'Oh, but she is good! I have underjudged her. She is a truly witty woman,'" and from a student participant the mystified comment, "There was one part of that audience that, I don't care what we said, they laughed."

Here, however, the evening subsided into an interminable dance presentation, followed by an even longer talk by one Charles Francis Daudier, poet, novelist, critic, and philosopher—all unenlightened by Gertrude's comment. However, her face, when they departed the auditorium to attend a reception

\textsuperscript{54}Jarrell, \textit{Pictures}, p. 234.
for Daudier at President Robbins' house, "was that of the characters in the Lays of Ancient Rome when they swear something upon the ashes of their fathers."

At the reception Daudier proves, as we might have expected, no match for the glinting irony of Gertrude's attack. He admits to being, among other things, an anthologist—a breed that Jarrell had already thoroughly disassembled in his article "Anthologies"—and that he is also one of those individuals responsible for selecting books for readers too dull to select their own. Of such are appointed the princes of the kingdom of Log. (That Jarrell's objections to anthologies will prove to be of the practical order rather than the theoretical is, of course, verified by his own subsequent editorship of the several anthologies discussed in Chapter V above.)

Gertrude's handling of Daudier, though more directly brutal than her conversation with Miss Rasmussen, takes longer to activate those kind hearts which are more than coronets. At one point the narrator enters into the assault to buttress Gertrude's contention that Daudier had not originated the idea that an ideal education would consist of manual labor and Greek. "My heart was hardened, and I said: 'I think it's Auden.'"

The wail of a small child interrupts their destruction

of Daudier, as Derek appears at the top of the staircase "hunched like an animal." Even as Mrs. Robbins attempts, "with surprising awkwardness," to console him and to lead him off to his bed, our narrator curses himself for noting "that she called him 'Pammy's little boy.'" Jarrell does not participate without guilt in the malicious clarity of Gertrude's perceptiveness, and seems to fear that the talent and inclination to become fully Gertrude are always present. Disheartened, he decides to leave the reception to her, but in taking his leave, speaks in such half-hearted tones that she becomes aware of his somber mood and her "face fell," leading the narrator to reflect:

'No, it isn't fair; she doesn't know any better.' I felt as you do when your cat brings you a blue-jay it has caught; the cat knows no better and the bluejay deserves no better, but just the same. . . .

Leaving Gertrude behind, in enemy territory but totally safe in her armor of wit, the narrator and Gottfried go forth into the night, both depressed, both pensive, seeking Irene and peace. To the question "What was Daudier like?" the narrator will reply, "He's a--he's a poor stupid old man." He had, within the hour, contributed to Daudier's humiliation, but he is not, like Gertrude, a person of a single mood, a single idea. He has, in the fullness of his personality,

---

56 Jarrell, Pictures, p. 245.
blunted the edges of the more incisive truths, learned, at least to some extent, to empathize with the toad beneath the harrow. It is only in the pure state—as Gertrude Johnson—that he allows himself free reign. He has, moreover, come to realize that he is "in a funny way," fond of Gertrude, and tells her,

'You were really good tonight, Gertrude. Did you hear what Gottfried said about you?'

'No, what?'

'He said that you are—' and I imitated his voice—'a truly vitty woman.'

But the world had once again "reminded us that underneath anything any of us could say about it, it existed." All of the characters of Art Night had come to seem only Dereks.

At home with the Rosenbaums, it was "more peaceful than, for a while, I could believe." They read poetry together and Irene's "Yes, this is so," is the amen which signifies their common acceptance of all that life may offer. As the pressures and the years and the disappointments begin to accumulate, these acts of faith will be made less frequently, but for that night Jarrell is at home, and at rest.

7. "They All Go"

The final section of Pictures from an Institution opens, as did the first, in President Robbins' office at the end of the school year. Jarrell is about to expel from Eden all these

57 Ibid., pp. 245-46.
figures of his imagination—types of the persons he has encoun­tered in his walking up and down in the Bentons of the world, and in some sense projections of his own ideals and personality. Some will return in the fall, the fig leaves of their innocence intact; others, no more adequately clothed, will remain to face the realities of existence outside.

The President, having at long last bid Gertrude farewell, is already in the pool, performing the swan dive with such exquisite grace "that you forgave him everything, were ashamed that it was necessary to forgive." He is happy—Pamela is to spend the summer in South Africa, "there to be the envy of her relatives and friends and any poor Hottentot or aardvark or aasvogel she could catch in her deadfalls and convince of her enviability." Derek and the Afghans are to be boarded, and "the Rockefeller Foundation was sending him to make a survey of Progressive Elements in European Education."

The Rosenbaums had long since confided to the narrator their intention to ask Constance to live with them as their daughter and to serve as Gottfried's secretary. As they plan to leave Benton together Gottfried reveals to Constance "that he did not consider himself a good composer." The narrator had clearly implied as much, but we had not been entirely sure that Gottfried knew of his limitation. "Failure," he admits, "is the common condition of composers—of common composers; I am no
different from my kind." Yet the best known of his modest compositions, "Lucifer in Starlight," is, as analyzed by the narrator, a "good" if minor piece of work. If Gottfried is not a great composer, he is a fully realized human being, and Jarrell, as we have seen, feels that it is better to have achieved even modest success as an artist than to have become a critic or a scholar. Dr. Rosenbaum warns, "If you are afraid of wolves, do not go into the forest," but he also knows that we all live in the forest and he "sported with the pack."

The narrator asked Gottfried and Irene to adopt him too—a projected wish-fulfillment that Jarrell seems to have carried with him from a youth scarred by abrupt and traumatic family changes. Mrs. Mary von Schrader Jarrell relates that after the young Randall had posed for the Ganymede on the Nashville Parthenon, the sculptors had to go back to whatever planet they'd come from and Randall was left desolate. Long afterwards his mother said the sculptors had asked to adopt him, but knowing how attached to them he was she hadn't dared tell him. 'She was right,' Randall said bitterly. 'I'd have gone with them like that.'

Constance, shamelessly weeping over a low-German tale in The Brothers Grimm called "Von dem Machandelboom," in which a child is sent to comfort an older couple, may be seen as Jarrell's

dream surrogate.

Then, in rapid succession, the narrator bids adieu to Gertrude and Sidney, on their way to Peru on a Guggenheim Fellowship, to Gottfried and Irene and Constance, incongruously jammed in the tiny Simca, and finally to Benton itself, for he too is to depart. President Robbins had attempted to make him feel disloyal at his abandonment of Benton, all unaware of his total rejection of Benton's values. The narrator is not, it seems, so honest as Gertrude. As he makes his way about the campus, closing his affairs, he meets John Whittaker, who confides to him a theory about the people of Benton drawn from science fiction: "They always return," he says. "They can't help it, ... they're androids."

But at the very end, something remarkable does happen to Jarrell, the lonely, alienated, orphaned narrator. As he is walking to and fro and up and down, Sona Rasmussen calls him into her studio to show him a statue he had never seen before—the figure of a man carved into a railroad tie mounted on a brass rod—a man like a foetus, like the ball-turret gunner—"part of the element he inhabited, and it and he moved on together silently." Stunned by this revelation, he ponders with disbelief the creation of this woman he had so badly misjudged on "Art Night." "He's the East Wind," Miss Rasmussen told him. "She was right; he was the East Wind." But after he has told her what a wonderful achievement it was,
she talked to me about the statue for a while, and I saw, not in dismay but in awe, that to appreciate what she said you still would have had to be an imbecile. 59

He thereupon realizes that she is, as he had known, a potato-bug, but now a potato-bug "who had been visited by an angel." He realizes that the lightning strikes where it will, and this brings him to a new and deeper understanding of himself, and of the world of which Benton is the symbol:

I felt that I had misjudged Benton, somehow—for if I had misjudged Miss Rasmussen so, why not the rest of Benton?—and yet I didn't feel repentant, only confused, and willingly confused; and I was willing for Benton in its turn to misjudge me. I signed with it then a separate peace. 60

Throughout Pictures from an Institution Jarrell has tried to demonstrate that one ought appropriately to respond to life "lightly, lightly"—a lesson that the Rosenbaums have learned and that Constance knew instinctively. The President and Mrs. Robbins, the Whittakers, Gertrude will never learn it. Only the narrator—Jarrell moves from a diffused darkness into the light of understanding during the course of the novel, and we may take his "separate peace" as the sign of his redemption.

Several of Jarrell's contemporaries regard Pictures from an Institution as of central significance to any estimate of his position in American letters at the mid-century. Lowell

59 Ibid., p. 275.
60 Ibid., p. 276.
found it,

whatever its fictional oddities, . . . a unique and serious jokebook. How often I've met people who keep it by their beds or somewhere handy, and read random pages aloud to lighten their hearts.\textsuperscript{61}

Denis Donoghue, on the other hand, is more concerned with its "cruel moments," and says that it was "the residue of the war feelings which, turning sour," sets them astir.\textsuperscript{62} Karl Shapiro saw it as Jarrell's contribution to the attack on "the rot of institutionalism" that was endemic in their poetic generation.

John Crow Ranson, declaring that the novel may well prove to be Jarrell's masterpiece, provides an extended analysis, based in part on his own personal estimate of Jarrell's character ("If Randall is the man we think he is."), tending to the conclusion that Gertrude Johnson's "salvation" is the crux upon which the plot turns.\textsuperscript{63} I do not, as I have indicated above, believe that the plot centers on Gertrude, but on Jarrell himself, and that Gertrude and the narrator, more significantly the latter, must both be seen as the author's surrogates.


CHAPTER VII

ONCE UPON A TIME

If wishes were stories, beggars would read: if stories were true, our saviors would speak to us in parables.¹

In his preface to The American, Henry James compares the reading of a work of fiction to a ride in a balloon. In a realistic work, such as we normally understand the novel to be, we remain firmly attached to earth by a quite visible rope, and the author tacitly insists that we compare his characters and his plot to real life. In the form James calls "romance," the author attempts to cut the rope without our noticing and draw us into realms of pure imagination. If he is successful he will, like the poet, have shown us our world and ourselves in a new light—given us insights that a firm adherence to realism would never have permitted. If he is not successful, we will look out of the balloon, find that the rope has been cut, and come to realize that we are "at large and unrelated."

Throughout his career as lecturer, writer, and teacher, Jarrell told stories. He told humorous, pointed anecdotes to the sophisticated adult audiences of the forties and early fifties, and he came to rely heavily on less humorous anecdotes

¹Jarrell, "Stories," A Sad Heart, p. 140.
and parables in addressing the increasingly hostile audiences of the later fifties and early sixties. He told stories to children at the very end of his career. All of his stories, including in many respects *Pictures from an Institution* would come under James' definition of "romance," but most clearly the three fairy-tales which we are to consider in this chapter.

In two of them, *The Gingerbread Rabbit* and *The Bat-Poet*, we never consider the rope. In the third, *The Animal Family*, we entertain a painful and continued awareness that it is being severed. In all three Jarrell is concerned with the themes of alienation that we have already examined in his essays, as if, having abandoned all hope of salvation for the parents, he had decided to direct his evangelistic effort to their hopefully unspoiled children.

1. **The Gingerbread Rabbit**

Once there was a mother who set out to make a gingerbread rabbit as a surprise for her little girl. However, the rabbit came alive and ran off into the forest to escape his fate. The mother gave exhilarating chase but, in the end, returned wearily home to fashion a replacement for the rabbit of felt and cotton. The gingerbread rabbit remained in the woods but would frequently visit at night the house in which he was created.

*The Gingerbread Rabbit* is obviously composed of a

---

mélange of familiar fairy-tale and folk materials. It is explicitly derivative from the traditional tale of the gingerbread man but with elements drawn from the Aesopian tradition of the clever fox—always urbane, totally self-centered, speaking in his accustomed double-tongued way to the naïve gingerbread rabbit. There are also helpful animals who assist the fugitive along his harried way, and at the end of the chase a rabbit-hole haven, with furniture and a pipe-smoking father-rabbit right out of Jarrell's favorite fairy-tale, Beatrice Potter's Peter Rabbit.

From these diverse elements Jarrell has woven a charming fable which demonstrates a sound and consistent handling of an elaborate hierarchy of characters—inanimate, animal, and human. There are explicit scenes of alienation and of metamorphosis—of appearance as opposed to an unstable reality—and he has added an element of irony that frequently verges on the satiric. The illustrations by Garth Williams complement the mood perfectly, so that The Gingerbread Rabbit is Jarrell's cleverest exemplification of the position that he had expressed in the essay "Stories."

The wish is the first truth about us, since it represents not that learned principle of reality which half-governs our workaday hours, but the primary principle of pleasure which governs infancy, sleep, daydreams—and, certainly, many stories.³

Each of the characters in *The Gingerbread Rabbit* has had to accommodate himself in one way or another to a reality neither of his making nor to his liking—to a reality that he frequently finds is not at all what he thought it to be. The message of the fairy-tale is that these accommodations can be made "lightly, lightly," and that the primary principle of pleasure can be served, but only in the forests of the imagination.

The mother had originally been inspired to make the gingerbread rabbit for her little girl when she caught sight of the largest brown bunny she had ever seen quietly hopping out onto her lawn from the nearby forest, like the unicorn in Thurber's garden. She was fascinated by his strange appearance and by his fearless demeanor. She moved quietly to where he sat and was about to touch this mysterious and alien creature when he sneezed, shocking both the mother and himself out of their trancelike state. Each of them had quickly withdrawn into his proper realm, but some disruption of the normal barriers between fantasy and reality had already occurred. Which of them is real? which imaginary?

Inspired, God the mother retired to her proper feminine domain, the kitchen, and set about her task of creation. The Garden of Eden has been imaginatively recreated in many strange situations, but Jarrell's placing it within the setting of the humble kitchen seems singularly appropriate. There, as the artist must, she works with the raw materials at hand, the stuff
of which our daily bread—our gingerbread—is made, and forms the figure of a rabbit dressed in coat and trousers out of flour, sugar, and fragrant spices, with raisins for eyes, an almond for a nose, and a cherry for a mouth. She lays him out upon the kitchen table to await her further ministrations when she is summoned forth by the call of the vegetable man.

While she was gone the gingerbread rabbit lay there on the kitchen table, and the morning sun streamed in through the window and fell on his coat and trousers. After a while the sunshine warmed them so and dried them so that they had a lovely look and smell, like clothes someone has just ironed.

Creation is a happy thing if we consider life in the universe a suit of clothes, freshly washed and warming in the sun. The rabbit's first experience of his suit of life is joyful, and will so remain until he is disillusioned by cynical companions and by events which prove their cynicism well-founded. However, the laundry metaphor, borrowed from Carlyle or from Swift, is rarely so joyous—as witness Jarrell's own use of it in the poem "Washing:"

The washing inhabits a universe
Indifferent to the woes of washing,
A world—as the washing puts it—
A world that washing never made.

We mortals pass from one place to another as we go about our business, and we tend to feel in our solipsistic, Berkeleian

way that we carry with us as we pass the whole of existence. So, as Jarrell sends the mother on her errand, we readers are left behind to witness in the kitchen a realm of existence of which she is unaware—which for her will never exist. The unbaked rabbit sneezes himself awake as if allergic to the life that has been thrust upon him. Even as man in his brief span addresses questions to no one in particular, the rabbit asks, "Where am I?" and receives an immediate and terrifying answer:

'Here in the kitchen,' said the paring knife.
'What's a kitchen?' said the rabbit.
'It's where they cook you and eat you,' said the paring knife.\(^6\)

The gingerbread rabbit, albeit naïve, has awakened to a modicum of understanding and is appropriately frightened. Further efforts toward self-identification only lead to further horror. He learns that he is a rabbit—

an animal that lives in the forest . . . and whenever anyone comes near him he runs away because he's afraid they'll shoot him and eat him.\(^7\)

Then he learns that as a gingerbread rabbit, he will be spared the shooting but will still be baked and eaten.

The shifting of viewpoint from the mother's fond intentions of delight to the terror of the rabbit she has fashioned establishes the primary theme that will govern the development of this deceptively simple tale:

\(^7\) Ibid.
The rabbit said: 'I don't want them to bake me! I don't want them to eat me!'

. . . 'It makes no difference what you want. . . . In a minute the woman will come in and pick you up and put you in the oven, and that will be the end of you.'

The rabbit has been plunged without preparation into an existence filled with pain and terror and despair. His only possible response is flight, "into the forest." He had not asked for existence, nor does he want to be eaten: but he does exist, and eaten he will surely be. For the rabbit, like all other creatures the pawn of possibly mistaken good intentions, appears to have been brought into existence only to follow a foredoomed path. He must undertake a journey into the heart of darkness not the less terrifying because of its external simplicity, and we are warned that we too, having been warmed into the sunlight of life, must set off on our journey into the forest which symbolizes our fears and our preconscious. There, as in the kitchen, we will be devoured if for one moment we cease running and cease watching. Only the Gottfried Rosenbaums are truly safe because they alone have seen the forest truly and have accepted it.

Still searching for his own image, the gingerbread rabbit examines his reflection in the warped surfaces of the cynical and disapproving utensils and is repelled by what he sees. It is only his undistorted reflection in the window—

---

8Ibid., p. 7.
pane that brings him to exclaim, "Why, I'm beautiful!" The kitchen has become the arena of life wherein the hero of this mock epic, rejecting the defeatist attitudes of his false comforters, has already achieved a high level of individualization and a fierce determination to survive. The kitchen utensils find beauty only in their own peculiar form and shape and deride the rabbit: "Beautiful!" said the mixing bowl, "Why, you're not even round." But the gingerbread rabbit has been ennobled by the vision, for it is the awareness of one's own excellence, of the intrinsic value of one's own life, that inspires the creature to want to preserve it as long as he can.

He lies back down and, his raisin eyes filled with horror, depicts the mother as seen by an edible being:

Her arms were four times the size of the rabbit's and instead of her having a cherry for a mouth, there in the middle of her face were dozens of tremendous shining white teeth the size of a grizzly bear's... 'I haven't a chance,' thought the rabbit.9

Jarrell creates a high level of suspense, playing the one point of view against the other—that of the victim rabbit against that of the mother unaware of the horror she is about to perpetrate. Only we are privy to both and realize as the mother reaches for the rabbit and starts for the oven that our sympathies have clearly fallen on the side of the creature, rabbit and man alike, and against the incomprehensible designs of the

9Ibid., p. 12.
creator. We applaud as the rabbit, squealing with terror, jumps down and dashes out the open door with the giantess in full pursuit.

A few brief episodes that follow comprise an allegory of man's passage through life. Like the rabbit's, his existence consists in fleeing from destiny, pain, and death. The chase into the forest now underway will come to an end for rabbit and man alike.

In the forest, the rabbit first meets a friendly squirrel secure in his nest in a great oak tree. He responds generously to the rabbit's plea, "There's a giant chasing me that's going to cook me and eat me." But the rabbit is too big for the squirrel to lift into the tree, and the mother is too near, and the warm sun which had breathed life into the soft dough now saps the rabbit's strength and makes him pant. In a panic he decides, "I'll go this way and maybe the giant will go the other way." He starts down the path to the right, but he does not fail to call back a warning to his friend the squirrel, "Hide! Hide!" But even as he runs down the path and disappears into the trees, the squirrel hears the giantess weeping, comes out of his nest and recognizes her, not as the monster with great teeth that the rabbit had described, but as "the lady who lives at the edge of the forest and always fed him nuts."

What can he do? He has accommodated himself to life at the edge of the forest—to a refuge amid the safety of the trees
from which he can descend to accept food from the hands of those
who do not live in the forest—from the hands of that very mother
who had planned to cook and eat the gingerbread rabbit. He can
only accept her reassurances that she no longer intends—never
intended harm to the rabbit—that she only wants him as a pet.
The squirrel, himself a small creature in a world of giants, at
first lies but then resigns himself to the compromise that those
of us who live on the edge of things—"neither out far nor in
depth"—always make, and betrays the rabbit: "He went that way.
But promise me you won't eat him!"

The ensuing chase is described in the manner of a set
ritual to which both pursuer and pursued instinctively adhere.
Like clockwork figures, they gain and lose but in the main retain
fixed positions relative to each other.

The gingerbread rabbit's second encounter is with a beau-
tiful red creature with a long bushy tail and pointed ears, who
immediately sets out to ensnare the rabbit. But the patently
fraudulent fox is laboring under a misconception equal in irony
to that of the rabbit. He sees that the rabbit is peculiar in
shape but assumes that he is nevertheless a genuine rabbit made
of meat, and he plans to lure him into his den, there to devour
him at leisure. He is not malicious but only, in the words of
Jarrell's poem "Variations," "does his duty." The rabbit, fail-
ing to identify in the friendly fox the enemy of all rabbits, is
preparing to accept final shelter with him when approaching
footsteps frighten the fox into his den.

But it is only the same large brown rabbit that the mother had seen earlier that morning, appearing just in time to save the gingerbread rabbit from both the fox and the mother. The two rabbits, one real, one made of pastry, both creatures of fantasy, flee from the fox down the forest's paths to the safe haven of the rabbit's home, where he lives in childless harmony with his silvery grey rabbit wife. They immediately propose that the gingerbread rabbit join their family:

> How would you like to live with us all the time, ... and go out in the meadow and play hide-and-seek with us at night, and it would be exactly the same as if you were our very own little rabbit.\(^{10}\)

And this is precisely what the gingerbread rabbit does.

Each of the creatures that the rabbit has met--squirrel, fox, and this oddly sterile leporian group of two--is concerned only with his own personal interest. The squirrel is fearful lest he compromise his regular supply of nuts, for he has reached a ready accommodation with powers he has found benign and over which he has no control. The fox had sought, inappropriately in this case, a delicious meal of fresh young rabbit. The rabbit couple complete their family by assimilating the gingerbread rabbit that the fates have delivered to their door.

Meanwhile, the perpetrator of this enormity, the creator-mother, has begun to retrace her weary steps. Disheveled and

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 42.
empty-handed, she meets the fox sitting near his hole, thoroughly disgruntled over his loss of a victim he had thought well within his grasp. The information that he has been in pursuit of a "gingerbread" rabbit creates a certain confusion in his breast:

'What's gingerbread? . . . What does it taste like?' asked the fox. 'Meat?'

'O, no,' said the mother. 'It's more like vegetable.'

The fox is humiliated to think he had gotten all excited over a vegetable, but the mother, whose urge to bring all things under the aegis of her kitchen seems unquenchable, pleads with him to come and be her household pet.

Her offer of dogfood does not strike him as adequate compensation for his loss of the freedom of the forest, and his sardonic remark about her lamentation over the loss of her little girl's surprise is a trenchant comment on the pretension of her quest:

Why don't you just hide behind the door and jump out and say Boo! at her when she comes in? That would be a real surprise.12

It is during a subsequent encounter with the squirrel that the mother thinks of making an alternate surprise for her little girl—a stuffed bunny made out of cotton felt with "a red button for its mouth, a white button for its nose, and two shining black buttons for its eyes." And so she did, and the

11 Ibid., p. 45.  
12 Ibid., p. 46.
little girl was surprised and happy. But afterwards the three rabbits would often stop at the edge of the forest and contemplate the house

all sleeping in the moonlight, and the gingerbread rabbit would say: 'That's where the giant lives. Oh, those teeth! Did she almost cook me! Did she almost eat me!'

His adopted parents were too polite to tell him it is not an ogre, but a mother and her little girl who live there.

Thus the story ends with our mock hero safe, secure and totally ignorant of who he is or how he came to be. His adoptive parents, basically as unreal as himself, prefer his ignorance to the effort of explanation. The mother-creator, who has settled for a surrogate surprise because her intentions with regard to the gingerbread rabbit have been frustrated and misunderstood, remains unaware of his continued existence. No single character has had a clear understanding of which part of his experience is appearance and which is reality. The author has given us a romance that demonstrates the possibilities of being. He has shown us the many ways that things can be seen if we possess the imaginative wit to pierce through appearance to the inner reality, and the understanding to realize that the inner reality is always more complex than it appears.

2. The Bat-Poet

Once upon a time there was a bat who became a poet, and in telling us his story Jarrell expresses in allegorical form most of the convictions on poetry and on the role of the poet that we have already examined. This child's version of "The Obscurity of the Poet" is, in a way, a far more effective poetic apologia than the essay provided, but it can also be read and understood as a typically anthropomorphic tale of charming little creatures somehow gifted with human attributes and speech, living out their simple lives and aspirations in a setting of rustic tranquility. Its underlying concepts, unlike those of The Gingerbread Rabbit, are rooted in the conscious rather than the preconscious, and it has neither the complexity of symbolism nor the multilevel significance of the earlier work. Moreover, its full didactic message is only ascertained when it is related to the poet's overall point of view. The poet has celebrated his disappointment in poems and has complained of it in frequently querulous essays. He is now, as it were, at the bed-time story stage of disillusionment, exercising his considerable talent for parable in a last effort toward reaching the children of the audience which had, he felt, eluded him most of his life.

\footnote{Randall Jarrell, \textit{The Bat-Poet} (New York: Macmillan, 1963).}
The Bat-Poet is circular in structure like The Gingerbread Rabbit. It opens upon a warm, furry community of bats that actually gathered on the porch of the secluded, ivy-covered home that the Jarrels purchased in 1959 upon their return to Greensboro after Jarrell's tenure as poetry consultant at The Library of Congress. Mrs. Jarrell speaks of the retired life they led among their many trees, sheltered from the clamor and frustrations of city life, and of how The Bat-Poet came to be written:

In a hammock at one of his stations 'out in Nature' and with the FM on loud, Randall wrote his Bat-Poet. His creatures were the half-tamed ones we fed. Some of them, or ones just like them, live on in these woods; and the real cardinal, the one who knew Randall, is the red bird in the green pine, who still calls birdie-birdie-birdie-birdie for his sunflower seeds. In Life, [Robert] Frost and Cal [Robert Lowell] were Mockingbirds; Michael di Capua and I were Chipmunks, of sorts; and Bob Watson and Randall were Bats.15

The bat-poet is temporarily separated from this community by his poetic vocation but is impelled to rejoin it in time to begin his winter's hibernation. The community has, in the meantime, moved west of the porch to the warmth of the barn, the area of refuge from death and coldness, from winter and night, where slumber and King Log reign.

The appropriateness of Jarrell's language—the exactness of the childlike conversational tone which he achieves and

maintains throughout the text—is complemented by the amazingly rich and detailed illustrations by Maurice Sendak, which capture and express both the covert and the symbolic significance of the text, as well as the overt activities of the characters. Three of the four poems which Jarrell uses in this fairy tale also appear in The Lost World.

The story opens, like every good fairy tale, with "Once upon a time" and goes on to describe a small but wholly satisfactory community. Its needs are easily satisfied, and it provides for its members the warmth and accommodation that every creature needs.

Sometimes one of them would wake up for a minute and get in a more comfortable position, and then the others would wriggle around in their sleep till they'd got more comfortable too; when they all moved it looked as if a fur wave went over them.16

The bat-poet's individuation begins when all the other bats, toward the end of summer, leave the porch and begin to sleep their days away in the barn. He, inexplicably, chooses to remain on the porch. It is the only sleeping place he has ever known, and he opts for a decision based on his own judgment in preference to the racial memory of the group. He tries to get the other bats to remain with him:

'What do you want to sleep in the barn for?' he asked them.

"We don't know," the others said. "What do you want to sleep on the porch for?" 17

Hanging alone now, missing the warmth of his brothers, he does not sleep all day as the community does but finds himself exposed to totally new dimensions of experience. Like Diogenes in his tub, he sees things that are forever hidden from the conformists outside. But when he flies to the barn toward nightfall and tells them of all the wonderful things he has seen, they are unimpressed and unbelieving. He appeals to them to look about themselves and to verify what he has told them, but they reply that the light hurts their eyes, and "the thing to do is to close them and go right back to sleep."

Contemplating the artistry of the mockingbird, who sings alike by day and night, the bat-poet tries to imitate him, but finds that he cannot. His voice is high and thin, and the mockingbird's melodies are out of his range, "so he imitated the mockingbird's words, instead."

His first effort is a poem about the daytime that he wants to "say" (Frost's term) to the other bats in order to share with them his new understanding.

At dawn, the sun shines like a million moons
And all the shadows are as bright as moonlight.
The birds begin to sing with all their might.
The world awakens and forgets the night.

The squirrel begins to - 18

---

17 Ibid., p. 2.  
18 Ibid., p. 5.
But they interrupt him, refuse to listen, deny him the audience he needs to complete the artistic transaction, and he cannot even remember the rest of his verse.

Although discouraged, the bat-poet continues his diurnal adventuring and makes up poems about a possum and her babies, about squirrels, and about an owl which nearly caught him for her evening meal. But without an audience, the poems are soon forgotten. He has pondered the possibility of saying them to the mockingbird but is put off by that artist's lofty professionalism. His real yearning is to sing to his brother bats of the wonders he has seen, just as Jarrell had insisted in his essays that the poet's true audience is not the feathered academic, the arid scholar, the fellow professional, but his own people. However, he is impelled by the apathy and rejection of his fellows to approach the mockingbird who is singing "To a Mockingbird." He is a superb poet, although conventional and somewhat self-centered, and is more interested in audience than in disciples. Unlike Jarrell, who could involve himself completely in another poet's work, the mockingbird makes the bat-poet listen to "To a Mockingbird" four times before he condescends to listen to the bat-poet's poem about the owl and his own narrow escape:

A shadow is floating through the moonlight.
Its wings don't make a sound.
Its claws are long, its beak is bright
Its eyes try all the corners of the night.
It calls and calls: all the air swells and heaves
And washes up and down like water.
The ear that listens to the owl believes
In death. The bat beneath the eaves,
The mouse beside the stone are still as death—
The owl's air washes them like water.
The owl goes back and forth inside the night,
And the night holds its breath.

The mockingbird praises the poem purely in terms of cleverness
and technique, which confuses the bat-poet:

'That last line of yours has six syllables and the
one before it has ten: when you shorten the last
line like that it gets the effect of the night
holding its breath.'

'I didn't know that,' the bat said. 'I just made
it like holding your breath.'

'To be sure, to be sure!' said the mockingbird.¹⁹

The bat-poet goes away dissatisfied and bitter. "The
trouble isn't making poems, the trouble's finding somebody that
will listen to them." Jarrell is once again explaining with
great care that a poet is really an ordinary fellow, a bat if
you will, who happens to be inspired. The bat-poet decides to
go into the market place and offer himself for hire. "For six
crickets I'll do your portrait in verse." He doesn't really
want crickets, "but they don't respect something if they get
it for nothing."

His first prospect is a thoroughly confused chipmunk.
To show him what a poem is, the bat-poet says him the poem
about the owl, and the chipmunk is overcome with wonder and

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 12-14.
with terror. He had not known such things existed, and now that he does, his life is changed. "He didn't say any of that two-feet-short stuff," the bat thought triumphantly; "he was scared!"

But the role of the poet is not yet completely fulfilled. The chipmunk has been given a new vision of the world he lives in, but there yet remains to bring him to a new vision of himself:

In and out the bushes, up the ivy,
Into the hole
By the old oak stump, the chipmunk flashes,
Up the pole

To the feeder full of seeds he dashes,
Stuffs his cheeks,
The chickadee and titmouse scold him.
Down he streaks.

Red as the leaves the wind blows off the maple,
Red as a fox,
Striped like a skunk, the chipmunk whistles
Past the love seat, past the mail box,

Down the path,
Home to his warm hole stuffed with sweet
Things to eat.
Neat and slight and shining, his front feet

Curled at his breast, he sits there while the sun
Stripes the red west
With its last light; the chipmunk
Dives to his rest.20

The chipmunk is delighted with the portrait and asks to have it repeated, and then to hear the poem about the owl again. He and the bat-poet speak, not of technique, but of the emotional and imaginative impact of the verse. The chipmunk has shown himself a nonpareil audience for the poet.

20 Ibid., p. 20.
The chipmunk then suggests that the bat-poet "do" the cardinal, and over the bat-poet's objections—"I've watched him, but I don't know him"—approaches the cardinal and wins his approval. But the bat-poet cannot rise to the occasion. The color and action are appealing, the subtleties of the relationship between the father cardinal and his voracious offspring are clearly observed, the ironic contrast between his splendid plumage and his mundane role is duly noted, but no poem will come because he does not "know" the cardinal, and because the lightning has not struck. So ends the bat-poet's career as poet-for-hire. "I guess I can't make portraits of the animals after all." He has within his own experience come upon the Wordsworthian principle that something truly unique about a subject must strike the poet before the poem be written.

And this happens very shortly thereafter, while the bat-poet is watching his old mentor the mockingbird drive every living creature out of the yard and then imitate his victims to perfection. This anomaly, together with his previous knowledge of the mockingbird's temperament and character, gives rise to this poem:

Look one way and the sun is going down,
Look the other and the moon is rising.
The sparrow's shadow's longer than the lawn.
The bats squeak: 'Night is here,' the birds cheep:
    'Day is gone.'
On the willow's highest branch, monopolizing
Day and night, cheeping, squeaking, soaring,
The mockingbird is imitating life.
All day the mockingbird has owned the yard.
As light first woke the world, the sparrows trooped
Onto the seedy lawn: the mockingbird
Chased them off shrieking. Hour by hour, fighting hard
To make the world his own, he swooped
On thrushes, thrashers, jays and chickadees—
At noon he drove away a big black cat.

Now, in the moonlight, he sits here and sings.
A thrush is singing, then a thrasher, then a jay—
Then, all at once, a cat begins meowing.
A mockingbird can sound like anything.
He imitates the world he drove away
So well, that for a minute, in the moonlight,
Which one's the mockingbird? Which one's the world?

The bat-poet's faithful audience, the chipmunk, fully appreciates what the poem is saying:

It really is like him. . . . You wouldn't think
he'd drive you away and imitate you. You wouldn't think he could.21

He does not, however, anticipate that the mockingbird will like the poem.

And he is right! The mockingbird's reaction is visceral: "You sound as if there were something wrong with imitating things." He goes on at some length, sounding much like a feathered Gertrude Johnson, explaining how right he is to chase everything out of the yard and then to demonstrate how each would sound if they had his talent.

'A mockingbird's sensitive,' said the mockingbird;
when he said sensitive his voice went way up and way back down.22

Pressed to comment on the technical aspects of the verses, he

21 Ibid., p. 28.  
22 Ibid., p. 32.
can only admit, "I didn't notice."

In his own simple way, the bat-poet is demonstrating almost every one of Jarrell's basic principles of poetry. He has given the chipmunk and the mockingbird, each in his own way, insights into themselves and into the world around them that they would not otherwise have experienced, and he has made them more aware, not of strange and esoteric scenes and sensations, but of the world of their own immediate, day-to-day existence. He has also demonstrated the poet's need for intuition, for inspiration, and for audience. His attempt to depict the daytime for his fellow bats was unsuccessful not because of his own failure as a poet but because of the failure of his audience—the necessary second party to the poetic transaction. However, once the audience has turned to listen, the focus of the act of communication shifts to the relationship between the audience and the poem—the completed work of art which now exists outside of and separate from the poet. Maurice Sendak has captured this latter point beautifully. The bat-poet appears in almost every one of the smaller illustrations scattered throughout the text, but is nowhere to be seen in the magnificent full and double page illustrations that accompany the fully realized poems.

The bat-poet's second exchange with the mockingbird demonstrates Jarrell's conviction that honest criticism occurs only when the critic responds emotionally rather than with critical acuity to what is essentially an expression of emotion.
on the part of the poet. The chipmunk, whose response is purely intuitive, is obviously a better critic than the bats who do not respond at all, but he is also a better critic than the mockingbird, whose judgment is distorted first by pedantry and then by vanity. "You just haven't any idea," he says to the poet who has just shown, clearly and succinctly, that he has a very good idea of what it means to be a mockingbird.

As winter draws on, the bat-poet grows fatter, in anticipation of the long hibernation. He is, after all, a bat—and he is drawn ineluctably to ponder his own kind and to dream again that if he writes a poem about bats they will listen to him out there in the barn. His racial memories also warn him that his very life depends upon his rejoining his own community, for soon not even the chipmunk will be awake to listen to him. Like Jarrell, existing in the strangely cultureless milieu of mid-century America, the bat-poet is striving against the onset of time to say his poem to a rapidly vanishing audience and to return, like Jarrell, to the lost world of his own kindred and his own childhood. He announces to the chipmunk, "I've done my poem about the bats. It's about a mother and her baby:"

A bat is born
Naked and blind and pale.
His mother makes a pocket of her tail
And catches him. He clings to her long fur
By his thumbs and toes and teeth.
And then the mother dances through the night
Doubling and looping, soaring, somersaulting—
Her baby hangs on underneath.
All night, in happiness, she hunts and flies. Her high sharp cries Like shining needlepoints of sound Go out into the night and, echoing back, Tell her what they have touched. She hears how far it is, how big it is, Which way it's going. She lives by hearing.
The mother eats the moths and gnats she catches In full flight; in full flight The mother drinks the water of the pond She skims across. Her baby hangs on tight. Her baby drinks the milk she makes him In moonlight or starlight, in mid-air. Their single shadow, printed on the moon Or fluttering across the stars, Whirls on all night; at daybreak The tired mother flaps home to her rafter. The others all are there. They hang themselves up by their toes, They wrap themselves in their brown wings. Bunched upside down, they sleep in air. Their sharp ears, their sharp teeth, their quick sharp faces Are dull and slow and mild. All the bright day, as the mother sleeps, She folds her wings about her sleeping child. 23

To the poet's perennial question, "Did you like the poem?" the chipmunk, who obviously did, expresses the highest praise a poet can ask: "O, of course. Except I forgot it was a poem. I just kept thinking how queer it must be to be a bat."

At this, the bat-poet, heavy with sleep, flies slowly to the barn. The sun is setting and winter has almost come. He will say them his poem, he thinks, as soon as they all wake up, and slowly comes to realize that he has forgotten it again.

I wish I'd said we sleep all winter. That would have been a good thing to have in. 24

---

23 Ibid., pp. 36-37. 
24 Ibid., p. 42.
3. The Animal Family

The Animal Family, written just before Jarrell’s nervous collapse early in 1965, came about in this manner:

Then something unexpected happened. After a false start or two, a book took hold of him and got written almost consecutively to its end. Daily, like a small glacier, it gathered up objects such as deerskin rugs from Salzburg, the new window seat we’d added, the Gucci hunting horn over our brick hearth and our female satyr figurine from Amsterdam. Into this setting Randall put a bearded hunter and a mermaid, the lynx from the Washington Zoo, the seals from Laguna days, and finally he gave these a boy who wanted to be adopted by The Animal Family.

It is the longest and most elaborate of his three published stories for children. The Gingerbread Rabbit and The Bat-Poet are, as we have seen, explicitly romantic in the Jamesian sense, and we were more than happy to accept the premises of total fantasy upon which they were based. Where there is no pretense to realism, the poet’s imagination is free to display reality in its hidden dimensions. In The Animal Family Jarrell’s attitude toward the rope which attaches the balloon to the world remains unclear. He has included an element of total fantasy in the person of the mermaid but treats all the other characters and elements of plot as realistically as possible, attempting, it would seem, to convince us of the

truth of his epigraph: "Say what you like, but such things do happen—not often, but they do happen."

The basic thrust of this allegory is toward a deeper understanding of and commitment to human community, but it is frustrated by the lack of fully rounded human or even anthropomorphized characters to participate in such community. The frontispieces to the seven chapters, each given over to an individual character, never depict the character himself. All that Maurice Sendak has given us in this book are drawings of the natural habitats in which such characters might possibly be found.

In "An Unread Book" Jarrell made the following observation:

A man on a park bench has a lonely final look. . . .
But if you look back into his life you cannot help seeing that he is separated off, not separate—in a later, singular stage of an earlier plural being. 27

The Animal Family opens on just such a situation—a hunter living completely alone after the death of his progenitors, made self-sufficient by an abundance of game, and exhibiting no great symptoms of loneliness or grief. In chapter two, he is joined by a mermaid; in chapters three and four they acquire a pet bear; and in chapter five, a lynx. In chapter six the lynx and bear bring to the growing family a small boy orphaned

27Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism, p. 3.
and marooned by shipwreck, and chapter seven celebrates the harmony of the completed family.

The hunter is physically alone and appears to be only mildly unhappy without the human companionship he once knew. The furnishings of his home and his clothing, which are described in great detail, are all derived from his trade. The few artifacts not of his own making are items of debris washed up from wrecked ships and represent his only contact with the outside world. He has come to live by the sea, which symbolizes an order of existence different from and freer than life on land—nature in its primordial goodness. He has come to think of beauty and of peace in terms of the sea:

In spring the meadow that ran down from the cliff to the beach was all foam-white and sea-blue with flowers; the hunter looked at it and it was beautiful.28

One day the hunter heard the song of a mermaid and answered it, and after a long period of time earned the mermaid's love. The mermaid, here as in the poem "A Soul," symbolizes an order of natural goodness to which man must rejoin himself if he is to have full and fruitful and joyful use of those spiritual powers inherent in what we call "soul."

The mermaid knows that the sea contains all that is good, but she is fascinated by the variety that the land offers and is eventually persuaded to come and live with the hunter in his simple home. Their relationship is not, apparently, carnal

and their domestic arrangements are flawed by realistic problems stemming from the mermaid's having lived her life beneath the sea. She almost burns herself on the first fiery coals she has ever seen. "I thought it was a red shell," she said, "the best I ever saw. I was going to put it on the wall." She also proves inept at cooking and housework, and it is here that the major fault in Jarrell's concept of the character and of her role in the drama becomes evident. "If you had a seal that could talk," he asks, "would you want it to sweep the floor?" He thereby reduces the mermaid from her status as symbol of primordial virtue, untainted by the knowledge of good and evil, to the level of a stock character in a television situation comedy. She is amusing rather than useful or beautiful. Her views of life, which present the sea people as morally superior in some undefinable way, are basically simplistic. She describes how the sea people fear the sharks and whales that eat them, and how the fish that the sea people eat, fear them. But there is no hostility under the sea because they all recognize that "everything lives on everything."

Jarrell's mermaid is, in short, an abstract construct, created for the sole purpose of enunciating Jarrell's vaguely Rousseauvian notions as to natural goodness. As with so many social critics, the positive aspects of his thinking are far less cogent than the negative. We have seen that he is capable of creating fully rounded creatures of fantasy, but the mermaid
is not one of them. Perhaps he should have made her a poet, as he made the bat a poet, so that she might have expressed the same poetic ideas in a more suitable poetic form. If the story were more fantastic, or less, it would be more successful.

Thus it is no wonder that the hunter is still lonely, for he and the mermaid are actually very much alike. The bat-poet made us fully aware of the unique individuality of the chipmunk, and of the owl, and of the mockingbird, in a few precise verses. Here we are constantly told that there are significant differences, but we find it increasingly difficult to remember what they are. Their living together has not created the warmth of a human family, so that the hunter's recurrent dream of himself as a child with his parents, a dream in which he has come to replace the father and the mermaid the mother, lacks the child that should replace him in the role he has outgrown.

The pattern of the missing child characterizes Jarrell's work from the earliest war poems, in which soldiers who are barely more than children are sent off to war, to the poems of The Lost World in which Jarrell is able to relate his own childhood experiences of loneliness to basic themes of human alienation. Thus the Rosenbaums in Pictures from an Institution adopt Constance, and also, in a sense, the narrator. Gottfried himself, like the young Jarrell, wanted to be adopted by creatures from another world. Jarrell's own family unit was completed
by the inclusion of children not his own. The hunter and the mermaid represent a recurrent preoccupation with the family unit bound together by ties other than blood.

It is to fill this blank in the picture of their lives that the hunter brings home a small bear cub whose mother he has slain in mortal combat. The cub becomes a member of this group of two, and is fed from their table. Symbolically, it is the hunter rather than the mermaid who has, with great effort and the shedding of his own blood, brought their first born into their lonely lives. That they should comfort the small bear during his first few lonely nights with them by putting him to sleep on a bearskin rug is beyond irony—it is macabre.

However, when winter comes and the bear goes into hibernation, their lives again become empty, so they add a lynx to their family circle. Subsequently, the lynx and the bear return to the house with a small boy whom they have found in a lifeboat that has been washed ashore nearby, and they all live together in peace and amity.

This basically slender plot is fortified with such a profusion of incident and truly poetic description that it collapses under the burden. The Animal Family becomes in the end a series of anecdotes to which a moral is affixed rather than a short novel bound into a coherent whole by plot and action and given substance by adequate character development. It is far too long and far too detailed a narrative to be
successfully bound and shaped by this slender element of theme. There is, as a result, no immediacy, no life, no opposition to breathe life into the bi-dimensional characters. The anecdotes themselves vary in profundity as well as in significance. The passages, for example, in which Jarrell extols the ability, beauty and grace of the lynx are as successful as one might have expected from a lifelong fancier of cats, while the passages on the bear are not nearly as successful.

There are also several broad implications in this strange tale that do not permit of satisfactory resolution. It seems clear that the hunter has not achieved anything resembling a prelapsarian state of bliss through his relationship with the mermaid, and he remains clearly aware that his isolated habitat is not the complete world of reality. He despises things that must come from the world outside, yet waits for ships from the outer world to cast their wreckage upon his shore, including at last the human child that he so desperately needs to give his household a spurious semblance of family structure. Thus we do not have a portrayal of a latter-day Eden untouched by evil as Jarrell seems to have intended, but a pseudo-world made possible by alienation, by isolation, and by the fortuitous acquisition of the real child that his sterile union with the mermaid had not provided. The lynx and the bear are, in the end, no more than pets.
In fine, there is in The Animal Family neither that adherence to and reliance upon ordinary human experience that lies at the heart of Jarrell's critical posture, nor that touch of lightning that gives depth and significance to the poetic utterance. Of the many characteristics that Jarrell himself demands before he pronounces a work "good," The Animal Family possesses only that of elevation of language.

In The Gingerbread Rabbit and in The Bat-Poet, a small masterpiece, as in his poetry, Jarrell is able to evoke a veritable land of fairy in which these waking dreams speak to us of the real and of the changing world in which we live. In The Animal Family, Jarrell yielded to the temptation that every teacher must resist and assumed a serious and even a moralizing stance. Foresaking the bat-poet's humility, he simply preaches to us on the family of man and ends by explaining and reexplaining in a profusion of insignificant, if frequently sensitive, detail. The story succumbs, under the weight of incident, to the tedium of a lecture.
PART III

THE POETRY OF RANDALL JARRELL

The poet writes his poem for its own sake, for the sake of that order of things in which the poem takes the place that has awaited it.1

The poetry of Randall Jarrell has now been consigned to the ages, and even as all the works of art which preceded his had enriched and modified the tradition from which he sprang, so have his unique efforts altered and enlivened our poetic heritage. It is the purpose of the final section of this study to examine certain of Jarrell's poems in the light of the critical principles we have established above.

Jarrell himself made a significant contribution toward achieving a comprehensive view of his poetry when, in the years of his maturity, he reviewed and in many cases revised much of the best of his earlier work. In preparing his Selected Poems (1955), he eliminated many earlier poems, revised others, and completely rearranged the entire selection under new captions. His patterns of excision clearly reflect the development of his poetic skill as well as the refinement of his critical judgment. He includes only ten of the thirty-six poems from his first independent collection, Blood for a Stranger (1942); twenty-five

of the thirty-three poems from Little Friend, Little Friend (1945); thirty of the thirty-two poems from The Seven League Crutches (1951). Only two of the ninety-four poems included were previously uncollected: "A War" (Nation, September 22, 1951), and "The Survivor among Graves" (Poetry, October, 1952). The volume thus represents his own reconsideration of his poetic effort from its beginnings through 1952.

Selected Poems is divided into two parts. The fifty poems included in Part I are placed under six subheadings: "Lives" (ten poems), "Dream-Work" (six poems), "The Wide Prospect" (nine poems), "Once Upon a Time" (nine poems), "The World is Everything that is the Case" (ten poems), and "The Graves in the Forest" (six poems). The forty-four poems of Part II contain all of the war poems for which Jarrell was best known at that time and are placed under seven subheadings: "Bombers" (five poems), "The Carriers" (four poems), "Prisoners" (five poems), "Camps and Fields" (eight poems), "The Trades" (seven poems), "Children and Civilians" (six poems), and "Soldiers" (nine poems).

Only two collections appeared after Selected Poems: The Woman at the Washington Zoo (thirty-one poems) in 1960, and The Lost World (twenty-two poems) in 1965. In 1969, four years after his death, Randall Jarrell: The Complete Poems (288 poems) was published under the supervision of his widow, Mary von Schrader Jarrell. It is divided into two parts, in the first
of which are to be found the complete texts of Selected Poems (with the author's Introduction), The Woman at the Washington Zoo, The Lost World, and seven "new" poems (published after The Lost World)—154 poems in all. In the second part are found the forty-eight poems which Jarrell had excluded from Selected Poems, forty-one published poems which he had not seen fit to include in any of his collections, and forty-five unpublished poems.

Critical analyses of certain specific themes and aspects of Jarrell's poetry were undertaken during his lifetime. The most notable of these is certainly that of Sister Bernetta Quinn, whose study The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry (1955) traces the extensive use of metamorphic symbol and device in the work of Jarrell and five other modern poets.\(^2\) Ingo Siedler's article "Jarrell and the Art of Translation" (1961) sheds significant light on Jarrell's skills and method in the many translations, chiefly from the German, that we find in his later work.\(^3\)

Since Jarrell's death, two dissertations on his poetry


---

In concluding this study of the writings of Randall Jarrell, we shall relate several selected examples of his verse to the principles and themes that we have discerned in his critical essays and in his prose fiction in order to establish the bases of a more comprehensive evaluation of his total literary contribution.
CHAPTER VIII

ON THE MATURE POETRY OF RANDALL JARRELL

Yet—yet—one is paid:
To see things as they are, to make them what they might be—
Old Father of Truth, old Spirit That Accepts—
That's something.8

It is the purpose of this final chapter to present extended analyses of six poems which most clearly illustrate themes that are central to an understanding of Jarrell's poetry: "A Conversation with the Devil" from Selected Poems, Part I, "Stalag Luft," from Selected Poems, Part II, "The End of the Rainbow" from The Woman at the Washington Zoo, and "Thinking of the Lost World" from The Lost World. We shall also consider "The Player Piano," an uncollected poem that postdates The Lost World, and "Orestes at Tauris," an earlier poem that expresses perhaps more explicitly than his later, more fastidious verse the themes and preoccupations that characterize Jarrell's work as a poet and his life in midcentury America.9

1. The Dimensions of Anxiety

The first part of Selected Poems presents a panorama of human existence. The first section, "Lives," introduces

8 Jarrell, Complete Poems, p. 30.

9 The full text of poems chosen for extended analysis will be found in Appendix I, as noted.
several varied characters playing out roles not chosen but assigned to them by life. "Dream Work" explores many of our subconscious preoccupations, each viewed from the vantage point of the bed. "The Wide Prospect" takes us aboard the Orient Express through the kingdoms of this world and the world of art. "Once Upon a Time" centers on the fairy tales we create for ourselves, and "The World is Everything that is the Case" considers the ineluctable barriers that the world of fact presents to our hopes and aspirations. The final section of Part I, "The Graves in the Forest" bespeaks man's ultimate defeat in death.

"A Conversation with the Devil," a poem of 139 lines arranged in verse paragraphs, first appeared in Poetry (April, 1951), and later that same year in The Seven-League Crutches. It is placed among a series of meditative personal studies in which Jarrell portrays such varied characters as a young girl blissfully drowsing her life away, oblivious to the worlds of experience contained in the volumes which surround her in the school library, or rural people so inured to an unimaginative oppressive daily round that before they ever become fully awake to life they have been lowered into their graves. In "The Knight, Death and the Devil" Jarrell speaks of the moment of life captured and made timeless in Durer's engraving. Jarrell shows us the loneliness of another young girl, motherless,

preparing Christmas for a brother she feels will also die. He depicts a vision of reality seen through the eyes of a woman whose soul is crushed beneath the burden of loss and insanity. And, in the midst of this gallery of anxiety, frustration and defeat, Jarrell presents his meditation on his own vocation.

"A Conversation with the Devil" expresses the inmost doubts and temptations of the poet in his struggle with life—with his art. In "The Obscurity of the Poet" Jarrell boldly maintains that a poet would write poetry even if he knew that nobody would ever read it, for a poet is chosen from on high—appointed to the poetic service even as the sons of Levi were chosen for the royal priesthood of Israel. He had in his youth accepted the calling, perhaps too easily, and now reflects wryly on his own rash impetuosity. To the devil's first offers of cheap success he had mockingly replied,

'Almost thou persuadest me,'
And made my offer:
'If ever I don't say
To the hour of life that I can wish for: Stay,
Thou art so fair! Why, you may have my—
Shadow.'

However, he has come to the point where he can no longer say, "Thou art so fair," and he wonders if he can sustain what he now more clearly sees to be the real terms of his agreement with life. His courage is sorely tried by a bitterness that flows from a maturer understanding of man's inadequacy, and from a realization of his own inevitable participation in it.
He is not tempted to abandon nor even to subvert his vocation, for he knows that that is no longer possible, but, more deeply and more insidiously, to deny its validity—to curse God and die. He is driven to this extreme not by the failure of his vision, but by the ingratitude of the readers he would serve, even as Christ was driven by the ingratitude of the lepers he cured to castigate the lone unfortunate who had returned to give thanks: "Were not ten cured? Where are the nine?"

Jarrell was no more than 37 when this poem was written, and his career could only be called successful—even prosperous. He is impelled by pressures that perhaps only the poet can understand to allow himself this satirical, witty, but essentially bitter and self-indulgent dialogue with his own dissatisfaction. How does the poet sustain his belief in the validity of his vision when there are so few who will even concern themselves with what he writes?

Indulgent, or candid, or uncommon reader
— I've some: a wife, a nun, a ghost or two—
If I write for anyone, I wrote for you.

A wife (presumably Mackie Langham Jarrell, from whom he separated in 1951), a nun (Sister Bernetta Quinn, whose interest and letters even at that time were a great help to his spirit)—these with an unidentifiable ghost or two were all that the poet can count as audience. He appreciates them, but he does not
overestimate them. "So, whisper, when I die, 'We was too few.'"¹¹

In the full tide of youthful vigor and success, the poet preoccupies himself with failure, death, and epitaphs, as if forewarned that this very obsession with the failure of our culture to provide the poet with the audience he needs will eventually shatter his own spirits and his faith in the worthiness of his vocation. In "Poets, Critics, and Readers," Jarrell claims that poets do not want to be read by critics with pencil in hand but by readers who have come to them to partake in the poet's vision of reality. He maintains throughout that the poet's courtship is of life and the world, but that the reader is the witness that validates his union. Without the witness of the reader the poet cannot sustain the marriage bond and faces a poetic divorce. The poet needs the recognition, the reaction of the reader even if it is negative.

The dark night of the soul that Jarrell experiences here is scarcely unique. In his "Dejection: An Ode," Coleridge pictures himself watching the long night through waiting for the wind to inspire and to repair his faltering spirit. In like manner, Jarrell places his conversation with the devil at the darkest hour of the night: "But twelve is striking," the

¹¹The sentence "We was too few" is an allusion to "the little boy in Hardy who wrote, 'We was too many.'" See introductory notes, Complete Poems, p. 5.
devil says, "time to be in bed." He too is hard pressed to be off before the ceaseless flux of a metamorphosis over which he has no longer any control catch him unaware and strip from him what little existence he retains in an age which deems him, like the poet, a romantic anachronism. The moment of dejection, of temptation will pass for both devil and poet, but they will bear with them new understandings. The poet, who once saw no choice save to write at the devil's dictation for "those artful, common, unindulgent others," or to live a life of solitude, is able to regain some confidence:

Yet—yet—one is paid:
To see things as they are, to make them what they might be—Old Father of Truths, old Spirit that Accepts—
That's something.

The devil too has come to doubt the validity of his calling, and for much the same reason as the poet. Man now "deals indifferently in life and death" and has become so spiritually debased that he no longer presents an audience for damnation.

I valued each of you at his own worth.
You have your faults; but you were bad at heart.
I disliked each life, I assure you, for its own sake.

The devil, like the poet, sees life steady and sees it whole and is forced by the exigencies of his own thinking to stop short of total repudiation of the values upon which he has built his life—"and yet—and yet—." Poet and devil alike are painfully aware of their own obsolescence. Within the context of democracy,
good and evil have both ceased to have any great significance. Both artists have been reduced to a sameness that is equivalent to nothingness and realize that the world will consign all that is not of immediate profit to the ash heap. The thrill of creation—the right to choose evil, to be angelic or demonic, is no longer part of our human heritage. As the devil points out, "Hell gives us habits / To take the place of happiness, alas!"

However, in spite of the vaguely positive tone of the poem's conclusion—the implication that the poet and the devil each continues his lonely way up the great bare staircase of duty—"A Conversation with the Devil" stands as a signpost marking a significant falling off of Jarrell's poetic activity in the years to come. His fame and influence increased steadily through the middle fifties. The greater part of his poetry was republished and extensively anthologized. Honors and appointments were bestowed upon him. But the outpouring of poetry that had carried him through the forties and into the early fifties now began to abate. He says in the poem that he is convinced that "one is paid," but this conviction is not borne out by the evidence of continued poetic creativity.

"A Conversation with the Devil" is dense with multi-leveled literary allusions. To the immediately obvious parallels with Faustian drama, and to the biblical references, both canonical and apocryphal (as to Lilith), Jarrell adds references to
philosophers as varied as Will Rogers and Ludwig Wittgenstein, several of which are explained in the author's introduction.

The dramatic formulation of the dialogue is based to a great extent on the same sort of subdivision within the individual persona that Jarrell had used successfully in *Pictures from an Institution*. The tempter is simply an extension of the poet's mundane and earthbound self rumbling about inside his empty soul. The doubts and misgivings that Jarrell puts into the mouth of the poor, anachronistic devil are only manifestations of insecurity and a bitterness verging on self-pity that we have noted in essays like "The Obscurity of the Poet." In other contexts Jarrell speaks of bearing the difficulties of life lightly—as in *The Bat-Poet* or in his characterization of Gottfried Rosenbaum—or else achieves a certain distancing or detachment—as in the war poems and in several of the poems of *The Lost World*.

In "A Conversation with the Devil" there is no distancing. If the poet is to be "paid," it is only in the devil's spurious coin or in the lonely privilege of being a poet. The only bargain with life that he can contemplate is bleak—perhaps unlivable:

'Neither to live Nor to ask for life'—that wasn't a bad bargain For a poor devil of a poet, was it? One makes a solitude and calls it peace.
2. The Lonely Warrior

The poem "Stalag Luft" first appeared in the Nation (June 28, 1947) and was collected in the volume Losses (1948). In Selected Poems, Part II, it is placed under the caption "Prisoners." The words "stalag luft," Jarrell explains, refer to "a (German) Prison Camp for Air Force Enlisted Men. One of the American prisoners is speaking." It is a brief poem of twenty-four lines, cast in three stanzas of eight concise trimeter verses, rimed abcbdbbe, except for the last four lines of the third stanza in which Jarrell uses a shortening of line structure and a succession of rounded vowel sounds—"below," "echo," "now"—to express the prisoner's melancholy anguish as he awakes to the realization of his plight. While "Stalag Luft" is not as widely anthologized as are "The Eighth Air Force" or "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," there is in it as powerful an evocation of the revelation of mortality in the violence of war as Jarrell achieved anywhere. It is also one of the two poems which Jarrell chose to record for the Library of Congress as early as 1949. ("Lady Bates," a hauntingly beautiful lament for a small black girl killed in an accident, is the other.)

As the poem opens, an American airman is lying bound and dazed in a ditch, as vividly aware of dream fantasies drawn from

---

memories of his boyhood as of his present situation:

The sound of my rabbit gnawing
Was the grasses' tickling shadow,
And I lay dazed in my halo
Of sunlight, a napping echo.

The figure of the confined and helpless rabbit as an image of man's life occurs frequently in Jarrell's poetry from the earliest pieces to the latest poems in The Lost World. He identifies with the prisoner lying with wrists bound in the ditch, discarded by his captors, dreaming that he hears a rabbit he once owned gnawing at the wood of its hutch. He is at his jailer's mercy as the rabbit was once at his mercy. Jailers are beasts of prey, and he has become, like the rabbit, prey.

The speaker in "The Prince," a prisoner awaiting execution, shrinks up "like a rabbit" at the anticipated approach of the executioner, then weeps

---because there are no ghosts;
A man dies like a rabbit, for a use.
What will they pay me, when I die, to die? 13

In "A Quilt Pattern," "good me, bad me," the Hansel and Gretel in the soul of the artist, await their doom in the witchmother's yard,

Where the cages are warmed all night for the rabbits,
All small furry things
That are hurt, but that never cry at all---14
That are skinned, but that never die at all.

Most significantly, in "The Lost World, III" Jarrell recalls

13Ibid., p. 97. 14Ibid., p. 57.
in agonizing detail his grandmother killing a chicken, and his own question, Could such a thing Happen to anything? It could to a rabbit, I'm afraid; It could to—
'Mama, you won't kill Reddy ever, You won't ever, will you?' The farm woman tries to persuade The little boy, her grandson, that she'd never Kill the boy's rabbit, never even think of it. He would like to believe her.15

So, now, lying in the prison ditch, he seeks reassurance from other captors:

After some feverish days
They smile, and the numbing laces
Are cut from my wrists with praise.

The "far-raiding captors" smile now, as Mama had smiled then, standing like Judith with the head of the chicken in her hand. The prisoner, like the child, cannot wholly accept the good will of those in power over him.

In his recording of "Stalag Luft," Jarrell's voice—a little high, a little nasal—is hushed in the tone of someone reliving a painful memory. He does not simply read the lines as a spectator sympathetic to the sufferings of a fellow creature but tells us what he felt when he was himself the prisoner. His voice is soft and meditative, as if in fear of his captors, and in awe of his realization that all of us—man, child, and rabbit—are life's prisoners and that reconciliation is a rare

---

15Ibid., p. 292.
achievement. With Job on his dunghill he laments man's passage from nothingness into nothingness and looks in vain for a reprieve that he knows will not be granted.

In this pensive type of poem, Jarrell is able to identify in complete compassion with the human sufferer whose most noble capacity is to endure. More like Whitman than like Frost, he does not present the suffering character, he becomes the suffering character. He is the woman at the zoo, the tormented child under the quilt, the prisoner in the ditch, as well as the boy with the broken bow lying in the yard with the caged rabbit.

The technology that allows the modern poet to record his own poems has given the reader a new modality of communication with the artist—an extra dimension for grasping the precise tone in which the poet intended his work to be heard. We have listened to Dylan Thomas chanting his magical poems like a bard, and pondered the pensive, cerebral tones of T. S. Eliot as he deliberately considers reality. No one is more matter-of-fact than Robert Frost as he says his marvelous poems to us. So too, Jarrell creates the dramatic atmosphere of an intimate conversation between poet and listener which reveals as no other experience can the intimacy of the verse heritage he has left us. William Meredith says that Jarrell's poetic voice expresses "what you could hear if you stood outside a door and
could not make out the words the voices were saying. . . . With this voice he was able to say beautiful, tentative things no one else could say."

The prisoner's spirit has been crushed by his experience, and he has become mute. He does not complain of his bonds but lies in his ditch listening to "the train's long mourning whistle." The grasses' tickle has been sufficient to meld youthful recollections with present agony. Only the train mourns for him—for all prisoners—with its melancholy whistle that yet bespeaks freedom. Subdued but not reconciled, he lies in his "halo of sunlight," reduced to a "napping echo" of the train's whistle. His salvation has not come through transcendence but through endurance, and the sunlight which in this brief moment of euphoria floods the dismal prison yard is a portent of the captors' smile and of the loosening of his wrists, but not of the end of his captivity.

The rainbow vision he sees through half closed eyes—a fusion of this time and place with other times and places—shows his captors' gaze as "barred and melting." They too are prisoners, as those who enslave are always more truly prisoners of their own malevolence than their captives are. The rainbow imagery of stanza two is a symbolic as well as real reflection of the "halo of sunlight" imagery of stanza one. The moment of peace that the prisoner has gained through endurance appears as the sort of final covenant between prisoner and master that
the rainbow signifies.

But the moment of tranquility is fleeting. His captors—like God, like kings, like parents, like all in power who under the guise of protecting those within their charge, stifle them—smile. All life prisoners seek the benevolent smile of those who have power over them, hoping always for the rainbow of total reconciliation. But our reward is only praise for pain endured and momentary relief from bondage, not escape from the Stalag Luft of existence, nor from the grave in the forest.

3. A Tartarus of Maids

Of the thirty-one poems in The Woman at the Washington Zoo, published nine years after The Seven-League Crutches, only eleven were written after 1955, attesting the significant decline in poetic activity. The collection is characterized by an almost total preoccupation with the notion of change—the ineluctable flux of creation and destruction that has preoccupied the greatest poets and philosophers from the dawn of recorded literature to our own times. Jarrell's thought and imagery center on the phenomenon of the decay of beauty—specifically of feminine beauty—as the passage of time exacts the toll that all must pay who bear the yoke of mortality. He does not, like Hopkins in "The Leaden Echo" or in "Spring and Fall," restrict himself to the point of view of the lover lamenting the vision lost but in poem after poem assumes the persona of the woman
herself. He does more than empathize and commiserate—he takes upon himself her voice and her manner and suffers in her own person the anxieties and the alienation that time and the world have visited upon her. Unlike Frost in "Home Burial," Jarrell does not scorn the woman's voice as he weeps for the blight that man was born for. It is mankind that he mourns for.

"The End of the Rainbow," a poem of 315 lines arranged in the verse paragraphs characteristic of Jarrell's later work, first appeared in the Kenyon Review (Autumn, 1954). One of his three longest poems, it is a dense and complex presentation of an aging woman with artistic pretensions rapidly approaching the end of her time of trial—at the end of her rainbow. She has found that the only treasures buried there are three pet dogs named Su-Su—these and the emptiness of opportunities forever lost. The value of her life in retrospect is no more than the sou that her dogs' names recall.

Jarrell's use of rainbow imagery is always negative, involving what would seem a specific repudiation of its biblical significance. His own experience has taught him to suspect that there has been no reconciliation between man and God, nor between man and his own nature. In "Stalag Luft" the rainbow that dazzles the prisoner's dazed eyes reveals a world striped with prison bars and is part of a false elation into which he has

16 Ibid., pp. 219-29. Appendix I, pp. 293 ff.
fallen through a surfeit of misery and fatigue. The rainbow of the present poem is a symbol not of the covenant but of that foolishness that is an ineradicable and disagreeable part of the human condition—a foolishness that bars men from happiness as well as salvation.

The lonely artist, whose name is Content, sleeps and wakes beneath a sterile banner upon which is emblazoned the motto by which she has lived her life:

**HE WHO HAS HIMSELF FOR FRIEND / IS BEST BEFRIENDED.**

She does not lament the loss of a full life lived out in joy, as does "die alte Frau, die alte Marschallin" of the much earlier poem "The Face," who gazes at the stranger in her mirror and exclaims,

This isn't mine.  
Where is the old one, the old ones?  
Those were mine.\(^{17}\)

The Marschallin has enjoyed her feminine role to the fullest, has whirled through her years in glamor and excitement and amusement—and yet—and yet she has been unable to ward off that one suitor whose embrace she fears and loathes. She cries out, in bitterness,

But it's not right.  
If just living can do this,  
Living is more dangerous than anything:  
It is terrible to be alive.

The women in Jarrell's later poems lament a life ill spent or a life not spent at all. An unnamed woman at the Washington Zoo stands unfulfilled and glimpses her own reflection in the mirrors of the only eyes that ever looked into hers—the eyes of the animals at the zoo—

these beings trapped
As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap,
Aging, but without knowledge of their age,
Kept safe here, knowing not of death, for death—

But this woman, unlike Content, knows that life has passed her by and rages within the bars of her own body—of her own utter emptiness. Not for her the armor of ignorance of which Content has woven herself a shield impervious to self-doubt. She cries out in a paroxysm of anguish, "O, bars of my own body, open, open!"

Although externally at peace, standing before the cages of the animals, she pleads grotesquely within herself,

Vulture,
When you come for the white rat that the foxes left,
Take off the red helmet of your head, the black
Wings that have shadowed me, and step to me as man.

In the poem "Next Day," Jarrell portrays the prosperous middle-class woman, family grown, shopping in vain for the Cheer, the Joy, the All that the supermarket promises. Like Ivan Ilych, she has lived her life well and honestly and now

---

reflects as she catches a glimpse of her face with its "plain-lined look / Of gray discovery,"

But really no one is exceptional,
No one has anything, I'm anybody,
I stand beside my grave
Confused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary.19

Unlike Content, unlike the woman at the zoo, she has fulfilled all those roles which make life rich and full; yet she is equally disconsolate.

"Cinderella," on the other hand, takes a tough-minded, women's liberation stance and becomes, with the aid of her fairy godmother and an unfortunately bemused prince,

A sullen wife and a reluctant mother,
She sat all day in silence by the fire.
Better, later, to stare past her sons' sons,
Her daughters' daughters, and tell stories to the fire.
But best, dead, damned, to rock forever
Beside Hell's fireside.20

Later, she alone of Jarrell's heroines will steal through the back door of heaven, to what happiness we cannot imagine.

Content lives out her last years in the deserts of the Southern California coasts—within sight of the magnificence of the ocean waves breaking ceaselessly upon the sterile sands.
Where the desert is irrigated, strange growths abound, but under—

19 Ibid., p. 280.
neath is the dry dust of the valley of ashes. She lives in a Hell glossed over with the appearance of life and beauty whose inner sterility Jarrell reveals through symbols as devastating as those of Eliot's The Waste Land. The only vital, loving things that have impinged on her existence are the four dwarf pekinese that she has owned since she came to take up her abode in this land where

The sun of Southern California streams
Unlovingly, but as though lovingly,
Upon the spare, paint-spotted and age-spotted hand's
Accustomed gesture.

Her life is simple, well organized, and lonely. After the mornings have spent themselves in painting:

Twelve o'clock: she locks
The door that she has painted, walks away
Straightforwardly, her Su-Su frisking
Before, on the leash that she has braided; eats
At a little table in a sunny courtyard.

As she mails a letter, she sees inside the mailbox a Frog-Prince, doomed to perpetual froghood by her long ago refusal of his kiss. He lives in the mail slot even as she lives within the four glass walls of a small shop built on the sand, like Snow-white sleeping in her crystal coffin, poisoned by the apple of her discontent. She turns, apparently unimpressed, from this vivid reminder of a world once spurned to walk into the "irrigated lands," whose false and unnatural appearance Jarrell attempts to indicate by the use of grotesque and inappropriate imagery:
With its blond hills like breasts of hay,
Its tall tan herds of eucalyptus grazing
Above its lawns of ice-plant, of geranium,
Its meadows of eternal asphodel.

The barking of the seals recalls the croaking of the frogs in
the salt marshes of her Massachusetts' girlhood, and

The dark ghosts throng by
Shaking their locks at her--their fair, false locks--
Stretching out past her their bare hands, burnt hands.

They are the ghosts of all that might have been had she accepted
the fructifying love of the long ago suitor now forever confined
in the mail slot.

Content is a painter of landscapes and seascapes, which
she glasses over once complete. She imitates the beauties of
nature and captures under glass the colors of the life she has
rejected. She has come to see the world in the unmixed, com-
cmercial colors of her paint box:

Beyond the mahlstick a last wave
Breaks in Cobalt, Vert Emeraude, and Prussian Blue
Upon a Permanent White shore.

The salt beach upon which break the ceaseless waves is Permanent
White, as the artist is Permanent White, virginal, untouched.
Her long red hair, "brushed till it is silver," has been falsely
colored blue by "the hairdresser, drunk with sunlight." Only
the dog is vital and of his own true color--black.

Her letter was to her former home, "where the dead are"
but not altogether dead, for the very mail slot which receives
it is alive with the memory of the lover she dreams of during
her long, quiet days and nights. The imagery of the Frog-Prince is directly, grossly sensual, and his invitation ominous and un-ambiguous—

There is brandy on his breath.
The cattails quivering above his brute Imploring eyes, the tadpoles feathering The rushes of his beard . . . rustle again In flaws or eddies of the wet wind: 'Say. Say. Say now. Say again.'

But this "rude and ginger" invitation is overcome by other voices from her youth—her own voice—re-echoing in her ear "Like a Death / Rubbing his bow with resin at a square-dance," replaying for her the stately measures of the danse macabre that has brought her down along this way to dusty death. "Go slow. Go slow. You owe it to yourself." Not for her that other wisdom that advises that the seed falling into the earth must be corrupted if it is to blossom forth in new life—that he who would save his life must lose it.

She has drawn around her the protective quilt of the fruitless, conservative Down East wisdom that will forever protect her from the awareness of her own unlovableness.

'Say to yourself,
Is it my money they're asking or me?'
It must have been the money.

Her life has come to a completion of sorts, and her end is in her beginnings:

Pieces of Pilgrim Rock; pomander-apples In rosemary; agates; a marsh-violet pressed In Compensation—red goatskin, India paper, Inscribed in black ink, 'for my loving daughter.'
And yet, and yet she holds within her that one small memory of life and risk foresworn. She holds it, as she holds her inheritance, "in trust until the end of time." Her dreams, of which she takes no more account than she took of the vision of the Frog-Prince, are brutally sexual. The great Silkie, the merman of her subconscious desires, comes to her in the night holding out to her in his "maimed flippers" a promise of fulfillment, "white bridal-veil-lace flowers" in which she sees "water babies." The image of the merman fades into that of a centaur, reaching for her, whispering patiently, "Say. Say. Say now. Say again."

Freud has shown the relationship between such dreams and our carefully repressed sexual drives, and Content is not totally beyond response:

A slow Delicious shudder runs along her spine: She takes off her straw sailor. Red again, and long enough to sit on, Her hair floats out to him.

But in her dreams, as in her life, the moment of acquiescence instinctively transmutes itself into the act of rejection: "Father, / If you come any closer I'll call Father." The father-lover figure fades, as she wakes, into the figure of Su-Su, whose love she does accept--love that dances on a braided leash. She has become, as Jarrell says in another poem about ghosts,
A being without access to the universe
That he has not yet managed to forget.

Awake, she knows that the Frog-Prince is dead, is married to another frog, has little frogs. She does not see herself as the poet does, unclean in the very sterility of her withdrawal:

Content
Goes through the suburbs with a begging-bowl
Of teak, a Wedgwood cowbell, ringing, ringing,
Calling: 'Untouched! Untouched!'

The doors shut themselves
Not helped by any human hand, mail-boxes
Pull down their flags, the finest feelers
Of the television sets withdraw.

Yet she lives in the very presence of death—is herself the figure of the living death she has made of her life. In the person of Death she says to herself,

Life's work. It's work.
Out here at the wrong end of the rainbow
Say to yourself: What's a rainbow anyway?

But Content has too heavy an investment in the wrong end of the rainbow to admit such thoughts. Although she sees in the mirror "the little home-made rainbow, there in tears," she does not dare to question her life in terms of Frog-Princes, Silkies or Centaurs, but only in terms of that art through which she transforms life into a form she can assimilate.

How many colors, squeezed from how many tubes
In patient iteration, have made up the world
She draws closer, like a patchwork quilt,
To warm her, all the warm, long summer day!
Between sleeping and waking, "she hangs there on the verge of seeing / In black and white" that reality is more truly alive in her erotic fancies than in the landscapes under glass that make her safe from nightmare.

The unpeopled landscapes
Run down to the seal-less, the merman-less seas,
And she rolls softly, like an agate, down to Su-Su
Asleep upon the doorsill of the seas.

"The End of the Rainbow" is a poem flawed in its intent and in its execution. Its wit, as Ferguson points out, is unsympathetic, detached, and even cruel. Instead of the compassionate identification that we have noted in Jarrell's shorter works on the same theme, it presents a harsh judgment of Content although she is in truth not criminal but victim, if only of herself. The poem's slender, basically lyric import does not give the inner coherence that so long a poem requires, nor will it sustain a profusion of detail that is permitted at times to drift into scarcely relevant aphorism. The poem is marked by a lack of that restraint which enabled Jarrell to accomplish the brilliantly successful and far briefer celebration of the same theme in "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." The language is sometimes flat, precious, and marked by outrageous images. Here, for example, we find the origin of the unfortunately transposed saying, "Let and live let," that he will later place in the mouth of the mermaid in The Animal Story.

We might suspect that Jarrell's intention was to multiply
detail and allow the poem to subside into a slow, suffocating conclusion symbolizing the emptiness of life at the wrong end of the rainbow. If this was the intention, it is unsuccessful. Moreover, the transition from the meditative, narrative voice of the first part of the poem, the voice that characterizes Jarrell's more successful efforts, to the dramatic dialogue of Content's own conversation with the devil in the last sixty-two lines is abrupt and disruptive.

4. You Can't Go Home Again

In the poems of The Lost World Jarrell has become preoccupied with the passage of time in terms of loss of contact with his own origins—"that calm country / Through which the stream of my life first meandered." In "Thinking of the Lost World," a poem of eighty-four lines in the free verse and conversational tone that he had come to use so successfully, Jarrell is carried back in time to his childhood days in Hollywood by the taste of a spoonful of chocolate tapioca, as Marcel Proust was taken back to Combray by the spoonful of tea in which he had soaked his morsel of "madeleine."21

Jarrell and his second wife had both lived in the same neighborhoods as children and shared memories of the same offices and shops. They had, they realized, perhaps even seen each other then, but those days are not as they remember them,

nor does that human habitation any longer exist. They had visited Los Angeles together, and found that

the sunshine of the Land
Of Sunshine is a gray mist now, the atmosphere
Of some factory planet.

The sun which once had warmed their hearts and bodies has grown colder with the winds of time. The buildings, the trees, the groves, all the things that were intimately theirs are gone.

Jarrell's eyes smart with the smoke of the industrial society, but it is not the smoke that brings tears, rather the longing for what can no longer be. So Jarrell, who had surely known wretchedness as a child, remembers with tears and laments,

Twenty Years After, thirty-five years after,
Is as good as ever—better than ever . . .
Except that it is unbelievable.
I say to my old self: 'I believe. Help thou Mine unbelief.'

In their secluded woodland home at Greensboro, the Jarrells tried to reconstruct through memory the life they had once known, and found that all that remains is faith. As a child he had dreaded to look into the eyes of a mad girl he had known—"Big, golden, without human understanding"—lest the world should change and disappear. And now, it has. The memory of that fear, as the memory of the terrors he knew watching his grandmother slaughter a chicken, is with him yet, so that his verses halt and hesitate with the realization that the annihilation is all too real—that the small boy, the mad girl, the rabbit, and the grandmother are all as if they had never been.
"If only I could find a crystal set," he muses. Sight has eluded him—taste has not brought them back—the smell of Vicks has not recreated the eucalyptus tree long burned. He will resort now to sound, tune in on them, listen back to once familiar voices as one playing an old home recording remembers, catching the voice of a small child in innocent worlds long gone in so short a time, and wants to reach through the tape, through time, back to the child and speak to him, love him. The tape exists and the small voice is forever imprisoned in its electronic impulses, but the child eludes the grasp as surely as the voices of the once familiar crystal set.

If I could find in some Museum of Cars
Mama's dark blue Buick,  Lucky's electric,
Couldn't I be driven there?

He can still feel the impressions of the rungs of the ladder to the treehouse on his hands and feet, but the ladder itself, like the ladder in Frost's "Directive," leads only to what is unseen, imagined, or remembered.

All of them are gone
Except for me; and for me nothing is gone—...
Mama and Pop and Dandeen are still there
In the Gay Twenties.

Only the narrator can climb back into the lost treehouse, out of our sight and out of the range of our imagination. Certainly he remembers their once existent beings, but all that remains to them, and to himself, is his memory. He is older now, older than his own parents seen in the photographs. His
hand "is brown and spotted, and its nails are ridged / Like Mama's." Remembrance is for him as permanent a condition as art. He immortalizes the pictures in his memory as though in a sculptured frieze, or painted on canvas, but it is not enough. The passage of time has destroyed them entirely. He reaches out to the memory of his former self, and he no longer exists. His hands are empty, and his life:

My soul has memorized world after world:
LOST--NOTHING. STRAYED FROM NOWHERE.
NO REWARD.
I hold in my own hands, in happiness,
Nothing: the nothing for which there's no reward.

If Jarrell had been a philosopher instead of a poet, he would have been a phenomenologist like Wittgenstein, from whom he took the subtitle "The World is Everything that is the Case" in Part I of the Selected Poems. He finds it impossible to ascribe existence to what cannot be tasted or seen or heard or felt or smelled. The imagery of sensation, then, is central to his poetic effectiveness. Thus, in this perfect poem, his eyes smart with the stinging effects of smog and of the tears which cloud his vision as surely as time clouds lost memories. Sight failed, he turns to hearing and to a seeking for the physical presence of remembered figures in a car of the past. In an earlier work, "The Märchen," listening is the catalyst that carries us back through time and history into the ancient forests of fairy tale and myth where the blurring of the distinctions between reality and fantasy obviates the betrayal of temporality.
Similarly, in "Field and Forest" a naked farmer takes off his senses one by one until he has completely withdrawn out of physical being and into some other realm of consciousness:

When you take off everything what's left? A wish, A blind wish; and yet the wish isn't blind, What the wish wants to see it sees.

In "The Taste of the Age," Jarrell is condemning not only the lack of artistic taste, but the lack of an authentic, truly sensitive savoring of the world around us that marks our present generation. Several poems are dedicated to blindness. An early poem, "The Blind Sheep," is done in the ironic tone of Hardy. Its point is not compassion for the plight of the sheep, but rather Jarrell's repudiation of a world of reality which he feels is not worth looking at.

To witness that enormity I would not give a blade of grass. I am a sheep, and not an Ass.

However, in "The Blind Man's Song," translated from Rilke, he has reversed his position and stresses not the shallowness of the world but the darker underside of a blind man who does not fit into our stereotype. Cut off from access to the world, he rages at those who think that sound can compensate for blindness, and the final message of this brief poem is not the pious sentiment that one can't know what it is really like, but rather the startling comment,
To you, at morning, the new light
Comes warm in your open house.
And you've a sense of seeing eye to eye,
And that tempts one to show mercy.

Jarrell's last poem, "The Player Piano," cast in seven stanzas of five lines, unrhymed, is one of the most memorable of the seven "new" poems published after *The Lost World*. He employs the personal, conversational tone, and the subject matter is clearly autobiographical. The poet as wayfarer meets in a pancake house "someone from home"—a woman from Pasadena, a woman, more importantly, from his generation with whom he can speak of times shared:

No, not Pasadena, Fatty Arbuckle.
Who's that? Oh, something that we had in common
Like—like—the false armistice. Piano rolls.

He shows her a picture of his grandson, and returning to his hotel, for our speaker is, as all men, *homo viator*—eating in all-night restaurants, sleeping in strange beds—he hums "Smile a while, I bid you sad adieu." Music is a great part of Jarrell's life and of his memories. Mary Jarrell mentions that he would frequently write his poems to the sound of the hi-fi, and here he remembers an old-time song in tune with the reflective mood aroused by meeting someone with whom he could share Fatty Arbuckle and piano rolls. When he is at ease with his verse, as here, his lines become melodies as well.

The photograph provides the touchstone of memory in this poem. The narrator, in his hotel room, looks at photographs of his parents, returning thereby in memory to everyman’s lost childhood—to memories of sorrows and of injuries long harbored but now at last to be set aside.

Here are Mother and Father in a photograph, Father’s holding me. . . . They both look so young. I’m so much older than they are.

"I don’t blame you," the poet continues, "you weren’t old enough to know any better." He is referring to his parents’ divorce long ago in California. But the time of forgiveness is past. He cannot travel back in time to a living room long gone, to parents no longer alive, to parents to whom his forgiveness may or may not have been important.

If I could I’d go back, sit down by you both, And sign our true armistice: you weren’t to blame.

He imagines the scene, with the player piano playing Chopin, and we are startled by the poet’s reference to himself as "their little girl." To this point we had assumed that Jarrell was speaking in his own masculine persona. However, the poet goes to the player piano and holds his hands over the keys.

Listen. Look, the keys go down by themselves! I go over, hold my hands out, play I play— If only, somehow, I had learned to live! The three of us sit watching, as my waltz Plays itself out a half-inch from my fingers.

These lines, written at the end of life, speak for the whole of Jarrell’s alienation. The poet cannot accept an
existence in which, although he has lived his life within sound of the melody, he has never been able to actually touch the action of the piano of life itself. He feels that he has lived, as it were, on some parallel plane always half an inch from the keys. The economy of the tightly knit imagery, and of melody and color provides a firm dramatic coherence to the theme. The piano rolls of the second stanza reappear in stanzas six and seven. The sharp contrasts of the black and white of the old-fashioned photographs clearly signify the sharp distinctions between death and life, past and future and the inexorable passage of time. The poet knows that the photo represents but a moment in a flux of reality that he fears may be as purposeless as it is transient.

"The Player Piano" successfully weaves these patterns of imagery into a single dramatic unit, rich with personal and emotional rather than literary allusion. Its power and its universality are drawn, at least in part, from an economy of incident and explanation. The poet has made his own childhood experience universal chiefly because he has neither narrowed the poem's meaning nor blunted its force with the clutter of extraneous detail found in "The End of the Rainbow." In spite of minor flaws in execution, "The Player Piano" should clearly be counted one of Jarrell's best short poems.

The confusion of persona we have noted is undoubtedly due to Jarrell's drawing upon two very personal yet totally
separate incidents for inspiration. The image of the child pretending to play the player piano is taken from a childhood reminiscence of Mrs. Jarrell's accounting for the feminine attribution, but the total impact of the poem is personal to Jarrell himself. Mrs. Jarrell speaks freely of the resentments that Jarrell harbored for many years, not only against his parents for their divorce but against his grandparents for allowing his mother to take him away from them.

'How I cried!' he said. And he'd begged them so hard to keep him that when they wouldn't—or couldn't—he blamed them for being cruel and resolved never to think about them again or write them a word. Later on he wrote them a poem instead (though they may not have lived to read it), 'A Story.'

There is, however, a curious ambivalence in her remarks on "The Player Piano:"

Just before he wrote 'The Player Piano' and forgave his parents everything, we were listening to the Richter record of Pictures at an Exhibition. Randall was sitting with his eyes closed and his face turned upward and was playing chords on his knees. When the music finished, he said with sudden vehemence, 'You'd have thought somebody would have given me piano lessons!' He has forgiven them "everything," yet a certain indignation remains—but even that is not unreasonable in terms of his own sense of transience,


24 Ibid., p. 296.
because--
of course,
I was a child, I missed them so. But justifying
Hurt's too: if only I could play you one more game,
See you all one more time! I think of you dying
Forgiving me--or not, it is all the same
To the forgiven.

5. The Orestes Myth

Jarrell's approach to the classic myth, "Orestes at Tauris," a dramatic poem of 324 lines in eleven irregular verse paragraphs, was first published in the Spring edition of The Kenyon Review in 1943 and later appeared in Losses (1948). It was excluded from the Selected Poems because, as Jarrell explains,

though I like it and some readers like it, it's very long, it's an earlier poem than any of these, and it's back in print in the new edition of Losses.

Jarrell's unique reconstruction of a fitting conclusion to the bloody curse placed on the house of Atreus by Thyestes focuses on the theme of the final alienation of man from his fellow men and stands, therefore, as a fitting conclusion to a study which has centered on the themes of alienation in the writings of Randall Jarrell.

He is certainly not the only modern artist to have discerned in the structure of that myth ideas as consonant


26 Ibid., p. 3.
with twentieth century thought as they are dissonant with the sentimental finalé of Euripides' trilogy, wherein Orestes and Iphigenia successfully carry the statue of the Taurian Artemis back to Argos and thereby achieve full and final expiation of the curse.

Jean Paul Sartre's *The Flies* (1943) deals with the incestuous relationship between Orestes and Electra and their slaughter of their mother and her lover. In the end, Electra seeks forgiveness, but Orestes the existential hero joyfully and triumphantly defies Zeus himself, thus assuming the role of scapegoat and taking upon himself all the guilt of the people of Argos. A tragic hero in the classical mode, he has opted for the freedom of his own choice at any price.

Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929-31), a trilogy like the Oresteia, is also fraught with incestuous relationships—father-daughter, mother-son, and finally sister-brother—in which all the characters undergo a Faulknerian degeneration that leads to death or to morbid isolation. T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* (1938) attempts to civilize the ancient myth with an overlay of Christian significance which ends in Orestes' withdrawal from the family of man, which cannot be reunited on its own flawed human terms, to become a Christian evangelist.

None of these versions carry on through Orestes' final adventure at Tauris. In focussing on Orestes' death, Jarrell,
like O'Neill, centers his concern on Orestes' human nature, abjectly subject to the necessities of the fate that attends upon those who defy tradition and presume to alter the currents of what the gods have decreed. Jarrell's Orestes, unlike the powerful and godlike Sartrian hero, is an anti-hero utterly crushed in his futile efforts to cope with a universe he has not made and over which he has come to know he has no control.

Jarrell recalls in a prefatory note how Agamemnon, praying for favorable winds to carry his ready ships across the Aegean to Troy, had been advised that he must make sacrifice to the gods of his beautiful daughter Iphigenia with his own hands and had accepted those terms. Most versions of the myth say that Iphigenia was rescued from the altar by the goddess Artemis and taken to the isle of Tauris, where she was made high priestess in the goddess' shrine. After long years of pursuit by the furies, Orestes is sent to Tauris, ostensibly to recover the statue of the goddess, but actually to find grim and final expiation of his crime. The poem is a relentless address by the poet to the hapless Orestes as he follows him down brutal paths to his inexorable fate. The technique provides a certain dramatic distancing and a dignified and somewhat less personal quality to the presentation.

The poem opens upon Orestes enroute to Tauris, already distraught, already abject, already made bestial by his emotional sufferings and by the unflagging attendance of the exhausted
furies.

You saw Them watching, Their pale mouths opened, 
Like shadows under the gliding sea.

Orestes, too, is weary unto death, and all the images of the 
first stanza breathe death and corruption, hint of incest and 
illicit lust:

One night you began to rot in your dream 
And held your sister, wet in your arms, 
Who wept with lips that fell apart in fat.

Orestes has neither the will nor the power to control the winds—
the privilege for which his father Agamemnon had once paid so 
dearly. He seems alone on a ghost ship, driven headlong by the 
furies toward his doom, so that when he strikes in the shoals 
off the coast of Tauris it seems only a natural and inevitable 
stage in his cursed progress. There is powerful imagery in the 
evocation of the fury of the seas as the ship is driven further 
onto the shore—

\[\text{and she heeled} \]
\[\text{Half-over to those towering crests—waves wore at her,} \]
\[\text{She wallowed shoreward, struck again, and stuck} \]
\[\text{There on that shelf, head fast against the rocks} \]
\[\text{That reached for her, stern back along the shoal} \]
\[\text{That streamed like a snow-plume from them.} \]

The ship and crew are doomed with Orestes to utter disaster.

The Tauri, accompanied by their priestess, appear on the 
beach, waiting patiently for the sea to deliver their victims 
into their hands:

Standing in a chariot, shading her eyes with her hand, 
A woman in a dyed cloak, holding a flat wand,
Gazed out at you, solitary among the swells. The riders stared at her, or called to her Till she stretched out her arms and sang.

At the final break up of the ship the Argives' humiliation is complete. Their weapons and shields lost in the moil of the sea, they are speared "with what imperious gestures!" by the "dwarfed" Taurian warriors until only Orestes remains alive,

And tried to stand, and staggered and sank back, Standing for one instant—imperishables!— Holding out to them your pressed hands.

The terse economy of Jarrell's diction and the tight patterns of his imagery, with the vividness of his verbs, create a pattern of crisp and exciting action.

Orestes, bound, is carried off in a chariot by his exultant captors, his eyes already wearing the vacant stare that they will bear when his severed head is fixed to the waiting post. His skin is "gilded with salt," like a carcass preserved for future consumption. He seeks a child's comfort in the chariot's cool rim and in the cold drops of water flung up by the horses' hooves, for although he has fled from the omnipotent fates and sinned against the laws of the gods and of men, he realizes that he has at last come to the fate to which he was foredoomed, and his emotion is almost one of relief. Throughout Orestes' progress to the place of sacrifice Jarrell contrasts the images of the fruitful, vital countryside to Orestes' condition of death already decreed and half accepted. The imagery is occasionally flawed, perhaps in its very exuberance, as in the
reference to "two haystacks like wheaten snow-men / Standing like glaciers by the flood," where the texture of the cold, wet snow refuses to mingle with the warmth and aromatic dryness we associate with hay. Jarrell's ironic juxtaposition of the notion of wheat and growth and life to Orestes' progress toward death is reminiscent in its imagery of the cry of the Bishop Ignatius as he was being taken to Rome and martyrdom.

God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ's pure bread. 27

Brought at last to his place of trial, Orestes is thrown down on the "gravel and the broken shells" and falls asleep like a child, asleep on the earth he has defiled with the blood of his mother. Furies, drowsy now with satisfaction, shake Orestes awake after nightfall, so that he cries out with a mournful wail and tries with only partial success to reject a drugged potion, after which he sleeps again.

Wakening to the late afternoon of a day of glorious sunshine, he finds himself in the midst of the great celebration of the fertility rites and face to face with the image he had thought to take with him to Greece.

You looked astonished at the image there That crouched like a hunted and misshapen thing, Swathed with the hides of horses, fox-furs, and the skins Of some long-horned, long-furred, and long-tailed beast.

All around him are the figures of maidens dressed as

bears, of old men garbed with "fresh-washed flax" and bearing "green branches, green rye-woven crowns." Poles bear the dried or rotting heads of former victims, some of whom gaze on Orestes from eyelids decked with jewels as though to beckon him to "their blind world." They gaze at him through long hair stirring in the wind, just as we may imagine he had looked back during his journey inland—back to a time when he had been free, when his mother had not been slain nor his sister chosen as sacrifice to fill the sails of a war-bound fleet—back to a further time when Helen had not departed Argos and Agamemnon's bed for love of Paris—back to a time before ever Thyestes had cursed the house of Atreus. For we feel that all embracing gaze of Orestes would look back beyond all the crimes that men have perpetrated and thereby earned the death and annihilation that he now faces—that all men face.

There follow rich and vivid descriptions of the ancient priest of Artemis as he strips the goddess in preparation for the sacrifice.

You saw her splintered arms and hacked-out breasts—
And yet the knife-scarred wood seemed still to bear
A rough and sooty bark. That bark, that skin was blood.

Orestes, now "lashed like a sail upon a pole," cannot fight against the maidens who, "sidelong, and timidly," deck him with flowers and garlands. He weeps out of pity for himself as the dancers, with no sound of music but the beat of their own feet against the turf, commence the sacrificial rites.

But then, Artemis is forgotten, his own terror is for-
gotten, and Orestes' heart leaps as the priestess appears:

You felt your life halt, your weak lids grate fast:
When you opened them she was standing before you.

She has come to purify with water the victim of the sacrifice she is to offer. Many years have passed since Orestes had seen his sister, and she is now made hideous by golden ornaments and dyed and painted skin and lips and lashes. Her eyes are "piti-less and gloomy," but to Orestes in his joy,

At Argos or Mycenae, or in all the isles
You never saw her like: a face so fair!

As she pours the water over his head the drops that run down his pale cheeks are like the tears that swell up within him, but he swoons and cannot speak to identify himself. Then, quickly taken down from his pole and pegged to the ground in the place of sacrifice, he wakes only in time to catch the last bright flash of the sword.

Iphigenia also senses something amiss, is overcome, and twice raises the heavy sword before she brings it down to sever Orestes' head with a dexterity born of long practice. At this very moment of intense and climactic drama, Jarrell, with consummate skill brings about the moment of recognition to which the poem has been building:

When between you and her face
The sword's line came—what did you see then, Orestes?

And this recognition, we see, is that same recognition that comes always too late for reconciliation—that Jarrell will
celebrate, less dramatically perhaps, but no less poignantly in so many of his later poems. "Orestes at Tauris" is "The Lost World" cast in the heroic mold of classic myth.

Unfortunately, this magnificent climax is followed by approximately eighty lines of denouement that is at best ant climactic. As Iphigenia picks up the severed head,

its lips curled
For a little in their trembling smile,
The lashes trembled, and bright eyes
Looked at her meltingly. The mouth said: Sister!

She is thereby driven to reflect upon her own escape from the altar of sacrifice, and that "None living had left her hand." She looks forward, like a character in an O'Neill play, to a future of vague regret in the realization that Thyestes' curse had at long last brought Orestes' death at her hands. Once again we find the pattern of recognition coming only at a time when reconciliation, repentance, or love is no longer possible or significant. Iphigenia and Orestes, like all men, are fated by their very existence never to return to the lost world of innocence and childhood. The water that is poured in absolution over Iphigenia's hands falls to the earth stained with a brother's blood. The water is stained, as life itself is stained, in an existence cursed by sin which once committed is impossible to redress.

Then, in the ninth stanza, Jarrell abruptly introduces, in imitation of Homeric patterns, a new story obscurely parallel
to the story of Orestes, in which a fictive hero's quest brings him to Tauris in time to record Orestes' fate and bring word back to Argos:

So the traveller might have come; but no man came,
No man lay hidden there—or saw, . . .
The people, silent, watching with grave faces
Their priestess, who stands there
Holding out her hands, staring at her hands,
With her brother's blood drenching her hands.

Unfortunately, the introduction of this Homeric pattern proves inappropriate in a poem which has already reached its dramatic resolution on other than Homeric terms, and Jarrell, like Homer, nods. There is also a certain awkwardness in the collapse of the poetic device maintained throughout the poem whereby the poet addresses Orestes in the second person. Orestes dead, the poet shifts first to speaking of Iphigenia in the third person, then to addressing her in the second person as he had addressed Orestes, and then back into the third person for the final passages. Finally, the device of repetition which has served Jarrell so well in other contexts becomes awkward here as he attempts to focus our attention on Iphigenia's guilt in the thrice repeated "hands" in the passage above.

However, though we may cavil at these awkwardnesses, "Orestes at Tauris" remains a remarkably stirring and dramatic poetic endeavor and stands, though totally unlike any other poem in the work of Randall Jarrell, as an indication of what he might have achieved had he chosen to travel what Ferguson so
aptly calls "a road not taken."

6. Recapitulations on a Theme

As we have traced with Jarrell the several dimensions of anxiety, he has brought us to see through his eyes the central force of an alienation which pursues man as relentlessly as Orestes' Furies. In his essays, in his fiction, and preeminently in his poetry, Jarrell returns again and again to a preoccupation with isolation. Man knows not whence he comes, fears whither he goes, and during his passage takes but little comfort from his fellow sufferers. Few of Jarrell's poems are overtly joyous, and none has that elán which lifts the heart and spirit. Our mood is sober and reflective as we complete our reading of an artist acutely in tune with the spirit of our time and place.

Thus, in "Gleaning," one of his latest poems, a very personal poem, Jarrell develops a rare joy, a deep sense of the vigor of life, only to return in the last few lines to an expression of the immutable sense of loss which is our human heritage.28 "Gleaning," a perfect short poem of twenty-eight lines in two verse paragraphs, which has become my own favorite among Jarrell's poems as I complete this study, sums up the stages of man's life on earth through images carefully paralleled to the biblical story of Ruth. In the opening lines, powerful in constraint and masterful in execution, Jarrell reminisces in the

now familiar feminine persona,

When I was a girl in Los Angeles we'd go gleaning.
Coming home from Sunday picnics in the canyons,
Driving through orange groves, we would stop at fields
Of lima beans, already harvested, and glean.

So throughout his life Jarrell had assiduously gleaned the already harvested fields of art and the world, seeking treasures of nourishment and sustenance to carry those few readers he was able to win on their brief journey from dark to dark. He reflects on the full, rich life he has enjoyed and continues,

I am resigned to gleaning. If my heart is heavy,
It is with the weight of all it's held.

Although his poetic effort had been drastically reduced during the 1950's--perhaps because of the very press of success--his achievements had been substantial, and he had been gifted with a capacity for the enjoyment of the finest things life has to offer that is granted to few men. He uses the analogy of physical love to dramatize the intensity of his enjoyment of life:

How many times I've lain
At midnight with the young men in the field!

And in this conceit is contained all the vigor, the joy of a full life. Jarrell had frequently used the imagery of marital union to symbolize the encounter between the poet and the world, and he now extends its symbolic intent to express the joy he has known both as poet and as man.

He is exasperated to find that he is not satiated and demands of himself, "What else do you want?" only to find that,
inside himself, something hopeful and insatiable—
A girl, a grown-up, giggling, gray-haired girl—
Gasps: 'More, more!'  

He writes these lines just before his final illness, recovery, and tragic death. Jarrell has become aware, as his "hands spill the last things they hold," of the true significance of the picture in the Bible story book:

We children would pick a few lima beans in play,
But the old ones, bending to them, gleaned seriously.

In the critical essays we have seen Jarrell as the poet-critic, applying his incisive imaginative judgment to the work of other poets. We have enjoyed his assumption of the role of novelist and story-teller, and we have, at the last, briefly considered Jarrell in his most characteristic role as poet.

For, although his essays are perceptive and delightful, although his fiction is original and witty, it is in his poetry that we come to fully appreciate Jarrell's personal impact. The poems are drawn from the poet's observation of the actions of ordinary men rather than from his unique subjective experience and possess the strength of things merely set down and left to speak for themselves. His language successfully captures the rhythms of ordinary speech. He is a poet in his essays, in his fiction, and in the very fiber of his daily existence.
APPENDIX I

A CONVERSATION WITH THE DEVIL

Indulgent, or candid, or uncommon reader
--I've some: a wife, a nun, a ghost or two--
If I write for anyone, I wrote for you;
So whisper, when I die, We was too few;
Write over me (if you can write; I hardly knew)
That I--that I--but anything will do,
I'm satisfied. . . . And yet--

and yet, you were too few:
Should I perhaps have written for your brothers,
Those artful, common, unindulgent others?

Mortal men, man! mortal men! So says my heart
Or else my belly--some poor empty part.
It warms in me, a dog beside a stove,
And whines, or growls, with a black lolling smile:
I never met the man I didn't love.
Life's hard for them . . . these mortals . . .

Lie, man, lie!

Come, give it up--this whining poetry;
To any man be anything. If nothing works,
Why, then, Have Faith.

That blessed word, Democracy!

But this is strange of you: to tempt me now!
It brings back all the past: those earliest offers
--How can I forget?--EACH POEM GUARANTEED
A LIE OR PERMANENTLY IRRELEVANT.
WE FURNISH POEMS AND READERS. What a slogan!
(I had only to give credit to "my daemon";
Say, confidentially, "dictated by the devil.")
I can still see my picture in that schoolroom.

And next--who has it now?--The World's Enormity,
That novel of the Wandering Jewess, Lilith,
Who went to bed with six millennia.
(It came complete with sales, scenario,
And testimonials of grateful users:
Not like a book at all. . . . Beats life. . . .)

Beats life.

How ill we knew each other then! how mockingly
I nodded, "Almost thou persuadest me,"
And made my offer:

288
"If ever I don't say
To the hour of life that I can wish for: Stay,
Thou art so fair! why, you may have my--
Shadow."

Our real terms were different
And signed and sealed for good, neither in blood
Nor ink but in my life: Neither to live
Nor ask for life—that wasn't a bad bargain
For a poor devil of a poet, was it?
One makes a solitude and calls it peace.
So you phrased it; yet—yet—one is paid:
To see things as they are, to make them what they
might be—
Old Father of Truths, old Spirit that Accepts—
That's something. . . . If, afterwards, we broke
our bargain—

He interrupts: But what nobility!
I once saw a tenor at the Opéra Comique
Who played the Fisher—of Pearls or else of Souls.
He wore a leopard-skin, lay down, and died;
And sang ten minutes lying on his side
And died again; and then, applauded,
Gave six bows, leaning on his elbow,
And at the seventh started on his encore.
He was, I think, a poet.

Renounce, renounce,
You sing in your pure clear grave ardent tones
And then give up—whatever you're afraid to take,
Which is everything; and after that take credit
For dreaming something else to take its place.
Isn't what is already enough for you?
Must you always be making something?
Must each fool cook a lie up all his own?
You beings, won't even being disgust you
With causing something else to be? Make, make—
You squeak like mice; and yet it's all hypocrisy—
How often each of you, in his own heart,
Has wiped the world out, and thought afterwards:
No need to question, now: "If others are, am I?"
Still, I confess that I and my good Neighbor
Have always rather envied you existence.
Your simple conceits!—but both of us enjoy them:
"Dear God, make me Innocent or Wise,"
Each card in the card-catalog keeps praying;
And dies, and the divine Librarian
Rebinds him—
rebinds? that's odd; but then, He's odd
And as a rule--
I'm lying; there's no rule at all.
The world divides into--believe me--facts.

I see the devil can quote Wittgenstein.
He's blacker than he's painted.
Old ink blot,
What are you, after all? A parody.
You can be satisfied? then how can I?
If you accept, is not that to deny?
A Dog in a tub, who was the Morning Star!
To have come down in the universe so far
As here, and now, and this--and all to buy
One bored, stoop-shouldered, sagging-cheeked particular
Lest the eternal bonfire fail--

ah Lucifer!

But at blacker an embarrassed smile
Wavers across his muzzle, he breaks in:
It's odd that you've never guessed: I'm through.
To tempt, sometimes, a bored anachronism
Like you into--but why should I say what?
To stretch out by the Fire and improvise:
This pleases me, now there's no need for me.
Even you must see I'm obsolescent.
A specialist in personal relations,
I valued each of you at his own worth.
You had your faults; but you were bad at heart.
I disliked each life, I assure you, for its own sake.
--But to deal indifferently in life and death;
To sell, wholesale, piecemeal annihilation;
To--I will not go into particulars--
This beats me.

To men, now, I should give advice?
I'm vain, as you know; but not ridiculous.
Here in my inglenook, shy, idle, I conclude:
I never understood them: as the consequence
They end without me . . .

"Scratch a doctor
And find a patient," I always used to say.
Now that I've time, I've analyzed myself
And find that I am growing, or have grown--
Was always, perhaps, indifferent.
It takes a man to love or hate a man
Wholeheartedly. And how wholeheartedly
You act out All that is deserves to perish!
As if to take me at my word—an idle mot
That no one took less seriously than I.
It was so, of course; and yet—and yet—

I find that I've grown used to you. Hell gives us habits
To take the place of happiness, alas!
When I look forward, it is with a pang
That I think of saying, "My occupation's gone."
But twelve's striking: time to be in bed.

I think: He's a changed—all this has shaken him.
He was always delicate: a spirit of society,
A way to come to terms—

now, no more terms!

Those pleasant evenings of denunciation!
How gratefully, after five acts' rejection,
A last firm shake and quaver and statistic,
He'd end, falsetto: "But let's be realistic"—
Had he, perhaps, exaggerated? He had exaggerated . . .
How quietly, a little later, he'd conclude:
"I accept it all."

And now to be unable
To accept, to have exaggerated—to do anything:
It's hard for him. How often he has said,
"I like you for always doing as you please"—
He couldn't. Free will appealed so much to him;
He thought, I think: If they've the choice . . .

He was right. And now, to have no choice!
STALAG LUFT

In the yard, by the house of boxes,
I lay in the ditch with my bow;
And the train's long mourning whistle
Wailed from the valley below
Till the sound of my rabbit gnawing
Was the grasses' tickling shadow,
And I lay dazed in my halo
Of sunlight, a napping echo.

I saw through rainbow lashes
The barred and melting gaze
Of my far-raiding captors.
(The dappled mustangs graze
By the quills of the milky leggings.)
After some feverish days
They smile, and the numbing laces
Are cut from my wrists with praise.

When I woke the rabbit was gnawing
His great, slow, ragged bites
From the wood of the wired-in hutchles,
And dusk had greyed the white
Leghorns hunched on the roosts of their run.
The train mourned below
For the captives—a thinning echo...
It all comes back to me now.
THE END OF THE RAINBOW

Far from the clams and fogs and bogs—The cranberry bogs—of Ipswich,
A sampler cast upon a savage shore,
There dwells in a turquoise, unfrequented store
A painter; a painter of land- and seascapes.

At nine o'clock, past Su-Su
--Asleep on the threshold, a spirited
Dwarf Pekinese, exceptionally loving—
The sun of Southern California streams
Unlovingly, but as though lovingly,
Upon the spare, paint-spotted and age-
spotted hand's
Accustomed gesture.

Beyond the mahlstick a last wave
Breaks in Cobalt, Vert Emeraude, and Prussian Blue
Upon a Permanent White shore.

Her long hair, finer and redder once
Than the finest of red sable brushes, has been
brushed
Till it is silver. The hairdresser, drunk with
sunlight,
Has rinsed it a false blue. And blue
Are all the lights the seascapes cast upon it, blue
The lights the false sea casts upon it. Su-Su
--Su-Su is naturally black.

Five sheets of plate-glass, tinted green
And founded on the sand, now house the owner
Of the marsh-o'erlooking, silver-grey, unpainted
salt-box
To which, sometimes, she writes a letter
--Home is where the dead are--
And goes with it past CALIFORNIA
And drops it in a mail-slot marked THE STATES.
The Frog-Prince, Marsh-King
Goggles at her from the bottom of the mail-slot.

There is brandy on his breath.
The cattails quivering above his brute
Imploring eyes, the tadpoles feathering
The rushes of his beard--black beard brought down
In silver to the grave--rustle again
In flaws or eddies of the wet wind: "Say.
Say. Say now. Say again."
She turns away
Into the irrigated land
With its blond hills like breasts of hay,
Its tall tan herds of eucalyptus grazing
Above its lawns of ice-plant, of geranium,
Its meadows of eternal asphodel.

The dark ghosts throng by
Shaking their locks at her—their fair, false locks—
Stretching out past her their bare hands, burnt hands.
And she—her face is masked, her hands are gloved
With a mask and gloves of bright brown leather:
The hands of a lady left out in the weather
Of resorts; the face of a fine girl left out in the years.

Voices float up: seals are barking
On the seal-rocks as, once, frogs were croaking
On rushy islands in the marsh of night.

Voices—the voices of others and her voice
Tuned flat like a country fiddle, like a Death
Rubbing his bow with resin at a square-dance—
Voices begin: . . . A spider a frying-pan, and tonic pop,
And—fancy!—put tomatoes in their chowder.
Go slow. Go slow. You owe it to yourself.
Watch out for the engine. You owe it to yourself.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be.
Better to be safe than sorry.
Better to be safe than sorry. Say to yourself,
Is it my money they're asking or me?
It must have been the money.

The harsh Voice goes on, blurred with darkness: Cheat
Or be cheated. Let
And live let.

Great me. Great me. Great me.
Proverbs of the night
With the night's inconsequence, or consequence,
Sufficient unto the night. . . . Every maid her own
Merman—and she has left lonely forever,
Lonely forever, the kings of the marsh.
She says to Su-Su, "Come to your Content."
—A name in the family for more
Than seven generations. And Su-Su
—Su-Su is Su-Su IV.
Twelve o'clock: she locks
The door that she has painted, walks away
Straightforwardly, her Su-Su frisking
Before, on the leash that she has braided; eats
At a little table in a sunny courtyard
A date milkshake and an avocadoburger.
Thus evil communications
Corrupt good manners.

Little Women, Little Men,
Upon what shores, pink-sanded, beside what cerulean
Seas have you trudged out, nodded over, napped away
Your medium-sized lives!

Poor Water Babies
Who, summer evenings, sent to bed by sunlight,
Sat in your nightdress on a rag-rug island
Seeming some Pole, or Northwest Passage, of
Hesperides
Of your bedchamber's humped, dark-shining Ocean:
The last sunbeam shone
Upon the marble set there at the center
Of that grey-glassed, black-eaved, white-
dormered chamber
Until, not touched by any human hand,
Slowly,
Fast, faster, the red agate rolled
Into the humpbacked floor's scrubbed corner.
From your bed that night, you looked for it
And it was gone—gone, gone forever
Out into darkness, far from the warm flickering
Hemisphere the candle breathed
For you and your Swiss Family Robinson, marooned
With one down pillow on an uninhabited
Hair mattress.

Su-Su is looking: it's the last of lunch.
She takes a piece of candy from her purse
—Dog-candy—and says, "Beg, sir!"

Su-Su begs.

They walk home in all amity, in firm
And literal association. She repeats: With dogs
You know where you are; and Su-Su's oil-brown,
oil-blue stare

—The true Su-Su's true-blue stare—
Repeats: With people you know where you are.
Her thin feet, pointed neither out nor in
But straight before her, like an Indian's,
And set upon the path, a detour of the path
Of righteousness; her unaccommodating eyes'
Flat blue, matt blue
Or grey, depending on the point of view--
On whether one looks from here or from New England--
All these go unobserved, are unobservable:
She is old enough to be invisible.

Opening the belled door,
She turns once more to her new-framed, new-glassed
Landscape of a tree beside the sea.
It is light-struck.

If you look at a picture the wrong way
You see yourself instead. ---The wrong way?
A quarter of an hour and we tire
Of any landscape, said Goethe; eighty years
And he had not tired of Goethe. The landscape had,
And disposed of Goethe in the usual way.

She has looked into the mirror of the marsh
Flawed with the flight of dragonflies, the life
of rushes,
And seen--what she had looked for--her own face
Staring up into her; but underneath,
In the depths of the dark water, witnessing
Unmoved, with a seal's angelic
More-than-human less-than-human eyes, a strange
Animal, some wizard ruling other realms,
The King of the Marsh.
She says: "He was a--strange man."

And the voice of a departed friend, a female
Friend, replies as crystal
Replies to a teaspoon, to a fingernail:
"A strange man. . . . But all men are, aren't they?
A man is like a merman." "A merman?"
"Mermen were seals, you know. They called them
silkies."
"You mean the Forsaken Merman was a seal?"
"What did you think it was, a merman?
And mermaids were manatees." "The things you know!"
"The things you don't know!"

The Great Silkie,
His muzzle wide in love, holds out to her
His maimed flippers, and an uncontrollable
Shudder runs through her flesh, and she says, smiling:
"A goose was walking on my grave.
—And the Frog-Prince?" "Oh, I don't know.
If you ask me the Frog-Prince was a frog."

These days few men, few women, and no frogs
Enter "my little studio-shop," "my little paint-store,"
To buy paint; paintings; small black dogs,
Pieces of Pilgrim Rock; pomander-apples
In rosemary; agates; a marsh-violet pressed
In Compensation—red goatskin, India paper,
Inscribed in black ink, "For my loving daughter";
A miniature of Great-Great-Great-
Grandfather Wotkyns, pressed to death in Salem
For a wizard; a replica, life-sized, of a female friend
In crystal—wound, the works say, "Men!";
A framed poem signed Beddoes: she has dreams to sell.

She has spent her principal on dreams.
Some portion, though, is left—left to her in
the Commonwealth
Of Massachusetts, in trust to the end of time.
But life, though, is not left in trust?
Life is not lived, in trust?
True, true—but how few live!
The gift for life, the gift of life
Are rarer, surely, than the gift of making
In a life-class, a study from the life
Of some girl naked for an hour, by the hour;
Of making, from an egg, a jug,
An eggplant, at cross-purposes on drapery,
A still-life; of rendering, with a stump,
Art-gum, and four hardnesses of charcoal, life
Whispering to the naked girl, the naked egg, the naked Painter: "What am I offered for this frog?"
A kiss? The Frog-Prince, kissed,
Is a prince indeed; a king, a husband, and a father;
According to his State, a citizen; according to
his God, a soul;

According to his—fiancée, a risk
Incalculated, incalculable; a load
Whose like she will not look upon again; a responsibility
She is no longer saddled with, praise Heaven!
[Applause.] And, smiling as she used to smile,
She murmurs as she used to murmur: "Men!"
She looks into the mirror and says: "Mirror, Who is the fairest of us all?"

According to the mirror, it's the mirror.

Great me. Great me. Great me. The voices tune themselves
And keep on tuning: there is no piece, just tuning.
... But there are compensations; there is Compensation.

She reads it (it, or else the Scriptures With a Key by Mrs. Eddy) when she wakes
In the night as she so often does: the earth Lies light upon the old, and they are wakeful.

She reads patiently: the bed-lamp lights Above her sunlit, moonlit, starlit bed
The little slogan under which she sleeps Or is wakeful: HE WHO HAS HIMSELF FOR FRIEND IS BEST BEFRIENDED—this in gothic.
One sees, through the bars of the first H, a landscape
Manned with men, womaned with women, dogged with a dog,
And influenced—Content says—by the influence Of The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Burgundy. The hours of the earth —The very rich hours, the very poor hours, the very long hours—

Go by, and she is wakeful.

She wakes, sometimes, when she has met a friend
In the water; he is just standing in the water, bathing.

He has shaved now, and smells of peppermint.

He holds out to her
With hands like hip-boots, like her father's waders,
A corsage of watercress: the white bridal-veil-lace flowers
Are shining with water-drops. In their clear depths

She sees, like so many cupids, water babies:
Little women, little men.

He pulls his feet with a slow sucking sound
From the floor where he is stuck, like a horse in concrete,
And, reaching to her, whispers patiently
—Whispers, or the wind whispers, water whispers: "Say.

Say. Say now. Say again."
A slow
Delicious shudder runs along her spine:
She takes off her straw sailor.
Red again, and long enough to sit on,
Her hair floats out to him—and, slowly,
she holds out to him
In their white, new-washed gloves, her dry
Brown leather hands, and whispers: "Father,
If you come any closer I'll call Father."

He melts, in dark drops, to a little dark
Pool drying on the floor, to Su-Su. It is Su-Su!
She holds out to the little dark
Grave drying in the grass, her little dry
Bouquet of ice-plant, of geranium,
And reads: In Loving Memory of Su-Su
I, II, III, IV.
She says: "That four is a mistake.
One two three is right, but leave out four."

The Prince is dead. . . . The willows waver
Above the cresses of his tomb.
--His tomb?
The Frog-Prince is married to a frog, has little frogs,
Says sometimes, after dinner, in his den:
"There was a mortal once. . . ." And his Content
Goes through the suburbs with a begging-bowl
Of teak. a Wedgwood cowbell, ringing, ringing,
Calling: Untouched! Untouched!
The doors shut themselves
Not helped by any human hand, mail-boxes
Pull down their flags, the finest feelers
Of the television sets withdraw.
Beside her, Death
Or else Life—spare, white, permanent—
Works out their pas de deux: here's Death
Arranging a still-life for his own Content;
Death walking Su-Su; Death presenting
To the trustees of the estate, a varied
Portfolio; Death digging
For gold at the end of the rainbow—strikes water,
Which is thinner than blood; strikes oil,
That water will not mix with—no, nor blood;
Pauses, mops his skull, says: The wrong end.
At home in Massachusetts gold, red gold
Gushes above the Frog-Prince, Princess, all the Princelets
Digging with sand-pails, tiny shovels, spoons, a porringer
Planned, ages since, by Paul Revere. They call:
"Come play! Come play!"

Death breaks the ice
On her Hopi jar and washes out the brushes;
Says, as he hands her them: Life's work. It's work.
Out here at the wrong end of the rainbow
Say to yourself: What's a rainbow anyway?

She looks into the mirror, through the rainbow
--The little home-made rainbow, there in tears--
And hears the voices the years shatter into
As the sunlight shatters into colors: Me. Me. Me,
The voices tune themselves.
She says: "Look at my life. Should I go on with it?
It seems to you I have . . . a real gift?
I shouldn't like to keep on if I only... It seems to you my life is a success?"

Death answers, Yes. Well, yes.

She looks around her:
Many waves are breaking on many shores,
The wind turns over, absently,
The leaves of a hundred thousand trees.
How many colors, squeezed from how many tubes
In patient iteration, have made up the world
She draws closer, like a patchwork quilt,
To warm her, all the warm, long, summer day!
The local colors fade:
She hangs here on the verge of seeing
In black and white,
And turns with an accustomed gesture
To the easel, saying:
"Without my paintings I would be--
why, whatever would I be?"

Safe from all the nightmares
One comes upon awake in the world, she sleeps.
She sleeps in sunlight, surrounded by many dreams
Or dreams of dreams, all good--how can a dream be bad
If it keeps one asleep?
The unpeopled landscapes
Run down to the seal-less, the merman-less seas,
And she rolls softly, like an agate, down to Su-Su
Asleep upon the doorsill of the seas.
The first Su-Su, the second Su-Su, the third Su-Su
Are dead?
Long live Su-Su IV!
The little black dog sleeping in the doorway
Of the little turquoise store, can dream
His own old dream: that he is sleeping
In the doorway of the little turquoise store.
THE WOMAN AT THE WASHINGTON ZOO

The saris go by me from the embassies.

Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet.
They look back at the leopard like the leopard.

And I. . . . this print of mine, that has kept its color
Alive through so many cleanings; this dull null
Navy I wear to work, and wear from work, and so
To my bed, so to my grave, with no
Complaints, no comment: neither from my chief,
The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief--
Only I complain. . . . this serviceable
Body that no sunlight dyes, no hand suffuses
But, dome-shadowed, withering among columns,
Wavy beneath fountains--small, far-off, shining
In the eyes of animals, these beings trapped
As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap,
Aging, but without knowledge of their age,
Kept safe here, knowing not of death, for death--
Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!

The world goes by my cage and never sees me.
And there come not to me, as come to these,
The wild beasts, sparrows pecking the llamas' grain,
Pigeons settling on the bears' bread, buzzards
Tearing the meat the flies have clouded. . . .

Vulture,
When you come for the white rat that the foxes left,
Take off the red helmet of your head, the black
Wings that have shadowed me, and step to me as man:
The wild brother at whose feet the white wolves fawn,
To whose hand of power the great lioness
Stalks, purring. . . .

You know what I was,
You see what I am: change me, change me!
Her imaginary playmate was a grown-up
In sea-coal satin. The flame-blue glances,
The wings gauzy as the membrane that the ashes
Draw over an old ember—as the mother
In a jug of cider—were a comfort to her.
They sat by the fire and told each other stories.

"What men want. . . ." said the godmother softly—
How she went on it is hard for a man to say.
Their eyes, on their Father, were monumental marble.
Then they smiled like two old women, bussed each other,
Said, "Gossip, gossip"; and, lapped in each other's looks,
Mirror for mirror, drank a cup of tea.

Of cambric tea. But there is a reality
Under the good silk of the good sisters' Good ball gowns. She knew. . . . Hard-breasted, naked-eyed,
She pushed her silk feet into glass, and rose within A gown of imaginary gauze. The shy prince drank A toast to her in champagne from her slipper

And breathed, "Bewitching!" Breathed, "I am bewitched!"
--She said to her godmother, "Men!"
And, later, looking down to see her flesh Look back up from under lace, the ashy gauze And pulsing marble of a bridal veil,
She wished it all a widow's coal-black weeds.

A sullen wife and a reluctant mother, She sat all day in silence by the fire.
Better, later, to stare past her sons' sons, Her daughters' daughters, and tell stories to the fire.

But best, dead, damned, to rock forever Beside Hell's fireside—to see within the flames

The Heaven to whose gold-gauzed door there comes A little dark old woman, the God's Mother, And cries, "Come in, come in! My son's out now, Out now, will be back soon, may be back never, Who knows, eh? We know what they are—men, men! But come, come in till then! Come in till then!"
THINKING OF THE LOST WORLD

This spoonful of chocolate tapioca
Tastes like—like peanut butter, like the vanilla
Extract Mama told me not to drink.
Swallowing the spoonful, I have already traveled
Through time to my childhood. It puzzles me
That age is like it.

Come back to that calm country
Through which the stream of my life first meandered,
My wife, our cat, and I sit here and see
Squirrels quarreling in the feeder, a mockingbird
Copying our chipmunk, as our end copies
Its beginning.

Back in Los Angeles, we missed
Los Angeles. The sunshine of the Land
Of Sunshine is a gray mist now, the atmosphere
Of some factory planet: when you stand and look
You see a block or two, and your eyes water.
The orange groves are all cut down . . . My bow
Is lost, all my arrows are lost or broken,
My knife is sunk in the eucalyptus tree
Too far for even Pop to get it out,
And the tree's sawed down. It and the stair-sticks
And the planks of the tree house are all firewood
Burned long ago; its gray smoke smells of Vicks.

Twenty Years After, thirty-five years after,
Is as good as ever—better than ever,
Now that D'Artagnan is no longer old—
Except that it is unbelievable.
I say to my old self: "I believe. Help thou
Mine unbelief."

I believe the dinosaur
Or pterodactyl's married the pink sphinx
And lives with those Indians in the undiscovered
Country between California and Arizona
That the mad girl told me she was princess of—
Looking at me with the eyes of a lion,
Big, golden, without human understanding,
As she threw paper-wads from the back seat
Of the car in which I drove her with her mother
From the jail in Waycross to the hospital
In Daytona. If I took my eyes from the road
And looked back into her eyes, the car would—I'd be—
Or if only I could find a crystal set
Sometimes, surely, I could still hear their chief
Reading to them from Dumas or Amazing Stories;
If I could find in some Museum of Cars
Mama's dark blue Buick, Lucky's electric,
Couldn't I be driven there? Hold out to them,
The paraffin half picked out, Tawny's dewclaw--
And have walk to me from among their wigwams
My tall brown aunt, to whisper to me: "Dead?
They told you I was dead?"

As if you could die!
If I never saw you, never again
Wrote to you, even, after a few years,
How often you've visited me, having put on,
As a mermaid puts on her sealskin, another face
And voice, that don't fool me for a minute--
That are yours for good . . . All of them are gone
Except for me; and for me nothing is gone--
The chicken's body is still going round
And round in widening circles, a satellite
From which, as the sun sets, the scientist bends
A look of evil on the unsuspecting earth.
Mama and Pop and Dandeen are still there
In the Gay Twenties.

The Gay Twenties! You say
The Gay Nineties . . . But it's all right: they were gay,
O so gay! A certain number of years after,
Any time is Gay, to the new ones who ask:
"Was that the first World War or the second?"
Moving between the first world and the second,
I hear a boy call, now that my beard's gray:
"Santa Claus! Hi, Santa Claus!" It is miraculous
To have the children call you Santa Claus.
I wave back. When my hand drops to the wheel,
It is brown and spotted, and its nails are ridged
Like Mama's. Where's my own hand? My smooth
White bitten-fingernailed one? I seem to see
A shape in tennis shoes and khaki riding-pants
Standing there empty-handed; I reach out to it
Empty-handed, my hand comes back empty,
And yet my emptiness is traded for its emptiness,
I have found that Lost World in the Lost and Found
Columns whose gray illegible advertisements
My soul has memorized world after world:
LOST--NOTHING. STRAYED FROM NOWHERE.

NO REWARD.
I hold in my own hands, in happiness,
Nothing: the nothing for which there's no reward.
I ate pancakes one night in a Pancake House
Run by a lady my age. She was gay.
When I told her that I came from Pasadena
She laughed and said, "I lived in Pasadena
When Fatty Arbuckle drove the El Molino bus."

I felt that I had met someone from home.
No, not Pasadena, Fatty Arbuckle.
Who's that? Oh, something that we had in common
Like—like—the false armistice. Piano rolls.
She told me her house was the first Pancake House
East of the Mississippi, and I showed her
A picture of my grandson. Going home—
Home to the hotel—I began to hum,
"Smile a while, I bid you sad adieu,
When the clouds roll back I'll come to you."

Let's brush our hair before we go to bed,
I say to the old friend who lives in my mirror.
I remember how I'd brush my mother's hair
Before she bobbed it. How long has it been
Since I hit my funnybone? had a scab on my knee?

Here are Mother and Father in a photograph,
Father's holding me. . . . They both look so young.
I'm so much older than they are. Look at them,
Two babies with their baby. I don't blame you,
You weren't old enough to know any better;

If I could I'd go back, sit down by you both,
And sign our true armistice: you weren't to blame.
I shut my eyes and there's our living room.
The piano's playing something by Chopin,
And Mother and Father and their little girl

Listen. Look, the keys go down by themselves!
I go over, hold my hands out, play I play--
If only, somehow, I had learned to live!
The three of us sit watching, as my waltz
Plays itself out a half-inch from my fingers.
ORESTES AT TAURIS

(Iphigenia and Orestes were children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. When the Greek fleet, on the way to Troy, was delayed by contrary winds at Aulis, Agamemnon killed Iphigenia as a sacrifice. Later versions of the myth have her snatched from the altar by Artemis, who makes her a priestess at Tauris, in the Crimea. Coming home after the fall of Troy, Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes, at Apollo's command, killed his mother and Aegisthus. He was pursued from country to country by the Furies, and finally was required, in expiation for his crime, to bring back to Greece that image of Artemis to which the Tauri sacrificed the strangers cast up on their shores.)

Sailing to Tauris: the pitchy cave,
The corpse bobbing, bleached, limp as oil.
Days, hung at the wind's aging breast--
The sail had no shade, the place of the sun
No shape to tell you where he rode--
You fell like a dream; or, looking down,
Smiling, the laurel darkening your face,
You saw Them watching, Their pale mouths opened,
Like shadows under the gliding sea... 
One night you began to rot in your dream
And held your sister, wet in your arms,
Who wept with lips that fell apart in fat.
You woke with a sob, rippling with sweat,
And ran to the helmsman, and turned his face;
He spoke in the gods' tongue, forsaking you,
His nostrils distended, drugged with the scent
Of the dried blood scaling from his lips--
That hair, prettier than a horse's mane!
And you cried "Lord!"--flung out your arms,
And looked into eyes so fierce and luminous
You woke with a hollow and tumbling cry.
A bird came by your head, her wings thudding,
The mast shook, the shields fell rattling to the deck,
The ship struck.

There, rocking, till day,
Your ship broke in that shallow way.
The waves friended with the urging wind
Flowed to your ship where she began
To rot and scale--grey foam lumped thick as bees
Gathered along her beak, spun up the oars
That hung there creaking; and she heeled
Half-over to those towering crests—waves wore at her,
She wallowed shoreward, struck again, and stuck
There on that shelf, head fast against the rocks
That reached for her, stern back along the shoal
That streamed like a snow-plume from them,—
Fast, with chopped oars and grinding beak,
Her snake's head twisted back, and trailing oars;
And as each wave burst, the plunging spray
Broke round you and clustered on you in such clouds
You looked like men whom darkness overtakes
In harshest winter, when snow falls so thick
They look like ghosts among the silent flakes
And hardly speak. So you stood mute
With hanging head, or looked indifferently
Along the smoking flats, or where a stream
Crept pricked with bony weeds; and your gaze failed
On all that water... 

Last, that day, dwarfed warriors
Crept along that floor, faceless with air,
A long time on the finger ridges,
Patient and necessary as a star.
The sand foamed with prints. Where they rode,
Stamped there on the edge of the world
Striped with the livid flutings of the sky,
They seemed as many as the night-seen swarms
Of journeying strangers, when from far on high
Their shrill song falls. So that day you heard
The neighing of horses and the sound of iron
And shouts—no Argive shouts!
Some dismounted and walked on the sand,
Waving to you, lifting their long cries
That seemed so strange to you—the surf's sounds strewn
Along the beaches, spoke in that savage tongue.
Standing in a chariot, shading her eyes with her hand,
A woman in a dyed cloak, holding a flat wand,
Gazed out at you, solitary among the swells.
The riders stared at her, or called to her
Till she stretched out her arms and sang:
The veils of mist, of foam riding the wind,
Rolled seaward, or sank slowly to the sea,
And the shore glittered in the fiery light.
Her voice came floating across the waves.
Then from the sea-depth voices groaned,
And you looked down, shrieked out to see
The black ship breaking, half-sucked-down.
Stripped off the mantle! flung down the sword!
Diving into the whirlpool, that cauldron
Loud with a thousand shouts, shields'-sound, the shields
Showing a last time their ornaments,
An oar up-ended in the sea's triumph—
You and your men sounded like birds with your cries:
Helpless, pale as fish,
Drawn down strangling, swept to the salt flats,
Trying to stand, trembling, clutching at
The spiked flowers of the reeds.
Some they speared (with what imperious gestures!);
And you, last left of them, lay senseless there
And rose half-senseless from the running sand
And tried to stand, and staggered and sank back,
Standing for one instant—imperishables!—
Holding out to them your pressed hands.

Afterward you remembered them looking down,
Standing so that the last foam of the wave
Swirled round, or ended at, their feet:
Doom looking at you, under the helmet's rim—
Over it, the trembling feathery plumes.
The journey inland: your wrists were bound.
Standing in the chariot, staring back
Through long locks the wind floats back,
You watched the long train, the low sun
Gilded your salt skin, your burning face.
Riders called to you, waving their shields to you—
The scarves waved, the wheat bent as you passed.
You sat trying to hold up your head
Or pressed your chin to the car's rim,
Felt it so cold, you gave a child's sigh.
Struggling through the first gasps of darkness,
The riders came past; you peered at them—
Limp hands, slow stride, wet beating sides—
And then the winding road, the weedy road,
Two haystacks like wheaten snow-men
Standing like glaciers by the flood.
How cold the drops flung from the hooves
Felt as you halted at the ford!
Wide and dark seemed the water, the sky darkening;
Weeping, listening to the sound of that water,
You lay by the gravels and the broken shells
The low waves lapped along; when the bird whistled,
You shuddered and fell asleep, and never saw
The frogs and water-rats and all those birds
That crept up through the reeds and stared at you;
And in their midst the Furies sat
And watched you with Their drowsy look, and patiently
Watched the horses drink with long sucking draughts
Or peered at the carved handles of the shields.
And as They stared at you, a mournful cry
Sprang from your lips and from the leaves
The Furies fondled with Their hands...

When they shook you awake, you moaned like a dog
And lay with stretched mouth and struggling limbs—
How bright the torches were! Then someone came to you
And held out water in a cup, and lifted you;
You looked at her senselessly, and shook your head.
Yet when she pressed it to your lips you gulped at it,
And it was so thick and bitter with some drug
Your teeth rang on the rim, you gave a long shudder,
Snatched it, and poured the rest out on the ground—
Then you looked up at her and laughed.
Her head began to swim away, you fell asleep.

How long had you slept? You woke to the late day.
Clouds blazed in the sunlight, the whole plain
Bent to the sigh of that steady wind.
You looked astonished at the image there
That crouched like a hunted and misshapen thing,
Swathed with the hides of horses, fox-furs, and the skins
Of some long-horned, long-furred, and long-tailed beast.
A fleece with its knotted and dragging fringe.
Around, the maidens dressed like bears
Pressed rank on rank; and past them old men stood
In fresh-washed flax, and held out in their hands
Green branches, green rye-woven crowns.
On poles around, their long hair stirring in the wind,
Some heads stood drying. One had rotted there so long
Shreds of its face hung fluttering like a beard;
And others, tanned like leather, stuffed with straw,
Their combed hair twisted back, looked piteously
From jewels sewn in their lids, into your eyes,
As though to beckon you to their blind world.
A man came walking through their midst, with clumsy steps.
A long, white, and heavy coat, high shapeless boots,
A broad-sleeved and knee-long coat, and great peaked hood:
Such garments, white as salt, hung covering him.
Come to the goddess, he swayed and stood
Two heads above her, huge as some high stone,
And then unstrung and broke the bow he held
With hands still hidden in his coat's great sleeves,
And spoke; but in a voice so tremulous
You stared, and saw under the high hood
No face at all: an egg of bandaging.
Then as he stripped the stiff skins one by one
From the black goddess who gazed passively
Past your still face and travelling eyes,
You saw her splintered arms and hacked-out breasts—
And yet the knife-scarred wood seemed still to bear
A rough and sooty bark. That bark, that skin was blood.
Then you knew you were dreaming; when the white man laughed
You laughed aloud—laughed senselessly until you saw,
Under the chest's stiff basketwork and loose-spun cloth,
An old man's withered face and twinkling eyes.

And so you came to her. Ah, lamentable it seemed
To lurch like a beast, with harsh forced steps,
To a wooden altar, there groan out
Unpitied words—and no more known as words. . . .
Sidelong, and timidly, the maidens looked
Who came to you; lashed like a sail upon a pole,
You struck with your head against the hands
That wound the furs along your limbs, or hid
Even the ropes that bound you with their flowers,
Long ribbons, leaves, and garlands hanging down.
You still spoke a while, and then for pity ceased
And wept at yourself; and strange it was to see
The dancers with their masks and swords and leaves,
And hear no music, no, nor sound except
Their feet against the turf and their intaken breath
Or your own moans and painful gasping breath. . . .
A sigh waved their ranks; they stood there silently.
You heard a sound, a sound, a long whispering sound,
Then silence; then you waited a long time
While your skin changed and your whole body changed,
And still there was no sound; until you sensed
A sort of warmth against your flesh, and suddenly
Felt someone breathing there, a feathery touch.
Sweat sprang from your limbs! your heart leapt!
You felt your life halt, your weak lids grate fast:
When you opened them she was standing before you.

Gold hung from her arms, dark gold clasped round
Her haggard face; what beasts worked red with gold
Twisted their antlers past her tangled hair?
Rays like a fan's shrivelling ribs
Curved from her lips to color her burnt cheeks;
Her lips were dyed; and through dyed lashes peered
Eyes with a bird's pitiless and gloomy stare.
So she looked; and yet in all that press
At Argos or Mycenae, or in all the isles
You never saw her like: a face so fair!
She wet your hair, and smoothed it with her hands,
Water ran down your face, and it looked pale
Under those dark and darkening locks; you shook them free,
And how ghastly it looked—your pale anxious face!
You trembled like a knife; was it thirst, then,
That you felt stirring, clapping its wings
In your dry breast and shrivelling throat?
And in your anguish, the heavy foam
Lay on your lips like a smile; until they came unstuck
With a short wordless shriek, your head lolled back,
And in your fit your eyes looked yellow
As the bone eyes of an orphan's doll
He makes from rags he finds, and sticks,
And splinters from a bone the house-dogs gnaw.
And surely, bound as you were, half-hid
In flowers and long leaves, you looked
More like a bush or some low branchy tree
Than like a dead man hanging at the side
Of his own death. A man came out, uprooted you,
And stripped the lashings off, and let you fall,
And you sat stiffly in the trampled grass
And did not move, you could not move,
And the man touched you and you fell.
He looped round cords, and stretched and pegged them fast,
And you lay staring to that endless sky—
You saw the sword blaze. She bent over you
And sobbed aloud, and raised it in both hands;
Then shuddered and shrank back, and loosened it—
You were still silent, and looked at her blindly.
And when she calmed herself, and picked it from the ground,
And once more raised it; when between you and her face
The sword's line came—what did you see then, Orestes?
The head sprang up, spun once, and fell.
The hairs that trailed back toward the trunk
Began to rise and shudder in the wind.
Then she trembled and turned aside,
Her hands were weakened, she loosed the sword
And moved back blindly, bent to lift the head;
But as she reached to take it, its lips curled
For a little in their trembling smile,
The lashes trembled, the bright eyes
Looked at her meltingly. The mouth said: Sister!
She stood there with her hand outflung
And stared at the head; her lips shook,
She stammered to herself the heavy word....
She once had stood and seen her slayers round
And left living. None living had left her hand.
Borne over the cloudless or shadowy deep,
Friendless, or friended with arms, and armored friends,
They swept to the garland and the wand,
Long-lined, through long years, and all to that end!
How strange to stand like a child, and tremble
At a headless body—one more head
To stuff and smoke and set on an empty stake;
And if in the long nights of the long winter
It still staring at you with its aching smile,
And when you name it, and lean to it longingly,
Its eyes seem to cloud in the firelight
And it turns from you, slowly, in the stinging smoke—
What is it but one more head? If it seems to you
The whole world and the way to a world
Lost in one instant, under the plunging sword—
Now once more your fingers shine with blood.
The maidens lift their jars, pour through your hands
Water that falls past stained; and after strew
Bright shells and sea-sand on that sodden ground.

An end for the children of a king,
The king of that age. And under foreign eyes
And far from their own home—from Argos, or from any town
In all the Greek land; too far for any Greek
To have come to aid, or bear back word of them:
For in another season, months before,
He must have boarded ship, and spread his sails,
Set out long-voyaging, and many days
Sailed the Aegean, till at length he came
Past Scyros, and far-seen Lemnos, to those straits
Where passed the Boeotian prince, that hungry year
His mother and her servants parched the seed
(He from the altar and his father's sword
Fled on the Ram, to Colchis; out of love for him
His sister fled, and by the Chersonese
Fell like a star); so, quitting her small sea,
Set forth upon the Euxine and, worn, wandering
Along those houseless shores until he seems
The dying autumn, or some wandering god—
He gains that savage coast; come there by night,
Goes all alone, silent, leaving his ship
Moored, set for sailing, in some shadowy cove;
And then bears inland, walking all that night
Among the marshes with their shivering reeds
And night-blanchèd and misshapèn flowers—swims
With slow strokes through some little stream
Dappled with stars and, at the western brim,
The sinking moon. . . . The late night quickens,
Over the stagnant waters of the marsh
An iron light flows; far away, with faint harsh cries
Some birds fly up. So dawns the day
The traveller walks through, and at eve he sees,
Naked and grim among her worshippers,
The image of the Taurian Artemis.

This was the image Crestes came to take—
And beside it his head and body lay.

So the traveller might have come; but no man came,
No man lay hidden there—or saw,
Parting the grasses with a silent hand,
Under the long light of the level sun,
The people, silent, watching with grave faces
Their priestess, who stands there
Holding out her hands, staring at her hands,
With her brother's blood drenching her hands.
GLEANING

When I was a girl in Los Angeles we'd go gleaning.
Coming home from Sunday picnics in the canyons,
Driving through orange groves, we would stop at fields
Of lima beans, already harvested, and glean.
We children would pick a few lima beans in play,
But the old ones, bending to them, gleaned seriously
Like a picture in my Bible story book.

So, now, I glean seriously,
Bending to pick the beans that are left.
I am resigned to gleaning. If my heart is heavy,
It is with the weight of all it's held.
How many times I've lain
At midnight with the young men in the field!
At noon the lord of the field has spread his skirt
Over me, his handmaid. "What else do you want?"
I ask myself, exasperated at myself.
But inside me something hopeful and insatiable--
A girl, a grown-up, giggling, gray-haired girl--
Gasps: "More, more!" I can't help hoping,
I can't help expecting
A last man, black, gleaning,
To come to me, at sunset, in the field.
In the last light we lie there alone:
My hands spill the last things they hold,
The days are crushed beneath my dying body
By the body crushing me. As I bend
To my soup spoon, here at the fireside, I can feel
And not feel the body crushing me, as I go gleaning.
APPENDIX II

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

1914 Born in Nashville, Tennessee, May 6, of Owen and Anna Campbell Jarrell. Family moved to Long Beach, California, shortly thereafter.


1926 Brought against wishes to rejoin mother and younger brother in Nashville. Poses for figure of Ganymede in replica of Parthenon, Centennial Park, Nashville.

1931 Hume-Fogg High School, Nashville; active in dramatics. Bored with business courses intended to insure a place in family candy business, sent by uncle to Vanderbilt University.

1935 Graduated from Vanderbilt, B.S. in Psychology. Had come under influence of John Crowe Ransom, and edited the literary magazine.


1937 To Kenyon College, with Ransom, as English instructor, where he formed lifelong attachment to Robert Lowell.

1939 Received M.A. in English from Vanderbilt; thesis: "Implicit Generalization in Housman."

1940 Instructor in English, University of Texas in Austin. Married Mackie Langham. "The Rage for the Lost Penny" published.

1942 Blood for a Stranger published (dedicated to Allen Tate). Enlisted in Army Air Force; failing to qualify as pilot, served as celestial navigation tower operator for duration of service.

1943 Jeannette Sewell Davis Prize for "Four Poems" in Poetry, 63:114, November, 1943.

1945 Little Friend, Little Friend published.

316

1947 Associate Professor in English at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.


1949 Poetry Critic for Partisan Review.


1952 Visiting professor in literary criticism at Princeton University. Taught at Indiana University School of Letters.

1953 Taught at University of Illinois. Poetry and the Age published.

1954 Pictures from an Institution published. Judge for Bollingen Award.


1957 Appointed to the Editorial Board of the American Scholar.

1958 Appointed to Elliston Chair of Poetry at University of Cincinnati. Appointed to rank of Professor at Woman's College.

1960 The Woman at the Washington Zoo published, for which Jarrell received the National Book Award.
1961  Edited *The Best Short Stories of Rudyard Kipling*.

1962  *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* published.


1964  *Selected Poems*, including *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* republished.

1965  *The Lost World* and *The Animal Family* published. Prepared preface to reissue of *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead. Hospitalized for nervous breakdown in February, and released in May. Returned to teaching in fall term, but was struck and killed by an automobile in Chapel Hill on October 14, 1965.


The Jarrell manuscripts are held at the Walter Clinton Jackson Memorial Library at the Greensboro campus and in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I

Collected Writings of Randall Jarrell


• The Seven-League Crutches. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1951.


319


II

Works Edited or Translated by Randall Jarrell


III

Articles and Reviews by Randall Jarrell

Note: The notation "Reprinted in Poetry and the Age" identifies those articles collected under the title Poetry and the Age; "Reprinted in A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," those articles reprinted in A Sad Heart at the Supermarket; "Reprinted in The Third Book of Criticism," those articles reprinted in The Third Book of Criticism.


- "The Appalling Taste of the Age." Saturday Evening Post, CCXXXI (July 26, 1958), 18-19, 44-45, 47. Reprinted in A Sad Heart at the Supermarket.


- "End of the Line." Nation, CLIV (February 21, 1942), 224, 226, 228.


- "Love and Poetry." Mademoiselle, XXXII (February, 1956), 123, 223.


- "Mr. Jarrell Replies." New Republic, CIV (March 17, 1941), 374-375.


- "Poetry in a Dry Season." Partisan Review, VII (March-April, 1940), 164-167.

- "Poets, Critics, and Readers." American Scholar, XXVIII (Summer, 1959), 277-292. Reprinted in A Sad Heart at the Supermarket.


- "Recommended Summer Reading." American Scholar, XXVII (Summer, 1958), 372.


"A Sad Heart at the Supermarket." *Daedalus*, CXXXIX (Spring, 1960), 359–372. Reprinted in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*.


"The 'Serious Critic.'" *Nation*, CLXVI (June, 1948), 670–672.


I Walter de la Mare. Nation, CLXII (February 2, 1946), 134-136.
II Alex Comfort. Nation, CLXI (December 29, 1945), 741-742.
VI Anthologies. Nation, CLXII (February 23, 1946), 237-238.
VII Bad Poets. Nation, CLXII (May 25, 1946), 632-634.


IV

Criticism and Comment on Randall Jarrell


Ciardi, John. "Over the Edge of Bathos." Nation, CLXXXI (July 30, 1955), 100.


---


---


---


---


---


---


```


Schwartz, Delmore. "Dream from which No One Wakes." Nation, CLXI (December 1, 1945), 590.


Williams, O. "On Five Young American Poets (Series I), Living Age, CCCLIX (January, 1941), 496-498.
The dissertation submitted by Elizabeth Browne has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

21 May, 1973

[Signature]