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AN ORNAMENT OF CIVILIZATION: THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF  
RANDALL JARRELL

*The University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

PH.D.

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AN ORNAMENT OF CIVILIZATION:  
THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF  
RANDALL JARRELL

by

Hayden Keith Monroe

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
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Approved by

  
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We were talking about survival and over-refinement. Marc said he didn't like to feel that, if his survival depended on being able to kill and dress an animal, for instance, he couldn't do it. The rest of us agreed we felt ashamed of our squeamishness, but Randall disagreed. "I consider myself the ornament of civilization!" he declared. "When it perishes, let me perish!"

Eleanor Taylor



MONROE, HAYDEN KEITH. An Ornament of Civilization. The Literary Criticism of Randall Jarrell. (1979)  
Directed by: Dr. Robert Watson. Pp. 276

Randall Jarrell, one of America's foremost postwar poets, was also a distinguished literary critic, a man Alfred Kazin once described as a "prince of reviewers." This study traces the course of Jarrell's critical development. It begins with a trio of chapters detailing his apprenticeship when, as a young man at Vanderbilt and Kenyon in the late thirties, he came under the influence of the New Critics. His first work for national magazines such as The New Republic, The Nation and Partisan Review is also examined, including the early support he received from Edmund Wilson. The fact that Jarrell made his early reputation by writing high-spirited attacks on inept or imitative poets is examined, particularly as this practice contrasts markedly with his later role as an appreciator of too little regarded poets of real worth.

The natural hiatus in Jarrell's work occasioned by World War II allows the inclusion of three more chapters on special topics. First, a discussion of the aesthetic behind Jarrell's reviewing is undertaken, based largely on Jarrell's "The End of the Line." The author contends that the groundwork laid in this early theory of modernism enabled Jarrell, in the ten years between 1946 and 1956, to become an extremely influential interpreter of the shape and meaning of

American poetic achievement in the first half of the twentieth century. A chapter on Jarrell's criticism of Auden follows. It suggests that Jarrell's development as a critic may be seen in microcosm in his work on that poet. Finally, a chapter on Jarrell's style as displayed in reviews, long critical essays and polemics is included. It argues that Jarrell's technique resembles that of earlier poet-critics, notably Matthew Arnold.

The study's last three chapters treat Jarrell's mature work as a critic in the last twenty years of his life. The first concerns his minor reviews from this period when he served as poetry editor for The Nation and later for the Yale Review. His adoption of the roles of appreciator, teacher and sage in his criticism is noted. This was the period when, in Robert Lowell's words, it became true to say that "eulogy was the glory of Randall's criticism." A second chapter examines his most important essays on eight poets-- Frost, Whitman, Williams, Moore, Stevens, Lowell, and Graves --several of which altered permanently the reputations of their subjects. The final chapter discusses the polemics and fiction criticism of Jarrell's last years.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE . . . . .	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	iv
PART ONE. 1914-1943 . . . . .	1
CHAPTER ONE. THE APPRENTICE . . . . .	2
First Reviews and Thesis . . . . .	14
Critic of Critics . . . . .	20
CHAPTER TWO. THE ASSASSIN . . . . .	38
The Inept . . . . .	43
The Imitators . . . . .	44
The Diminished . . . . .	47
The Dishonest . . . . .	49
CHAPTER THREE: CONSOLIDATION . . . . .	53
Wilson . . . . .	53
Reviewer Reviewed . . . . .	56
First Appreciations . . . . .	64
PART TWO: HIATUS . . . . .	74
CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICS . . . . .	75
Poets and Poetry . . . . .	76
Modern Times . . . . .	88
Morlocks and Eloi . . . . .	96
CHAPTER FIVE: AUDEN . . . . .	102
CHAPTER SIX: STYLE . . . . .	130
PART THREE: 1945-1965 . . . . .	157
CHAPTER SEVEN: PRINCE OF REVIEWERS . . . . .	158
At War with War Poets . . . . .	167
Brief Murders . . . . .	170
Little Lessons . . . . .	176
Praise . . . . .	179

	Page
CHAPTER EIGHT. THE POET CRITIC . . . . .	186
Frost . . . . .	190
Whitman . . . . .	197
Ransom . . . . .	201
Williams . . . . .	204
Moore . . . . .	213
Stevens . . . . .	218
Lowell . . . . .	223
Graves . . . . .	230
Conclusion . . . . .	237
CHAPTER NINE: LAST THINGS . . . . .	244
Polemics . . . . .	244
Fiction . . . . .	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	271

PART ONE: 1935-1943

## CHAPTER ONE: THE APPRENTICE

Nothing will satisfy a finished taste  
The soul that still is growing, still is grateful.

Goethe

Randall Jarrell thought of himself and wanted to be thought of as a poet. But he admitted that poets must spend much of their time "waiting for the spark from heaven to fall."<sup>1</sup> He envied men like Wallace Stevens who apparently could wait for poems writing poems. Jarrell could not. He filled the time between them with teaching and lecturing, which he loved, and which he said he would have paid to be allowed to do. He also did translations, wrote children's books, one novel and criticism. All of these activities helped him promote the cause of literature, enlist an audience for it, and enhance his own reputation. He was probably most ambivalent about the writing of criticism since it was farther from poetry than was translation and farther from an audience than teaching. And yet there was a demand for it which was both flattering and distressing. He solved the problem in part by making criticism out of lectures, and by using his criticism as a kind of crusade against defective poetry, and the enemies of poetry.

Still, once when he found it hard to produce poems, but was in demand as a critic, he cried: "Help! Help! A wicked fairy has turned me into a prose writer!"<sup>2</sup> He could also



complain in his criticism of criticism that "They'll pay us to do anything, so long as it isn't . . . writing poems" (SH:86). It isn't hard to get the impression that he felt about the writing of criticism as he felt about painting the walls of an apartment: caught in that act and weebegone, he said, "I don't like it. I just happen to be good at it" (RJ:235).

His being good at it has provoked this study of the literary criticism of Randall Jarrell, an undertaking that probably would have neither surprised nor pleased the author of "The Age of Criticism," in part at least criticism of criticism of criticism. If I am later to approve his condemnation of this sort of infinitely regressive business, but now wish to justify my own study, two possible avenues are open to me. Either I am engaged in a contradiction, or there are factors involved in this case which make it exceptional. It would be pleasant to accept the former course and simply quote one of Jarrell's favorite bits of Whitman, "very well then I contradict myself," but I believe a convincing case can be made for the latter explanation.

Jarrell's criticism is worth examining for a number of reasons. It was, at its best, the work of a poet-critic in the tradition of Arnold and Eliot and, as such, interesting as the expression of the considerable mind of a practicing artist, interesting for what it tells us about the man himself, and for reasons of style as well as content. Jarrell's

pronouncements on Frost, Lowell, Stevens continue to appear in the blurbs of book clubs fourteen years after his death, twenty-five or thirty years after they were written, not merely because what he said about those poets was correct, but because it was correctly said. Truth by itself is not enough to insure longevity.

On the other hand, if what Jarrell did say was not also of some intrinsic interest, his views, no matter how well expressed, would have only the kind of specialist appeal that some of the wilder opinions of Yeats and Pound have. But many of Jarrell's critical perceptions remain essentially just and illuminating. In the case of more than one poet, his essays have earned a place in the indispensable criticism on that writer. Furthermore, most of his important observations on American poetry were made between 1945 and 1956. They came at a transition point, when a new generation was attempting to arrive at some sort of overview of the poetry of the first half of this century, at a point when it was necessary to assimilate and consolidate the work and reputations of a great number of predecessors, and to discern some shape in a mass of heterogeneous material. Jarrell's criticism helped many to do that work. It helped solidify some reputations, curb others, establish still others. In relatively few cases has time overthrown Jarrell's judgments.

Finally, Jarrell's criticism is interesting and important not only because it tells us a good deal about himself

and his subjects, but also because it has much to say about American culture in the decade and a half after the Second World War. Jarrell was not only New Critic, psychologist, poet-critic and book reviewer, but polemicist and culture critic as well. He came to feel, for example, that one of the threats to art in the 1950's was criticism itself, so some of his criticism became unfashionably anti-critical. Jarrell says of a character in his novel, Pictures from an Institution, that "the world was the arsenal Gertrude used against the world" (PI:191). To an important extent, criticism was the arsenal Jarrell used against criticism.

Virtually all of the reviews and essays Jarrell wrote will be soon contained in book form. Two collections, Poetry and the Age (1953) and A Sad Heart at the Supermarket (1962), appeared during his lifetime. The contents of the posthumously published The Third Book of Criticism (1967) were outlined before his death. Kipling, Auden and Co. (1980) will gather all that remained uncollected and include many early reviews. Because much of Jarrell's earliest work is contained in the last two books, I have chosen not to organize this study around these collections, but rather in a roughly chronological manner. Thus, Part I will follow his development as a critic from 1935 to 1943. Part II will take advantage of the natural hiatus in his work that World War II occasioned in order to discuss three special topics-- Jarrell's aesthetic theory, his work on Auden, which

represents his critical development in microcosm, and his style. Part III will briefly trace his critical activities from 1945 to 1965, and will conclude with a look at his major essays in three categories--poetry, polemics, fiction.

This chronological organization is appropriate because Jarrell did develop or evolve as a critic, and because his critical faces were to some extent a reflection of the changing times he inhabited. His earliest review, from 1935, is simply a book review with little to distinguish it from its innumerable brethren. By 1939, he was discernibly under the influence of the New Critics, giving an Empsonian close reading to some Housman poems and praising similar activity in reviews of other critics. He soon after was giving evidence of other influences: the willingness to evaluate associated with a Pound or Winters, the historical, cultural, biographical perspective of Wilson, the use of psychology in his work on Auden. By the end of World War II he had amalgamated these various influences in order to achieve a kind of personal hybrid, an eclectic method of criticism distinct from any one school. I will argue in the pages that follow that this eclecticism was a deliberate response to critical developments in the years following the war.

Jarrell had little or no interest as a critic or as a creative writer in schools or movements; in categorizing literature, in genres, or in any restrictive study of literature in terms of Freud, Jung, Marx, linguistics. He refused

to specialize. He took from New Criticism the method of close reading, employed psychology or biography or history when it served his purpose, which was always to communicate the special quality of a given poem or poet. For Jarrell as poet-critic the schools existed to provide him with tools, not to restrict him to a single method.

Because Jarrell's intention as a critic was always to instruct, to improve the taste of his readers, to damn bad poems and praise good ones and show the difference between them, he turned more and more to the writing of appreciative essays and reviews and sought a wider and wider audience. What he wanted ultimately was not to be a critic at all and certainly not a scholar. Both to some extent preach to the converted. Rather he aspired to the status of guide or teacher or, at his most grandiose, sage. He wanted to be Arnold, or better yet, Goethe.

This helps to explain the curious fact that so influential a critic was content to work for the most part in the forms of book review and personal essay. He was in part responsible for giving new respectability to the often old-maidish and unregarded art of book reviewing. He did so simply by taking the form seriously as an occasion for impassioned pleas, brilliant exegesis, furious denunciation. It is consistently surprising to realize how many of his most important and influential assessments of poets occur in mere book reviews of Bishop, Lowell, Frost, Moore, and Williams.

Even extended essays on Graves and Stevens were only reviews of their collected poems which grew in the writing, and for which he was able to beg additional space. Equally interesting is the fact that so many of these pieces appeared not only in the expected Kenyon, Partisan, and Yale Reviews, but also The New Republic, The Nation, the New York Times Book Review, Harpers, Vogue, Mademoiselle, The Saturday Evening Post.

What follows, then, is a look at the stages in the development of the critic Alfred Kazin called a "prince of reviewers" (RJ:95). I have tried to show Jarrell as tentative beginner, slashing young Turk, inspired editor, fond appreciator, teacher, wit, minor literary panjandrum of the 50's, reputation maker and polemicist.

Randall Jarrell was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1914, but spent his childhood in California. His parents separated when he was eleven, and his mother and brother moved back to Tennessee. Jarrell, however, spent one more year in California living in the Hollywood of the silent film era with his paternal grandparents, and a great-grandmother who remembered the Civil War, with an aunt nearby. This luminous year was apparently the happiest of his childhood, if the evidence of his late poem, The Lost World, can be trusted. He rejoined his mother in Tennessee in 1926, when he was twelve.

Many of Jarrell's poems concern themselves with childhood, and suggest that for him it was a dark and troubling time, during which his chief solace was the world of books. His early reading seems to have included Grimm's Tales, Swiss Family Robinson, James Branch Cabell, James Barrie, pulp magazine science fiction, H.G. Wells, Homer, Greek and Norse mythology, and all of Kipling.<sup>3</sup> Grimm and Kipling, at least, were to remain lifelong enthusiasms and influences. Numerous poems evoke the world of the Marchen as infiltrated by Freud. And practically the last criticism Jarrell did was introductions to several collections of Kipling stories. In 1941 he could say to Edmund Wilson that when he first read Kim, he "tried to go barefoot and got a nail in my foot. So I'm hardly an impartial judge of Kipling."<sup>4</sup> Jarrell's ability to write this to Wilson hints at one of his unique traits as a critic. Despite the accumulation of a formidable erudition, he was able to sustain a child's freshness of response long into adulthood.

Many of Jarrell's happiest hours as both child and adult were spent in libraries. Forty years later he was still annoyed that as a child he had only been allowed to take out four books at a time, for he consumed "half his weight a week" in books.<sup>5</sup> His chief fear in those years was that he would not have any new books in the house. Thus, in The Lost World, he describes a trip to the library as "ideal," intending to suggest that for him the world of literature was

separate from and superior to everyday reality. Schoolwork was something to be finished quickly so as to allow more time for reading. The critic who was to admonish other critics to "read at whim" is already apparent in the boy of The Lost World. And yet, and yet, as Jarrell was so fond of saying, neither bookishness nor escapism was precisely the point or the result. Many of his reviews attack poets for literariness, for a lack of knowledge of the world. And several poems register the paradox that an immersion in the imaginative world of literature serves to return the reader to the real world better able to understand it, but impotent to change it.

Jarrell's first experience of writing for an audience came when he was back in Nashville attending Hume-Fogg High School. There he wrote a column in the school paper filled with fantasy and humor, reflecting the influence of two groups of writers: twenties humorists like Benchley, Parker, Kaufman, and F.P.A., and British romancers such as Doyle, Stevenson, Haggard, Wells, and Barrie. He was also involved with the school's drama club as actor, and reviewed community plays in the school paper. In one review he contrasts a traveling company's performances of Hamlet and Twelfth Night with a local production of The Wild Duck. He takes the visitors to task for acting the "incredibly debased" first quarto of Hamlet, speaks as if well acquainted with the complete works of both Shakespeare and Ibsen, alludes to a



"classic review" of Hamlet, and admits to having disrupted the performance by laughing aloud at the lameness of the actor playing the ghost. In all of these traits portents of a later Jarrell may be seen, as in his fearless enthusiasm in calling The Wild Duck "the greatest play of the greatest dramatist since Shakespeare."<sup>6</sup>

Jarrell graduated from Hume-Fogg in 1931, filling the office not of class poet, but class prophet--an amusingly prophetic detail in one later to specialize in cries in the wilderness. He was enrolled briefly in a business course in hopes that he would enter the family business, but almost immediately was enabled by an uncle's largesse to matriculate at Vanderbilt. His twin ambitions at this time were poetic and psychological. He eventually received a B.S. in psychology in 1935. He seems to have begun college with no interest in a career as teacher or scholar in the field of literature. However, by 1935 his goals had been modified to the extent that he stayed on at Vanderbilt, for graduate study in English that led to a master's in 1939.

This change in direction might well not have occurred if it hadn't been for the presence, at the hometown school Jarrell probably attended for reasons of economy, of the lively and influential circle of Fugitive-Agrarian-New Critics. Certainly the stimulation and encouragement Jarrell received from these first mentors--Ransom, Tate, Warren, Brooks, Davidson--must have helped him decide to abandon psychology for literature.

Ransom has said that as a sophomore in his writing class Jarrell was already an "enfant terrible." And Tate has said that he seemed "as an undergraduate to have read all English poetry" and remembers that Ransom believed "that Randall knew more than he did." In much the same tone Tate also remarks that "his technical knowledge of verse must have come to him without labor" and that an early poem of his "had a formal mastery that I, nearly fifteen years older, could not have equalled." Remembering his first meeting with the eighteen-year-old Jarrell, Tate says he was shy and awkward, "conscious of his superior gifts and chafing under the restraints imposed by youth." He seemed "proud and difficult--studied all the time and had few or perhaps none of the purposeless diversions of the undergraduate." On this occasion Robert Penn Warren showed Tate a few of Jarrell's poems, one of which Tate pronounced "prodigious" (RJ:230).

Though Jarrell was always out of sympathy with the Agrarian ideals of this group, having had as he later said "a radical youth and a scientific education," his reception at Vanderbilt was such that he chose to stay on to study for a master's in English, petitioned the school to retain Ransom when he planned to move to Kenyon, had the favor returned when Ransom recruited him for his first teaching job at Kenyon, dedicated his first book to Tate and so forth.

Nevertheless, the picture that has just been painted of Jarrell's precocity and its early recognition may be

misleading if it is now expected that we will be treated to the sight of him springing fully armed from the head of Zeus (or the commencement at Vanderbilt in 1935) into the forefront of American poets and critics. Actually, it was not until ten years later in 1945 that Jarrell really began to assume a place in American letters. It is not enough to have a technical mastery of verse, or to be, as Peter Taylor (who became a Vanderbilt undergraduate and disciple of Jarrell the graduate student in 1936) has said "a boy who knew a lot" (RJ:241). It is necessary to know what to do with one's technique and knowledge that hasn't already been done.

This was particularly true for Jarrell and his contemporaries, coming to maturity in the late thirties. Behind them were a hundred years of revolutions and counter-revolutions in poetic theory and practice. The literary landscape in those years featured a heterogeneous array of older but still practicing poets--Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Moore, Williams--and, looming in the foreground, the hugely seductive young Auden. The confused, contradictory, and often dangerous example of all these poets had to be understood and either rejected or assimilated by Jarrell's generation. It is no surprise that many of them practiced criticism as well as poetry. For some it remained a negligible by-product of a poetic career or academic employment. For others like Jarrell criticism became important as an alternative means of expression.

First Reviews and Thesis

Jarrell's first opportunity to review came as a result of his attendance at Vanderbilt. In 1935 Warren and Brooks were newly installed at L.S.U. and presiding over the inaugural issues of Southern Review. They turned to their friend from Tennessee for an omnibus review of fiction--twelve volumes by Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Erskine Caldwell and others. The review's interest today is as an isolated example of Jarrell as an undergraduate critic. What it lacks is more interesting than what it contains. Later Jarrell was to make an art of three-page reviews of eight books filled with summaries, advice, assassinations, exhortations, miniature lectures on technique, and wit; all delivered at a furious tempo. This fourteen-page review remains merely a review. It seems more than anything else too long. Jarrell later was to write to Edmund Wilson that "when talking about the virtues of so-so people my style collapses."<sup>7</sup> That may be part of the problem here, if he had a style to call his own by 1935. It is also true that fiction as a category mattered less to Jarrell than poetry. One feels he expected most of it to be boring, and could generate neither anger nor malice when it was, which was not the case when poetry was concerned. In the next thirty years he wrote only a half-dozen reviews of fiction and then only on authors important to him. Furthermore, in describing this review to Brooks he claimed to have "tempered justice with

mercy."<sup>8</sup> It resulted in the review's sounding simply tentative. Later he almost always chose justice and let mercy take care of itself.

Still, there are a few traits in embryo in this first review which were to become characteristic of Jarrell's criticism. His penchant for quotation is evident, for instance. He quotes eighteen people, ranging from Kant to Chekhov, from Sophocles to Dorothy Parker. There are also a number of little parables beginning with if, a device to which Jarrell was to become habituated: "If one were to begin a novel by making the hero almost drown," "If Miss Glasgow were aroused in the middle of the night by a burglar."<sup>9</sup>

There is also evidence in these reviews of Jarrell's overriding interest in technique. At first reading it may seem that his criticisms have to do with subject matter, and he is capable of sounding like an overly fastidious, even precious moralist. On closer inspection it becomes clear that Jarrell objects to no subject matter for art, if the art is equal to it. But he does say that "even the most gruesome and tragic art must give the reader pleasure."<sup>10</sup> If he objects to these works, it is for failure of technique, which he demonstrated most often by comparison with greater works that attempt the same effects and succeed where these fail. And the tone of the aesthete may be justified in part by the subject matter of these books, one of which concerns a philosopher, one a composer, one a group of artists.

Of Jarrell's killing wit, which was to become a trademark, there is little evidence. His remark about Stark Young's characteristic attitude that, "as people tell you about the Grand Canyon, it must be seen to be believed" is to become familiar in form, though he will phrase such things more gracefully in the future. His remark that "it is only a lack of proper facilities. . ." that keeps Jule Brousseau's overly introspective characters "from recording their blood pressure" is nearer the mark. He also uses quotations from the victims to impale them. But here, too, he goes on too long. His examples from Glasgow take up a full page. Best is his remark that: "it is only necessary to quote a sentence, and let the reader decide for himself by whom Miss Wilhelm is influenced."<sup>11</sup> The sentence which follows could not have been bettered by Hemingway himself and leaves Gale Wilhelm dead without time to bleed.

Jarrell did not appear in print again as a critic until four years later, in 1939, when he began to review frequently. One publication from this first period of serious critical activity demands separate treatment, since it is unlike anything he was later to do. This is undoubtedly so because "Texts from Housman," which appeared in Kenyon Review in 1939, is an excerpt from Jarrell's Master's thesis. As such it is marred by the need to conform to a predetermined thesis, the overuse of a technical vocabulary, occasional overwriting, and a penchant for long parentheses.

Robert Watson has said of the mature Jarrell as a teacher and critic that "few could explain the very difficult more simply" (RJ.259). In "Texts from Housman" he had not yet learned to avoid convolution and abstraction. The worst example may be the following sentence.

The part as part has a misleading look of independence and reality, just as does the word as word; but it has only that relationship to the larger contexts of the poem that the words which compose it have to it, and its significance is similarly controlled and extended by these larger units of which it is a part.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, this is out of context, but a later Jarrell would never write a sentence like this in any context with its "significance" and "units" and "word as word." The best of Jarrell's later work is free of even such simple technical words as metaphor, versification, and symbol, let alone implicit generalization, sublimated and hypertrophied, all of which appear here. As he came to write for a wider audience, and gained experience as a teacher, he saw that such a vocabulary alienated still further readers already alienated from poetry.

On the other hand "Texts from Housman" does show Jarrell's debt to his Vanderbilt training in relatively pure form. The years in which he studied there saw the publication of Tate's Reactionary Essays, Ransom's The World's Body and The New Criticism and Brooks's Modern Poetry and the Tradition. "Texts from Housman" is in this critical tradition, essentially an Empsonian close reading of two Housman

poems, "Crossing alone the nighted ferry" and "He nods and curtseys and recovers." It probably led Berryman years later to remark that Empson was "Jarrell's master," though he was really only one of several (RJ:11).

In this article Jarrell argues that the most common logical structure in poetry is inductive, the inferring of general truths from particular instances. He further asserts that the general truth is often left unstated, is only implied and that this procedure is characteristic of Housman. He then sets out to demonstrate this in readings of the two poems which are painstaking, absorbing, and occasionally brilliant. But something interesting happens as we are led through the poems. We become so interested in them, in Jarrell's demonstration of their intricate construction that we forget about the thesis he is trying to prove. We end by appreciating the poems a good deal more than when we started, but remain unconvinced that the idea of implicit generalization is much more than a fancy way of saying something quite commonplace about the way poems work. It is hard not to feel, in fact, that for Jarrell himself much the same thing happened. He seems much more interested in the particular poems than in any general theory about them. In his later criticism he retained and perfected the willingness shown here to submit himself to the poem and not impose preconceptions upon it, to brilliantly paraphrase, to ferret out multiple meanings, to mint striking and often homely phrases



which illuminate the poem or poet. Here, for example, he describes a poem as an "onion of contexts," says that Housman's tone "shivers between [several qualities] like a just-thrown knife," calls Housman's poetry "a sort of home-made nettle wine."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore some of Jarrell's most interesting points have only a tenuous relationship to the idea of implicit generalization. Specifically, he argues that "Crossing along the nighted ferry" is a love poem, and that the theme of "It nods and curtseys and recovers" is the Freudian death wish. The lover who has hanged himself for love is really in love with death. He makes the case for this particularly well, and it is worth noting that even here, when he is most determined to be a New Critic, he is willing to be a Freudian critic as well if it serves the poem. This eclecticism, which he developed, and which kept him from being an unswerving adherent to any critical school, is early evidence of his unwillingness to let theory get in the way of a thorough apprehension of a poem. At his best he follows where the text leads--enriches his analysis with whatever special data he has to offer.

Without his New Critical training Jarrell's later essays (on Frost for example) would not have been possible. With only this background, they would not have been what they are. Richard Kostelanetz makes this point when he places Jarrell with Leslie Fiedler and Paul Goodman as among the most

interesting critics of the postwar period, precisely because they did not remain in the movements that spawned them, because they were "marginal members eccentric and productive enough to transcend their cronies' limitation and thus make an individual contribution. . ."14

Finally, Jarrell's choice of Housman as a subject for his thesis points forward to later preoccupations. Housman seems at first an odd choice for one who was later to write almost exclusively on poets after Eliot, but he was always full of allusions to Arnold and Hardy, and always a passionate partisan of Frost. It is obvious that in them and Housman, he found the sources of the tone which is peculiar to modern poetry. He remarks, for example, in this piece that in traditional English poetry roses grow on lovers' graves to show remembrance, but that "Housman puts the nettle there, for forgetfulness." He is primarily attracted to Housman's cast of mind, which is more early modern than late Victorian. For Housman "death is better than life, nothing better than anything,"15 a belief which is at least latent in Arnold, Frost and Hardy, and congenial to Jarrell.

### Critic of Critics

"Texts from Housman" is the only essay of Jarrell's that can legitimately be said to be almost wholly academic in conception and execution, the last in which the writing is

sometimes simply bad. In the same year, 1939, he contributed a pair of reviews to Kenyon Review which have many more of the earmarks of the style Jarrell was to develop throughout the decade of the forties. By the following year he was beginning to be asked to write for magazines outside the Kenyon--Southern Review circle. Since three of these first reviews are of other critics, and a fourth piece is a polemic on the nature of poetry reviewing, they conveniently provide a reasonably clear idea of where Jarrell stood in regard to the critics of the generation preceding his and suggest his emerging attitudes concerning the functions of literary criticism and the sort of criticism he himself might consider attempting.

The first thing that is apparent about these three reviews of Winters' Maule's Curse, Macneice's Modern Poetry, and Tate's Reason in Madness is that Jarrell's style seems to have improved by a quantum leap. This is probably due to the fact that he is here writing about a subject that really interests him in a form he enjoys. He calls Maule's Curse "the best book on American literature I ever read," and is obviously a partisan of his friend Tate, though in fundamental disagreement with him. He disliked the MacNeice book sufficiently to be enthusiastic about attacking it, and wrote the polemic because he wanted to.<sup>16</sup> It was not assigned.

In these pieces we begin to see quite clearly what criticism should be as far as Jarrell is concerned. First, a

critic should be able to write. He praises Tate for his style and attacks MacNeice for his. This necessarily means that the critic ought to have an individual voice. This again is a flaw in MacNeice, who possesses

The straightforward, general elevating tone, varied judiciously with jokes and pieces of slang, the reassuringly commonplace analogies, the frequent little guidebook summaries, the general air of more or less talking down, of good humoredly and sensibly overlooking any unprofitable or embarrassing complications. . . .<sup>17</sup>

All of these don'ts, imply some dos. The critic should be his own man, should have both range and depth of knowledge. The worst things he can be are the things MacNeice is--"amateurish and negligible," guilty of provincialism, lacking in emotion, simply uninformed about his subject--"how much . . . he has forgotten or simply never learned," "a reader given to exaggeration might in an excess of enthusiasm call his knowledge of American poetry sketchy." All of this adds up to a "tepid journalistic reasonableness."<sup>18</sup> MacNeice is finally contrasted with his betters--Empson, Tate, and Blackmur--whom Jarrell calls "real critics." And he describes modern criticism as "a jungle through which one wanders, with its misshapen and extravagant and cannibalistic growths, bent double with fruit and tentacles, disquieting with their rank eccentric life."<sup>19</sup> Next to these MacNeice is a houseplant.

We see here the beginnings of a pantheon of critics which is extended in "Contemporary Poetry Criticism" to include Eliot, Ransom, Richards, Zabel, Brooks, Warren and

Delmore Schwartz. This pantheon, once elected in the late thirties, remained intact. In the early fifties Jarrell was teaching a course in Contemporary Criticism which relied on much the same group. Warren, Zabel, and Schwartz were dropped, Burke and Edmund Wilson added--the rest remained the same.

If a critic ought to be, as we have seen, intelligent and possess a style, he ought also to be objective, to be open to the matter he surveys, free and undogmatic. On these grounds, Jarrell objects in varying degrees to all three critics he reviews. They each have a program of their own which matters more to them than their material. This is for Jarrell critical heresy. It distorts judgment and influences, unfairly, taste which ought to be purely aesthetic.

MacNeice is again the chief offender because his prejudice is so narrow and obvious that he seems to be writing "not so much history as propaganda." Even worse, the propaganda centers around Auden as "one far off divine event to which the whole creation moves."<sup>20</sup> We shall see shortly that Jarrell's own struggle to come to terms with the influence of Auden about this time was such that he would be particularly unsympathetic to MacNeice's attempts at canonization. But the existence of any personal program which distorts judgment annoys Jarrell. He objects to Tate and Winters in almost identical terms because their criticism grows out of a morality, not an aesthetic. Both deplore the

modern world. Of Tate and his followers Jarrell says that "it has been later than they think for four hundred years."<sup>21</sup> Of Winters he says, "he writes as if the last three hundred years had occurred, but not to him."<sup>22</sup> In a writer noted for fecundity of wit, it is nice to discover this parsimonious recycling of a jest which also demonstrates the identical nature of Jarrell's objection to both men. They are attempting to impose morality on art, to judge works by their conformity to the critic's view of the world.

It is not surprising to find that, of the many things these men object to in the modern world, the one Jarrell singles out is science. He points out that Tate deplores those who would discard art, religion and philosophy, but that he himself is "eager to sacrifice the scientific, mathematical and technical half of European culture." He makes a similar point when he suggests that Maule's Curse as a history of ideas "neglecting both science and philosophy, is almost wholly theology."<sup>23</sup> Thus, both Tate and Winters have taken a biased, partial view of the world that values the past, religion, art and despises the present, materialism, science, and have inflated this view until it has become the only Truth. For Tate, his view is reason in the midst of madness, for Winters "any great deviation from his own standards of order and significance"<sup>24</sup> is madness. Jarrell says that Tate "can believe so much more and ignore so much more than other people." To Winters, "there are few questions unanswered and none unanswerable."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, these critics are damned for their prejudice, dogmatism and narrowness. If this were all there were to them they would be wholly negative examples, what a critic should never be. However, both are redeemed by their specific judgments, which contrast markedly with their larger philosophical pronouncements. Thus Winters' lapses are almost excused because they have "helped produce the extraordinary criticism" of Maule's Curse. Jarrell was later to make much the same argument about Graves and Auden and other poets--that they believed in unbelievable things, but were not to be scorned since those beliefs made the poetry possible. There is even something endearing in such idiosyncrasy, so Jarrell says that "one gets a perverse pleasure from a confirmed old reactionary like Mr. Tate, who sticks to his opinions for all the worst reasons, instead of deserting them for all the best."

Chiefly, however, Jarrell thinks the doctrine behind such criticism is worthless and should be ignored if possible. What is important in Winters is "thoroughness, clarity and real penetration." Further,

He puts into exact and lucid shape judgments informed by an unusual sensitivity, a rigorous intelligence, and a dismayingly thorough knowledge. He reads every writer as if he had never been read before: he is a critical instrument completely uninfluenced by any fear of ridicule or consideration of expediency.<sup>26</sup>

Here, then, are the virtues of the ideal critic--knowledge, thoroughness, clarity, impartiality, individuality, style,

objectivity, freshness of reaction, courage, freedom from dogma, and from past interpretations and personal bias.

In addition to these virtues, several of which he also finds in Tate, he clearly likes Tate's method, "the attack," and approves Tate's choice of victims "scholarship--PMLA variety" and critics on whom he is "sound, brilliant and crushing." Tate also altogether avoids "the filial relaxation of standards that is our customary tribute to the distinguishable dead."

These reviews suggest, if nothing else, that Jarrell's ideas on criticism were reasonably clear by 1940, and that he approved the methods of the New Critics without embracing the conservative philosophy of Eliot, Tate and others. Tate has said that Jarrell "would have none of the fugitive tradition: from the beginning he was his own man" (RJ:231). And Peter Taylor describes him at both Vanderbilt and Kenyon as Ransom's "loyal opposition" (RJ:244).

The fourth of these pieces on the subject of criticism was Jarrell's first important non-review. This article, "Contemporary Poetry Criticism," from The New Republic of July 21, 1941 was his first polemic, and as such the forerunner of all the later ones, from "The Age of Criticism" to "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket." It is like them in that it contains as much rhetorical flourish as analysis, and ranges in tone from ironic to aggrieved, from peremptory to engaging. It is in some ways remarkably prescient since at the



time it appeared Jarrell had written only five poetry reviews, all in the space of a year. He had, of course, been reading them for years but the piece suggests more than a student's understanding of book reviewing. It must, at least, have seemed authoritative enough for the editors of The New Republic to print it.

Jarrell described his intentions to his mentor at the magazine, Edmund Wilson, in May 1941.

I've started with a part on ordinary commercial criticism, its functions and the conditions its produced under. I try to show that anything but bad or mediocre criticism (in the ordinary commercial magazines and newspapers) is commercially impossible because of the nature of the publishers' advertisers and public's demands. Do you think that's a good idea? Somebody here said it was true but too obvious; that sensible people know that. Do you think that? I thought it needed saying.

Then I'm going to talk about scholarly criticism, and the rest is about real criticism.<sup>27</sup>

In carrying out this plan Jarrell begins with an ironic discussion of the poem in the modern world as an economic object, "an unimportant commodity for which there is a weak and limited demand." He goes on to describe the buyers of this commodity as persons who have "inherited from another age both their respect for and taste in poetry." They "are afraid that if one is questioned the other will disappear." He continues the economic comedy by defining a magazine as "a device for inducing people to read advertisements" and

reasons that to those who make the publishing and editing decisions criticism is simply a "subspecies of advertising." This leads to reviewers who are not experts on poetry, "not expert on any subject except Reviews." The reviewer is expected to be a common man who tells the public "what it is going to think of the book." If the reviewer refuses this position, "tries to elevate the public taste, writes real criticism," he will be "condemned for arbitrary dogmatism." We shall see that Jarrell's early experiences as a poetry reviewer led directly to this conclusion. Here he proves his point by offering a critical chamber of horrors--reviewers who have said that "Marianne Moore's poetry isn't poetry at all," that their six year old can "write better poetry than Auden." He concludes by continuing the economic metaphor and describing such reviewers as "replaceable parts of the machine."<sup>28</sup>

Jarrell next goes to work on scholars who are to past poetry what reviewers are to contemporary poetry. He describes most scholarship as "negligible as scholarship and worthless as criticism." It is "pseudo-science," interested in "amassing a gigantic rubbish-heap of facts," a practice which is "absurd in theory and disastrous in practice."<sup>29</sup>

To both of these types of literary drone ("of scholars, as of bees, the criterion is industry"), Jarrell contrasts the "real critic" who uses neither standardized taste nor pseudo-science, but "trained and scrupulous taste." He

attributes to critics, who are really at war with scholars, the revision in taste of the last twenty-five years--the reevaluation of Donne, Webster, Herbert, Marvell, Hopkins, Dryden, Pope, and others. He goes on to say that there was never another age that produced "so much extraordinarily good criticism of poetry," and describes previous criticism as "morals or biography or information--anything but criticism." He concludes this section of his essay by erecting the pantheon of chiefly New Critics already cited and admitting that their work is difficult, little read, almost criticism for critics. He further admits that such criticism defeats its own desire for readers by its "complication of surface, its self-conscious employment of so much knowledge" and by the fact that the majority of its practitioners "can only be called--who call themselves--reactionary."<sup>30</sup>

Jarrell ends with a peroration in which he remarks, not surprisingly after the Winters and Tate essays, that "neglecting criticism because we are annoyed at the critic's politics (or tone or style or anything else) is a fool's game." But he does prescribe for the critics he admires "less concern with poets, periods, society (big-scale extensive criticism) and more concern with the poems themselves." More specifically, he hopes for "a few hundred or thousand detailed critical analyses, done by first-rate critics of important English poems."<sup>31</sup> He ends by a return to the economic theme, pointing out that this prescription will only

be filled if people buy books of such criticism, print magazines full of them, give such critics fellowships and university jobs.

Before considering some of the ironies involved in this piece in light of subsequent history, two supplementary points may be made by examining responses to the essay. Edmund Wilson apparently wrote to say that he thought Jarrell had been too one-sided in discussing the critics he admired, had praised them too lavishly. Jarrell agreed, but defended himself by saying he was writing "for a certain audience and a certain purpose, and if I'd talked at length about all their faults it would have helped make them more unread than they are." In other words, as a polemicist he was not above a bit of tactical hyperbole. In his letter to Wilson, he went on to be more candid than he had been in the article.

I think that extensively they're misguided or crazy ( particularly so about anything scientific, economic, social, and so on) but that intensively they're (2 or 3 of them) the best who have existed. But I guess you can tell pretty well what I think about politics, economics, and so on--and it's just the opposite of what they think.<sup>32</sup>

That is about as clear a statement of disagreement with the Fugitives' premises as we could hope for. It might be possible to be suspicious that Jarrell is simply considering his correspondents' views and behaving as a good literary politician, if later remarks (his "radical youth"), and the evidence of the war poems didn't exist to convince us of his sincerity.

A more public reaction to "Contemporary Poetry Criticism" came in the form of a letter to the editors of The New Republic, by David Daiches. Daiches objected to Jarrell's indictment of scholars and claimed that Eliot and the New Critics were only following scholars like Grierson, that "The critical performances shown, for example by Cleanth Brooks . . . were commonplace at British universities . . . between 1920 and 1940."<sup>33</sup>

Jarrell replied enthusiastically, pointing out that Daiches' proof of his assertion relied on the evidence of editions of the works of previously neglected poets. Jarrell said this only proved that there was no poet

scholars have not tried valiantly to resurrect, to overrate. . . . To select a very small part of this indiscriminate incoherent mass of advocacy, and then to call that a critical change, is fantastic. Scholarship is like the man [Leacock's] who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions; no matter which way criticism goes, Mr. Daiches can say that it is merely following scholarship.

Finally Jarrell included a remark on the British scholars Daiches rated so highly. "I have not had the good fortune of hearing what they say, but I have had the bad fortune of reading what they write." His conclusion was that Daiches was simply playing "the old game of keeping the status quo as nearly as possible intact, by insisting that the radicals' advances are only what the old guard wanted all the time . . ."<sup>34</sup>

This look at Jarrell's first pieces as a critic, particularly those on criticism itself, makes appropriate some remarks on the direction his own work was shortly to take. His championing of intensive reading of poems, and his call for thousands of them, suggest that he might have gone on to become just such a critic, and settled down to write dozens of Empsonian pieces full of difficult analyses for an audience of other critics. He did not. A number of explanations suggest themselves. The first has already been hinted at. Jarrell's first pieces were written for the journals of the circle from which he emerged. He was writing for a select group of friends. When he began to publish in Partisan Review, The New Republic and The Nation in 1940, he had the heady experience of being praised by Edmund Wilson, attacked by Malcolm Cowley. He was no longer the "enfant terrible" of Mr. Ransom's poetry class or even Kenyon College, but of American poetry criticism. But this is to stress the negative side. It also meant that his views, his taste reached a much wider audience and that was Jarrell's perennial goal as poet, teacher, lecturer, critic. If he abandoned to some extent the kind of minority close reading he advocated in "Contemporary Poetry Criticism," it was because he was less interested in being a critic than in being a proselytizer, a proselytozer, and evangelist for poetry. He wanted poetry to reach an ever-wider audience, and he could contribute to that happening more successfully

by writing for The Nation than for the Kenyon Review, by expanding his technique from narrowly New Critical to an increasingly eclectic use of biography, psychology, any tool useful to an examination of the text, and by perfecting a style that was graceful, devoid of technical jargon, accessible to the average reader.

Furthermore the circumstances of criticism changed dramatically in the ten years after his wish, in "Contemporary Poetry Criticism," that 'real' critics have more opportunity to publish books, obtain university jobs, found critical journals. As a lover of fairy tales Jarrell must have appreciated the perfect irony of what followed. He wished for a pudding, found it affixed to the end of his nose, and spent the rest of his life as a critic trying to wish it back off again.

In the years after World War II, there occurred the well-known explosion of academic and critical writing. The critics of the thirties, each one going his own idiosyncratic way, spawned schools of criticism which became institutionalized and specialized. One was no longer a member of a round table united against barbarism;--one was a member of a sect contending against other sects--a New Critic or Freudian critic or archetypal critic or stylistic critic. Therefore it is not surprising to find him saying with dismay by 1952 that "new critic is but old scholar writ large" (PA:82). What he chose to be was what he'd always admired in other

critics, an individual. He said that of all the critics writing between 1912 and 1922 in Poetry magazine, Pound stood out. And, if some of Pound's specific judgments struck him as simply bizarre, as did some of Winters' or Tate's or Arnold's, at least they were his own courageous, crazy opinions, not those of a committee or Poundian critics.

Thus, Jarrell's temperament, his intentions and opportunities as a critic, and trends in the practice of criticism in America which were apparent even as he began writing all combined to influence him to engage in a variety of criticism substantially different from that of the conventional academic or professional critics of his time. We shall see what resulted in the following chapters.



## NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>All references to the following works by Randall Jarrell, and one about him, will be to the editions indicated, and will be cited parenthetically in the text by means of appropriate abbreviations. This first citation would, thus, become (TB.66).

By Jarrell.

(PA) Poetry and the Age (New York. Knopf, 1953).

(PI) Pictures from an Institution (New York: Knopf, 1954).

(SH) A Sad Heart at the Supermarket (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

(TB) The Third Book of Criticism (New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

(CP) The Complete Poems (New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

About Jarrell.

(RJ) Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor and Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell. 1914-1965 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967).

In addition, virtually all of the previously uncollected magazine articles by Jarrell cited below as well as the unpublished "Auden. Poems to Shield" are scheduled to appear in a final forthcoming collection, Kipling, Auden and Co.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Jarrell, "Faust and Randall Jarrell," in Goethe's Faust: Part One, trans. Randall Jarrell (New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 281.

<sup>3</sup>This list of early reading is compiled from a number of sources, notably "The Lost World," the unpublished lecture on libraries, and letters cited below.

<sup>4</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Edmund Wilson, Feb. 1941. This and all subsequent Jarrell letters are unpublished, and drawn from the collection of Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>5</sup>From an unpublished lecture on libraries in the collection of Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>6</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Shakespeare Versus Ibsen," Hume-Fogg Echo, Mar. 1930, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Edmund Wilson, Oct. 1941.

- <sup>8</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Cleanth Brooks, Aug. 1935.
- <sup>9</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Ten Books," Southern Review I (Autumn 1935), 397, 398.
- <sup>10</sup>Jarrell, "Ten," p. 403.
- <sup>11</sup>Jarrell, "Ten," pp. 410, 405, 400.
- <sup>12</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Texts from Housman," Kenyon Review, 1 (Summer 1939), 261.
- <sup>13</sup>Jarrell, "Texts," pp. 262-63, 267.
- <sup>14</sup>Richard Kostelanetz, The End of Intelligent Writing (New York. Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1974), p. 24.
- <sup>15</sup>Jarrell, "Texts," p. 269.
- <sup>16</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Morality of Mr. Winters," Kenyon Review, 1 (Spring 1939), 214.
- <sup>17</sup>Randall Jarrell, "From That Island," Kenyon Review, 1 (Autumn 1939), 468.
- <sup>18</sup>Jarrell, "Island," pp. 469-71.
- <sup>19</sup>Jarrell, "Island," p. 471.
- <sup>20</sup>Jarrell, "Island," p. 470.
- <sup>21</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Tate Versus History," The Nation, 153 (July 26, 1941), 75. All subsequent Tate references are to this same one-page article.
- <sup>22</sup>Jarrell, "Morality," p. 213.
- <sup>23</sup>Jarrell, "Morality," p. 212.
- <sup>24</sup>Jarrell, "Morality," p. 214.
- <sup>25</sup>Jarrell, "Morality," p. 213.
- <sup>26</sup>Jarrell, "Morality," p. 214.
- <sup>27</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Edmund Wilson, May 1941.
- <sup>28</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Contemporary Poetry Criticism," The New Republic, 105 (July 21, 1941), 88.
- <sup>29</sup>Jarrell, "Contemporary," p. 88.

<sup>30</sup>Jarrell, "Contemporary," p. 89.

<sup>31</sup>Jarrell, "Contemporary," pp. 89-90.

<sup>32</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Edmund Wilson, Apr. 1942.

<sup>33</sup>David Daiches, "Critical Scholars," Letter, The New Republic, 105 (Apr. 18, 1941), 223.

<sup>34</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Critical Scholars," Letter, The New Republic, 105 (Oct. 6, 1941), 439.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ASSASSIN

It's no use turning nasty  
 It's no use turning good  
 You're what you are and nothing you do  
 Will get you out of the wood  
 Out of a world that has had its day.

W.H. Auden

John Berryman, in an essay on the occasion of Jarrell's death, recalled that as a young man he was a "terror as a reviewer," that he was "immensely cruel," that "he'd take a book of poems and squeeze, like that, twist. . . ." (RJ.16). Robert Lowell, in a similar eulogy, said that Jarrell "had a deadly hand for killing what he despised" and speaks of "the flashing reviews he wrote in his twenties" as being full of "witticism and barbs," as being "tone-deaf to the amenities and dishonesties that make human relations tolerable," and quoted a remark that Jarrell's first reviews were "symbolic murders" (RJ:103-4).

A consideration of the first three collections of Jarrell's criticism makes these remarks seem simply untrue. We see in those books that Jarrell trusted his own taste, that he could turn a phrase maliciously, could be witty and dispatch the mediocre or truly awful with swiftness and ease, but the sadistic killer Lowell and Berryman describe seems a product of poetic hyperbole. However, if one goes through

the yellowing magazines in the stacks, one sees the description is accurate. The early Jarrell was an assassin and one armed with mace or broadsword, not with the later rapier. This is an interesting revelation, and the first question that arises concerns his reasons for this tactic.

Youthful high spirits, which may be a kinder way of describing "hubris," may explain a good deal. By 1940, Jarrell was beginning to publish his own poetry, had been teaching for some time, had begun to evolve a prose style, had amassed a sizeable amount of information, and organized a view of poetry. This adds up to a confidence in his own powers and a conviction in the rightness of his judgments, the accuracy of his own taste. He felt prepared to emerge on the national literary scene, and when the opportunity came, when Rahv and Wilson and others solicited reviews, he was not shy about saying what he thought. This was coupled with the fact that most of the books he was given to review were actually undistinguished. A list of the authors he does in, in these early reviews, is hardly a who's who of modern verse.

Furthermore, Jarrell had become convinced that modernism had come to an end, that something new was necessary and inevitable. When he met with recycled Auden or Eliot or Yeats--or Swinburne or Keats--it annoyed him more than it might if he hadn't evolved his theory, and he said so.

Finally, he disliked intensely the conventional politeness of poetry reviewing in popular magazines that treated "best and worst . . . with the same winning and vacant smile." He later made fun of this attitude in Pictures when he said that "if you cannot discriminate between good and bad yourself, it cannot help seeming somewhat poor spirited and arbitrary of others to do so" (PI:89). By temperament and conviction he was prepared to treat the terrible with unstinting harshness. With Hamlet he probably would have said "I must be cruel only to be kind," not to the individual poets he attacked, but to poetry itself.

This is not to endorse the view held by Berryman and others that he didn't know what he was doing; that it "didn't occur to him that . . . there was a human being also being squeezed," that he "didn't know he was being cruel" (RJ:16). Ransom's view is surely closer to the truth, when he says that Jarrell "learned to use his powers properly, like a good magistrate, becoming always gentler and less aggressive," (RJ:155). This is suggested by the fact that he included none of the early savage reviews and relatively few of the tougher later ones in the collections of criticism he supervised. He deliberately chose, ten years later, to emphasize his appreciations and eliminate or play down his assassinations. By the time he was writing regularly for The Nation, after the war, he had already begun this process. It was aided by the fact that, by then, he could choose what he

would review. But even then, when he took on a book he didn't like, he had changed. In the early reviews he would devote whole reviews, three or four columns long, to a prolonged massacre. Later, if he had to destroy, he would do so quickly, in a little paragraph, and move on to happier work. He became less avenging angel and more responsible husbandman nurturing those plants worth saving and uprooting the weeds as swiftly and painlessly as possible. Furthermore, though the style in which they were written may seem unnecessarily violent, these early reviews were successful in pragmatic terms. They got Jarrell noticed immediately. They were shocking, but impossible to ignore. As we have seen, Berryman and Lowell remembered them twenty-five years later though they were unavailable in book form. And there seems to have been a kind of generational split regarding them. Older men seem to have felt they were the ravings of an upstart, lacking in gentility. For Jarrell's contemporaries, they seem to have been like a fresh wind sweeping away the cant cliches of the worn out generation whose places they hoped to usurp. Perhaps someone like the young Jarrell is inevitable in each generation. He would probably have justified the harshness of these early reviews by contending, as he did in his review of MacNeice, that "'progress,' in poetry at least, comes not so much from digesting the last age as from rejecting it altogether (or, rather, from eating a little and leaving a lot)."<sup>1</sup>

A final general remark about these early, unkind, attention-attracting reviews is required before we go on to examine some specific examples: that is that their impact and influence in establishing a reputation for Jarrell was out of all proportion to their number. Between 1940, when Jarrell first published in a popular magazine, and 1945, when he returned from the war, he published fifteen reviews or essays. Of these, two, on Tate's criticism and on poetry reviewing, having already been discussed. Two more on Auden will be treated in a chapter on that poet. Two more, highly favorable discussions of Yeats and Moore, will be examined in the next chapter. One essay, "The End of the Line," was a theoretical piece on the meaning of modernism. It will be discussed in Chapter Four. Finally there was a review of Kafka's Amerika and a review of a New Directions anthology which had no direction. Jarrell dismissed it as a "reviewer's nightmare," saying "it's enough punishment to read it all, without writing about it too."<sup>2</sup>

This leaves only six unfavorable poetry reviews in four years. Of these, five were reviews of as few as two and as many as eleven new books of poetry. The first of these appeared in Partisan Review in April of 1940. Then, between December of that year and September of 1941, came the other four, three in The New Republic, the fourth in The Nation, establishing the format of the "Verse Chronicle" Jarrell was to use as that magazine's poetry editor after the war. Only



one further unfavorable review remains, an extended denunciation of MacLeish's The Fall of the City, which appeared in the Sewanee Review in 1943. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of these six eye-catching reviews.

Since most of the books discussed in these reviews seemed bad to Jarrell, the most obvious way to organize a discussion of them is probably in terms of faults. This has the advantage of suggesting, by implication, the virtues Jarrell felt poetry should possess, and which these books lacked. A few titles of these reviews suggest Jarrell's prevailing attitude: "Poetry in a Dry Season," "A Job Lot of Poetry," "The Rhetoricians."

### The Inept

The first sort of writer Jarrell dealt with was the one ruined by utter ineptitude. These he treated with either dismissive tolerance or awed disbelief. These poets are beyond helping. For instance, there is a man who has written a song for every North American bird. Jarrell says, "I'm no ornithologist, but there can't be any more of the damn things." He admits the author's tone of amiable, unpretentious tolerance has won his heart, which he can't say of the other poets he's reviewing. "But then, Mr. Evans is no poet." Similarly, he dismisses a batch of sonnets as being "All Italian, all regular, and all bad." They are meaningless and useless. This may be a bit hard, but is quick and

surgical. He is even harder on ineptitude that presumably ought to know better. Thus, he describes America Was Promises as "a brilliant and malicious parody of MacLeish's public speaking period." This would not be damning if the book itself weren't by MacLeish. Jarrell pretends to disbelieve it, says it must be an elaborate hoax, that no serious poet could write like this. The point is obvious. MacLeish, like Evans, is "no poet." The book is accused of "sentimental solemnity," of trying to speak "For Man," with "accusation, exhortation, condemnation," and with "innocuous generality."<sup>3</sup> For Jarrell, then, poetry should do the opposite of all these things. Finally, among the poets Jarrell considers simply inept, is Joyce Kilmer. He says that some outside stimulus is probably needed to cause one to read Kilmer's collected works and "a second World War is of the right order of magnitude."<sup>4</sup>

### The Imitators

The next category of poetry Jarrell damns overlaps the simply inept. It is imitative verse which often announces itself by being so unoriginal as to appropriate its effects from other more competent poets. At least half of the books reviewed during this period fall into this category, which Jarrell takes to be a demonstration of the correctness of his theory that modernism was in 1940 a used up, worn out, poetic dead end. However, before poets imitating

the great moderns, we encounter a class that might best be termed fossils. They imitate betters long dead.

Reuel Denny for instance is "wonderfully academic" and provides Jarrell an opportunity to do in not only Denny but his mentor. This poet is "what everyone has been dreading, a poet to take Robert Hillyer's place (going on the safe assumption that Mr. Hillyer is dead)."<sup>5</sup> Leonard Bacon and Witter Bynner are late Victorians lost in time. They are "traditional in the sense that an appendix is traditional;" they are "not yet up to" modernism. Its demise (again, Jarrell's chief theoretical article of faith) "is for them something in a remote Wellsian future." To their triumphs one can only say: "I have seen it before." They write formal verse, but it is only filling "shining little jelly-molds" with "quaking and formless gelatin." They "have not learned that the forms were made for man, and not man for the forms."<sup>6</sup>

These two objections often go together in Jarrell's criticism. The writer who follows outmoded models becomes the captive of his forms; an error in aesthetic judgment has technical consequences. Jarrell considers a too great enchantment with form and technique deadly. As much as he loves literature, it must be a means to a living end or it dies. In reviewing the poetry of Marya Zaturenska he returns to this theme. He imagines her appalled by modern life and turning to the pastoral. Unfortunately the "repose and

order" of this form settles over her "feverish spirit like a wet blanket." She ends "like the salt-mill at the bottom of the ocean, grinding out pastorals." She is "obsessed with the trimmings" not the substance of pastoral and so produces the "stalest, romantic diction." She is "regrettably literary," "her tableaux are less vivant than Tussaud."<sup>7</sup>

The same literariness can also endanger those who are not fossils, but are trying to be extremely up-to-date. Horace Gregory, for example, tries in Jarrell's view to follow Crane's dictum that poetry "assimilate the machine." But, as pastoral trappings do not guarantee a pastoral, so "the modernity of its terms does not guarantee the truth or even the modernity of an insight." Gregory's models are Eliot, Joyce, Cummings, Crane, but the technique of irony, and tone of disillusionment ill conceal the "embarrassingly romantic and sentimental" core of the book. The flaw once again is derivativeness. Gregory's radicalism is "something the age furnished him just as it did his irony or his prosody."<sup>8</sup> Again, form is organically linked to the poet's intelligence and integrity. Similarly, in Raymond Holden who writes Millay or Wylie poems, "the forms are traditional in the deadest sense of the word; often one can hardly pay attention to the poem for staring at the terrible I AM A SONNET writ large on every feature."<sup>9</sup>

Other imitators are Sydney Salt, Calder Joseph and Elder Olson who writes "in dozens of the most extravagantly

literary styles." These Jarrell details alluding to Yeats, Donne, MacLeish, Eliot, Hopkins, Browning, Shakespeare, Aiken, Baudelaire echoes in both diction and structure. Again, "inveterate literariness that vitiates everything it touches" is the difficulty. Olson is trying to be modern, but isn't at home in the guise. "He belongs to a simpler age; whenever I think of him, it is with a sword-cane, a green beard and an opera cloak, applauding passionately the first performance of Hernani."<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Patchen is the other extreme--too modern for words--Cummings without delicacy, originality, organization--full of self-indulgence and sentiment. His motto (a favorite device of Jarrell's) is "Too much," and when he hints, "pigs run in from miles around."<sup>11</sup>

Finally and harshest is a review of Frederic Prokosch, "a sort of decerebrate Auden." Jarrell, who fought his own struggle against the influence of Auden, tended to be unpleasant when he found it in others. Prokosch exploits Auden superficially, has "sublimated Auden's worst vices and Auden's easiest virtues into a method." Having done so, "the poems pour out like sausages." Jarrell's unkindest epithet in these reviews is "fashionable," and Prokosch is being fashionable in filling his poems with secondhand and second-rate effects which are "oh, so effective!"<sup>12</sup>

### The Diminished

Jarrell is much less harsh when considering established poets who have simply failed in direction or inspiration. They are more to be pitied than censured. In this class are Aiken, Pound and Auden. Aiken's sonnet sequence In the Human Heart is accused of being traditionally romantic. Jarrell admits he is a rhetorical magician but complains that the rhetoric itself has become the subject matter. He goes on to count Aiken's favorite words, acting like a malicious Josephine Miles. Love appears 50 times; flowers, 58; celestial objects, 50; time, 33 and so on. He says that the world is to Aiken a thesaurus and that "any similarity between the poems and reality is purely coincidental."<sup>13</sup> Aiken's failure is one of daring or originality.

Pound's failure, in Cantos LII-LXXI, seems to Jarrell to be a lack of self-control. His weakness in logic and organization have caught up with him, he has "deteriorated with the world" so that he now writes dull, prosaic poetry that is "day dream" solidified by way of "prejudice, whim, idiosyncrasy" into "universal imperative." Pound has succumbed to "fatty degeneration of the critical faculties," "the technical skill that went into some of the earlier Cantos has almost disappeared."<sup>14</sup> One feels Jarrell's compassion for a sad spectacle. He wrote in much the same tone years later in 1962 about Pound. He had been influenced by Pound's criticism and poetry as a young man, but never softened his view that the Cantos as a whole were a disordered hodgepodge.

The Dishonest

Jarrell's fourteen page demolition of MacLeish's The Fall of the City deserves separate attention and classification. Published in 1943, though written earlier, it was the last occasion on which Jarrell devoted an entire article to a negative judgment. Thereafter, some of his benignly or at least scientifically intended autopsies of poets he admired, as in the case of Auden, could be painful to witness because of the meticulous and zealous care expended in the effort. Such appreciation in depth could look distressingly like a "massive attack" as Karl Shapiro has noted, especially if the appreciator understood the victim's mind in Berryman's phrase "better than anyone ought to be allowed to understand anyone else's . . ." (RJ:10). But in most cases, as Lowell said, even the most destructive judgments had "a patient, intuitive, unworldly certainty" (RJ:104).

This is what makes the MacLeish piece so interesting. It is unusually hotblooded and bloodthirsty. It goes on too long and too horribly--a beating to death with a blunt object. It lacks the wit and deftness that were becoming a trademark. These lapses were probably less the result of the play's badness than of its popularity, which must have enraged Jarrell. Ineptitude was bad, but praised and rewarded and anthologized it became unendurable.

Jarrell was fond of making up mottos, and for this he might easily have used "Unreal City" for his chief objection

to The Fall of the City was on the grounds of its unreality. He describes it as taking place on a literal Aztec level and topical, allegorical level. He objects not only to the play's failure to relate these two levels but to the unreality of events in both. He calls the "empty romantic exoticism" of the play's rhetoric and trappings a way of avoiding the representation of "contemporary reality." The People behave with unremitting stupidity, "a Girl Scout Troop with hysterics." There is no dialogue in the play, only set speeches. And in describing those speeches, Jarrell is incapable of keeping a straight face. He adopts the tone of a Thurber or Perelman. "'Opinions and talk! Deliberative walks beneath the ivy and the creepers!' cries one, as men mad with terror will."<sup>15</sup>

Jarrell points out that the play also lacks conflict, action, characters, and motivation. He describes the plot and remarks that he's not "sure what this is the structure of; but it is certainly not the structure of a play." And as usual in Jarrell's analyses - failure of form proceeds from failure of conception, of philosophy. The Fall of the City is unreal, undramatic, incompetent dramaturgy because it is based on false premises. MacLeish's people cravenly fail to fight for liberty, unlike the Loyalists, the Chinese and "half the nations of Europe." They are "a figment or prejudice dressed in oratory but not vivified." Jarrell considers the premises which have "systematically discredited the



people of the democracy" to be quite simply lies, and he attempts to show how they create the flaws which ruin the play.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of the critique itself, however, is clumsy and repetitious. Jarrell is to some extent performing a patriotic rather than critical service and the work suffers because of the heat involved. Jarrell seems to have learned a lesson from the experience. Hereafter, he would adopt the policy described in his review of Auden's Age of Anxiety. Jarrell disliked that poem intensely, and said so at some length, believing himself justified because Auden was "one of the best poets on earth." If he weren't, a poor piece of work "would be worth neither our indignation nor dismay, but only a line or two of indifferent dismissal."<sup>17</sup> And this was to become the modus operandi of the assassin of the early forties when he returned after the war. Incompetence merited little attention unless it came from those with some potential.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

- <sup>1</sup>Jarrell, "Island," p. 469.
- <sup>2</sup>Randall Jarrell, "In All Directions," Partisan Review, 9 (July-Aug. 1942), 347.
- <sup>3</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Poetry in a Dry Season," Partisan Review, 7 (March-Apr. 1940), 164.
- <sup>4</sup>Randall Jarrell, "A Job Lot of Poetry," The New Republic, 103 (Nov. 11, 1940), 667.
- <sup>5</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 164.
- <sup>6</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Poets. Old, New and Aging," The New Republic, 103 (Dec. 9, 1940), 797.
- <sup>7</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Town Mouse, Country Mouse," The Nation, 153 (Sept. 20, 1941), 257.
- <sup>8</sup>Jarrell, "Town Mouse," pp. 257-58.
- <sup>9</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Rhetoricians," The New Republic, 104 (Feb. 17, 1941), 222.
- <sup>10</sup>Jarrell, "Job Lot," p. 668.
- <sup>11</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 165.
- <sup>12</sup>Jarrell, "Poets. Old, New," p. 800.
- <sup>13</sup>Jarrell, "Rhetoricians," p. 222.
- <sup>14</sup>Jarrell, "Poets. Old, New," pp. 799-800.
- <sup>15</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Fall of the City," Sewanee Review, 51 (April-June 1943), 269, 271, 274.
- <sup>16</sup>Jarrell, "Fall," pp. 278, 274, 275.
- <sup>17</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, 165 (Oct. 18, 1947), 424.

## CHAPTER THREE: CONSOLIDATION

I am grown so cowed by all the rebuke my original speculations have drawn upon me that I find myself more and more filling the part of a listener.

Arnold

In this chapter I want to draw attention to Jarrell's relations with Edmund Wilson, his first mentor outside the Fugitive circle, to discuss early reactions to Jarrell's first nationally published reviews, and finally conclude with a look at his few appreciative reviews of poets from before the war. These suggest his future direction.

Wilson

It was Jarrell's good fortune that, shortly after he began publishing in the Kenyon Review, Edmund Wilson, with his infallible eye for talent, returned briefly to The New Republic in an editorial capacity. He was there from October of 1940 through the spring of 1941. By September he was living on Cape Cod.<sup>1</sup> He must have offered Jarrell a reviewing assignment almost immediately since Jarrell's first piece for the magazine ran in December. The last of four reviews ran in July 1941. He never again published in The New Republic as a reviewer. This may have been, in part, due to his antagonizing Malcolm Cowley, who stayed on after

Jarrell's protector, Wilson, was gone. In any case, Wilson (along with Rahv at Partisan Review) was instrumental in promoting Jarrell at this early stage. Jarrell's long association with The Nation did not begin until his work had been showcased in The New Republic. Jarrell was aware of his debt to Wilson and suitably grateful.

In March, 1941 after three reviews for the magazine, Jarrell wrote to thank Wilson for publishing two poems as well. He said,

I was naturally very pleased and complimented at having you say that you were interested in what I write, and that I ought to take prose more seriously. I like writing it, and am learning to, more or less; I never wrote any until recently because nobody asked me to.

He goes on with becoming honesty, if not tact, considering he is communicating with a professional critic. "A poem doesn't exist till its written, but prose criticism is what you think or say anyway (mostly) so you don't have much tendency to write it all out, if you have no idea whether it will be used or not."<sup>2</sup>

Despite this somewhat negligent attitude, Jarrell did begin to take reviewing more seriously and two months later was writing a thank you letter because "I've been asked to do a good many articles and reviews, and I'm quite sure I wouldn't have been without The New Republic reviews you got me to write."<sup>3</sup> He also got advice from Wilson and in the process made some admissions which are interesting at this remove.

What you said in your last letter about repeating points in my reviews I had no difficulty in recognizing as the truth: I wrote the reviews pretty much as collections of fragments, and I'd made a joke which meant what another one had at the beginning of the review (two weeks before).<sup>4</sup>

It is pleasant to discover that the ubiquitous Wilson probably had an effect on Jarrell's eventual lucidity of style. It was not the only time he would take his young pupil to task. We don't know precisely what he said about Jarrell's reviews of Zaturenska and Gregory in September of 1941, but Jarrell answered that

the criticism is just; when I start talking about the virtues of so-so people my style collapses, I hardly know how to say the things I feel obliged to say--certainly saying them well or wittily is beyond me. I guess I'll have to practice--seriously, I've thought of doing that; being able to is practically a necessity for the Perfect Reviewer.<sup>5</sup>

Despite what I take to be an ironic side glance at Eliot's "Perfect Critic," it seems obvious that Jarrell was quite serious about his apprenticeship. It is amusing to hear him modestly describe writing well or wittily as beyond him, and revealing that he mentions the two attributes in the same breath, almost as synonyms.

In passing it might be noted that Wilson rendered one more service for which Jarrell was especially grateful. He indefatigably promoted Jarrell's poems. He printed some in The New Republic and recommended them to other magazines. In August 1941 Jarrell told Wilson the Atlantic Monthly was

using two of his poems, "so I thought I'd write and thank you for it."<sup>6</sup> He was thanking him for letters like this one to Cap Pearce in December 1940, ". . . why don't you run some of Jarrell's poetry in The New Yorker? His writing interests me more, I think, than that of any of the younger people. . . ." <sup>7</sup> Considering all this, it isn't hard to see that Jarrell was only half jesting when he sent Wilson a copy of his first book of poetry Blood for a Stranger with these words: "I started to write a touching inscription . . . to the One who drew me from the sea of anonymity and exposed me, all dripping, to the world--or at least to the readers of The New Republic. . . ." <sup>8</sup>

If it was pleasant to be published, tutored by Wilson, in demand as a critic and reviewer, this first touch of fame also brought with it controversy. Jarrell seems to have been genuinely concerned at first, but quickly amused and delighted--controversy having such an attractive way of turning into notoriety.

#### Reviewer Reviewed

Almost as soon as Jarrell began reviewing for The New Republic, in February and March 1941, he became a topic for discussion in its pages. It began when Frederic Prokosch wrote to protest Jarrell's review of his work. He described Jarrell as jaded, apprehensive, pretentious, arrogant, immature, amateurish, clever, entertaining, but deficient in

"reading power and critical education," and motivated by "the middle-class desire that poetry should be motivated by some lofty moral purpose, should improve and elevate, should be occupied with some deliberate program or other."<sup>9</sup> He ended by recommending that poets never be allowed to review other poets and promised he would never publish verse in America again.

Some of this may have been justified, but the screams of a victim are necessarily subjective. The following week saw the publication of a 1500-word article entitled "Poets as Reviewers" by Malcolm Cowley, one of the magazine's editors. It was a thinly disguised rebuttal to Jarrell's review of Aiken's In the Human Heart. Jarrell called attention to the peculiarity of the situation in a response a few weeks later. "There is something agreeably odd about reviewing a book for a magazine and having the review reviewed, as a typical crime, by one of the magazine's editors, I feel as if my decision had been overruled by the Supreme Court."<sup>10</sup>

Cowley's piece is peculiar in a number of respects. It did not dwell on Aiken's poetry but on his refusal to play "the literary game." Cowley's argument seemed to be that Aiken was a competent poet and a nice man whose latest book was reviewed very little and then unkindly by people like Jarrell who used it "as the occasion for a diatribe against rhetoric. . . ." Cowley digresses at this point to praise Jarrell as a talented poet, a brilliant writer, a witty

reviewer, and quotes some of his jibes as a "clue to the nature of Mr. Jarrell's book reviews: they are a form of art in which the technical skill and the attitude--the dandysm--of the reviewer are more important than his subject matter. Poetry enters them only as a target." Jarrell unkindly kills little poets with heavy weapons and misses large poets altogether by "using the duck gun on wooden decoys whittled out by himself, while the real bird flies away." The remainder of the review is Cowley's attempt to point out how wrong Jarrell is about Aiken. He concludes that anyone who doesn't respond to Aiken's music lacks "an ear for verse," is "an eye, an ego and an adding machine." He says that twenty years ago reviewers were amateurs with no knowledge of schools or "abstract laws of aesthetics, but at least they had enthusiasm. They liked what they were doing and what they were reading." He concluded that it was "Fear of helping a rival or hurting their own reputations" which made people like Jarrell depict all other poets as "cretins or zanies, hog-callers, copyists or rhetoricians."<sup>11</sup> Cowley failed to defend the Aiken poems very successfully, and his attack on Jarrell boiled down to an objection to his rhetoric, his tone. He wanted reviews which are kindly, in which wit is never malicious.

Surely Jarrell is one of the most enthusiastic reviewers who ever lived, but not by Cowley's definition. For him, a reviewer must like what he is reviewing in order to be



enthusiastic. Naturally, Jarrell offends when he is so obviously enthusiastic about reviewing poets he dislikes. However, the charges of self-serving, of a psychological inability to review anyone kindly are not in themselves kindly. They question Jarrell's honesty and integrity. They are a good deal more ad hominem than any of Jarrell's reviews had been.

It is interesting to observe Jarrell's reponse to all this. Before the Aiken piece even appeared, before Cowley's rebuttal, Jarrell had written in an early letter to Wilson that he had so far reviewed more criticism than poetry, liked doing it and hoped Wilson would

give me some such book as Delmore Schwartz's essays to review. I'd like awfully to have a good book to review, and be able to make some favorable judgments; the books I've reviewed have been so bad I'm afraid the readers will start thinking, "O, him. He doesn't like anything."<sup>12</sup>

In a slightly later letter to Wilson, Jarrell said that Nigel Dennis of The New Republic had told him about the time of the Cowley piece "that the next few correspondence columns would be fun for me to read, there'd be some letters for me and some against me." As we'll see, that's exactly what happened, and Jarrell's response was that the situation was a joke or would be "if it didn't show what most poetry-reviewing's like. I have to laugh unbelievably when I think of those little unfavorable reviews by a quite unknown reviewer making such a mess--it's completely absurd."<sup>13</sup>

Despite the bold front, I think it is possible to detect some tension here. In the same letter Jarrell says, "The books were bad, I said so, and I'm glad, is the way I feel." But he was a quite unknown reviewer and must have been somewhat troubled by all the excitement. He did not now think he had been wrong, would certainly not recant, but on the other hand did not want to become persona non grata. I can only assume that Wilson reassured him about the Cowley piece in terms similar to those he used in writing to Morton Zabel on March 15, 1941, when he said Cowley "performs prodigies of bumbling in the current The New Republic on Jarrell."<sup>14</sup> The correspondence section of March 10 must also have helped eliminate worry and enhance his amusement.

J.V. Healy wrote in the most exaggerated terms, damning Jarrell for having "not the slightest conception of poetry and the critical method." He too attacked Jarrell for objecting to Aiken's repetitious use of a few words. He pointed out that Dante, Wordsworth, Keats and Yeats all had favorite words, and concluded that Jarrell "despises and distrusts language that is brought to life." His own verse was "pretentiously metaphysical, devoid of concrete thought and imagination" and as a critic he implied "that poetry is without value, or else should be as valueless as his own verse."<sup>15</sup> The reader will note that this complaint is precisely opposite Prokosch's who objected to Jarrell's demand that poetry should have "some lofty moral purpose."

Other letters were less hysterical but equally amusing. One writer was grateful for Prokosch's offer to publish no more poetry in America, and wrote to ask if he'd "extend this offer to his novels." Rolfe Humphries also wrote to laugh at Prokosch, and to say he thought Jarrell good "and probably will, until he gets around to work on me." He urged the editors to ignore Prokosch's idea that poets not be allowed to review poets. Another wrote to call Jarrell arrogant, ignorant, full of Ph.D. verbiage, "mean and smartboy." Finally someone challenged Jarrell to clear his name "by writing one interesting review, with quotes, about a book that for some reason or other pleases him."<sup>16</sup> Curiously, this directive exactly describes Jarrell's method after the war. Practically all he did was write interesting reviews about books that pleased him, with quotes. This prophetic correspondent also pointed out that Aiken had little to kick about since he as a reviewer was also less than courtly when another poet was "fed to him." Jarrell himself referred to this fact six months later in a letter to Wilson. "I've been amused by the fact that, try whom he will, Cowley can't get favorable reviews of poetry, his pet lamb, Aiken, is unkindest of all, and dismissed MacNeice, Cummings, and John Peale Bishop in one Issue."<sup>17</sup>

Jarrell was shrewd enough to save his own reply for Malcolm Cowley. He pointed out that Louise Bogan had also objected to the same "ornamental and empty romanticism;"

said he had appreciated the music of the verse, quoted a few lines from his review to prove it, but said he could not share Cowley's belief that it was good poetry. He also punctured Cowley's pretense that he was attacking Poets as Reviewers instead of Jarrell personally and exclusively. "I doubt that my own reviews furnish a very good text for a sermon against poetry-reviewing; most reviewers would say hastily, 'the damn things aren't like mine.'" He demurely declined to be taken in by Cowley's "overestimation of my wit" which concealed the implication that he had been "dishonest enough to say unfavorable things for a chance to be witty." This Jarrell naturally denied. He ended by saying he thought "a good motto for critics might be what the Persians taught their children: to shoot the bow and speak the truth; but perhaps a better one would be Cordelia's love and be silent."<sup>18</sup> As he wrote to Wilson, this was intended to be "pure irony . . . and rather nasty under the surface." This response appeared three weeks after the Cowley article: from the context of the letter to Wilson cited above, it appears it was slated to run earlier, but would have appeared on the same page with all the denunciatory letters. Jarrell seems to have prevailed on Wilson to hold up its publication (or Wilson did it independently), because "coming after a letter like Healy's it would have looked awful, as if I were more or less apologizing, something I shouldn't even dream of, of course."<sup>19</sup>

The episode came to an end here with a reply by Cowley to Jarrell's reply to Cowley's rebuttal of Jarrell's review. Cowley said he stood by his view that Jarrell as reviewer acted as

jury, judge or executioner at the trial of twenty poets. As jury he acquitted two of them, Dylan Thomas and W.H. Auden. . . . As judge, he found mild virtues in three others. . . . As executioner he skillfully dispatched the fifteen remaining poets, covering their bodies with quicklime and strewing salt over their graves.<sup>20</sup>

This seems damning, but with thirty-five years hindsight, it is interesting to glance once more at the poets he "executed." Their names are William Evans, Florence Becker, Archibald MacLeish, Kenneth Patchen, Reuel Denny, Conrad Aiken, Raymond Holden, Sydney Salt, J. Calder Joseph, Joyce Kilmer, Leonard Bacon, Witter Bynner, Pound, Frederick Prokosch. Unless Jarrell literally drove stakes through these authors' hearts in the early 1940's, they have certainly had time to recover from his reviews. On a purely statistical basis, his record seems quite good--he spared Rukeyser, Graves, Auden, Thomas, Olson and dispatched the above (with the understanding that he admired early Pound and Aiken and a few of MacLeish's lyrics). How many of those judgments has the court of appeals of time overturned?

This constitutes Jarrell's experience as a famously unkind book reviewer before World War II. He appears to have emerged unchastened, but canner, committed to his own taste,

to improving as a reviewer without compromising. If he took any lesson from the experience it seems to have been the same one James Watson in The Double Helix drew from his first meeting with the aristocracy: "I would not be invited back if I acted like everyone else."<sup>21</sup>

### First Appreciations

At the same time that Jarrell's bloodthirstiness was being remarked, however, he began to be asked to write on subjects that allowed him to exercise his enthusiasm. Four appreciations, which inaugurate the form of his customary work after the war, round out the picture of his apprenticeship. Three were reviews: of Auden (which will be treated elsewhere), of Dylan Thomas and of Marianne Moore. The fourth was a longer article on Yeats for a memorial issue of the Southern Review, Winter 1941.

Jarrell calls Thomas very good and "more original, better organized and possessing more feeling for language than Hart Crane to whom he's been compared." Once more killing several with one blow, he says Thomas's poems mean less than Crane's, "but when you consider Crane's meanings, this is not altogether a disadvantage." Nevertheless, Jarrell would have preferred both sound and sense, and concludes that Thomas is an "idiot savant of language. . . . The outside of a first-rate poet."<sup>22</sup>

About Marianne Moore, Jarrell was less equivocal. His review of What are Years? from The Kenyon Review of Autumn, 1942, was the earliest he chose to include in Poetry and the Age, and the first outright appreciation he had been able to write. It is important as such since as Lowell said "eulogy was the glory of Randall's criticism" (RJ:104). Though rare at first, it was to become his most characteristic tone as he came to be able to choose his subjects. This piece sets the tone that was to become standard in several ways. It is brief, humble ("words fail me"), hyperbolic. It is full of quotations or allusions to Pound, Wordsworth, Mozart, Stevens, Lucian, stupid critics, Milton, James, Tolstoy. It employs one of Jarrell's favorite devices, the imbecilic remark directed at the writer which he proceeds to answer cleverly. Here, people say of Miss Moore's poems: "'They are so small.' Yes, they are as small as those animals which save the foolish heroes of fairy tales--" (PA:184). Miss Moore is commended for "restraint unparalleled in our time" which conceals a "natural, excessive and magnificent eccentric." Her poems have "form, concentration, emotion, observation, imagination. . . ." She makes "poetry out of everything and anything" in forms which have "the lacy mathematical extravagance of snowflakes." He likes her because she is rereadable, moral, humble, and because she triumphs over her limitations. He threatens at the outset to simply go through her book pointing. "This is Miss Moore's own method

of criticism" (PA:179). It was soon to be his own. In this piece, all of Jarrell's traits are displayed except appreciation by quotation. Surprisingly, he doesn't quote her once. With this review, his attack on MacLeish, and "The Development of Yeats's Sense of Reality," Jarrell concluded his prewar critical writing where he'd begun eight years before--in the southern, New Critical journals. The Yeats article appeared in a memorial issue alongside others by Mathiesson, Eliot, Tate, Blackmur, Ransom, Burke.

Jarrell chose to discuss the transformation of early Yeats into late Yeats. To do that Jarrell said it was necessary to "remember how Yeats lived and what he thought." Jarrell actually ignored the poetry in order "to give a sketch of what [Yeats] did and thought during the first half of his life."<sup>23</sup> This interest in social, cultural, biographical, psychological determinants of art is a heretical development in one schooled as a New Critic and is most reminiscent of Edmund Wilson.

Jarrell tells of Yeats's experience of growing up in a dual world--romantic, backward, magical, folkish, ideal Sligo and modern, scientific, materialistic London--how he loved the one and hated the other, and eventually through the creation of a private system, was able to integrate the real into the ideal world of his poetry. By doing so he fulfilled the "rigorously partial" early poetry which was "weak and shallow" and full of nostalgia for the past. By accepting



the modern world "as one phase of an inexorable historical cycle," Yeats was able to embrace the contemporary world and avoid the modern poet's "greatest weakness," "his rejection of the present, his inability to write about the life of his own times."<sup>24</sup> As so often in Jarrell, the hallmark of a poet's excellence is his ability to confront reality.

In the course of this article we also encounter a theme that runs through Jarrell's criticism of modern poetry. He finds Yeats divided between reality and idealization, himself and others, Irish and English, past and present. Jarrell viewed this division between us and them as a defining characteristic of modern verse. Jarrell found it consistently in Auden, Ransom, Lowell, Graves and others.

This article is also notable for one more instance of the intensive, formal, analytical side of Jarrell. We saw him counting words in the Aiken review discussed above, and he does it here in order to offer a comparison of early and late Yeats's diction. The lists are predictable but quite interesting. The most common words in early Yeats are dream, rose, heart, lonely, wandering, gentle, sorrow, sweet, mournful, holy and so on, in the later foul, passionate, ignorant, ignorance, malicious, abstract, crazy, lunatic, mad, bitter and so on.

All in all, this article provides a lucid introduction to Yeats's development. And Jarrell constructed it when Yeats was only three years dead, using little of the data we

now take for granted. For instance, Jarrell wrote to ask Edmund Wilson in October 1941 if Yeats ever said "anything about Pound's having helped change his style."<sup>25</sup> The deductive talent demonstrated in this article, its method of discovering the wellsprings of art in biography and psychology were to appear later, most notably in Jarrell's work on Auden and Graves. Also implied is an idea that we have seen before and will see again in Jarrell's work on Auden. It constitutes a kind of axiom or "given" in Jarrell's criticism. For him a change of style is only an outward manifestation, an accident which signals an essential change of mind or heart.

We have now followed Jarrell through the period of his apprenticeship and seen him trying out various critical stances, gathering the elements of his mature style. The years 1939-1942 were good ones in which to accomplish such a task. This was the period during which the critical work begun in the twenties, chiefly by critics in England, was brought to fruition by the American New Critics. Thus, there was a solid foundation for a young critic to build upon, but, at the same time, criticism was flexible and diverse. Moreover, this period must have seemed to an American a reasonable one in which to experiment, to make mistakes without penalty, since the structure of society, and of the world itself, was tentative. The Second World War was already under way in Europe and Asia, but had not yet involved

America. It was a kind of Indian summer. Little foresight was required in order to see that whatever happened, the world was destined for change. This conferred a peculiar kind of freedom. If the world was likely to change out of all recognition tomorrow, it would be absurd to be too cautious about what one said or wrote. After the war Jarrell chose to preserve little of the poetry or criticism he wrote before it began, but knowing it was about to begin probably allowed him to make those experiments which led to the construction of a mature style afterward.

In both poetry and criticism he had attracted notice as a promising newcomer possessing abundant raw materials and beginning to learn what to do with them. By the war's end he was ready to assume a prominent place in American literature. Suzanne Ferguson has said of his poetry that "Between 1942 and 1945 a series of impulses primarily aesthetic and worldly rather than personal, I believe, coalesced to set for once and ever the course of Jarrell's career."<sup>26</sup> The same could be said of his criticism.

Several elements missing from these early pieces were later to become prominent. With the exception of the review of Marianne Moore there are no unqualified appreciations in the early work, though this was to become his habitual form after the war. The reason may be, in part, that he mellowed or consciously chose to promote favorites rather than attack the untalented, but this change must also be seen as a

function of his increasing reputation. After the war he could choose his targets; before, many of his reviews were assigned.

Another hallmark of Jarrell's mature style is heavy quotation from the writer under discussion, as well as from favorite sages. There is much less of this in the early pieces. Indeed, one would probably be able to classify most Jarrell pieces as coming before or after 1945 simply by counting quotations. A special case of the above involves Goethe, Jarrell's favorite author after the war. Then he quotes him three times as often as any other author. Before the war he is quoted not at all.

Finally, there are few instances of lists in the early work--lists of traits, lists of best poems by an author and so on--and they too became characteristic after the war. Several of these traits--list making, copious quotation, eclecticism of technique, frank admission of affection--are devices most likely to be employed by one sure of his ground and impervious to attack. When they appear it is a sign that Jarrell is at ease as a critic, and his style also becomes more graceful, tactful, supple, precise.

Thus far we have noted Jarrell's debts as a critic to his near contemporaries and colleagues in the critical establishment--Tate, Wilson, Ransom, Burke, Empson, Blackmur among them. It is probably true that Eliot, Pound and Arnold were always important to him as well, but before the war he

was less secure as a poet than he was to become, and more inclined to write narrowly defined articles or reviews. With increasing success as a poet and increasing confidence in his prose style and the correctness of his judgments and their theoretical underpinnings, he expanded his idea of himself as a critic. Schooled in what was becoming academic criticism and in command of its tools, he was able after the war to begin to think of himself as something freer and less restricted--a poet-critic.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics. 1912-1972 (New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 355.

<sup>2</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Edmund Wilson, Jan. 1941.

<sup>3</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, May 1941.

<sup>4</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Feb. 1941.

<sup>5</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Oct. 1941.

<sup>6</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Aug. 1941.

<sup>7</sup>Wilson, Letters, p. 362.

<sup>8</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Oct. 1942.

<sup>9</sup>Frederic Prokosch, "Poet Asking for Trouble," Letter, The New Republic, 104 (Feb. 17, 1941), 212.

<sup>10</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Mr. Jarrell Replies." Letter, The New Republic, 104 (Mar. 17, 1941), 374.

<sup>11</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "Poets as Reviewers," The New Republic, 104 (Feb. 24, 1941), 281-82.

<sup>12</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Jan. 1941.

<sup>13</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Feb. 1941.

<sup>14</sup>Wilson, Letters, p. 370.

<sup>15</sup>J.V. Healy, Rolfe Humphries et al., "The Poets' Bloody Corner," Letters, The New Republic, 104 (Mar. 10, 1941), 343.

<sup>16</sup>Healy et al., pp. 343-44.

<sup>17</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Oct. 1941.

<sup>18</sup>Jarrell, "Replies," pp. 274-75.

<sup>19</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Feb. 1941.

<sup>20</sup>Malcolm Cowley, Rebuttal of "Mr. Jarrell Replies," The New Republic, 104 (Mar. 17, 1941), 275.

<sup>21</sup>James D. Watson, The Double Helix (New York. Signet Books, 1968), p. 90.

<sup>22</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 166.

<sup>23</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Development of Yeats's Sense of Reality," Southern Review, 7 (Winter 1941), 653-54.

<sup>24</sup>Jarrell, "Development," pp. 660, 665.

<sup>25</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Oct. 1941.

<sup>26</sup>Suzanne Ferguson, The Poetry of Randall Jarrell (Baton Rouge. LSU Press, 1971), p. 36.

PART TWO: HIATUS



## CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICS

Every attempt to exalt taste over knowledge has behind it the feeling that the possessor of taste is certainly a gentleman, while the possessor of knowledge may be only a pedant.

Frye

Jarrell's mentors, the New Critics, eschewed theory and filled their books with it. New Criticism was itself a theory and Jarrell knew it. He approved its method for some purposes but could not share many of the principles behind it, which he thought reactionary, neo-classical, "misguided or crazy." His own mature method was eclectic, but he wasn't without theory--interested only in the work of art--because it is impossible to be. Any taste or judgment or practice in poet or critic is founded on some set of principles. The writer has no choice about that. He may be highly conscious or barely conscious of his own system, world view, theory. If conscious, he may choose to make his agenda plain or keep it hidden, and he may make that decision on a number of grounds. If he makes his principles plain, it may be out of a desire to play fair with the reader or because he feels the theoretical system is as important or more important than the work under discussion. He may be the sort of critic who is interested in fitting individual works of art into such a system. On the other hand, if he has worked out his views consciously but keeps quiet about them, it may be because

he hopes to insinuate them slyly as he goes along or because he thinks they have only a private importance, that they make possible his practice but need not be articulated. For these last--and Jarrell is one of them--the object to be interpreted is more important than the tools which make interpretation possible.

Jarrell has sometimes been accused of being impressionistic, a term of derogation which seems to mean that one is without theory or principles. At its most extreme, impressionism would produce a kind of critical will-o-the-wisp who not only didn't know anything about art, but didn't know what he liked for very long at a time. Jarrell has been made liable to this criticism because he said readers ought to "be converted, and become as little children," ought to be open to new aesthetic experience, and because he was capable of changing his mind in print. He said a good critic was one who could say "he has not set up rigid standards to which a true work of art must conform, but that he has tried instead to let the many true works of art--his experience of them--set up the general expectations to which his criticism of art conforms. . . ." (SH:102). Believing all this, however, does not mean that one is without theory. The key word above is surely "rigid."

### Poets and Poetry

Early in his career Jarrell constructed a view of poetry, modern poetry in particular, which he held throughout

his life. Having done so, he did not feel compelled to reiterate it at length: the kind of criticism he practiced and thought should be practiced did not call for overt theorizing. To a sizeable extent his career is a product of this decision. He reserved his views of the purpose of art, and the function of criticism for other articles. Jarrell did, however, consciously evolve a systematic view of poetry, expressed it early in his career, and held to it. It is implicit in all the specific criticism of individual poems and poets he later wrote. In effect, Jarrell tried to have it both ways. He had a theory, but also tried to keep it from becoming so rigid that it impaired his ability to appreciate the unexpected beauty of a new creation. He was able to do this with success because his theoretical view of poetry was generous. In the remainder of this chapter, I want first to discuss Jarrell's general conception of the nature of poetry and the poet and then his view of the relationship of poetry to society in the last hundred and fifty years.

Anyone who has read even a few pages of Jarrell's criticism must be impressed by his sympathy for artists. He is clearly in love with these creatures. At the same time, he can be very stern with incompetents. This mixture of extreme attitudes may be more common in an artist who is also a critic than in the professional critic or scholar. Jarrell could forgive a great artist almost anything, feeling that

"a tree is justified in its fruit" (TB.64). But this could lead to the notion that a writer is no more valuable than his product, and may account for Jarrell's ability to be merciless as a reviewer, believing that the good is the enemy of the best (RJ:260).

Still, Jarrell was aware of how difficult it is to produce a work of art. Most often it is not a failure of inspiration or imagination or "magic" that provokes his ire because those things are not at the writers' command. If he attacks an artist it is for being technically deficient, because technique is supposed to be an acquirable ability, though we have seen that Jarrell often spoke as if technique is a result of, a by-product of the poet's inspiration. Jarrell no doubt wrote less and less condemnatory reviews because he came more and more to believe that the artistic product is largely out of the artist's control. As he eventually said of Auden, "who wastes powers if he can keep from wasting them?"<sup>1</sup> Because of this expanding sympathy he came more and more to write grateful studies of work he thought good and reserved his attacks for critics, the age, the media, the educational system--anything which made the existence of "suffering, complaining, helplessly non-conforming" artists more difficult (SH:64). If as a young reviewer he seemed to be saying to some poets that they ought to be ashamed of being bad, by the fifties he could admit that "to have failed as an artist may be a respectable and valuable thing" (PA.76).

Behind this sympathy for the artist is a kind of muse theory. Jarrell often used the word, though he certainly didn't take the idea as literally as Graves. He did feel, however, that the creation of art was, to an important degree, unpredictable, miraculous, accidental at its heart. In praising Auden's early poems, he said they were produced by his whole being, "as much unconscious as conscious." He went on to contend that though the "rational intelligence guides and selects, it does not produce and impose; we make our poetry, but we make it what we can, not what we wish" (TB:148). The true source of poetry is in the unconscious, and this source can be "dried up, by too rigorous supervision" (TB:149). One of Jarrell's most used words of praise about poems is "magical," and he very politely defines it as having to do with "levels which we are not accustomed to verbalize or scrutinize" (TB:155). Poetry which is "magical" speaks to those levels in the reader and emerges from them in the writer.

Because the unconscious is the source of poetry, and because the poet is liable to dam that source by too much application of rationality or ego, he is more helpless victim of the capricious unconscious than controlling intelligence. He is "a sort of accident-prone worker to whom poems happen," and this leads Jarrell to the following judgment: "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" (PA:148). Robert Watson, Jarrell's colleague for the last decade of his life, has said that this is a precisely accurate description of Jarrell's attitude as reviewer. If he found two or three first rate poems in a new book he would give it a rave. And Jarrell himself has said that "any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody" (PA:113). This belief in the unconscious and largely uncontrollable fountainhead of poetry leads Jarrell to endorse Blake's "There is no competition between true poets." For how can the unconscious be expected to compete?

Still, this does not mean that there are no distinctions to be made among poets. They may all be at the mercy of the muse, but all are not treated equally by her. Some poets are simply struck by lightning more often than others, are more fully open to the unconscious. And, though this is the sine qua non for poetry, it is not all that is required of a poet. He must also possess the ability to do something with raw material, must have an ear and some technical accomplishment. A very delicate balance is required. Too much unconscious and too little rational control is bad, but so is too much rational control because it can censor the unconscious offerings. Before examining some of Jarrell's remarks on this balance, it should be pointed out that all of it applies only to true poets. There is also poetry which lacks everything--in which "people's hard lives and hopeless ambitions

have expressed themselves more directly and heartbreakingly than they have ever been expressed in any work of art: it is as if the writers had sent their ripped-out arms and legs, with 'This is a poem' scrawled on them in lipstick." Such poetry lacks technique and the unconscious, which speaks indirectly. It is simply a conscious scream or moan or sign. Such poets "have never made anything, they have suffered their poetry as helplessly as they have anything else" (PA:178). This is Eliot's idea of the objective correlative, restated. If you want the reader to feel the same sickness you do, you cannot simply say: "I feel sick." As Jarrell says more than once, "true art is indirect," "art lies to tell the truth."

But even among true poets the luck of being in touch with the unconscious is parcelled out unevenly and this makes hierarchical judgments possible. Most good poets are "partial poets;" only the greatest have so much contact with the unconscious that it provides them with a complete vision. Wordsworth and Rilke and Yeats are examples, and when you compare them with a partial poet, however brilliant, "you are comparing a rearrangement of the room with a subsidence of continents" (TB:94). And that distinction, while partially technical, is primarily based on one's lucky relations with the muse.

The worst thing one can do is become too conscious and rational. Philosophy is dangerous for a poem. Most poets

are not logical. Poetry "specializes in muddles" (TB.131). It is the poets' "subordination to the poems they write that makes them admirable" (PA:14). The poet should write "his poem for its own sake," not for his sake or the audience's sake. The conscious side of the poet is necessary but dangerous. The poet should use consciousness to acquire "The chameleon's shameless interest in everything but itself" (PA:142). Otherwise the ego gets in the way and kills the poem. Many of Jarrell's individual judgments are based on this principle. In short, Jarrell subscribes to the Bhagavad-Gita's injunction that "work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done without such anxiety, in the calm of self-surrender."<sup>2</sup> Auden, in Jarrell's view, lost touch with the unconscious source of poetry. He became "the most professional poet in the world," but that "is not necessarily to be the best: Minerva says, 'But you don't need me!'"

This, then, is Jarrell's view of a true poet--someone lucky enough to be open to the unconscious, who has acquired sufficient technical skill to complete the gifts the muse provides, but who is not so conscious of himself and his technique as to close the channel to the unconscious. Most are partial poets. All write much poetry that is less than completely successful--a few successes redeem all the rest. Each poet has his own difficulty in maintaining this balance. Williams tends to refine too little. Stevens tends to



philosophize too much. Pound's interest in himself obtrudes.

If we now have a sense of what a poet is for Jarrell, we must still ask what a poem is, and here some problems of vocabulary will trouble us. The words which Jarrell uses most often to approve poems are real, truthful, imaginative, original, individual, magical. Many of these seem to apply to the consciousness, the ego, and this seems to make nonsense of the importance of the unconscious as the source of poetry. Jarrell, however, was no Jungian. For him the expression of a poet's unconscious would be individual and original, and it is in this sense that these terms are used. So, the kind of imagination he is approving is most often not involved with the ego, but with its effacement. For him imagination is the vehicle by which the poet escapes the self, submerges himself in other lives. Imagination is a form of empathy and thus "a part of seeing and knowing" (TB:68). As such it is not something fantastical, but something rooted in reality.

"Reality" is Jarrell's key word in defining poetry; it recurs endlessly. No doubt he hammers it so hard because our age has been guilty of viewing art and the subject matter of art as somehow unreal; as if only the conscious, logical, rational, quantifiable side of life had reality. Jarrell insists, as both poet and psychologist, that the unconscious, subjective world of feeling and emotion, dream and wish and

contradiction, is equally real. It is the poet's business to plunge "into the very blood of the world" (TB:142) and create a real object which "is simply there, in different unchanging actuality" (PA:42). The poet halts the flux of existence for a moment, captures the bug of life in amber, but an amber capable of letting it out again alive. The poet has an "immemorial power to make the things of this world seen and felt and living in words" (PA:186).

Thus, poems are experience exempted from time but produced by it--"ageless products of an age." As such they are important because they are the link between the past and future. Art is valuable not only because it is "the most magnificent ornament and the most nearly unfailing occupation of our lives, but because it is life itself . . . because so much . . . truth can be learned through works of art and through works of art alone . . . ." (PA:22). Artistic truth is also timeless truth because it proceeds from the unconscious, where time does not exist. It is not only made up of the things of the world, captured, but wishes, lies, and dreams about those things. "Literature is necessarily mixed up with truth . . . our truth, truth as we know it; one can almost define literature as the union of a wish and a truth, or as a wish modified by truth" (SH:26).

Poetry thus combines what is real and how we feel about what is real to create "animals no one has succeeded in naming, young things nothing has succeeded in aging" (TB:56).

Both the objects and the wishes are individual, but individually real. "How can anybody write about unreality?" Jarrell asks. And since the raw materials of poems are so essentially human, the interplay of conscious and unconscious with the material world, it follows that "human life without some form of poetry is not human life but animal existence" (PA:23). It also follows that, since poetry is the product of the individual mind, the potential forms of poetry are infinite. It is a "delusion that a single poem can serve as a model for the poet's poems or for Poetry. . . ." (TB: 145-6). One measure of a poet is, therefore, in his diversity--in how much of reality he can encompass. Graves is praised because his poems are "different either from one another or from the poems of any other poet. His poems have to an extraordinary degree the feeling of one man's world, one man's life" (TB:193).

This is a recurrent refrain. If poems are what the unconscious makes of the world refined by conscious technique, then a poet's success is measured by the size and individuality of that imagined world. Thus, Ransom's poems give us "parts of one world." Reading Frost we are "not in a book but in a world." There is in Whitman "almost everything in the world." Lowell provides us not with "themes or generalizations but a world" (PA:96, 126, 217).

This last remark brings us to the point where the three elements Jarrell has defined intersect. First, there is the

world itself, and poets are praised for knowing as much of it as possible and damned for being the "'alienated artist' cut off from everybody who isn't, yum-yum, another alienated artist" (PA:31). The first thing a poet should do is imagine, observe, be "faithful to reality," obsessed by "lives, actions, subject-matter," "shaken out of himself, to have his subject individualize his poem" (PA:141). The second link in the chain that produces art enters here. A great poet must be a great observer, but next he must be an individual personality whose mind is open to all he observes. From the interaction of observed world and observing mind, poetry is produced, and the third element, technique, enters. The process can fail at any point. If the poet knows too little of the world his product will be slight. If the poet does not bring his data back alive, he has failed. Yet he must not give us a poem with only "as much reality as the brick one stumbles over on the sidewalk," because then too little has been done to the raw materials (PA:244). His technique or unconscious must organize, subordinate the part to the whole. Poems must be concrete, singular, compressed, concentrated life. They must be exact and concise. Blake's "minute particulars" matter--not only the minute particulars of the world but of technique.

Yet Jarrell thought conscious technique dangerous. He often quoted Ruskin's remark that perfection ought not to be expected of a work of art, praised a Whitman passage that

had faults that didn't matter, said that logic was not crucial, that "the contradictions in works of art . . . make them able to represent us, . . . [since] our world and our selves . . . are also full of contradictions" (PA:128). He believed a style could become habit-forming and remove the reality from the poem, or limit the amount of reality that could be encompassed. Tennyson was restricted by his tight forms, Whitman liberated by his freer ones.

Considering all the ways in which a poet may fail according to this scheme, it is no surprise that Jarrell considered a successful poem a miraculous creation, a great poet the rarest of beings. His view that all of reality--objective and subjective--was the province of the poet, that form might grow organically out of the material, meant that he was able to appreciate a great range of poetry--Williams and Whitman, Stevens and Yeats, Frost and Moore, Graves and Pound. These attitudes allowed him to read a poem as if he were "entering a foreign country whose laws and language and life [were] a kind of translation" of his own (PA:12). He could do so because he believed the function of art was to show us excellence "unlike our own" which would extend and complete us.

It has been noted above that, in Jarrell's view, art was one measure of humanity, that poetry was "an indispensable part of any culture we know anything about" (PA:23). He was the first to acknowledge, however, that the form poetry

takes is greatly influenced by the culture from which it arises, and that cultures may be more or less hospitable to poetry. The first fruit of his interest in the relationship of poetry to society was a theoretical view of modernism which took shape as early as 1940 and led on to the polemics of the fifties. It cannot be stressed too strongly that, though any overt reference to this systemization is absent in most of Jarrell's pieces on individuals, once it has been identified it can be seen to be implicit in almost all of them.

#### Modern Times

As has been said, it was probably inevitable that any young poet in the late thirties should give some thought to the future of poetry and its immediate past. Yeats was dead, Eliot silent for long intervals, Pound going in directions few would wish to follow, Auden approaching middle age. All the great innovators had become or were about to become institutions. The rising generation faced the problem of coming to terms with these influences.

In a letter to Edmund Wilson in 1941, Jarrell said that he had notes enough for

dozens of articles. I've made them for a book on modern poetry--I read all last spring trying to get a better understanding than usual of how neo-classicism turned into romanticism; Rahv asked me for an article on modern poetry for Partisan Review, and they ought to be useful for it."<sup>4</sup>

The book described was never written. The article was, but appeared in The Nation, not Partisan Review, and it was concerned not with how neo-classicism turned into romanticism, but with how romanticism turned into modernism.

The article in The Nation was called "The End of the Line," and was really an expansion and revision of a six-page preface Jarrell was asked to contribute to his section of Five Young American Poets. Though that was the first appearance of his theory in print, he told Wilson in another letter that he'd been working on it for years and had "wastebaskets full of notes."<sup>5</sup> It was evidently, then, the product of much thought and a view Jarrell took seriously. As late as 1951 a portion of it appeared again in "The Obscurity of the Poet," and traces of it can be found in many reviews. A number of the judgments we have already examined in the apprenticeship reviews can be seen to have been directly influenced, dictated by, this theory. The theory is best examined in its fullest form, "The End of the Line."

Jarrell's thesis is that the "differentness" of modern poetry which everyone had noticed was a difference of degree, not kind. He considered modernism "an end product in which most of the tendencies of romanticism have been carried to their limits." As such it was the product of evolution rather than revolution. It is probably this aspect of the theory that caused Jarrell to describe it as, implicitly, "heavily Marxist," though it might as easily be called

Darwinian. He believed that poetry would eventually reach "an impasse, a critical point, a genuinely novel situation that it can meet successfully only by contriving genuinely novel means--that is, means which are not romantic; the romantic means have already been exhausted."<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly Jarrell felt that this impasse had been reached at the time he was writing, hence his title. Modernism had come to the end of the line.

Most of the essay is taken up with suggesting reasons why the metamorphic relationship between romanticism and modernism had not been previously noted, and in showing that it did, in fact, exist. This evolutionary connection had been obscured by the fact that all poets did not change at the same rate, by the survival of some fossils which made it seem that there were many poetic streams, instead of many poets at different places in the same stream, by the paradox of anti-romantic critics who nevertheless wrote late romantic poetry, and by a concentration on surface differences instead of essential similarities. One further factor which contributed to confusion, and might be taken to be Marxist, had to do with "The Victorian prosperity which slowed up the economic and political rate of change in England." Because of this conservative influence on the evolution of English poetry, romanticism first turned into modernism in France, and the English were slow to follow. Americans, however, "lacking a determining or confining tradition of their own,



were particularly accessible and susceptible."<sup>7</sup> This meant that because of modernism, "The whole center of gravity of poetry in English . . . shifted west of England" (TB.296).

Jarrell next constructs a long list of romantic tendencies taken to their limit by moderns. Among them are a desire for originality defined as "novel techniques" such as "external formlessness, internal disorganization," irregular meter, montage, "heightened emotional intensity, violence of every sort" (that Yeats is a transitional figure may be suggested by Jarrell's description of his later technique as "formal violence"), obscurity and inaccessability which includes a neglect of logic, a display of erudition or allusiveness, a contempt for the masses and attempts to restrict the audience, which involves a cultivated alienation or specialization of the poet. "Contemporary life is condemned, patronized or treated as a disgraceful aberration or special case, compared to the past." In addition modernism displays the romantic traits of "a lack of restraint or proportion," an "emphasis on details--on parts, not wholes," a preference for lyric as opposed to dramatic or narrative verse, a "preoccupation with sensation . . . , the unconscious, dreams, the stream of consciousness, the irrational," and "irony of every type." Finally the alienation from the present, the culture, the masses was extended to an alienation from other poets, "refine your singularities is everybody's maxim."<sup>8</sup>

Jarrell claims, not very convincingly, that he is not attacking either romanticism or its fully evolved result, modernism, though the latter sounds curiously like a victim of a glandular disorder. He admits that modernism created "the most successful and influential body of poetry in this century," but he also believes that it is dead. Modernism cannot become more violent, disorganized, obscure, but it can't stop either since it is as dynamic "as the science and industrialism it accompanied." Its excesses "are the necessary concomitants of the excesses of late-capitalist society."<sup>9</sup>

Jarrell goes on to suggest that when the limits of modernism were reached, the older generation, perhaps frightened by their own innovations, lonely in their individuality, "turned toward anything collective: toward Catholicism, communism, distributism, social credit, agrarianism; they wrote neo-classical criticism or verse; they wrote political (Marxist or fellow traveler) criticism or verse; they stopped writing."<sup>10</sup>

Jarrell says that while modernism lasted, "it was wonderful." But it accompanied developments in the world that were not so wonderful. Jarrell has contempt for the conservative turn of his elders, their anti-scientific, anti-progress, anti-industrial, anti-humanitarian biases. But we have seen that his own values in poetry were far from those he ascribes to modernism. He did not care for technical

experiments for their own sake, formlessness, violence, disregard for metrics, lack of restraint or proportion, the exaltation of parts over wholes. He approved dramatic or narrative poetry and wanted the poet to be a part of his society, not an alienated artist. And he felt his generation was going to have to pay for modernism. The young poets had no choice about "making their own choice. The muse forsaking her sterner laws, says to everyone: 'Do what you will.'" The poet is left with "a fairly heartless eclecticism or a fairly solitary individuality."<sup>11</sup> Jarrell did not care for either choice.

This is the argument of "The End of the Line," but it was not the end of Jarrell's concern with the issues involved. The question of the poet's place in society in the twentieth century was to occupy him all his life. In this article he affected a dispassionate tone and employed a scientific vocabulary, but he was far from coolly rational about the problem. Its deepening, as he saw it, and the further decline of the west after the war, led him to respond with cries of alarm in his polemics.

Though Jarrell could not help approving the poetic accomplishments of his older contemporaries, the narrowed role of the poet in society troubled him deeply. He was fully aware that poets since at least Horace have complained that the golden days for poetry are in the past. But he was in agreement with most twentieth-century poets in feeling

that this traditional claim was particularly justified in respect to his own time. He teetered between a long-range optimism and a short-term pessimism. As a student of Marx, Freud and Spengler he seemed to believe in both progress and decline. He certainly believed in necessity, but even that was a two-edged sword. Internal, personal, psychological necessity was the force that created the great works of art-- all the rest was exercise so that when necessity spoke it would be prepared for. On the other hand large-scale, cultural necessity had reduced the poet's place in the world.

As a brash young man he was amused at the Fugitives' regard for the past and he played the role of scientist looking unflinchingly at the hard facts. But the longer he looked, the harder the facts seemed to become and the more vulnerable the poet in the face of them. He could be very witty on this theme as when he said that "people who live in a Golden Age usually go around complaining how yellow everything looks," but the humor carried real pain (SH:17). By the early fifties, he was willing to agree that the past had been better, but unable to believe in any of the remedies by which the previous generation intended to recapture it.

He also was less sweeping about the reasons for the past's superiority, perhaps more honestly selfish. The past wasn't better because of The Church or feudalism or because its sensibility had not yet been dissociated. It was better because poets were important then, because "any man who

could not understand poetry would be regarded as a poor specimen of a warrior," because poets were rewarded then with gold rings almost as if in a fairy tale (SH:96). Then, only a hundred years ago, "people stood on chairs to look at Lord Tennyson." Then, according to Wordsworth, they read verse a hundred times more often than prose (SH:91). A poet like Vachel Lindsay could get "far more readers than any poet could get today," a poet like Millay was read by idle youths in canoes (TB:299).

He believed, with most twentieth-century poets, that the poet's changed position was an effect of a "long-continued, world-overturning cultural and social revolution" in which an "old hierarchy of values" had disappeared, leaving the poet "a condemned man" (PA:4, 18). Much of Jarrell's quarrel with critics rose from this situation. He felt many of them shared the century's bias in favor of prose and looked on poets, as did Gertrude, his novelist in Pictures from an Institution, as makers of stone axes: "what a shame that I hadn't lived back in the days when they used stone axes! And yet, why make them now?" (PI:94).

All of this mattered to Jarrell because these attitudes in society meant that even so powerful a figure as Frost found himself victimized. In comparing him to the "last of the Old Ones, Goethe," Jarrell was "saddened and frightened at how much the poet's scope has narrowed, at how difficult and partial and idiosyncratic the application of his intelli-

gence has become. . . ," (PA.69). The age was unfortunate because it no longer allowed a poet to become what Jarrell most admired--a complete intelligence, a sage. His reverence for Goethe and Arnold (and for Eliot, to some extent) was based on their attempt to take the whole world as their province. His admiration after the war for the old European culture symbolized by Germany was based on its willingness to allow the poet to do that.

### Morlocks and Eloi

Jarrell's discussion of the poets of his time, his thesis in "The End of the Line," and his polemics in the fifties all show he agreed that things were permanently changed--and for poets, changed for the worse. There is a corollary belief that was never stated as a theory, perhaps never consciously recognized by Jarrell, but which nevertheless forms a leitmotif in his criticism of individual poets.

Jarrell believed that in reacting to the narrowed role for poetry in the modern world, many poets had constructed world views which were markedly different in their surface attributes, markedly similar in underlying structure. These poets developed private systems which attempted to justify poetry and to indict a culture inhospitable to it, and many of their systems had a touch of paranoia about them--a division of the world into friends and enemies--many enemies, few friends. Yeats had the "ability to distort some facts

and leave out the rest, to make the universe conform to a private system at any cost." His system began with a "real and detestable world of London," an "ideal world of Sligo." He hated specialization and longed for a "return to the 'Unity of Being' of the Middle Ages." He tried to believe in his ideal world but reality "crushed Yeats's picture of it." The poet's response was to invent a system which accepted "the modern world--as one phase of an inexorable historical cycle."<sup>12</sup>

This modus operandi, seen at its most complete in Yeats, Jarrell found in many of the poets of the same period--the elevation of a private sense of threat and isolation into an external system, a projection of the poet's unhappy situation onto the world. This psychological operation was necessary because it justified poetry and eased the poet's isolation. In his first article on Auden, Jarrell identifies at great length a similar mechanism. Auden experiences a "profound alienation, intellectual, moral and aesthetic--financial and sexual, even. Since he rejects the established order, it is necessary for him to find or make a new order." In doing so Auden sets up "a We (whom he identifies himself with--rejection loves company) in opposition to the enemy They." These are "tremendous clusters of elements derived from almost every source" (TB:116).

Again, Jarrell finds a similar situation in Ransom. All of his subject matter is "joined, actively, by fighting on

one side or the other in the war that is going on in the world. On one side are Church and State, Authority, the Business World, the Practical World," a cluster of enemies similar to Auden's and Yeats's (PA:96). We know without reading further who We are. Again in Lowell Jarrell finds an "essential theme or subject" running through all the poems. The theme is "a sort of conflict of opposites." On one side, "The Old Law, imperialism, militarism, capitalism, Calvinism, Authority, the Father," on the other side, "everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change" (PA: 208-9).

It is hardly unnecessary to discuss Robert Graves's version of this recurring schema at any length. His *We and They* are more personal and unusual than any of the above, but *The White Goddess* clearly serves the same function for Graves that Yeats's unifying *Vision* does for him, or Auden's mixture of Marx, Freud, adventure and whatnot for him. Pound's case is equally obvious and unusual. And Jarrell identifies a similar dichotomy in Wallace Stevens between "everything that is neither bought, sold, nor imagined on Sunset Boulevard or in Times Square" and everything that is (PA:134).

Something similar is occurring on a smaller scale in Marianne Moore who writes about "armour, weapons, protection, places to hide" (PA:199). All of these poets are looking for a place to hide. They are also attempting to annex the world, in an effort to transform it into a place where



poetry is welcome. This tendency leads poets to try "to invent an art form" that will permit them "to put all my life, all my thoughts and feelings about the universe, directly into a work of art." Jarrell is describing the Cantos, but he might as well be referring to Yeats's Collected Poems, "The Comedian As The Letter C," Paterson, The Waste Land, or The Bridge. The danger is that "when they've invented it, it isn't an art form" (TB:304).

All of this suggests that in Jarrell's view, one further characteristic of modernism in poetry is an attempt to construct a vision of the world characterized by an opposed We and They--to make our side right and their side wrong and to legislate this vision, this view of the world, for everyone else. When "The End of the Line" came, it was clear that none of these attempts, some of them magnificently comprehensive, had worked. The poets had written their poems, been helped to by their systems, had won readers, but no converts. They were all left as alone as they were when they began. Few lovers of Eliot became royalist-classicist-anglo-christians; few readers of Pound came to believe in the economics of Major Douglas; no one was much interested in reconstituting society with The White Goddess at the apex. And some poets, like Auden, were unable to maintain their system.

Jarrell admired an older poet like Frost for his courage in refusing to succumb to any such system, for keeping his

idiosyncrasy personal. He also saw that his own generation could no longer seek refuge in constructing such a system. It had been done without success. It was one more thing in which it was impossible to believe, one more method of reinstating poetry that would not work. He and Lowell and Roethke and the rest faced a situation in which the poetic possibilities had been limited yet again. Their response was to turn inward, to treat their own persons as subject matter, to write of childhood, for instance, or private despair, to become confessional. But something else interesting happened in the wake of the Second World War. The poets, though they were still unread, were no longer such exotic creatures. Reduced to writing directly of their own alienation instead of projecting it onto the world as the earlier generation had, they found themselves reduced to plain men. They became more representative, just like everyone else in their alienation--hopeless humans instead of the constructors of the mythical kingdoms we find earlier in the century.

This last development would not interest us in discussing Jarrell's criticism except that the awareness of the futility of attempting such system building any longer, and the sense of the poet's ordinariness, may have contributed to Jarrell's decision to acknowledge his own vulnerability, and to practice less "highbrow" criticism. Instead he tried to become a spokesman for poetry, as well as a critic of society seeking the widest possible audience in reviews and polemics.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Recent Poetry," Yale Review, 44 (Summer 1955), 604.

<sup>2</sup>The Song of God. Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Prabhavananda and Isherwood (New York: Mentor Books, 1954), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, p. 607.

<sup>4</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Jan. 1941.

<sup>5</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Oct. 1941.

<sup>6</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The End of the Line," The Nation, 154 (Feb. 21, 1942), 159.

<sup>7</sup>Jarrell, "End," p. 161.

<sup>8</sup>Jarrell, "End," pp. 162-64.

<sup>9</sup>Jarrell, "End," p. 164.

<sup>10</sup>Jarrell, "End," p. 165.

<sup>11</sup>Jarrell, "End," p. 165.

<sup>12</sup>Jarrell, "Development," pp. 653, 656, 660, 663, 665.

## CHAPTER FIVE: AUDEN

Man invents God when he loses his party card.

Cyril Connolly

Jarrell's criticism of Auden is unique in its extent and character, and thus deserves separate treatment. Its peculiar quality is derived from the special relationship that existed between critic and subject in this case. Auden's first book was published in 1930, when he was twenty-three and Jarrell sixteen. The works that made him the most influential poet in English by 1940 followed through the decade, and it is fair to say that Jarrell grew up as a poet and critic with Auden serving as a kind of brilliant older brother. Jarrell's first poetry was heavily influenced by Auden's, and this was a dangerously seductive influence. As Jarrell said in "The End of the Line," Auden's poetry represented "the only novel and successful reaction away from modernism."<sup>1</sup> Since Jarrell was preoccupied with the problem of the collapse of modernism, this poetry was necessarily crucial to him. Here, for example, is the first stanza of the first poem in Jarrell's contribution to Five Young American Poets:

The rewarded porters opening their smiles,  
Grapes with a card, and the climate changing  
From the sun of bathers to the ice of ski's  
Cannot hide it--journeys are journeys (CP:359).

Theme, setting, diction, tone, rhythm, rhymes are all Auden's. The same might be said of "I came to London, what did I find there?/ I found my house full and my cupboard bare," or "'Your eyes are red with weeping,'/ you murmured tranquilly./ But when I could still say nothing/ you stretched your hand trembling to me . . . ." (CP:360-61). It would take a slim volume to detail all Jarrell took from Auden and a larger one to describe all he did to avoid taking more. Jarrell had to fight hard as a poet to free himself from Auden. One way he did this was to examine Auden critically, so there is often a touch of the exorcist in the critic's demeanor.

Writing about other poets Jarrell could indulge in celebration, could give himself up to the writer and still return at the end of the experience with his poetic personality intact. With Auden it was, for a long time, different. Embracing Auden might be fatal. Thus, in the early pieces, Jarrell often dons his scientist mask, ostensibly the better to dissect Auden with but really, one feels, in order to keep him at arm's length, as if afraid to touch him without the aid of tongs. One of the glorious facts of Jarrell's criticism is that, eventually, in a review of The Shield of Achilles in 1955, he reached the point where he could accept Auden for what he was.

This development, however, was far from being solely a result of Jarrell's growing security and self-confidence as

a poet. It grew as well out of Auden's own decline. This points to the central fact of Jarrell's criticism of Auden--his belief that he was a great and original poet in Poems: 1930, Paid on Both Sides, The Orators, a drastically diminished though marvelously professional one by The Shield of Achilles. It was obvious to Jarrell when he first wrote about Auden in 1941--at the time of Another Time and The Double Man--that Auden's changing style indicated a shrinking stature. One has the feeling that this both relieved and infuriated Jarrell. It made him feel safer from his mentor's dangerous influence, but it was also frightening. Auden had seemed a sort of last best hope of poetry, and now he was fading prematurely. One sometimes gets the uncanny feeling that Jarrell, who understood Auden's mind so well, secretly hoped Auden might write his own poems for him and make the effort unnecessary, but also dreaded the possibility--an odd love-hate relationship between Siamese twins. If this seems overstated it might be pointed out that in "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" (1941), Jarrell begins with a list of attributes of Auden's We which represent the poet's enthusiasms. The list includes Marx, Freud, the folk, the blood, fairy tales, parables, the sciences, "all sorts of boyish sources of value: flying, polar exploration. . . ." (TB:116). It is easy to see why Jarrell the Freudian, reader of Marx, lover of Goethe and the Marchen, celestial navigation instructor, and author of

"90° North" found this poet irresistible. It is impossible to say whether Jarrell acquired his interest in so many of these same things directly from Auden or independently, but that they shared a good deal is undeniable.

Thus, Auden's poetic changes were both a source of liberation and anxiety for Jarrell—a perplexity he felt compelled to understand. If he asked the familiar question of Yeats--the astonished: "How did he do it?"--he asked a similar one of Auden: "What happened to him?" In Auden's case, he asked the question very early and answered it at a time when readers with less emotional involvement and intimate knowledge of the poet's work were barely aware of the full extent of the change.

In 1935 Jarrell remarked in a letter to Cleanth Brooks at the Southern Review that it would suit him if his Auden piece ran in the Winter 1935 number.<sup>2</sup> No such article appeared and it is not clear whether it was written and rejected, or never written, but it is the earliest mention of a Jarrell critical article on any poet, and as such points to a longstanding interest in Auden. Peter Taylor has said that, Jarrell had the tennis team he coached at Kenyon reading Auden in the soda shop (RJ:245). In 1941 in a letter to Edmund Wilson Jarrell spoke of an "interminable Auden article" he was working on.<sup>3</sup> It appeared in the Southern Review as "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" in the winter of 1941. Jarrell wrote to ask Wilson's

opinion shortly afterward, saying it represented an attempt to get away from "intensive limited criticism."<sup>4</sup>

Jarrell's second major piece on Auden, "Freud to Paul: The Stages in Auden's Ideology," appeared in Partisan Review in 1945. In it he promised a third article which would discuss Auden's sources in "Freud, Marx, Paul, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Barth, and Niebuhr" (TB:185). At the same time he wrote to Robert Penn Warren, and said that upon leaving the service he hoped to teach a year, "and then take two years off to finish some books." One of these, which he described as "half done," was to be on Auden.<sup>5</sup> From the context it is clear that he meant the half done part was the two long articles referred to above. However, Jarrell's career after the war expanded in unexpected directions. He did not finish his book on Auden, nor did he write the proposed third article on Auden's sources which would have been extremely specialized and academic in intention. Instead, Jarrell became poetry editor of The Nation, visited Germany, settled in Greensboro, North Carolina, and wrote a different sort of criticism.

By 1951 Jarrell was giving a series of lectures at Princeton on Auden. However, when he compiled Poetry and the Age in 1953, Auden was missing because Jarrell felt the bulk of articles and lectures he had written on Auden made "two-thirds of a book" by themselves (PA:vii). By the time Jarrell was planning his Third Book of Criticism in 1965, he



had decided to include the two articles "Changes" and "Stages" and a third to be called "The Best of Auden." The latter, however, was unfinished at his death. Something like it will finally appear in the fourth book of criticism under the title "Auden: From Poems to The Shield of Achilles." This manuscript, which has been put into publishable form by Jarrell's widow and his editor, is a compilation of material from the Princeton lectures and virtually the complete texts of Jarrell's reviews of Auden over the years. The reviews are of Another Time in 1940, The Double Man in 1941, The Age of Anxiety in 1947 and The Shield of Achilles in 1955. For all practical purposes Jarrell's work on Auden may most conveniently be considered to consist of "Changes," 1941; "Stages," 1945; "From Poems to The Shield of Achilles," 1980, in all over one hundred pages. The first two are principally theoretical, the last is much more relaxed and appreciative. The contrast is the most exaggerated example of the difference between the early and mature Jarrell. These pieces show in microcosm Jarrell's evolution as a critic.

An easy way to get a feeling for the different qualities of these three essays on Auden is to look at the first and last lines of each. The first two essays are, in a way, companion pieces preoccupied with the question, "What Has Happened to Auden?" But their method and tone are very different. "Changes" begins with Jarrell saying: "In the first part of this article I want to analyze the general

position Auden makes for himself in his early poems, and to show how the very different attitude of the later poems developed from it" (TB:115). It ends: "An essay like this may seem an ungrateful return for all the good poetry Auden has written. . . . But analyses, even unkind analyses of faults, are one way of showing appreciation; and I hope at another time to try another way" (TB:150). The piece is what these quotations imply--serious, scholarly, investigative, concerned with ideas and their reflection in style. The author is seeking to understand his subject, tells few jokes, quotes only to illuminate ideas. The mature Jarrell, intent on getting his audience to appreciate the author under discussion, would never have given an abstract list of characteristics of a style, and then said the list "obviously gives the reader no idea of the effect or value of the language" and contented himself with hoping that "he will look up examples" (TB:134). He would have quoted extensively to convince the reader. This first essay, then, is written for an audience of specialists who presumably know the work well.

The second piece, "Freud to Paul," is similar. It too assumes familiarity with Auden's work and is probably the most rigorous piece of scholarship in Jarrell's criticism. Where the first is chiefly concerned with ideas and their influence on style---a development of New Critical analysis-- this piece is frankly psychoanalytic, interested in the unconscious sources that lie behind Auden's changing ideas.

Where the first is humble and even apologetic, puzzled by the need for censure, the second verges on polemic. By now the author is sure of his ground and has thoroughly analyzed his subject. Jarrell is full of high spirits at having solved a difficult case and a trifle superior because of it. He is also disappointed in the Analysand's failure to heal himself. The article begins in full confidence that "There are three stages of the works. . .that we call Auden. In the beginning there is the Old Auden, The Ur-Auden" (TB:153). It ends with something close to denunciation. "When the people of the world of the future--if there are people in that world--say to us--if some of us are there, What did you do in all those wars? Those of us left can give the old, the only answer, I lived through them. But some of us will answer, I was saved" (TB:187).

The change is striking. The first essay retains vestiges of the apprentice asking, "What has happened to Auden?" The second is the mature critic in full possession of himself saying, "I know far better than you what happened to Auden and when I have finished telling you, you'll agree how right I am." This is not the other way of showing appreciation promised at the end of "Changes," but a way of subduing a rival. The analysis is brilliant, but we are probably grateful that this marks the end of this style of treatment. Jarrell later used his psychologist's training to examine Graves as thoroughly as Auden, but the difference is

enormous. There the analysis is full of interest, affection, even awe and pleasure. Here it is nearly vindictive. Some of the reasons have been hinted at, others will become clear in a moment.

For now, what must be noted is Jarrell's change between the second Auden article and the third, which is as intellectually vigorous, but filled with love and affection and human, rather than scientific, understanding. In it, there are endless quotations, many jokes and witticisms and sly mottos, but few which are malicious. The stages identified in the first two essays are elaborated, but all is well. Auden is what he has to be even though it is not what Jarrell might have wished he would become or remain. The third article begins with a typical parable:

Imagine a man on an island, a desert island. He loves poetry and has none. For years he has lived on nursery rhymes, "To a Wild Fowl" and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." One morning, walking along the beach, he sees a packing box: he pries it open with a bone. There inside, in oil-cloth, is--everything Auden ever wrote.<sup>6</sup>

We may well exclaim, as Jarrell later has his castaway exclaim about Auden, "All changed--changed utterly." What gratitude is apparent in that "everything Auden ever wrote." In the desert island of the world, Jarrell would rather have Auden than a month of Fridays.

Actors and orators are often cautioned not to begin too "high," because they may then be forced to end "low." The above constitutes a fairly high beginning, but Jarrell's last

Auden piece has plenty of stratosphere left. He easily tops himself with his conclusion which returns, as do all of Jarrell's thoughts on Auden, to the earliest works--Poems and Paid on Both Sides. Jarrell concludes by saying "he wrote, then, some of the strongest, strangest, and most original poetry that anyone has written in this century; when old men, dying in their beds, mumble something unintelligible to the nurse, it is some of those lines that they will be repeating." I suspect we are meant to be reminded of the death of Charles Foster Kane. The connection is entirely appropriate. Auden was always Jarrell's "Rosebud," and it is wonderful that this submerged allusion was to be Jarrell's last word on Auden.

It is charmingly apposite that the critic who spent fifteen years tracing the stages in Auden's development went through three himself in doing so--a metamorphosis from apprentice through academic to poet-critic. Before looking at the stages Jarrell identified in Auden, some problems the contemporary reader faces in approaching these essays, may be noted. First, they expect of the reader more than a little acquaintance with the body of Auden's work up to 1945. When they were originally published, this may have been a reasonable demand to make on the average educated reader of poetry in English. Auden was the most available, most famous poet of the thirties, "our Byron," as Jarrell says. However, as these essays were being published, Auden was beginning the

revision of himself that Jarrell consistently bemoaned in the most exaggerated terms. The change in itself was bad enough, from the marvelous work of what Jarrell called Stage I in the early thirties to the ghastly travesty of Stage III exemplified by The Age of Anxiety, but far worse was Auden's systematic suppression or alteration of the early poems which Jarrell said was the attempt "to get rid of a sloughed-off self by hacking it up and dropping the pieces into a bathtub full of lye" (TB:161).

The reader who had glanced into Auden's books as they appeared from 1930 to 1945 could probably follow Jarrell's first pieces with a minimum of difficulty. But from the appearance of the Collected Poems in 1944 all was changed. The reader sitting down with that volume and the two Auden essays published in book form in 1965 would have been thoroughly at sea because the collected poems eliminated or changed drastically the work of Stage I - Poems, Paid on Both Sides, The Orators - upon which Jarrell's analysis depends. For the last thirty years a reader interested in following Jarrell's argument would have had to have access to five or six volumes of Auden's early work in order to do so. That Jarrell understood this is clear from the structure and attitude of his third essay, based on the Princeton lectures of 1951. One of his favorite practices as a critic was the demonstration of neglected beauties in a given author. It is his technique in the essays on Frost and Whitman. Auden's

revision of himself made it possible for Jarrell to perform this service of resurrection for him. He was aware that all but the most thorough readers of Auden from the appearance of the Collected Poems on were likely to get an extremely distorted picture of that poet, and he attempted to correct this misimpression by a heavy emphasis on the early suppressed work. This difficulty may have finally been overcome by the recent publication of Edward Mendelson's The English Auden, which restores the poet's work from 1927 to 1939 in its original form. This volume makes Jarrell's first pieces useful again in a way they haven't been since shortly after their original publication.

Finally, all three of Jarrell's essays on Auden are too long. This may be the result of their having all been published in book form after his death. I suspect he would have pruned all three if he had lived, might well have moderated some of the harsher judgments in "Freud to Paul," might have combined the first two into a briefer, more synthesized whole and made them conform in style to his later work. As they stand, the three offer an illuminating overview of Jarrell's stylistic development. Finally, the last essay, made up of previously published reviews and never published portions of lectures, was not left at Jarrell's death in publishable form. Much of it is lovely (and the somewhat recast review of The Shield of Achilles which concludes it is one of Jarrell's finest pieces), but he would undoubtedly have

done much to the essay as a whole before publishing. As it stands, there are infelicities of style, some unnecessarily difficult passages, some transitional problems. All of this is, naturally, inevitable in work left unfinished at an author's death. It is certainly better to have this final essay unpolished than not to have it at all. Especially so, since it represents a culmination of Jarrell's criticism of modern poetry.

All of Jarrell's criticism of Auden is founded on the fundamental premise, already stated, that his best work was his earliest and that after about 1934 he was never so good again. Jarrell reacted to what Auden became first with puzzlement and dismay, next with understanding but condemnation, finally with resigned acceptance and affection. In Jarrell's schematization, Auden's Stage I comprises Poems, Paid on Both Sides, and The Orators. Stage II spans the late thirties from On This Island to Another Time, includes the plays with Isherwood, Journey to a War, and Letters from Iceland, and is best viewed as a transition to Stage III, which begins with the "New Year Letter" from The Double Man, and includes The Sea and the Mirror, For the Time Being, and The Age of Anxiety. Stage IV had not been reached when the first two articles were written, but Jarrell describes the work in Nones and The Shield of Achilles in this way, and probably would not have found anything in Auden's later work to justify the invention of a fifth stage.



The view taken of the early Auden of Stage I, what Jarrell calls Ur-Auden, is crucial to any overview of the poet's work. Jarrell believed that this was the poet's most fertile, original, intuitive, imaginative period, and that all the later changes were a regressive or digressive abandonment of the initial inspiration. If the opposite view is taken (Edmund Wilson's in a letter to Auden in 1947--"I thought The Age of Anxiety was wonderful. . . .Don't let anybody tell you that your recent work isn't your best"), the poet's career will be seen in terms of creative evolution.<sup>7</sup>

Jarrell saw in the early Auden a poet who possessed instinctively a view comparable with the one Jarrell was later to articulate in "The End of the Line": that the modern age in 1930 was dead or dying, an end not a beginning. Capitalism, industrialism, democracy, religion, all the old authorities were in decay. As Jarrell saw it, Auden expressed this view by utilizing verse forms neglected by the tradition. He went back to a mock Anglo-Saxon flavored with "Skeltonics," "Hopkin's accentual verse, alliteration, assonance, consonance; the Owens rhymes; the use of fairy story, parable, ballad, popular song--the folk tradition" (TB:122). Jarrell says of Paid on Both Sides that "the most important influence on the play is the sagas," and implies that that influence is not simply a technical one.<sup>8</sup>

For Jarrell, part of the early Auden's brilliance is his intuitive drawing of a parallel between the modern world and

the world of the Anglo-Saxons--both dying cultures knowing themselves to be dying. And this parallel is additionally useful because it provides Auden with an ideal as well as an archetype. Because of it Auden can transform the schoolboy Marxism of the great depression into a tribal ideal from out of the sagas, full of rural scenery, blood feuds, loyalty to a closed community in combat with a spooky enemy, heroic death, desire for rebirth. It allows the integration of Auden's favorite imagery--mines, glaciers, islands, mountains, and "the machines, rusting tutelary deities of the countryside in which everything occurs." As Jarrell says, "if Jung had read the early Auden he would have decided that rusting machines in the country are Archetypal Images of the Racial Unconscious" (TB:155). It is the everpresent saga parallel which gives Auden's early work its power. It also allows for the idea of a qualitative evolutionary leap out of the doomed stagnation, but in Jarrell's view this had disastrous consequences.

Behind this almost unconscious linking of the world of the sagas with the England of the 1930's, Jarrell found a complex of psychological causes. He believed that the young Auden, "son of a doctor and nurse, loaned a dream" (the dream of science, modernism, progress), saw that it had failed and so rebelled, but was guilty about the rebellion and so created a system in which rebellion against authority was both necessary and wrong, and doomed the hero to death. He

buttressed these ideas, born of psychological necessity, with a mass of erudite evidence--Marxism, psychological doctrines out of Freud and particularly Groddeck (which interpreted bodily disease as a manifestation of psychological disease), a kind of Darwinism, all sorts of determinism. By extrapolation from all of this, Auden was able to "take exactly the same attitude--a very disapproving moral one--toward the species refusing to evolve, the country unwilling or unable to modernize its industry, that he takes toward the boy who stays home and clings to his mother."<sup>9</sup> But the force behind all this was the fundamental guilt and anxiety born of rebellion.

Auden's need to overcome the guilt led him through all the changes Jarrell found in the poetry. It is implicit in Jarrell's analysis that Auden ought to have psychoanalyzed himself, recognized that his attitudes were "causally instead of logically necessary," "produced by and special to his own training and culture." If he had done so, he could have freed himself. Instead, neurotically, he devoted "all his energies and talents to finding the most novel, ingenious or absurd rationalizations of the cluster of irrational attitudes he has inherited from a former self" (TB:185).

In the beginning, Auden's unconscious anxiety and guilt spoke almost directly in the poems, but because he became increasingly distressed by this voice from within, Auden forced his poems to become more and more rational,

conventional, conscious. Finally the poems were written by "the head, the top of the head; the correct reasoning, idealistic, sentimental intelligence," rather than being products of "Auden's whole being, as much unconscious as conscious, necessarily made just as they are . . . the direct representation of the forces that made them" (TB:148). The later poems of Stage III were still the "projection upon the universe of his own self and situation, as the necessary law of that universe," (TB:172) but muddied, obscured, falsified by the process of rationalization.

Jarrell carried out this analysis of psychological forces--chiefly guilt over rebellion against authority--and their consequent rationalization in ideas and their consequent reflection in the poetic style with great thoroughness, using a minute knowledge of everything Auden had written, but drawing particularly on The Orators. His schema may be summarized as follows.

In Stage I the world is dominated by the authority of organic necessity. Rebellion is sanctioned because it is the way to fulfill the imperative of this necessity--to evolve. But the rebel, while representing an evolutionary step, is personally doomed: one is guilty if one fails to evolve, also guilty if one does, because all personal revolt is temporary, partial, insignificant. The only success is evolutionary, and this is personally impossible. The style of these poems is powerfully primitive, all presentation--

and the dominant motif is the doomed hero of the sagas. This stage represents an intolerably pessimistic picture and, thus, a psychologically uncomfortable position. Auden transmutes it in the next stage.

In Stage II the world is dominated by the authority of logical as opposed to unconscious, organic necessity. This substitution allows the rebel to become a reformer who can change the world not by evolving but by persuading the world to change its mind or, as Jarrell derisively puts it, its vote. One's guilt is no longer that of the species or the unconscious but that of the social or moral man who fails to act or persuade. And one is less guilty in rebelling because of the less dramatic nature of the reform. Success is no longer evolutionary, and cosmic, but merely secular and thus less important. Jarrell regarded Stage II as a waystation, and we can see, in the denigration of physical and worldly success suggested above, the direction in which Auden's thought was tending. As Jarrell has said, he was a man "ripe for religion."<sup>10</sup> Auden's style in these poems changes from the solid presentation of things of this world to categorization signalled by capitals: *The Just City*, *The Good Place*, *Collective Man*. The dominant motif shifts tellingly from doomed saga hero to fairy tale quester.

In Stage III, the process reaches an inevitable conclusion. The authority has moved from the organic through the logical to the supernatural. One is no longer impelled to

evolve or even reform but to sit still and wait for grace. Auden is reconciled with a higher authority and no longer presents or categorizes, but preaches. He does not rebel, but accepts--not the world, but something above. He has had his cake and eaten it too. He can rebel against the world because authority is no longer there, in an iron evolutionary determinism, but above. He has come to the position of man after the fall, guilty as man but able to escape guilt by escaping the world. Success is as impossible as it was for the doomed hero, but it no longer matters because all such success is temporal and, therefore, trivial. Fairy tale quest has turned into Christian allegory. Unfortunately the style has suffered in the process. "Auden's early style is rooted in the English country; his later style, compared to it, is an air plant in a window box of the cloud city of the exiled Wandervogel" (TB:155).

The reasons for Jarrell's complaints against these changes are by now familiar to us. On the psychoanalytic level he is dismayed with Auden because he has failed to know himself, to cure himself, but has carried out a massive self-deception. "In the end he submits to the universe without a question; but it turns out that the universe is his own shadow on the wall beside his bed" (TB:186). This is bad for a number of reasons. All that rationalization and projection cuts Auden off from the unconscious sources of poetry, and produces poems written by the top of the head. This in turn

means that the ego, the self, intrudes too thoroughly. The "thingness" of the world, the English countryside, men involved in life and struggle, are replaced with ideas, concepts, abstractions. In discussing Another Time, Jarrell says

Auden at the beginning was oracular (obscure, original), bad at organization, neglectful of logic, full of astonishing or magical language, intent on his own world and his own forms; he has changed continuously toward organization, plainness, accessibility, objectivity, social responsibility. He has gone in the right direction, and a great deal too far . . . the forms are automatic, the language is plain or formally rhetorical. Now, in too many of the poems, we see not the will, but the understanding, trying to do the work of the imagination.<sup>11</sup>

He is even more damning in discussing The Age of Anxiety, the nadir of Stage III. In it Auden became "a rhetoric-mill grinding away at the bottom of limbo . . . . Auden no longer has to struggle against standard tricks, set idiosyncrasies, behavior adjustments aged into obsessive behavior--it is these that write his poems."<sup>12</sup> With the rational ego in charge, characters become "four chairs in which Auden takes turns sitting: always the same old voice saying the same old thing."

Auden's unwillingness to keep in touch with his unconscious has allowed it to use his consciousness to erect an unreal projected world, ruining his poetry in the process by divorcing it from reality, and finally creating a false style. Jarrell's heat in this particular case may be

excessive, but it is because his attachment to the early Auden was also excessive. The analyses linking Auden's psychology and its intellectual and stylistic manifestations are exhaustive. In these first two essays we see the introduction of some traits and devices of Jarrell's which are to recur. In "Freud to Paul" Jarrell does his first, full-scale Freudian analysis. In "Changes" he gives evidence of his fondness for lists, excessively. In a thirty-five page essay there are fourteen lists, several a page or more long. Jarrell even apologizes for them: though their thoroughness tends to reinforce the confidence one has in his analyses, they also tend to become tedious. Finally, there is the evidence of the critic's familiarity with all his subject has written or said, which was to become a trademark in later essays on Frost, Graves and Stevens.

The third Auden essay represents the work of a cooler, calmer, more mature critic who has lost a God, but retained a friend. It is an overview of an entire career. It proceeds chronologically and, as one might expect, Jarrell's favorite Stage I occupies roughly half of the essay. He gives a detailed analysis of his favorite poem from the first book, "Easter, 1929," "one of Auden's best and most carefully worked out poems."<sup>13</sup> But he also says that what is important about Auden's early work is that it gives "a picture of a world and a description and valuing of our existence that are different . . . from any we are accustomed to



in previous works of art." This picture is a kind of "empathy map--designed primarily to make us feel." He particularly admires Auden's ability to make us understand how the "Necessity that determines men and Man" is experienced by "the entity doing the changing; that the pan of water, before it finally becomes ice, is so full of neurotic dread of its future, of a neurotic yearning to regress to its original gaseous state, that the whole thing seems to it a nervous breakdown." He also admits that in the early work "the best poems do not stand out from the others, as big, dazzling successes, in the way in which a poet's best poems usually do." But this is an advantage as well as a drawback. What Jarrell admires in the early poems is a comprehensive view of the world expressed in new language.

The same is true of Paid on Both Sides, which Jarrell values more highly than any other verse drama of the century, except perhaps for those by Yeats. He regards it as "one long conceit and big metaphor for life." Its speeches are "morals in action;" it is an "unusual and original work of art" whose quality can only be discovered "by repeated readings." Because he feels so strongly about this neglected work, Jarrell goes through it minutely, quoting extensively, making explicit connections which are only implied in the drama. He spends less time on The Orators, treating it chiefly as a source for his insights into Auden's change from Stage I to Stage II, but pointing out memorable portions and praising three of the Odes which follow it.

Jarrell treats Stage II in the single poem "Spain 1937" and uses it to demolish that development in Auden. He attacks the wishful thinking and self-deception of the poem, and scorns Auden's assertion that "Necessity is only our aggregate free will." For Jarrell the Freudian, reader of Marx and Spengler, this was heresy. It is clear from this analysis that Jarrell's objections to Stage II and III Auden are to his ideas, as well as his style. He says, for example, that "few men, few women and few children have ever written anything as shamefully and awingly silly" as "all the fun under Liberty's masterful shadow." However, despite Jarrell's objections to Auden's morality and politics, his chief conclusion is that "it pays to write for the ages--not the age." The badness of "Spain 1937" is a badness which arises from its occasional nature. Poets are as likely to be stupid, misled, foolish, wrong about current events as ordinary mortals. That is not their natural habitat. If poetry is a bad medium for philosophy, as Jarrell says, it is obviously a worse one for politics. If nothing else, it introduces the possibility of non-aesthetic judgment, removes the combat of We and They from a private, symbolic, evocative, specific context to a public, logical argumentative one. It reduces poet from oracle to orator.

Jarrell is kinder to some of the poems of Stage III. He likes "New Year Letter" simply because the form is adapted to the content and because of Auden's technical mastery. He

was continually in awe of Auden's technique and so could say of a book like Another Time that its few good poems were so expert that "when he writes badly, we can afford to be angry at him, and he can afford to laugh at us."<sup>14</sup> Similarly in a later review he described Auden as "so angelically skillful" that other poets reading him were "likely to feel, 'well, back to my greeting-cards.'"<sup>15</sup> This did not prevent Jarrell from demolishing something like The Age of Anxiety, but by this time Jarrell had come to the opinion that such demolition was only justified in the case of "one of the best poets on earth."

In his final Auden article, this attitude leads to a reticence about much of Auden's work of the late thirties and forties. Jarrell chooses Caliban's and Alonso's speeches from The Sea and the Mirror to praise, and ignores the rest. He calls Caliban's speech "rocket-assisted James." This increased benignity is nowhere more apparent than in Jarrell's remarks on The Shield of Achilles, which was his final word on Auden, his summation. In this conclusion to his third essay on Auden, he identifies Stage IV as Auden simply growing old. "He often seems about to lapse into a state of just sitting on the bed and staring out the window--and then yawning." He no longer puts facts "through an egg-beater," but simply consents to them. Jarrell quotes the lines from "Nones" about the witnesses of the crucifixion who cannot "remember why/ We shouted or what about/ So loudly in the

sunlight this morning . . . we are left alone with our feat." In doing so he implies that this is Auden's attitude in Stage IV to his earlier selves. He has become placidly unconcerned and matter of fact about his skill and subject matter, "a man full of dry tired knowledge, in whom a little weak emotion convalesces among ruins." But Jarrell says all this without complaint. The poet's attitudes are impressive because they seem "natural, not an effective role or stylistic device," as were those of Stages II and III. In growing old and tired, Auden seemed to Jarrell to have gotten more honest than he had been since Stage I. In Stage IV "he has given up morality!" Finally, Auden had become simply "the last of the great English eccentrics," no longer the busy representative of anything other than himself.<sup>16</sup> To Jarrell such individuality is always a virtue.

Auden's other virtues are catalogued. Despite Jarrell's dislike of some of Auden's stages, he admires his ability to go through them. "Even at his worst he could never get laid away in that real graveyard of poets, *My Own Style*, going on like a repeating decimal until the day someone drove a stake through his heart." He is cited for his sheer ability to be interesting, to make poems that are "manifestations of an important unique being, an Extraordinary Personality," for his "astonishingly wide range of information and subject matter." He is even praised for his ability to write to order, for being "the greatest living rhetorician," the

greatest since Joyce; for the great variety of poems he had written, for immense technical skill (though in the late poems he "is using extraordinary skill in managing a sadly reduced income"). Auden is finally commended for being a "complicated, caring, worrying human being who remembers that life is a demanding predicament."

Jarrell admits that some of these virtues have associated faults. Auden has wide knowledge but few original thoughts, little empathy for people or concern with their lives; he lacks a humble spirit. His late attitude that art is frivolous is especially troubling to Jarrell, and he traces its origin to a lack of humility: "If Auden thought a little worse of himself and a little better of poetry, how different Auden and poetry would be!" But Jarrell had worked over most of these flaws before. He uses the occasion of this review of the diminished late Auden, who writes as if from "vacation or retirement," to praise all Auden has been and isn't anymore. This was also Jarrell's method in a review of Frost's Steeplebush. Jarrell admits he is one of Auden's "old, superstitious, compulsive readers" and as such can only "smile back" at him.

In one of his loveliest paragraphs of praise, he quotes lines ending with "of pure things water is the best," and says: "At this point, reading 'Ode to Gaea,' I've no more morals, I murmur only, 'Now who else on all this earth--' whether they write poems or don't write poems, poets are

best." That little sentence really says all that needs to be said about the changes Jarrell went through in regard to Auden and his own role as critic. He came to feel that the only criticism worth his time was the sort that told a disbelieving world this forgotten home truth: poets are best.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER FIVE

- <sup>1</sup>Jarrell, "End," p. 165.
- <sup>2</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Cleanth Brooks, Apr. 1935.
- <sup>3</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Aug. 1941.
- <sup>4</sup>Jarrell, Letter to Wilson, Apr. 1942.
- <sup>5</sup>Randall Jarrell, Letter to Robert Penn Warren, 1945.
- <sup>6</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Auden: From Poems to The Shield of Achilles," unpublished manuscript. See Chap. I, Note 1.
- <sup>7</sup>Wilson, Letters, p. 431.
- <sup>8</sup>Jarrell, "Auden: Poems to Shield."
- <sup>9</sup>Jarrell, "Auden: Poems to Shield."
- <sup>10</sup>Jarrell, "Auden: Poems to Shield."
- <sup>11</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 166.
- <sup>12</sup>Jarrell, "Chronicle," Oct. 18, 1947, p. 424.
- <sup>13</sup>Jarrell, "Auden: Poems to Shield." Subsequent consecutive quotations from this essay are identified in the text and are not individually noted.
- <sup>14</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 167.
- <sup>15</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, p. 607.
- <sup>16</sup>Jarrell, "Auden: Poems to Shield."

## CHAPTER SIX: STYLE

It was the tone man, the tone.

Kipling

In one of those mocking, instructive, double-edged passages in which Jarrell manages to have it both ways, he says, "I do not mean that critics should go out and try to have Styles, or that we should judge them by the way they write . . . It is his reading that we judge a critic by, not his writing" (PA:85). But Alfred Kazin, speaking of Jarrell, has pointed out that a poet-critic is different in that he

works not from the side lines but has to be right in the middle of the parade . . . obviously has to be "right" - 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 (RJ:88).

So, a "professional" critic can afford to be dispassionate, objective, almost ideally unconcerned with audience response, but also cautious, carefully weighing, less concerned with style, with rhetoric in the old sense of the art of persuasion. "Professional" critics need not be as "firm, clear, coherent and involved in their literary judgments as poet-critics are" (RJ:89).

In the bulk of his criticism, Jarrell acted as a poet-critic. In these works stylistic devices were much more prominent and necessary since his motive was frankly



persuasive. He acted chiefly as an advocate, an evangel, a salesman. He was very American in this, and through all his criticism it was clear that what he was selling was art. His motto might well have been, "save holy art and holy song, nothing on earth endures for long." As a good salesman, and a good rhetorician, he adapted his pitch to the product and the audience. He used different techniques as the case warranted. In most cases involving the criticism of individual poets, whether he praised or damned, the soft-sell approach he adopted actually contained elements of the hard sell. He seemed to say, "I need only show you the excellence (or ineptitude) of this poet and you will surely agree with me." But behind this humble facade he deployed numerous stylistic devices which confirmed his authority, and made the reader reluctant to dispute his judgment.

He spoke mockingly of critics who

can write in an impressive and authoritative way; can use a definitive tone, big words, great weighty sentences, Clinching References-- the plagues of Egypt couldn't equal all the references to Freud and Jung and Marx and myths and existentialism and Neo-Calvinism and Aristotle and St. Thomas that you'll sometimes see in one commonplace article. ('If he knows all these things how can he be wrong about a little thing like a poem?') the reader may well feel (PA:87).

Jarrell made his persona much less imposing, much more colloquial, but behind it were many of those same techniques, designed to enlist the reader's faith in his wisdom. In discussing poetry he worked from a position of power. He

knew more about it than his readers. They would admit as much if he forced them to. Instead of alienating them by doing so, however, he did what he said so many of the poets he described did: he set up a We and a They. He encouraged his readers to believe they were like him--clever, tasteful, cultivated lovers of poetry, allied against ignorance and barbarism. Then behind this distinction he could employ the evidence of his own superior knowledge, which would make his readers subconsciously chary of disputing his judgments without feeling consciously inferior to him. Weren't they together in all things fundamental?

In discussing larger cultural issues in his polemics, issues about which his audience might feel themselves his equals, he applied the same strategy with minor alterations. He was still the humble, colloquial advocate backed up by all sorts of learning. He still erected a righteous We and barbarous They. But instead of stressing the power and right of We, in the polemics he made Our side an oppressed and benighted minority. We were still right and good, but threatened and victimized by a more powerful They. He enlisted the audience not by making them feel right, but by making them feel wronged.

Before discussing these two variations on a single method, we might consider those traits that appear consistently in all of Jarrell's criticism. The most important, by far, is the sense of a personal voice speaking to the reader.

It is the opposite of the kind of criticism he scorned, which might just as well have been written by a syndicate of encyclopedias for an audience of International Business Machines. . . . an astonishingly graceless, joyless, humorless, long-winded, niggling, blinkered, methodical, self-improvement, cliché-ridden, prestige-obsessed, almost-autonomous criticism (PA:72-3).

Jarrell tried to write criticism whose qualities were the opposite--graceful, joyful, and humorous. He has most often been commended for having an identifiable voice. Berryman admitted "his prose giggled on occasion" and had a "nervous overemphasis," but said "it sounds always like a human being talking to somebody" (RJ:11). Kazin called Jarrell "an extraordinary performer--in verse, in prose, and obviously . . . on the platform. . . . Clearly, Randall was very dependent on an audience and identified with it" (RJ:94). And Schwartz says he succeeded "in being joyous, angry, contemptuous, and gay as well as lucid, direct, and colloquial with complete genuineness and ease" (RJ:189).

These remarks suggest that the personal tone was the result of Jarrell's consciousness of an audience, of his speaking to someone. And in fact many of his pieces, especially the polemics, began as lectures and were refined by use before being committed to print. Some of the traits which contribute to the sense of an individual voice speaking to the reader grew out of the awareness of an audience and the lecture format. For example, the range of diction is greater than usually encountered in such writing. Though

the sentences are supple and well crafted, the diction ranges from oratorical and poetical flourishes to dips into colloquialism. When Jarrell says that if in making an anthology "you leave out Spenser you mean business," when he says "any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody," when he says of Frost's "Design" that "it is the argument from Design with a vengeance; is the terrible negative from which the eighteenth century's Kodak picture (with its Having wonderful time. Wish you were here on the margin) had to be printed," when Jarrell talks in this way he is miles from the standard critic's tone of voice and diction (PA:46). Few professional critics would talk of "Breakfast-Club-calisthenics, Radio-Kitchen heartiness" in explicating a poem (PA:47).

Lowell has remarked on an aspect of this in pointing to a passage in "To the Laodiceans" when Jarrell breaks into a recommendation of some long poems to say he feels "frustrated at not being able to quote and go over them, as I so often have done with friends and classes" (PA:63). Lowell remarks that "few critics could so gracefully descend from the grand manner or be so offhand about their dignity" (RJ:106). Furthermore, Jarrell knew perfectly what he was about as is suggested by his remark that in Whitman's similar "changes of tone" was contained "the essence of wit" (PA:116).

If Jarrell's persona is manifest in his diction, it is also apparent in the range of emotion he allows himself to

show. He refused to maintain a safe tepid tone. His criticism is full of exclamations, generally enthusiastic, of imperatives and rhetorical questions all designed to close the distance between himself and his audience, to make them one. Of Marianne Moore's poems he says, "what intelligence vibrates in the sounds. . ." He says "she has great limitations--her work is one long triumph of them" (PA:183). He exclaims, "Think of the magical rightness of 'Prufrock'" (TB:315). He says of Corbiere "it is time to talk for a hundred years about his virtues" (PA:160). And the rhetorical questions are endless. "Is this a classical poem? If it isn't, what is?" "What other writer . . . has ever called his sweetheart and himself 'Fairy Democrats'?" "Do we really want it to be an Age of Criticism?"

Aside from simply being emphatic and colloquial, and closing the distance between writer and reader, these devices, as well as the constant italics and capitals, are also instances of hyperbole--another favorite colloquializing device. Jarrell's series serve the same purpose. Williams is "outspoken, warmhearted, generous, fresh, sympathetic, enthusiastic" and fifteen more. He speaks of Frost's "tenderness, sadness and humor," his "vanity and a hard complacency," his "seriousness and honesty," his "bare sorrow," his "subtlety and exactness . . . classical understatement and restraint." Again, examples can be multiplied at will.

Another element common to all of Jarrell's criticism is a reliance on humor. Often the humor arises simply from diction, the wit inherent in a well-turned phrase, but there were several formulas to which Jarrell was addicted. One was the interpolation of little stories, and parables. In discussing Frost's "Design," Jarrell breaks off to describe a witless coed's misinterpretation of the poem. In discussing Marya Zaturenska's pastorals, Jarrell begins by imagining her

perplexed with this sick disease of modern life, standing in the subway reading 'Finnegans Wake' . . . it is like a nightmare. A schoolgirl begins to recite her homework, 'Corinna's Gone A-Maying.' Word by word, stanza by stanza, the repose and order of the pastoral settle over Miss Zaturenska's troubled mind, over Miss Zaturenska's feverish spirit, like a wet blanket. Joyce, Einstein, Engels fade away, are quite forgot; the subway is a mass of Ivy.<sup>1</sup>

These little tales can be as simple as a metaphor, as when Jarrell describes Aiken as "a kind of Midas: everything that he touches turns to verse. . . ." (TB:231). Or he can say of Cummings that "His fairy godmother, after giving him several armfuls of sensibility, individuality and rhetorical skill, finished by saying: 'And best of all, everyone will forgive you everything, my son'" (TB:319-20). Or he may say of Marianne Moore that "some of her poems have the manners or manner of ladies who learned a little before birth not to mention money" (TB:317).

These little fables, however, often leave such relatively simple dramatic comparisons behind and grow into

quite elaborate allegories. This is particularly common in the polemics. "The Intellectual in America," is half given over to an updated retelling of the story of Diogenes and Alexander. "The Age of Criticism" contains an allegory about various types of readers. There are little dramatic scenes involving Queen Victoria and Matthew Arnold in "The Taste of the Age." All of these little parables or tales are not only humorous, of course, but dramatic as well.

So is the use of invented dialogue. This quite often takes the form of a kind of elaborated rhetorical question. Jarrell allows his imagined reader to say well meaning, but less than clever things to which he can then persuasively reply. "People always ask: For whom does the poet write? He need only to answer: . . ." He imagines someone in the future ruins of New York reading Leaves of Grass saying to herself: "How very American!" In discussing Stevens' Supreme Fiction Jarrell has the reader protest: "why, even Hegel called it a concrete universal." Again in regard to Stevens, "Some of my readers may feel about all this, 'But how can you reconcile what you say with the fact . . .'" In discussing Miss Moore, "The reader may feel, "You're certainly quoting a lot."

Another favorite verbal device is the comic comparison. Frost sometimes makes "a point like the end of a baseball bat" (PA:l40). Arnold's touchstones "remind one of the charm bracelets little girls wear" (PA:l71). Miss Zaturenska is as

"efficient as a piece of carbon paper."<sup>2</sup> Expecting Tate and Warren to be influenced by Ransom "is like expecting two nightmares to be influenced by a daydream" (PA:108). A Cummings poem "looks like the ruins of a type-casting establishment."<sup>3</sup> These humorous metaphors often turn into parables. The two devices overlap, as in this passage which begins with a kind of pun on the title of Hyman's The Armed Vision.

Critics are so much better armed than they used to be in the old days: they've got tanks and flamethrowers now . . . . Can't you imagine an age in which critics are like paleontologists, an age in which the last bone that the youngest critic has wired together is already hundreds of years old? (PA:93).

Another source of humor is in two related devices, the submerged or unattributed quotation and the altered cliché. At one point Jarrell says, "I have only begun to quote." He says Frost is "always getting on the buttered side of both God and Mammon." He says the moral of "Provide, Provide" is that you should "settle yourself for life in the second-best bed around which the heirs gather, the very best second-best bed." In discussing literary quarterlies, Jarrell says there are a few poems and stories, "the rest is criticism." Of Eliot he says, "when all of you can read me your own articles about Eliot, would it have really been worth while to write you mine?" (TB:314). And in some of the polemics, Jarrell took this technique a step further and wrote clichés with appendices. "If you have been put in your place long



enough, you begin to act like the place" (SH:11). Or, "Big Fleas have little fleas to bite 'em, especially when the little ones know that they are going to get applauded by the dog" (SH:10). Or, "we say that somebody doesn't know what he is missing; Arnold, pretty plainly, didn't know what he was having" (SH:17).

Apparent in many of these examples is one other dramatic device, direct address of the reader. Jarrell is always talking to him, addressing him as you, introducing him into the essay with invented dialogue. And, of course, humor itself is a kind of dramatic device, in that it draws the reader much closer to the writer than a staid, serene demeanor could. Jarrell's humor is far from academic, though in its use of submerged quotations it might be called learned. In its reliance on the sound of words, in its dramatic character and its deflation of pomposity, its fondness for phrase-making, it is most reminiscent of the wit of the thirties, Jarrell's formative decade. It is not hard to hear in Jarrell the accents of the Algonquin writers and of radio and Hollywood writers. One suspects he was much influenced by Benchley and Kaufman, and Perelman and Groucho, and Fred Allen and Fields.

These, then, are some of the stylistic devices Jarrell uses habitually throughout his criticism--1) the construction of two dramatic sides--us and them; 2) personal tone and wide range of diction from colloquial to poetic; 3) a wide range

of emotion expressed through exclamations, imperatives, italics, capitals; 4) the use of rhetorical questions; 5) lists of adjectives; 6) apparently loose discursive structure; 7) humor, from simple verbal wit through parables, tales, stories, scenes, invented dialogue, comic comparison, cliches. There is hardly a paragraph in Jarrell without several of these devices.

One final device is the most noticeable of all in Jarrell's repertoire. It is the use of quotation of which there are three sorts. In some of his appreciations--notably of Frost and Whiman--his essays consist of virtually nothing but quotations with annotations. Then there are quotations from authorities meant to add weight to the author's argument. And finally, most often in the polemics, there are foolish remarks made by the enemy which are used to humiliate him.

In discussing Jarrell's quotation from authorities, Kazin has said they were "his touchstones," adding that he was "as full of quotations as a unitarian minister--they were his theology" (RJ:91). And several writers--Shapiro notable among them--have remarked that he wrote "a style of inlay in which quotation is so exquisitely handled that everything Jarrell quotes sounds as if he wrote it" (RJ:196). This is true, and I think there are several reasons for it. First, amid so much invented dialogue, direct address, and wit, his quoted aphorisms seem perfectly at home. His style was

already so dramatic that a wise saying or two did not stand out. Also, in most cases, he really did possess the quotations he used. They were not hunted up for the occasion, but sprang to his lips unbidden and so sound that way.

But there are a lot of them. In some essays it practically rains quotations. My enthusiasm for counting them waned after the first three books, but in those he quotes over a hundred and twenty people. This does not include those directly under discussion (Frost in an essay on Frost, for example) nor does it include allusion--simply direct quotations. The range is enormous: Frederick the Great, Hitler, Ernst van den Haag, Darwin, Euclid, Lycophon, Luther, The Koran, Kepler, Jung, Wittgenstein, Eisenhower, Duns Scotus, Shoenberg, Nijinsky, Liberace, Buddha, Cromwell, Heraclitus, Kardiner, Kierkegaard, Goya, as well as innumerable literary figures. Those quoted over three times, his pantheon, are interesting. Goethe leads the list with over three times the citations of the nearest competitor. The others are The Bible, Blake, Eliot, Freud, Henry James, Kafka, Kipling, Proust, Rilke, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Yeats. Chekhov, Hopkins, Hardy, Marvell and Grimm's Tales are not quoted directly too often, but are often alluded to favorably.

Jarrell, who loved to strike aphorisms, loved to read them as well, and two of his favorite books were The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and Goethe's aphorisms. He had no

compunction about reusing quotations if they helped him make a point. Blake's, "If a fool would persist in his folly he would become wise" appears in five different essays.

Cromwell's "I beseech you. . ." is used twice. A story about a woman who responded to Alice in Wonderland by saying, "What a lie!" is used three times, in quite different ways.

These quotations are used in the conventional way, to confer authority on positions Jarrell wants to take, to make him seem an authoritative figure for knowing them, but also, paradoxically, to leave dogmatic statements to others. By invoking the wisdom of others, he often manages to seem to be humbly submitting to the undeniable truth rather than asserting some questionable position.

If these devices occur generally throughout Jarrell's criticism, some others are particularly prominent in one sort or another. For example, over the years he wrote many columns discussing new books, often by new authors. In doing this sort of review he was faced with some serious problems. First, space for such reviews is often limited to a thousand or at most two thousand words. Often more than one book is to be discussed. How does one give the reader a real feeling for a poet's quality, if the poet is an unknown one, in under a thousand words? Quotation is the most obvious method, of course, but if space is being allocated not in words but in columns or column inches, this can be self-defeating. A relatively few lines of poetry can take up the better part

of a magazine column, a disproportionate amount of space for what is conveyed.

In order to solve this problem Jarrell adopted some devices that he used consistently. He would describe poets as belonging to the school of Winters or Wilbur, or as Romantic or Victorian mastodons left over from an earlier time. This was classification by type for those poets who deserved it. He also classified poets in terms of value. He said, for example, that it might make sense to say Frost wasn't in Rilke's class, but that it did "not make much sense if you substitute for Rilke's name that of Eliot or Moore or Stevens or Auden, that of any living poet" (PA:38). Likewise, "Can Whitman really be a sort of Thomas Wolfe or Carl Sandburg or Robinson Jeffers or Henry Miller--or a sort of Balzac of poetry, whose every part is crude but whose whole is somehow great?" (PA:113-14). Likewise, Kipling is "closer to Gogol than to a normal realist or naturalist" (TB:282). Such classifications are not only normative, not only establish a hierarchy, a peerdom, but also help give a shorthand feeling for a writer's qualities.

As classification shades into comparison, Jarrell acquires another method for briefly giving a feeling for a writer's own tone. When he began writing criticism he was fond of comparisons drawn from the sciences. This was undoubtedly a result of his scientific education, but he may well have learned from Eliot's famous equating of the poetic

process with the chemistry of platinum that such comparisons conferred on mere opinion a solidity and weight they might otherwise lack. They made mere judgments look like scientific proofs. Thus, Paterson (Book I) is "a geological event." Frost's poems are "geometrical." Marianne Moore's have "the lacy, mathematical extravagance of snowflakes." Romanticism evolving into modernism is "a vector." Critics are assigned books by "natural selection." The last two lines of "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" exhibit a "careful suspension between several tones, as a piece of iron can be held in the air between powerful enough magnets" (PA:43). Corbiere's poems pass "through interjections, vocatives, imperatives as an electron passes through its orbits--now here, now there, and in between nowhere" (PA:162).

In the fifties, Jarrell began to use fewer such comparisons, and more from the worlds of art and music, apparently hoping that an audience ignorant of poetry might still have some cultural reference points he could play on. And, as in the case of the scientific allusions, these came readily to mind. So, Aiken poems are like Delius or Liszt finger exercises. Bishop's are compared to Mahler songs, Vulliard and Vermeer paintings. Marianne Moore resembles Mozart "choosing unpromising themes for the fun of it" (PA:179). MacLeish's best lyrics are like Georgia O'Keeffe paintings. Whitman employs Berlioz orchestration. Cummings

is "neo-primitive." Ransom has "Mozartian lightness of texture." These comparisons are almost always intended to convey tone but on occasion can be malicious, as when Jarrell objects to Stevens philosophizing (with an allusion to Peter Quince) by calling him "G.E. Moore at the spinet" (PA:144).

One final shorthand device Jarrell used in reviews where space was at a premium, was the coining of mottos meant to sum up a poet's stance in a phrase. They were often, though not always, a trifle snide. Kenneth Patchen's motto is "Too Much!" Jeffers' is "More! more!" Lowell's is "Make it grotesque." Williams' is "In the suburbs, there one feels free." And the early Pound's is "Write like speech--and read French poetry!" All of these devices often make for a fairly dense thousand-word review, but they do not constitute overkill. Rather they represent Jarrell's attempt to give the reader numerous clues to a writer's special qualities. If he doesn't profit from one device, he may from the next. And they add up to a formidable erudition and authority, however lightly carried, which is bound to exercise a persuasive force on the reader.

Some of Jarrell's most famous essays between 1948 and 1953 deal with the complete works of neglected poets or with neglected aspects of better known ones. Typically these pieces are between three and five thousand words long--three or four times the length of the reviews just discussed. In

these slightly longer essays, he uses two techniques which are extremely simple. He quotes extensively from the author under discussion and makes lists of the author's best poems. Their simplicity, however, is deceptive. To be employed successfully they require a minute knowledge of all a writer has written. This, of course, Jarrell generally had. It allowed him, as Fiedler says of Jarrell's Whitman essay, to find, "with his typical uncanny precision, precisely the lines capable of rekindling our interest. . . ." (RJ:67).

This sort of criticism is bold, because it allows for no equivocation or obfuscation by means of "fine writing." When you choose the best lines from a poet, and list his best poems, you are putting your prestige on the line, exposing your taste nakedly and daring others to disagree. Of course, this also makes the technique appealing. Lowell has commented on this aspect of Jarrell, saying that "he was forever musing, discovering and chipping away at his own misconceptions. Getting out on a limb was a daily occurrence for him, and when he found words for what he had intuited, his judgments were bold and unlikely" (RJ:104-5). No one was more aware than Jarrell himself of the risks and potential benefits of this method. He said: "Anthologies are, ideally, an essential species of criticism. Nothing expresses and exposes your taste so completely--nothing is your taste so nearly--as that vague final treasury of the really best poems that grows in your head all your life. . . ."



(PA.171). The locus classicus for this technique is probably "To the Laodiceans." In a twenty-six page essay, eleven pages are simply quotations from Frost, eight pages are interpolated explication, one and a half pages are lists of Frost's best poems. Only five and a half pages are given to general introduction and conclusion. Despite this, Jarrell manages to work in citations from Blake, Empson, Rilke, Pascal, Shakespeare, Stendhal, Moore and Housman--most for the sake of comparison--and allusions to Kafka, Darwin, Dante, Hardy, Cummings, Goethe, Arnold, Thomas, and Stevens.

An even higher percentage of quotation appears in the Whitman essay: ten and a half of eighteen and a half pages. Likewise, the six-and-a-half page review of Paterson contains four pages of quotations. In the essays on Graves, Stevens and Moore, a third of the space is given to quotation.

In Jarrell's unfavorable reviews he began by attacking directly, mockingly, unabashedly. As we have seen, he abated this technique in part because he no longer chose to devote his efforts to unfavorable reviews, in part because direct attack might alienate the reader, but chiefly because he found other better, bigger targets for his ire. But in writing on these--the poet's plight, the practice of literary criticism, education in America, anti-intellectualism, and the threats to culture--he needed a modified technique. He

was speaking to a wider audience on subjects concerning which his authority was not obvious. To do so he evolved a polemical style which capitalized on some techniques he already used, added others, inverted some.

How did he acquire this style? By writing, of course. Feeling the need to convince readers of a poet's worth, he taught himself to be persuasive. Like any style, his was the product of practice, and was acquired by osmosis, by absorbing useful techniques from other writers he admired. He possessed a poet's ear and an apparently inborn taste that he sought endlessly to refine. His range of reading was wide and his openness to quality wherever he found it extraordinary. His widow has said he could chortle over Road and Track's style, saying: "Baby doll, what prose!" (RJ:277). And, of course, more conventional masters from whom he learned have already been suggested--Tate and Wilson. Another was certainly Eliot. As Kazin has said, "Everybody knows--Randall knew nothing else so well--that T.S. Eliot's early essays turned literary opinion in English away from certain poets and toward other poets who hadn't been read with so much interest and affection. . . ." (RJ:88). It is obvious that Eliot's example was immensely important to Jarrell. However, in at least one regard, they are quite different. Jarrell never adopts that austere, hieratic, impersonal tone of voice so customary in Eliot. For much of Jarrell's technique in the polemics we will do better to look to Matthew Arnold.

Arnold's name comes up quite often in Jarrell's prose. He expresses the wish that his touchstones had evolved into an anthology, and imagines him in "The Taste of the Age" as looking "round him at the age of Victoria, that Indian Summer of the Western World," and giving way "to a wistful, exacting, articulate despair!" (SH:16). Jarrell's "The Age of Criticism" is certainly a kind of dark mirror-image of "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." And both poets rather wished they were Goethe. I hope to show that Jarrell's polemical style was, in an astonishing number of particulars, a gleeful adaptation of Arnold's. Lowell saw this and called Jarrell's essays in A Sad Heart at the Supermarket "their author's Culture and Anarchy."

In discussing Jarrell's debt to Arnold I am going to draw on John Holloway's well-known study in The Victorian Sage. One of his important points is that Arnold in his polemics "aims to transform the reader's outlook," but that he has "no rigid doctrines to argue for, only attitudes." He wants to "inculcate . . . a certain temper of mind," not "a set of ultimate beliefs." Because of this, "much of his work is negative: he wants to deprecate what is crude and exaggerated to leave questions open where they have been precipitately closed."<sup>4</sup> Jarrell realized the same of himself, as when he had one of his invented interlocutors say to him: "All this is negative," or when he admitted he had come to "a gloomy, an equivocal conclusion" (SH:88). Jarrell, also,

like Arnold and "other moralists . . . regards his important function as that merely of bringing familiar knowledge alive."<sup>5</sup> So Jarrell's essays often conclude with such mild advice to critics as "vary a little," to readers "Read at whim," to anti-intellectuals, "it takes all sorts of people to make a world . . ."

Jarrell is also like Arnold in that he too offers his chief example of "wisdom or sanity or mental poise" in himself. His points are not so important as the "sense of what intellectual urbanity is" that we derive from "the whole experience of reading him." Holloway says Arnold's "persuasive energy goes to build up, little by little, an intimate and a favorable impression of his own personality as an author, and an unfavorable impression . . . of the personality of his opponents."<sup>6</sup> This is the opposition of We and They we have already remarked in Jarrell. And Holloway says that Arnold does it by the use of a number of odd devices of which the "most conspicuous is tone." Arnold's is whimsical and apologetic, it is "the intelligent, modest, urbane Arnold who is what he advocates."<sup>7</sup> The same is obviously true of Jarrell and as with Arnold, this self-depreciation in the context of the We and They antithesis is ironic. Both writers say to us: "I may not be much to look at. I put forward no great personal claims. But look at my opponents. Whose side do you want to be on?"

Jarrell's use of this ironic self-deprecation may be seen most clearly in the first lines of "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," when he describes himself as "a fool, a suffering, complaining, helplessly nonconforming poet-or-artist-of-a-sort, far off at the obsolescent rear of things" (SH:64). It is also apparent in "The Obscurity of the Poet" when Jarrell, speaking as a poet, admits "I have suffered from this obscurity all my life," or when, again as a poet, he says, "The public has an unusual relationship to the poet: it doesn't even know he is there" (SH:90).

Such an attitude is certainly tactically useful, since it allows the writer to enlist the sympathy of the audience. He keeps it by means of the dramatized conflict of We and They. Several devices are essential to this. First, the author maintains a surface modesty, but the underlying irony announces to a reader what he should really feel. Second, the writer is careful not to assert dogmatically. He leaves that to authorities with whom he allies himself. Holloway says Arnold's habitual quotation of authority "adds something quite distinctive to our impression of him as we read. Through it we see his modesty, his circumspection, and, oddly enough, his independence," not from the wise men he quotes but from the mob of fools he opposes. This is Jarrell's method as well, and as with Arnold, "time and again his quotation is introduced at the crucial stage, and his authority constitutes the rock of his argument."<sup>8</sup> In Jarrell's

"The Intellectual in America" the entire piece is founded on a quotation by Tocqueville, and clinched by one from Lincoln. In the early stages of "The Age of Criticism," a remark from Elizabeth Bishop is used as a foundation for much that follows. The "Obscurity of the Poet" is summed up in two long quotations from Forster and Proust. Emerson's "Things are in the saddle/ and ride mankind" occupies a crucial spot in the development of "A Sad Heart." Many other examples could be given.

Once the writer has established himself as a modest, intelligent, victimized voice with powerful allies and more resources than the enemy gives him credit for, he is prepared to practice what Holloway calls in Arnold "lethal innocence." He does so by the use of irony, but even more obviously by employing dramatic devices. First, the enemy is simply named, respectfully even, but those names are set ironically against the authorities invoked. In Jarrell, We are Goethe, Freud, Shakespeare, Proust and all the rest. They are Look, Life, Reader's Digest, the president of a paint factory and his minor executives, McCarthy, Westbrook Pegler, Mickey Spillane, a commission of sociologists, the medium, people with names like Kushner, Leroy Layton, Jack Waypen, readers who act like "Mortimer Snerd pretending to be Dr. Johnson," Fulton Sheen, Fulton Ousler, General Eisenhower, "The President of the Macedonian Federation of Labor, and the House Committee on Un-Macedonian Activities."

Not content with this, "in what seems like an attempt to do justice to the other side," Arnold "quotes from them" hoping his reader will notice not just the meaning of their words, but "their general tenor and their tone."<sup>9</sup> Jarrell follows him in allowing the enemy to convict themselves out of their own mouths. Eisenhower is permitted to say an "intellectual" is "a man who takes more words than is necessary to tell more than he knows." A publisher of children's books says, "Today's children like stories condensed to essentials, and with visual and tactile appeal as well as interesting content." To which Jarrell responds with a vanilla-flavored book which says: Red meets wolf, Red escapes wolf (SH:31). A high school girl who seems to know nothing at all except how to make a dirndl seems to Jarrell exceptional. Her teacher says: "Exceptional indeed! She's a nice normal well adjusted girl. She's one of the drum-majorettes and she's Vice President of the Student Body. . . ." (SH:36). An advertisement says, "If you have too seldom opened your Bible because the way it is written makes it hard for you to read . . . ." (SH:41). A man writing to Saturday Review hopes that in fifty years "nobody will remember that Joyce or Stein or James or Proust or Mann ever lived" (SH:38). Another writer praises Maugham because he was able to read a whole novel of his "without having to look up a single word. . . ." (PA:18). A scholar says, "I can't get my colleagues to read anything!" (PA:78). And legions of well-dressed, articulate,

successful, cosmopolitan people say they've never heard of Frost or Eliot.

But this is not enough for either Arnold or Jarrell. They go one step further. Arnold invents "figures to speak his opinions for him," as does Jarrell. Even more amusing is the opposite technique. Arnold "put imaginary speeches" into the mouth of his opponents. If he controls his own sympathetic tone scrupulously, he also "foists a contrasting tone on his opponents."<sup>10</sup> Again Jarrell follows suit. An American woman is asked what she did until the bombs came: "I bought things" (SH:69). As in this case, Jarrell often goes beyond the invention of a snippet of dialogue to create whole little scenes. Critics regard writers as knowing nothing about literature. "If a pig wandered up to you during a bacon-judging contest, you would say impatiently, 'Go away pig! What do you know about bacon?'" (PA:74). Queen Victoria is projected into the present, onto a game show, is asked a question, gives the wrong answer. The present says to the past. "No, I think you will find that Bismarck is the capital of North Dakota!" (SH:29). The enemy says: "Shakespeare wrote for the Medium of his day; if Shakespeare were alive now he'd be writing My Fair Lady" (SH:85). An imaginary figure out of statistics is asked, "'Why don't you read books?'"--and he always answers, after looking at me steadily for a long time: "Huh?" (PA:18). Critics consider an important writer, full of years and say,



"He's as good as dead." People remark of a poem, "I've read it, but I've never read a thorough analysis . . ." The same people are said to say to themselves about reading poetry uncomprehendingly, "After all . . . I'm not reading prose." Children are made to ask after hearing of the dead Babes in the Woods, "But where was their electric blanket?" Thus, Jarrell in his polemics, though not exclusively in them, shares with Arnold a self-deprecatory tone which is ironic, a studied pitting of We against They in which we are revealed to be allied with great authorities whose remarks form the underpinnings of the argument in which they are characterized, quoted, dramatized through imaginary speeches, to their own disadvantage.

These are some of the stylistic traits Jarrell employs in his major essays; we have already examined the principles behind them. In the following chapters it will be time to examine his specific judgments on various figures and to examine his polemical stands and their relation to the time during which they were composed.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER SIX

<sup>1</sup>Jarrell, "Town Mouse," p. 257.

<sup>2</sup>Jarrell, "Town Mouse," p. 257.

<sup>3</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Profession of Poetry," Partisan Review, 17 (Sept.-Oct. 1950), 728.

<sup>4</sup>John Holloway, The Victorian Sage (New York: The Norton Library, 1965), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup>Holloway, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup>Holloway, p. 207.

<sup>7</sup>Holloway, pp. 208-09.

<sup>8</sup>Holloway, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup>Holloway, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>Holloway, pp. 237, 239.

PART THREE: 1945-1965

## CHAPTER SEVEN: PRINCE OF REVIEWERS

You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an Eighteenth Century Londoner while reading Johnson.

C.S. Lewis

When Jarrell emerged from the Army Air Corps in 1945, at thirty-five, his apprenticeship as both a poet and critic was at an end. He was ambitious to make an important place for himself among the writers of his generation. He was certainly equipped to do so, had been a brilliant student, had early acquired technical mastery of verse, was a born teacher who apparently could explicate Chekhov stories or Auden poems as well while playing touch football or coaching tennis as in the classroom. James Dickey has said few poets have begun with the "sheer amount of information" Jarrell possessed.<sup>1</sup> Robert Lowell has called his mind "unearthly in its quickness" (RJ"102). And many students have said he "seemed to know ten times better than they what their poems and stories were about" (RJ:261).

Because of all this he could seem somewhat monstrous. He "loved being right," and had no scruples about telling friends, enemies or strangers what was wrong with their work. Lowell said he made "no distinction between what he would say in our hearing and what he would say behind our backs . . . woe to the acquaintance who liked the wrong writer, the

wrong poem by the right writer, or the wrong lines in the right poem!" (RJ:101). Alfred Kazin has said when he and Jarrell first met they had a "bitter argument," Jarrell putting his "passionate literary allegiances on the agenda" with "the smart, bristling, military air . . . of a commander arguing for an absolutely necessary position" (RJ:86). Friends who have written about him have trouble finding enough adjectives. Lowell has said that at twenty-three, he was "upsettingly brilliant, precocious, knowing, naive, and vexing" (RJ:101). Elizabeth Bishop calls him "difficult, touchy and oversensitive to criticism" (RJ:20). The monstrous side of him was redeemed for them by his wit, his honesty, his sheer exuberance at his own enthusiasm, and because his "laughter, cruel and/or gleeful, really was irrepressible" (RJ:243). If he began as the cruelest of critics, he became for Elizabeth Bishop "the best and most generous critic of poetry," for Philip Booth "the most human critic of his age" (RJ:20, 23).

The years he spent away from the academy, first in the Army and afterwards in New York, were arguably crucial to the development of his human side. Thornton Wilder has said that the acquaintance of young American writers should include not only other artists and students but "also those who have read only Treasure Island and have forgotten that."<sup>2</sup> I suspect Jarrell's time in the Army not only enlarged his sympathies and gave him the subject matter of the poems that made him

well known, but also reinforced a growing conviction that as a critic he should try to reach a larger audience, should not analyze or attack poems for other academics, but should attempt to proselytize for poetry and convert the heathen. He became less the professional critic, more the poet critic. In doing so his mentors became not the New Critics, but Eliot, Arnold and Goethe. If critics were going to turn into scholars, he chose to try to turn into a sage, as a number of reviewers of his first critical book observed, Delmore Schwartz among them. His experiences immediately after the war helped him progress in this direction.

Jarrell's second book of poems was published in 1945, and he won a number of prizes, acquired a Guggenheim, and settled in New York. Almost immediately he was asked to replace Margaret Marshall, who was taking a year's leave of absence as literary editor for The Nation. He held that post from April 27, 1946, through April 5, 1947. He disliked New York, "that treasure-hoard which Americans lie with their tails around, growling at one another," but as Robert Fitzgerald has written, "he loved his job at The Nation, or at least he certainly loved the game of matching reviewers and books, and he did it so well that in Mr. Ransom's later judgment his editorship deserved a Pulitzer Prize" (PI:174, RJ:72). Among the reviewers he recruited were Eleanor Clark, Jacques Barzun, Louise Bogan, Blackmur, Berryman, Kenneth Burke, Kardiner, Robert Fitzgerald. Some of the more

interesting matches were Hannah Arendt on John Dewey, Marianne Moore on Elizabeth Bishop, Ransom on Henry James, Empson on Kafka, Dylan Thomas and Graves, Ruth Benedict on Hersey's Hiroshima, Dwight MacDonald on Hillaire Belloc, Delmore Schwartz on Patchen, and Lowell on Wallace Stevens. In addition, he ran a poem apiece by MacNeice, Graves, Shapiro, and Robert Fitzgerald, two of his own, two by Elizabeth Bishop, three by Williams and twelve by Lowell.

While at The Nation he became a friend and admirer of its music reviewer Bernard Haggin, and a few years later reviewed a book of his collected pieces. His praise of Haggin is interesting because Jarrell admired him for qualities he himself sought to cultivate as a critic. He called him "an exemplary monster of independence, of honesty, of scrupulous and merciless frankness." Haggin said "precisely what he thinks" and represented "as accurately as possible the quality and value of what he hears." His taste had "consistency and rigor" and was "not distorted by having friends or enemies, by being part of any movement, by needing to like or dislike some work in order to prove something." He was interested in intrinsic values and he could write "clear vigorous exact efficient prose" that was also "personal and characteristic" and could express "surprising heights of enthusiasm or exasperation." He had a style but was never carried away with it. He was witty. And best of all, despite his skill at unfavorable reviews, none were

"as notable as any of twenty or thirty favorable ones . . . essays full of real forgetfulness of self, of anything at all but their subjects." Finally he could frankly admit error and change his mind, a trait which "makes us trust a critic as nothing else but omniscience could." It is hard not to see in this praise for a critic who writes with "seriousness, insight and love" a blueprint of Jarrell's mature manner.<sup>3</sup> This is almost precisely how one would describe him.

At this same period another potent influence on Jarrell was Hannah Arendt and her husband, with whom he spent a good deal of time, and from whom he extrapolated the Rosenbaums in his novel. Arendt has said that "what originally attracted him not just to me or to us but to the house was the simple fact that this was a place where German was spoken" (RJ:4). What she and her husband and German and The Marchen and Goethe seem to have symbolized for Jarrell was a refinement and amenity of life, a respect for culture he did not find in twentieth century America. "German" was another world where he and Miss Arendt and Goethe and Rilke and his favorite composers could relax together. He loved reading her American poetry and hearing her read German and contending with her husband, an equally enthusiastic man, over the greatest poet of the century--Jarrell's choice, Rilke; the German gentleman's, Yeats. Before this period there are virtually no quotations from Goethe in Jarrell's criticism, afterward he is quoted more often than anyone else.



When his year at The Nation concluded, Jarrell taught briefly at Sarah Lawrence, spent a summer at the Salzburg Summer Seminar in American Civilization, and then joined Peter Taylor at what was then the Women's College of the University of North Carolina, now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. R.W. Flint has called this a retirement to a "private Weimar," and others have been surprised at Jarrell's decision to remove himself from the seat of literary power (RJ:77). Richard Kostelanatz has said that Jarrell, like Schwartz and Lowell, had begun "to forge . . . [an] ecumenical role" in which he was accepted by both Southern and New York Jewish literary establishments, "but [that] once he moved south permanently the New Yorkers lost interest in him."<sup>4</sup> There may be some truth in this, in terms of pragmatic literary politics, but Jarrell's subsequent career makes it seem much too sweeping a statement. Besides, Peter Taylor, with whom Jarrell initially shared a duplex in Greensboro, says Jarrell had consciously decided "that he wanted to live in what he called 'real America' and he knew that he could do with a little more of the seminary atmosphere in the college where he was to settle down to serious teaching and writing" (RJ:248).

Once settled, Jarrell stayed in Greensboro for the rest of his life, exercising considerable power in the duchy of the college's English department. There he taught courses in English composition, in writing poetry and criticism, in

twentieth century literary criticism, in contemporary poetry, in European literature. He served on committees and imported his favorite writers, Frost and Lowell for example, for readings. From the late forties on Jarrell himself was increasingly in demand as a lecturer, and many of his essays began to have their genesis in lectures delivered at Princeton, Harvard, in Cincinnati, Colorado, New York. The fifties were perhaps the first decade in history when it was possible for a literary critic to become a full-fledged celebrity--getting on airplanes to fly to conferences, lectures, performances, appearing on television, getting paid serious money to appear in unserious magazines. This period of the infancy of media hype as applied to literature created the Dylan Thomas boom, the beats, the Lowell phenomenon, the quality paperback, the coffee table book, the hi-cult mass-cult debate.

Jarrell, who was always a spirited performer, took to this atmosphere with mingled enthusiasm and dread. He grew his beard, acquired his natty wardrobe, sports cars, hi-fi, got onto planes, on television, in the magazines, become a minor cultural panjandrum, deplored the Alexandrianism of the age in print for cash. Poetry and the Age appeared in 1953. The following year his novel was a minor best-seller. He again reviewed regularly in 1955-56, this time for the Yale Review. And in the years 1956-58 he was poetry consultant to the Library of Congress.

In a typical irony, this period of Jarrell's greatest public prominence actually coincided with a poetic dry spell. He published no new book of poems between The Seven League Crutches in 1951 and The Woman at the Washington Zoo in 1960. His Selected Poems in 1955 contained only two previously uncollected poems and the 1960 volume is half given over to translations, chiefly of Rilke. In the absence of poetry, he filled his time with other pursuits. Almost all his important criticism, particularly of poetry, was written between 1945 and 1956. By the late fifties he had treated most of the living poets he cared to, and thereafter concentrated on other projects.

In the last nine years of his life, from 1956 to 1965, Jarrell published two books of poetry--The Woman at the Washington Zoo, which won the National Book Award, and The Lost World. He also produced most of the essays which made up his second book of criticism, A Sad Heart at the Supermarket, (1962)--translated Faust, The Three Sisters, Rilke, and wrote his four children's books, which were published in 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1976.

All of this left little time for criticism. In the late fifties he did write a series of polemics on the age, a few pieces on sports cars, the year's best books, love poems, for magazines like Harpers, Vogue, Mademoiselle. An agreement with the inventor of the quality paperback, Anchor Books, led to his editing an anthology of stories, several collections

of Kipling stories, a volume of Russian novellas, all with sizeable introductions. He also introduced a reissue of Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children. Most of these were old enthusiasms. In October 1965, he was struck by a car and killed at the age of fifty-one.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to discuss only the minor pieces of criticism from Jarrell's final period, reserving the major essays for a later chapter. In particular I want to discuss his unfavorable reviews in order to show how they differ from the earlier ones, and some short but highly favorable reviews of Warren, James Stephens, Rich, Bishop, Corbiere. If Jarrell was a "prince of reviewers," it is in pieces like these that this aspect of his talent can best be seen.

The aesthetic behind Jarrell's criticism has already been treated. In all the reviews and essays for the rest of his life, what he looks for remains the same, a balance between artifice and life (both inner and outer), between consciousness and the unconscious, the creation of an individual world, forms that grow out of the matter. He quotes Frost often: "a little of anything goes a long way in a work of art." What he dislikes is at the borders of art--spontaneity without control, concision, and organization, (which explains his antipathy for the beats and much of Pound), or organization that is so tight and cautious that it kills spontaneity (which explains his antipathy for academic

poetry, particularly the school of Winters). Behind all this is a belief that poetry is bigger than the poet--there is no "right" or "wrong" poetry, but only poetry that is either good or bad according to the criteria the poetry establishes for itself: "There is no kind plainly different from, and plainly superior to all the rest--" (PA:150).

### At War with War Poets

Jarrell's first piece of prose after the war was not criticism at all, but a eulogy for Ernie Pyle. Pyle was another mentor for Jarrell, and for the next two or three years many of the poetry books he was asked or chose to review were of war poetry. Jarrell was an appropriate choice as reviewer because he had begun to establish his reputation with his war poems. The essay on Pyle is important because he was a major source for what might be crassly called local color (Jarrell never got overseas), but also because he was, to Jarrell's mind, the premier war poet of the second war, the standard by which lesser verse writers were measured.

Pyle was so good because he did not tell the "reassuring lies" of press releases, propaganda, the media, because he was "obsessed with one thing--the real war: that is, the people in it." "What he cared about was the facts. But facts are only facts as we see them, as we feel them." And because Pyle saw people and not statistics, his work had a moral dimension often lacking in war writing. He "'couldn't

help feeling funny about' fighter pilots who had just strafed a truck convoy, and who, 'so full of laughter . . . talked about their flights and killing and being killed exactly as they would discuss girls or their school lessons.'"<sup>5</sup> This is the same world as that of Jarrell's "Eighth Air Force" and "Losses." It is a war in which soldiers wait to fight and never see combat. It is a war in which soldiers who do see combat are seen not as heroes, but murderers. Pyle was important not because he gave an objective report on combat, but because "he was precisely, detailedly and unremittingly introspective."

Most of the writers of war poetry Jarrell reviewed seemed less like poets than Pyle because they were not obsessed with their subject, because they were not introspective enough, because they missed the moral dimension, because their forms dominated their material. A.M. Klein, who treated the liquidation of the Jews in These Are Not Psalms, failed because he used forms "simply because he wants to." If he had been a poet "possessed and dominated" by his subject he could not have done so, could not have written poems which were "stagey," so "industrial," so lacking in "personality."<sup>6</sup> He is too reasonable, too lacking in doubts. Jarrell quotes some real Psalms to make the point that these really aren't psalms and the line from Whitman--"I was the man, I suffered, I was there"--to show what is wrong with Klein.

Jarrell finds an even worse example of a kind of moral dogmatism in the work of Alex Comfort, whose war poems, influenced by Thomas, "seem hardly more than allegorical emanations of some passive, amoral reality." In them it is hard "to remember that Mr. Comfort is talking about the deaths, not of Corydon and last fall's leaves, but of the peoples of the Second World War" (PA:155). This is largely so because of a failure of sympathy, an excess of self-righteousness. As a conscientious objector, Comfort regards the dead as victims of their own stupidity. "And he never wonders: how does it feel to be a dupe?" He does not become "that witness of the actions of men, the poet" (PA:156). Jarrell admits that Comfort may be right in regarding the State as humanity's chief enemy, but the poet's job in the face of such a fact is not to feel superior about having noticed, or to promulgate solutions or slogans, but to tell others how it feels to know that "it is we who wither away, not the state" (PA:157).

The rest of Jarrell's reviews of war poets repeat the same objections. One of John Ciardi's Other Skies may stand for them all. In it Jarrell complains that the poems "are mostly rhetoric . . . and Dear Diary . . ." The poet, a B-29 gunner, has gotten little "feel of what happened to him" into the poems because of his reliance on "flashy machinery." "As it is, the quoted sentences of interphone conversation have a thousand times the reality" of the poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Brief Murders

In looking through the unfavorable reviews of a decade, it is possible to feel at first that the vampire Jarrell, familiar from before the war, was at large again and still hungry for blood. Though Jarrell was capable in the middle fifties of apologizing for the necessity of giving bad reviews ("Disliking what is bad is only the other face of liking what is good"), he was never able to persuade himself that there was no need for bad reviews and he continued to write them. However, as a rule, he dispatched the hopeless quickly and with finality. The brevity of the bad reviews makes any summary of them begin to sound like an anthology of witty aphorisms. This constitutional inability of Jarrell's to be stodgy or solemn about the awful may strike some readers as malicious. In some cases it was a mark of honesty and a good deal of courage. It must also be admitted that if he had been only intelligent and sensitive and tasteful, Jarrell might have had fewer readers. And though humor may be only another face that pain wears, it is the one we would rather look at.

Again, the reasons most common for bad reviews are incompetence, derivativeness, and fatal caution on the parts of the poets involved. There are standards behind the laughter, not cruelty for its own sake. Eve Merriam's poems are full of reality, but lacking in art. "Their aesthetic distance is negative . . . these are real toads in real gardens . . ."8



"Tennessee Williams must be one of those hoaxes people make up to embarrass Poetry." But Jarrell does not go on nearly as long as he obviously could with this sport. He ends a brief paragraph by saying "Mr. Williams writes two prefaces, a serious version and a frivolous version; I have printed only a frivolous version of my criticism, but I assure his friends that they would not willingly exchange it for the other."<sup>9</sup>

In that most cautious of decades, the nineteen-fifties, Jarrell most often expressed despair about cautious poets. He reviewed Rolfe Humphries several times and said once, for example, "he rarely attempts to write anything so difficult as a good poem: he is like a high jumper who jumps five and a half feet with easy grace, and then leaves the track meet."<sup>10</sup> When this passion for orderliness was mirrored in technique, the results could be disastrous, as in the case of Donald Drummond, a student of Winters. His work was nothing if not regular. Jarrell says, "if there are any prosodists who are also Mongolian idiots, this is the verse for them to scan."<sup>11</sup>

Similar objections are made to John Frederick Nims. He is unindividual, his poems are spoiled by "commonplaceness," "approximation," "anonymity." "The I of the poems (as it usually is with the youngish American poets of whom I am speaking) is that composite photograph, that institutional lay-figure, the poet in the street." He is derivative of

Auden and Shapiro whose effects he so concentrates "that reading a stanza was like having one's mouth stuffed with pennies."<sup>12</sup> The image is so marvelously evocative that Jarrell doesn't need to make the ultimate point--that you are left at the end with a bad taste in your mouth and less than a dollar in change. And finally, in discussing Isabella Gardner, he says, "Many young poets, nowadays, are insured against everything. For them poetry is a game like court tennis . . . one they learned at college--and they play it with propriety . . . their poems are occasional verse for which life itself is only one more occasion."<sup>13</sup>

Jarrell had an easy confidence in the precision of his taste in these years which allowed him to dismiss the negligible swiftly and move on to other more rewarding business. Now, in 1948, when confronted with another book by Conrad Aiken, Jarrell disposed of it in a brief paragraph. He described The Kid as a "surprisingly crude hodge podge of store-bought homespun."<sup>14</sup> Aiken screamed in protest, echoing Cowley's rhetoric from seven years earlier. He called Jarrell a malicious "executioner" suffering from "autointoxication" among other ills. And he repeated the charge that Jarrell wrote only negative reviews.<sup>15</sup> In fine humor, Jarrell replied with a list of his previous favorable reviews, protested that there was nothing personal about his attacks, and concluded with an ironic threat. "Reviewing poetry is hard work--I read The Kid three times:

if Mr. Aiken isn't more charitable toward my mistakes about his work, I shall have, in the end, to give up reviewing his poetry altogether."<sup>16</sup>

The sheer relish Jarrell brought to both praise and blame in the reviews of this period is admirable, though it had unfortunate consequences in one case. Reviewing a number of anthologies, he said that what an anthologist required would seem to be taste, but that "zeal and a publisher seem to be the irreducible and, usually, unexceeded minimum" (PA:170). He goes on to give a mixed review to an Oscar Williams anthology, pausing along the way to make fun of the editor's introduction, to compliment him for "a real taste for good poetry" which is immediately undercut by the remark that Williams "has just as real a taste for bad" (PA:174). He also points out that

the book has the merit of containing a considerably larger selection of Oscar Williams' poems than I have ever seen in any other anthology. There are nine of his poems--and five of Hardy's. It takes a lot of courage to like your own poetry almost twice as well as Hardy's (PA:173-74).

That Jarrell did not share Williams' judgment of his own work is clear from a review of one of the anthologist's books of poems in which he says his older poems "gave the impression of having been written on a typewriter by a typewriter." The new are little better. "The poems themselves are the true subjects of the poems."<sup>17</sup> Jarrell's own poems were conspicuously absent from subsequent Oscar Williams anthologies,

not an insignificant price to pay for an honest review. And Williams self-aggrandisement looks particularly crass next to the Jarrell who, as editor of The Nation, published two of his own poems and twelve of Lowell's.

In the middle fifties, just before he quit reviewing poetry altogether, Jarrell was much less likely to produce such cutting remarks, such visually and kinesthetically satisfying images. One often feels that Jarrell by this time had said all he had to say. If the points were not obvious, it wasn't his fault. He had other larger targets for his wit, other uses to which to put his seriousness. He could still occasionally remark that "writers like Constance Carrier are the well oysters that don't have the pearls."<sup>18</sup> Most often he simply described derivative writers as "poets of faithful emulation" and quoted their own lines back at them. Or he contented himself with saying James Kirkup was capable of writing "flat Herbert, flat Cowper, and flat School of Auden," or with pointing out Mark Van Doren's "terrible regularity, methodicalness, habitualness . . . ," or Elder Olson's failure to know the world except "through literature."<sup>19</sup>

More and more he would digress in order to avoid murder or in order to do it obliquely. Sometimes he would digress by way of comparison, insinuating a favorite passage from Frost or Whitman or Rilke alongside one by the poet under discussion, allowing the former to demonstrate the weakness

of the latter. Or he would dismiss a poet by recommending his betters. "Compared to our bad young poets Mr. Reed is a controlled, civilized, attractive affair; but compared to the good ones--Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop say--he is a nap after dinner."<sup>20</sup> Sometimes he avoided reviewing by reviewing the art of criticism itself. In discussing a talentless poet's second book, he spent virtually the entire review taking the critics to task who had praised the poet's first book. If they hadn't done so, they might have prevented the production of the second book which now vexed Jarrell by its badness, its existence. He calls this story, mockingly, "a parable of the way in which critics can guide and encourage the poet to the fullest realization of his powers."<sup>21</sup>

Most of his digressions onto the subject of criticism are apologies for its necessity, the need sometimes not to be nice. He says that there are two laws readers and writers of reviews should keep in mind. First, at any given time, "there are only a few good poets alive." Second, "if a man likes a great many contemporary poets, he is, necessarily, a bad critic." But he admits this makes reviewing an unpleasant occupation. Good poetry is "always a white blackbird, an abnormal and unlikely excellence." But, "it is unpleasant, discouraging, unnatural to have to go on saying, about each shining new blackbird: But it's black; I do it, but I hate doing it."<sup>22</sup>

Little Lessons

One further method Jarrell contrived to offset the pain of unfavorable reviews was to use them as the occasion for lectures on the art of poetry. If Jarrell in the fifties lost the ability to arouse himself to the exercise of wit, his compassion and concern survived. The later reviews are less humorous but more helpful. Because of this, some of Jarrell's reviews of books without much interest yield useful insights. Thus, he says kindly that some "poems seem at a very early stage in a poet's career--too early, really, for a publisher to print him and a critic to judge him." He says of Rolfe Humphries, "True poets . . . turn down six things and take the seventh; Humphries always takes the fifth or sixth."<sup>23</sup> Another student of Winters, Lincoln Fitzell, is scathingly indicted--but there is a point being made when Jarrell says, "where poems have hearts, an iamb is beating, here." And he goes on to ask a series of rhetorical questions. "Does the muse come to men with a ruler, a pair of compasses, and a metronome? Is it all right to say anything, no matter how commonplace and pompous and cliché, as long as you're sober, and say what the point is and see that it scans?" He calls this attitude "a learned imbecility, a foolishness of the schools."<sup>24</sup>

Jarrell really wants poets to be bolder, to write better. He is happy when he can say, for instance, of Howard Nemerov's third book that "behind the old poems there was a

poet trying to write poetry; behind these new ones there is a man with interests and experiences of his own."<sup>25</sup> He really does believe in the educative value of criticism (though he is capable of saying to Louis Simpson: "Whatever you do, don't pay any attention to critics").<sup>26</sup> He tries hard to convince Ben Bellitt that his poems are being ruined by rhetoric. He tells Stephen Spender that he is marring his poetry by an assumed simplicity.

The poet is a lot smarter man than his style allows him to seem. (If he were as soft and sincere and sentimental as most of his poems make him out to be the rabbits would have eaten him for lettuce, long ago.) He is a shrewd, notably competent literary journalist, but all his prose intelligence and worldliness . . . is kept out of the poems.<sup>27</sup>

Jarrell leans on Shapiro because "he has made fewer demands on himself with every poem." He admonishes him "to get free of the rut he has ground himself down into."<sup>28</sup> Most of Jarrell's advice to poets worth his time is to be individual, to stop being derivative, to write better poems than they usually try to write.

Jarrell's ultimate interest in useful criticism and lack of interest in attacks for their own sake is shown by the selection of short reviews for inclusion in Poetry and the Age. All these pieces are either encouragements or at least have some point to make about what constitutes good poetry. He cautions Muriel Rukeyser about thinking of herself as, "that terrible thing, a public figure," and encourages her

not to tell her readers so much but to show them. She says some questions are pure and fiery. Jarrell says. "Tell us the questions and we can see whether they're pure and fiery" (PS:165). He urges Josephine Miles "to be possessed by her demon, instead of possessing him so complacently" (PA:221). He believes Richard Wilbur has real talent, but worries that "most of his poetry consents too easily to its own unnecessary limitations." And he warns him that "if you never look just wrong to your contemporaries you will never look just right to posterity." He says to Wilbur, as he says to so many of these poets: "Come on, take a chance!" (PA:253-54).

Sometimes his desire for poets to top themselves seems extreme, and he realized it could take the edge off his praise. He speaks of this in a review of Katherine Hoskins. He says that some impressive stanzas he has just quoted

must have made the reader exclaim, impatient with my qualifications and objections: 'But this poetry has imagination and taste and reality; comes--very plainly--out of an individual's life. What more do you want? Are you insatiable?' Yes, I am insatiable; and the poems do so plainly come out of a special life that I have come to have for them the defensiveness that you have for the works of a relative or friend--I long to see the poet armored in dozens of perfect poems . . . 29

It is this tone in Jarrell's reviews that mattered to other poets because, far from being a malicious ogre, he was extremely generous. He wanted poets to succeed, to become more themselves. This is a singular attitude to have made Jarrell seem unique to his contemporaries.



Praise

Robert Lowell has said "eulogy was the glory of Randall's criticism," and I have reserved his smaller paeans for last. Because his theory of literature was based on the premise that "every writer has to be, to some extent, sometimes, a law unto himself," he could appreciate a wide range of styles (PA.254). Among those poets of whom he wrote appreciatively, the one he probably appreciated least was E.E. Cummings. Jarrell believed he had "a place off at the side, a special place all his own, among the good poets . . . ." The flaws he found in Cummings were those almost bound to accompany so much individuality--a willing shallowness of attitude, a mechanical repetition of experimental formulas, a complacent, arrogant, egocentric disregard of everyone but himself. All of this meant to Jarrell that there was "a great big moral vacuum at the heart of E.E. Cummings' poetry." He refused to regard Cummings' Complete Poems as a feast, but rather as "a picnic which goes on for yard after yard, mile after mile." He said Cummings sat "at the Muse's door making mobiles." This ultimately meant that he was "a monotonous poet." His worst flaw was that "all his work thanks God that he is not as other men are; none of it says, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.'"<sup>30</sup> His greatest virtue was in being "expert in illegal syntactical devices . . . a magical bootlegger or moonshiner of language" (TB. 321).

At the other extreme is Jarrell's great enthusiasm for Tristan Corbiere, a poet in some ways very close to Jarrell in spirit and, because neglected, the more endearing to him. Jarrell admired his rhetorical accomplishment with its "antitheses, puns and half-puns, idioms, cliches, slang, paradoxes" (PA:158). He quotes the line Tu sais: J'avais lache la vie avec des gants and says that "it certainly does temper one's feelings for 'I have measured out my life with coffee-spoons.'" He honors this "contemporary of General Grant's for having invented the genre of Prufrock" (PA:159). He calls Corbiere's range "bewildering," including stoical sayings, cries of agony, "reckless wit," "neurotic self-dramatizing self-analysis," "sardonic exaggeration" (PA:159-60). Best is Corbiere's ironic "consciousness of power," his daring leaps, his idiomatic speech. As is often the case in Jarrell, the life and the work are inseparable. Corbiere as man and poet is admirable because "he lived and died cater-cornered . . . a rock set against all the currents of the world" (PA:163).

Jarrell went out of his way to praise and defend two poets likely to be neglected as too old-fashioned, Walter de la Mare and James Stephens. He said one was forced to make great allowances for de la Mare, but that "you would be a fool not to." "The man who would wish him a different writer would wish the Great Snowy Owl at the zoo a goose, so as to eat it for Christmas." He conceded that much in de la Mare's

poetry would not satisfy a discerning man's idea of what poetry should be, but that that was because "many of the values of good poetry are irreconcilable" (PA:150). Since any one poet cannot provide all, a wise man will take those each poet has to offer and be glad.

If Jarrell appreciated de la Mare as a last romantic, writing about "part of the pre-1914 world," he honored James Stephens for being almost the last folk poet, treating an equally lost world in "eloquent and elevated speech" with "pure and extreme emotion." At his best he wrote a few poems which "could be rolled downhill, and hammered red hot, and dropped in cold water, and nothing would happen except that the hammer would break and the water boil away." It is no surprise that Jarrell would respond to a poet who could write: "And this old head, stuffed with latinity,/ Rich with the poet's store of grave and gay,/ Will not get me skim-milk for half a day." Jarrell loved him for his frank humanity and thought Stephens' production of four or five "really good" poems and a dozen nearly as good ones was as much reward as those can expect who "strictly meditate the thankless muse."<sup>31</sup>

The younger poet Jarrell came to rate most highly in these years, after Lowell, was Elizabeth Bishop. He reviewed her North and South in 1946 and her Poems in 1955, both in superlative terms. He recognized her debt to another favorite, Marianne Moore, admired her technique, but even

more her moral attractiveness. "She understands so well that the wickedness and confusion of the age can explain and extenuate other people's wickedness and confusion, but not, for you, your own . . ." He said that her work was "unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity--and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, I have seen it" (PA:235). Jarrell seems to have surprised even himself in 1955 by compiling a huge list of her best poems--thirty-one of a possible fifty-four. He was reduced to saying, "I don't know of any other poet with so high a proportion of good poems."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, among poets of the generation now approaching fifty, Jarrell's most important rave was for Adrienne Rich's The Diamond Cutters reviewed in 1956. Jarrell, who wrote so often in a female voice, was unusually sympathetic to women poets. He found the young Rich "enchanting," her technique "close to water, close to air." He listed her subjects, all close to his heart, "The past against the present, museums and their contents, Europe and its contents, youth and middle age, morality." He admonished her to avoid rhetoric, especially if borrowed from Auden, though he was delighted to feel her influenced by Kipling and Frost. She was particularly valuable to him because her poetry so thoroughly escaped "all of the vices of modernist poetry," though he said it had "escaped many of its virtues too." All in all he thought her somewhat cautious--"a good poet all too good."

But he said she could afford to wait "to be wild tomorrow," a judgment that her subsequent development seems almost deliberately crafted to fulfill.<sup>33</sup>

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER SEVEN

<sup>1</sup>James Dickey, "Introduction," The Young American Poets, ed. Paul Carroll (Chicago: Follett Pub. Co., 1968), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>"Thornton Wilder," Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Compass Books, 1959), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Randall Jarrell, "B.H. Haggin," The Nation, 169 (Dec. 17, 1949), 599-600.

<sup>4</sup>Kostelanetz, Intelligent Writing, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Ernie Pyle," The Nation, 160 (May 19, 1945), 573.

<sup>6</sup>Randall Jarrell, "These Are Not Psalms," Commentary, 1 (Nov. 1945), 88-89.

<sup>7</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, 166 (Mar. 27, 1948), 360-61.

<sup>8</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Poetry in War and Peace," Partisan Review, 12 (Winter 1945), 123.

<sup>9</sup>Jarrell, "War and Peace," pp. 123-24.

<sup>10</sup>Jarrell, "Chronicle," Mar. 27, 1948, p. 360.

<sup>11</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Poetry Unlimited," Partisan Review, 17 (Feb. 1950), 190.

<sup>12</sup>Jarrell, "Profession," p. 275.

<sup>13</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Recent Poetry," Yale Review, 45 (Autumn 1955), 122.

<sup>14</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, 166 (May 8, 1948), 512.

<sup>15</sup>Conrad Aiken, "The 'Irresponsible' Critic," Letter, The Nation, 166 (June 12, 1948), 670.

<sup>16</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The 'Serious' Critic," Letter, The Nation, 166 (June 12, 1948), 671-72.

- <sup>17</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, 162 (May 25, 1946), 632.
- <sup>18</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, p. 602.
- <sup>19</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, pp. 601-02.
- <sup>20</sup>Jarrell, "Chronicle," May 27, 1948, p. 360.
- <sup>21</sup>Jarrell, "Unlimited," p. 193.
- <sup>22</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, p. 599.
- <sup>23</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Summer 1955, p. 602.
- <sup>24</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Autumn 1955, p. 125.
- <sup>25</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Autumn 1955, p. 126.
- <sup>26</sup>Jarrell, "Unlimited," p. 189.
- <sup>27</sup>Jarrell, "Recent," Autumn 1955, p. 130.
- <sup>28</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, 167 (July 17, 1948), 80.
- <sup>29</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Five Poets," Yale Review, 46 (Autumn 1956), 107.
- <sup>30</sup>Randall Jarrell, "A Poet's Own Way," New York Times Book Review, Oct. 31, 1954, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup>Randall Jarrell, "'The Poet's Store of Grave and Gay,'" New York Times Book Review, Aug. 15, 1954, p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup>Randall Jarrell, "The Year in Poetry," Harper's, Oct. 1955, p. 101.
- <sup>33</sup>Jarrell, "Five Poets," pp. 100-03.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: THE POET CRITIC

For many of us, if asked that old question: "To what or whom do you address your poems?" The truthful answer would be: "To the mind of Randall Jarrell."  
 Adrienne Rich

In addition to his articles on Auden, Jarrell wrote important appreciations of eight poets--Frost, Whitman, Ransom, Williams, Moore, Stevens, Lowell, and one non-American, Robert Graves. It is worth considering what qualities a poet had to possess to be blessed with a favorable response from Jarrell. Statistically, being an American seems practically a prerequisite but these were the authors available to Jarrell, the reviewer. Even more important was being a too little or incorrectly valued writer. This motive of elevating the position of the writer under discussion figures obviously in the articles on Whitman, Frost, Moore, Stevens and Williams. A similar motive may be seen in Jarrell's famous review of Lord Weary's Castle, where he goes to some lengths to greet Lowell at the beginning of a great career. It is at least arguably at work in the cases of Graves and Ransom. Almost all commentators have agreed that his pieces on Whitman, Frost, and Lowell were extremely influential. Frost reportedly once went so far as to confide to Mrs. Mary Jarrell that her husband had "put me on the map" with academic readers.<sup>1</sup> Jarrell's involvement with the making of Lowell's reputation was even more intimate.



This extrinsic excuse for a favorable review--the elevation of a poet's status--was matched by some intrinsic reasons for praise. If a poet showed a concern in his work for the combat of the rational everyday world and the unconscious poetic world of drama, myth, and poem--what I have styled the duel of Morlocks and Eloi in my fourth chapter--Jarrell was likely to approve. He found such a combat figuring prominently in Frost, Ransom, Stevens, Lowell, and to a lesser degree in Moore, Graves and Williams. Only Whitman--lucky to have lived in a different century--exhibited no signs of it. Sometimes Jarrell found this conflict where eyes less anxious to discover it might find it hard to discern. As Jarrell began to write polemics which treated this subject, he became less anxious to discover it in any poet he discussed.

A poet was also likely to please Jarrell if he avoided extravagant violence of matter rather than manner, if he concerned himself more with pity than terror, if he had a sense of quiet desperation and subdued suffering. Lowell is in some ways an exception to this rule, but Frost, Graves, Ransom, Whitman, Stevens, Williams, Moore, are all praised for their humanity, their empathy. Jarrell was sometimes prone to exaggerate these qualities. One wonders if magnanimity is really as prominent in Stevens as he thought, and must be dubious whether "anyone" would think Williams warm-hearted, generous, sympathetic, humanitarian. Qualities

in the critic had a way of getting attributed to the writers under discussion.

Finally Jarrell seems to me to have occasionally been uncritically generous to those least like him in poetic practice, Moore and Williams especially. He rarely objected to anything formal in their work--a kindness not extended to any poet employing a more traditional prosody--Ransom, Stevens, Lowell, Graves. This suggests that, though Jarrell is consistently engaging on these writers whom he liked and helped others to like, he wasn't consistently brilliant and accurate. On Frost, Whitman and Graves he is really impressive; he convinces the reader of the accuracy of his view of these writers, and of his impeccable taste in choosing their best. He is a trifle less so on Lowell, but at his best extremely helpful. However, when I turn from some of Jarrell's remarks on Stevens, more on Ransom and Moore, quite a few on Williams, to their work, I am not always sure I am looking at the same poems he was. Now and then in the heat of an enthusiasm he seems to have seen what wasn't there as clearly as he normally saw what was. One effect of this is something Jarrell would have deplored. It is sometimes more pleasant to read about a poet he has idealized than to read the poet himself.

It is my hope that this dwelling on a few negative aspects of Jarrell's penchant for eulogy at the outset of the chapter will allow me, after looking at each poet he treated, to conclude with superlatives.

None of Jarrell's criticism has been more highly regarded or influential than that on Frost and Whitman. He wrote only one piece on the latter, "Some Lines from Whitman" in 1952, and of several on Frost "To the Laodiceans," also from 1952, is the most important. Both have been frequently reprinted. They are properly considered together not only because of the regard in which they have been held, nor simply because both attempt to remedy the neglect of certain aspects of their subjects, but because their method is similarly daring, consisting largely of annotated quotations.

Of the large claims that have been made for these pieces Delmore Schwartz's may be the largest, that in them Jarrell moved forward to "what may very well be the beginning of a new evaluation of poetry and what poetry has been, what it is, and what it can be" (RJ:189). Berryman made a similar claim that in his best pieces Jarrell's equal attention "to matter and manner constitutes a development from what is called the New Criticism" (RJ:12). Others have been almost as laudatory. Philip Booth called Jarrell "Frost's most illuminating critic," and Leslie Fiedler saw him as a kind of John the Baptist in regard to Whitman, preparing the way for Ginsberg. He also remarked that "it is Whitman the comic poet whom he gave back to us, perhaps gave to us for the first time" (RJ:67).

A dissenting view in the review in The Nation called these articles "two jobs of special pleading . . . which

try by selective quotation, belligerent assertions that poem after poem is 'an immortal masterpiece' . . . to establish Frost in the canon as an American Hardy and Whitman as an American Hopkins." The reviewer concluded that the "most charitable" response to this must be. "Not Proven."<sup>2</sup> This reveals a good deal about the climate of opinion which Jarrell faced in these essays and tried to alter. James Cox has pointed out that through the years of World War II, Frost was regarded, especially by The New Critics, "as being unworthy of serious consideration."<sup>3</sup>

Jarrell was successful in countering prevailing opinion in the case of both writers in part because the time was ripe, but also because of his method. Berryman described it by calling "To the Laodiceans," "nothing much but thirty pages of quoted poems and passages, with detailed comment" (RJ:11). What made such a method work, according to Fiedler, was Jarrell's knack of "finding, with his typical uncanny precision, precisely the lines capable of rekindling our interest and providing a paradigm for new work" (RJ:67). Or, as Cox has noted, "Jarrell's enthusiastic abandon is convincing not because it is merely 'different' from ordinary criticism but because he has the rare wit, taste, and intelligence to sustain his reckless appreciation."<sup>4</sup>

### Frost

Jarrell's first work on Frost was a review in 1947

of Steeple Bush. In it Jarrell discussed the two things that interested him about Frost. that the common view of Frost as a poet was incorrect, and that the common view of him as a man was equally wrong. The half of the review dealing with the poetry, really with Steeple Bush's only first-rate poem, "Directive," was reused intact in "To the Laodiceans." The portion dealing with Frost's character was recycled almost as completely in "The Other Frost."

"The Other Frost" also appeared in 1947 and was ostensibly a review of The Masque of Mercy. However, it devoted only a page and a half of eight to that poem. Rather than dwell on it, which Jarrell pronounced "no great shakes--as you see, its style is catching," he used the occasion to attack conventional views of Frost, praise his virtues, and offer a counter-view, chiefly of the poet's character (PA:34).

Jarrell put readers who were wrong about Frost into three categories. first were academics "who are eager to canonize any modern poet who condemns in example the modern poetry which they condemn in precept." Next came intellectuals who reacted to academic enthusiasm (and note the mutual exclusion of those categories) by neglecting and deprecating Frost "as something inconsequentially good that [they] knew all about long ago." Last were ordinary readers who thought Frost sensible, tender, humorous and found "nothing hard or odd or gloomy" in him. Jarrell said all

the error implicit in such views stemmed from not knowing Frost's work well enough or from "knowing the wrong poems too well." Jarrell's response was to list fourteen best poems "likely to seem . . . too new to be true" (PA:28-9).

The center of the article is occupied by a listing of Frost's virtues, which include writing "about the actions of ordinary men," knowledge of people, the use of "the rhythms of actual speech," seriousness and honesty, "bare sorrow" which does not exaggerate or evade things, subtlety and exactness, "classical understatement and restraint," empathy with nature, imagination, organization (PA:30-1). But the heart of the article is not so much concerned with poetic virtues as personal qualities. The poems are described in terms that Jarrell's academics, intellectuals and ordinary readers would presumably never have thought to apply to them or their author. They are moving and appalling, merciless, grotesque, disenchanting, inspiring, not obvious, optimistic and orthodox, but subtle and strange, flat and terrible, they make "pessimism seem a hopeful evasion" (PA:30).

These traits lead Jarrell on to an investigation of the poet's character. He discriminates between the public mask and the private man who wore it. Jarrell described Frost's carefully cultivated image of "The Farmer-Poet" as "a sort of Olympian Will Rogers out of Tanglewood Tales." He is "The Only Genuine Robert Frost in Captivity" (PA:28). And it was Jarrell's contention that the man did become captivated and

finally captured by his own image. When young he was "a very odd and very radical radical"; he "had a final identifying knowledge of the deprived and dispossessed, the insulted and injured." He surrounded himself with his characters, "living beings he has known or created" (PA:34). Jarrell contrasts all of this with what Frost became. He hints deftly at the Frost now familiar from Lawrance Thompson's biography. Whether as a result of his encounter with the bitch goddess, or the belatedness of her arrival, Frost became "callously and unimaginatively conservative," "an elder statesman like Baruch or Smuts, full of complacent wisdom and cast iron whimsy." This development was accompanied by "an astonishing constriction of imagination and sympathy" and left the poet without the solace of his characters; "the older Frost is alone." This meant, for Jarrell, that the later 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." He said the poet of Steeple Bush and A Masque of Mercy had "long ago divorced reason for common sense" (PA:33-4). Earlier he had married will and imagination.

In a few pages Jarrell says a good deal, rather obliquely, about this man's nature. And this is as good a place as any to point to a curious fact about Jarrell's criticism. He was not averse to employing his psychological background and doing a thorough work-up on a writer. And

yet he subjected only four writers to this sort of treatment--Auden, Yeats, Graves, and Kipling. Perhaps he felt he knew enough about American authors by being one himself not to need to avail himself of this additional technique in their case--settling for a little dry point sketch in treating them instead of a full portrait in oils. Or perhaps--the other side of the same feeling--he felt less at ease with British subjects and so gained confidence by subjecting them to a fuller analysis. Also, their psychological as well as physical distance might have made the application of this technique seem less like an intrusion. Whatever the reason, one can't help wishing Jarrell had given his full treatment to Frost or Williams or Lowell or Stevens.

Having looked at Frost the man in "The Other Frost," Jarrell undertook a full-scale appreciation of the poet in the face of the hostility, apathy and disregard with which he was customarily treated until the fifties. The title, "To the Laodiceans," with its allusion to Revelation 3:16 ("because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth"), makes clear Jarrell's scorn for those who had so far misread Frost, especially for those who had been indiscriminate enough to be taken in by his public face at the expense of a just appreciation of the real character of his work.

The essay begins with a fast reprise of this theme, and then goes on to a reading of several of Frost's best and



least-known poems; the works of the other Frost, the real Frost, who had almost been eclipsed by the "Yankee Editor-ialist" who got "in the way of everything." Jarrell argued that to discover Frost it was only necessary to ignore the invented Frost and look steadily at the Complete Poems. These, Jarrell said, were sufficient "to educate any faithful reader into tearing out a third of the pages, reading a third, and practically wearing out the rest" (PA:40-1).

Jarrell stressed two aspects of Frost in discussing individual poems--first his view of the world, next his technique, especially his diction and tone of voice. Jarrell's method here is essentially a return to that of "Texts from Housman," a close reading of the poems in question. But, as usual, with the assumption that manner proceeds from matter.

Jarrell begins with "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" which he describes as "a very geometrical poem" and which he compares to Housman's "Stars, I have seen them fall." He praises the poem for its tact and restraint, operating "without even the consolations of rhetoric." There is no primal fault in Frost's poem, but there are "the essential limitations of man." This along with isolation, and "the wiping out of man, his replacement by the nature out of which he arose" are, in Jarrell's view, Frost's characteristic themes (PA:39, 43). And he repeatedly compares him with Hardy on these grounds. One or the other theme figures in most of the poems he treats at length--"Provide, Provide," "Design," "The Most of It," "Directive," "Acquainted with the Night."

In "Provide, Provide," he finds "the minimal case for mortality;" in "Design" "the fact that Original Sin is only Original Accident, so far as the creatures of this world are concerned." And he notices that in Frost as in Hardy, "both a metaphorically and literally astronomical view of things is . . . common" (PA:49).

Jarrell also stresses that in the best of Frost the poet is tender, passive, sad, wise, heartbreaking, unreassuring, stubbornly truthful. "Directive," the poem Jarrell seems to have regarded as the capstone of Frost's career, he thought the poet's last word about isolation, extinction and the final limitations of man. And Jarrell's enthusiasm for this poem and others like it points to a fact about his criticism in general. Though he often called for poets to treat the real world of business, machines, people on the street, he didn't want them treated as if by businessmen or mechanics. The poets he loved talked about those subjects, about all subjects, as if they were children, as if human, sufferers in a suffering world. What he wanted from poets was "original response," that of the child enchanted or terrified, in dream or nightmare, safe and at home or lost and far from home. In praise of Graves he said he had "never forgotten the child's incommensurable joys; nor has he forgotten the child's and the man's incommensurable, irreducible agonies" (TB:81). The same might be said of many of the poets he valued--Stevens, Ransom, Auden, Whitman, Frost. And, of course, it is true

of his own poetry. It is what he found especially important in "Directive" and many of the other "best" Frost poems and is embodied in the line he singled out for attention--"weep for what little things could make them glad."

### Whitman

Jarrell wasn't really happy unless engaged in combat. Fighting on the side of neglected poets brought out the best in him. His assassinations early in his career, and his late polemics also show this trait. The essay on Whitman is built around another of these congenial combats. Here Jarrell is at war with evaluations of Whitman as "The Thomas Wolfe of 19th Century democracy, the hero of a de Mille movie about Walt Whitman." He refused to believe Whitman "a sort of . . . Carl Sandburg or Robinson Jeffers or Henry Miller-- or a sort of Balzac of poetry whose every part is crude but whose whole is somehow great" (PS:113-14). And behind this is a secondary skirmish directed against Rahv's "Paleface and Redskin," which pitted James and Whitman in a war "in which you and I will go on fighting till the day we die" (PA:113). This was the one sort of combat likely to be harmful to poets. He objected to a similar tendency in Williams. For Jarrell all poets were always allied in all essentials against the other side and any infighting or civil war among them was counter-productive.

He defends Whitman against the charge of being a crude-and-clumsy-but-wonderful-anyway Redskin by saying that such a creature is impossible, quoting Blake's "all sublimity is founded on minute discrimination." This means 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" (PA:114).

Taking this as his root contention, his essay on Whitman becomes a long list of citations of lines and brief passages chosen to demonstrate Whitman's gift for language. This means showing him to have been attempting to present the real look of the world in words, not to impress by rhetoric. If his language was sometimes peculiar, that was only a further sign of his originality and his attempt to incorporate into poetry things which never before (or only long ago) had been thought to belong there. Whitman's contention that the muse is "Bluff'd not a bit by drainpipe, gasometer, artificial fertilizers," but is "install'd amid the kitchenware" is particularly appealing to Jarrell, who so often worried about the incompatibility of poetry and the modern world.

He also admired Whitman's wit and was shrewd enough to realize that often when we laugh at Whitman's excesses we are laughing along with him. Whitman is compared favorably with Breughel, Berlioz, Hopkins and finally with Homer and the sagas. Jarrell feels him to have been authentically epic, the largest, most comprehensive poet he ever wrote on--free

to stand alongside the large poets Jarrell loved and rever wrote on--Wordsworth, Goethe, Rilke, Proust.

If most of Jarrell's article is involved with pointing to minute particulars--living lines and brief passages, "little systems as beautifully and astonishingly organized as the rings and satellites of Saturn," he also is willing to treat briefly the question of the larger organization in Whitman's work (PA.126). Though he praises Frost and Lowell for their formal organization, in discussing Whitman he is willing to admit that the advantages of form have accompanying drawbacks. He compares Whitman to Tennyson and suggests that the latter's tight, traditional forms forced him to leave out of his poems a good deal of his world that Whitman's looser ones had allowed him to include. It is interesting that English reviewers of Poetry and the Age found this remark particularly objectionable.

The article begins with a discussion of the failure of criticism to adequately treat Whitman and ends in the same way, asserting that critics "have to spend half their time reiterating whatever ridiculously obvious things their age or the critics of their age have found it necessary to forget" (PA:132). Elaborating on this, Jarrell implies that it was in the nature of formalist criticism, then dominant, to succeed with "the controlled, compressed, seemingly concordant contradictions of the great lyric poets," to fail with

larger, digressive, epic writers such as Whitman, Melville, Milton, the later Blake, Dickens.

A final point concerns Jarrell's quotations from both Whitman and Frost. A general principle (which also applies to other poets he discusses) seems to govern his choice of their best works. Because of his belief that the best poetry involves a marriage of will and imagination, or conscious control and unconscious inspiration, the poems he chooses from each poet are those which best balance both qualities. And since each poet begins with different strengths and weaknesses, Jarrell places his emphasis differently in each case. For Frost the danger almost always lay in the poet's tendency to allow his mastery of technique to lead him into being shallowly endearing, merely a performer, or in his tendency to let his egotism betray him into being self-satisfied, doctrinaire, inhumanly complacent. Thus Jarrell chose narrative poems in which his preoccupation with other lives avoided this danger, or poems about inhuman subjects like "Design" which kept the ego out of the poem, or poems expressing real sorrow, defeat, despair.

In choosing lines from Whitman, Jarrell resolutely excluded everything philosophical, abstract, ideal, mystical, and emphasized the solid and pictorial--men bathing, ships sinking, the amputated limb that "drops horribly in a pail," not the abstractly ecstatic but the concretely terrible, all in Whitman that proclaimed: "I am the man, I suffered, I was there."

Ransom

In 1948 Jarrell contributed "John Ransom's Poetry" to a celebration of his teacher and colleague. It is not among his most important criticisms, but shows him at his easy and graceful best as stylist, the quality a defender of Williams against him bemoaned: "The prose alone would hold one's interest even if every one of Jarrell's judgments were flawed."<sup>5</sup>

Jarrell's chief interest in Ransom is in how he evolved from a writer of "broad, direct Southern pastoral" to a writer concerned with "the sweet-sour, good-and-evil, steady struggle of opposites" (PA:105-6). Jarrell was interested in how one more writer concerned with the modern combat of the Morlocks and the Eloi evolved a poetry that turned from "revulsion and condemnation that are the direct response of innocence and goodness to the evil of the world" to a more subtle and oblique treatment of this same feeling (PA:106). Instead of preaching, he turned to showing in little stories "the world as it seems to him." And, at that, he almost ceased showing the side of experience, practicality, and authority at all. His innocent victims often found themselves "forgetting even that they are fighting, and wandering off into the flowers at the edge of the terrible field." Jarrell finally admits that the land of practicality, evil, disintegration that is supposed to be at the center of everything in Ransom becomes "unseen, like the blind spot in the

middle of one's eye" (PA:97, 109). The reader must decide whether this is, as Jarrell maintains, a deliberate strategy, "a principle of style," an attempt at gaining aesthetic distance, or rather, as it may easily seem, a delicate flinching, an artful retreat.

Jarrell is certainly led to make this argument because Ransom's innocents are children "and the old, women--innocent girls or terrible beauties or protecting housewives," characters that might as easily come from his own poems (PA:97). And Jarrell is also attracted to Ransom because he managed to invent a kind of modern poem which employed "classical . . . treatment of romantic subjects" (PA:99). This method allowed Ransom to be "sympathetic and charming, full of tenderness and affection, wanting the light and sorry for the dark" without being accused of sentimentality (PA:99). He was able to reject modern vices such as titillation with evil, the conviction that his age was the last and different from all others, and to treat "the greatest single subject of the romantics, pure potentiality," without being branded old-fashioned (PA:98). He did so by subtle rhetorical means. Instead of one modern method, that of "forcing intensity, of creating . . . arbitrary excitement," he employed another, a sort of irony in which the author stands to one side of the events he describes and seems to claim he "is not feeling much at all, not half so much as he really should be feeling" (PA:98). By this device, Jarrell asserts, Ransom is able to



treat the real world, but indirectly, to tell the truth "but tell it slant." The result was that he "made a small garden, and not a large crater" (PA:100).

Jarrell concludes that Ransom's poems are not "of the largest scope or of the greatest intensity," but that their profession (so candidly) of their own limitations almost excuses this. And his placing of these poems with *Campion* and *Wyatt* and *Mother Goose* also helps a good deal by what it says not only of their qualities but of their size and of their neatness, and compactness of surface--"as unified, individualized and unchangeable as nursery rhymes" (PA:102).

One final trait in this and others of Jarrell's essays may be seen in a kind of crude equation. The better a poet seems to Jarrell, the more he quotes. A poet less self-evidently good requires of the critic less quotation and more argument. Thus, in this essay Ransom is quoted twelve times; in a shorter one on Whitman that poet is quoted over fifty times. Jarrell, instead of letting the lesser poet speak, paraphrases. Both the exordium and peroration of this essay fall into this habit, and some of his little summaries seem almost as good as the poems they summarize--"the friar pouring doubtfully over the bloody leaves of the battlefield," "lovers embracing like acrobats on a tightrope, lovers quarreling and wandering through the dewy night like ghosts" (PA:110). The logical conclusion of the method would be that, with artists of a certain size, no criticism at all

(at least of the sort Jarrell was practicing) would be necessary. And, in fact, he said almost precisely that in discussing Whitman, Stevens, Frost and Eliot.

### Williams

A frequent device of Jarrell's was the use of a little essay-within-an-essay. In discussing Ransom he outlined the vices of modernism for a page; in reflecting on Stevens he turned his attention to the general subject of philosophizing in verse. Similarly, in his introduction to The Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams, he paused to differentiate what three poets--Williams, Moore, Stevens--owed to imagism. As usual, in discussing any grouping of writers, Jarrell's interest was less in what linked them than in what separated them. He wanted his poets individualized as much as possible.

Jarrell said all of these last poets were American in their "feeling that almost nothing is more important, more of a true delight, than the way things look" (PA:239). He traced this feeling in part to the fact that all three did their first work "in an odd climate of poetic opinion" whose

expectations of behavior were imagist (the poet was supposed to see everything, to feel a great deal, and to think and to do and to make hardly anything), its metrical demands were minimal, and its ideals of organization were mosaic (PA:239-40).

Stevens escaped "that pure crystalline inconsequence that the imagist poem ideally has" by his "passion for philosophy, order, and blank verse," Moore by her unique method and "an extension of moral judgment, feeling, and generalization to the whole world of imagist perception." Williams was least able to flee from a strict construction of imagism because of "a boyish delight and trust in things," because he was "the most pragmatic of writers." However, "the world and Williams himself kept breaking into [his poems]; and this was certainly their salvation" (PA:240).

In these few lines Jarrell forecasts clearly what he will find both to praise and blame in all three of these poets. In the case of Williams, Jarrell was consistently delighted with finding the world and Williams and "the familiar pragmatic American these are the facts" in his work and consistently critical of Williams' apparent belief that the facts, that things merely presented were sufficient to constitute a poem. He thought Williams' imagist background had given him for good an "emphasis on truthfulness, exactness, concrete 'presentation,'" and for ill an "underemphasis on logic, narrative, generalization" (PA:249).

Jarrell wrote on more books by Williams than by any other poet, five, and contributed an introduction to his Selected Poems. Only four of these pieces are really important, those included in Poetry and the Age. Berryman thought they showed that "Jarrell overrated William Carlos Williams

. . . considerably" at first and then "came to see" he had (RJ:16). This meant that in his later reviews of Williams, Jarrell faced the delicate problem of undoing some of his earlier praise without undoing it all. It may have been this change in Jarrell's perception, or change in Williams himself, that prompted Jarrell to allow the views of an earlier self to stand side by side with later ones in Poetry and the Age, allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions. Instead of replacing four sometimes contradictory estimates of Williams with a final integrated one, he was content, as he said the poet was, "to rest (or at least to thrash happily about) in contradictions, doubts, and general guesswork" (PA:242).

Jarrell's highest praise in these essays is for Paterson (I), in particular its organization, which he thought:

musical to an almost unprecedented degree. Dr. Williams introduces a theme that stands for an idea, repeats it . . . in varied forms, develops it side by side with two or three more . . . recurs to it . . . echoes it . . . with the greatest complication and delicacy (PA:226).

He demonstrates this using the example of various repeated exclamations (breath!/Breath!, late, late!, Clearly! Clearly!). And he says "if you want to write a long poem which doesn't stick to one subject, but which unifies a dozen, you can learn a good deal from Paterson" (PA:227). Jarrell believes the poem's subject is: "How can you tell the truth about things?--that is, how can you find a

language so close to the world that the world can be represented and understood by it?" (PA:228). He culls quotations which help him elaborate this view of the poem's argument and ends by praising the poem's "extraordinary mixture of the most delicate lyricism of perception and feeling with the hardest and homeliest actuality . . . ." (PA:233). It is a remarkably perceptive reading of a difficult poem, the more so since it was a book review written, no doubt, under the pressure of a deadline.

The introduction to Williams's Selected Poems is predictably full of praise, chiefly for personal qualities rare in the "good poets of our time," such as outspokenness, impulsiveness, and spontaneity. These qualities tend to make Williams himself the "most interesting character in the poems" (PA:242). Jarrell also believes these qualities allowed Williams to write free verse as "accomplished and successful" as anyone's that was characterized by "delicacy and subtlety" (PA:247). But his sheer inventiveness was a two-edged sword.

One thinks about some of his best poems, I've never read or imagined anything like this; and one thinks about some of his worst, I wish to God this were a little more like ordinary poetry (PA:246).

Jarrell believes Williams is worst when he relies on a mere presentation of the world, which often creates poems with "as much reality as the brick one stumbles over on the sidewalk." He believes the poet is best when he does "just

enough, exactly as little as necessary" in the way of refining his raw materials (PA:244-5). For Jarrell that "just enough" extra is often the addition of a minimum of narration to a maximum of observation. Thus, Jarrell singles out such poems as "The Yachts," "A Unison," "The Widow's Lament in Springtime," and "Semblables."

The dark side of Jarrell's criticism of Williams centers in a review of the complete Paterson, his harshest essay on a major poet after World War II. Jarrell begins by saying, "I was afraid I knew what was going to happen . . ." in the later books of the poem (PA:261). The rest of the review goes on to say how justified his dread was. First, the poem as a whole does not "seem to be a whole;" next, the poem seems to grow "steadily worse," (PA:261) Jarrell practically refuses to discuss Book IV. He criticizes the poem's "scrappy inconsequence" and "arbitrary irrelevance," which resembles the middle and later Cantos in practicing "The Organization of Irrelevance (or, perhaps, the Irrelevance of Organization)." He also blames Williams for following Pound in introducing "Credit and Usury, those enemies of man, God, and contemporary long poems." He says the principle behind taking this from Pound while leaving "Santa Sophia or the Parthenon, rhyme or metre, European things like that" might be "I'll adopt your child if only he's ugly enough" (PA: 262-63).

In all, Williams is "one of the best poets alive" but "a very limited" one. More cutting still is Jarrell's remark that "in his long one-sided war with Eliot Dr. Williams seems to me to come off badly--particularly so when we compare the whole of Paterson with the Four Quartets" (PA:264). And Jarrell adds a few more strictures to these in his review of Williams's Collected Earlier Poems. Here he objects to Williams self-regard, which can look like self-pity, and to his looking "at the poets along his street in time . . . distrustfully." He disposes of Williams's preoccupation with "how modern American poets should write poetry," his demand that American poets create a new language by saying that Williams and others "are already writing in it" (PA:269). Finally, Williams is criticized because he "conserves little, . . . distrusts any part of the past that he hasn't made his own particular possession," because he dismisses "the great body of poetic techniques that dead poets, from Homer to Rilke, have invented and refined and perfected" (PA:270-71).

This willingness on Jarrell's part to sift the positive from the negative in Williams's work, to keep trying to take his measure as each book comes out, even if that means contradicting himself, has produced some interesting reactions. Paul Mariani, a partisan of Williams', is led by Jarrell's shifts to interpret them more personally than they deserve. He begins by noting that when Jarrell dismissed Patchen in a paragraph in 1940, Williams wrote to the editors to call

Jarrell's review "a wastebasket full of . . . trite flippancies," to call Jarrell "offhand," one of a group of "professional literary sophomores" whom he detested "as I detest plant-lice."<sup>6</sup> Mariani then suggests that the reviews of The Wedge and Paterson (I) were intended by Jarrell to affect "a truce of sorts," that Jarrell tried, "in his nervous distant way, to make things right with Williams without compromising himself." Mariani then feels free to call Jarrell's work on Paterson (I) "strong praise," and to describe his Introduction as "astute" and "brilliant." When he comes to the review of the complete Paterson, however, he feels compelled to call Jarrell "self-conscious" and "brittle."<sup>7</sup> The adjectives add up to a fairly confusing and, one must feel, inaccurate picture of Jarrell--nervous, distant, brilliant, astute, self-conscious and brittle. Here is a man who makes truces in a war the other side has begun. It is surely more accurate to say, as Donald Davie has, that "belated admiration for Williams' performance in poetry" was "a development inaugurated if by any one person then by Randall Jarrell."<sup>8</sup> And that Jarrell's changing views of Williams represented not truce-making or attempts "to make it right with Williams" but a quality Lowell noted, that "his mind kept moving and groping more deeply" (RJ:104).

Of course, it was unlikely to look that way to the victim. And Williams' responses to Jarrell's reviews show him to have possessed, not surprisingly, rather less than



the inclusive generosity Jarrell ascribed to him. In a letter following the Paterson (I) review, he said he'd been pleased by it.

I invited him out to supper with his wife one night subsequent to his review's appearance and found him pleasant. I haven't heard from him since that day. We had not been particularly friendly before that and can only presume that he had reverted to his old instinctive antagonism. I may be mistaken. What he said in his 'interpretation' seemed to show an extraordinary perception of the elements that went into the composition of the piece.<sup>9</sup>

This was written during the summer of Jarrell's move from New York to Greensboro which may account for the lack of communication. As for the "old instinctive antagonism," one must wonder whether it was Jarrell's or Williams'.

In any case, all writers on Williams agree that he was hit hard by Jarrell's review of the complete Paterson. Mariani says that to Williams it "constituted betrayal."<sup>10</sup> And Louis Simpson and Paul Sherman both feel Williams

. . . never got over this review. Ten years later he was still bringing it up in conversation. Jarrell, he said, was clever but shifty--making his way up in the world and willing to change his opinions.

In another context Simpson says Jarrell's Introduction was "too cheerful," that he exaggerated "the 'largeness' and 'generosity' of Williams' disposition."<sup>11</sup> Remarks like the above make it easy to believe.

If it is true that Jarrell did tend to overvalue Williams and then found it necessary to draw back somewhat,

the reasons are illuminating. First, some of the things in Williams' poems are things Jarrell cared about and he may have been a bit free about attributing his feelings about these things to the poet. There are plants and animals in Williams, but calling them "our brothers and sisters in the world" is pure Jarrell and somewhat alien to Williams (PA: 241). Then there is Jarrell's habitual springing to the defense of the neglected. He was as likely as he said Williams was to speak up "For the underdog, hard" (PA:267). When the underdogs were as ample as Frost or Whitman, there was no need to curb one's enthusiasm. And the time was also propitious for a reevaluation of Williams. As David Perkins has observed, readers in the fifties were predisposed to be attracted to "the deliberately scaled down, the unassuming" in both Williams and Frost.<sup>12</sup>

There was also an issue larger than Williams at stake. American critics since the time of Emerson have called for a native American poetry and American idiom, and Jarrell was always happy to praise someone practicing a distinctly American art. There is also Jarrell's fondness for anyone not willing to submit to authority, a trait he distrusted in Eliot, Pound and others of their generation. Finally, Williams had some qualities Jarrell as a poet lacked and which he was likely to overvalue--chief among them his freedom, not so much from dogma but from standard poetic forms. Jarrell feared, I think, committing "the usual bad poem in

somebody's collected works . . . a learned, mannered, valued habit a little more careful than, and a little emptier than, brushing one's teeth." He, thus, tended to overreact to a poet able to produce "more or less autonomous and irrelevant entries in a Lifetime Diary" (PA:238-39). He envied Williams for being able "to say anything at all without worrying: Can one say such things in poetry? in this particular poem?" (PA:268).

### Moore

Jarrell reviewed three books by Marianne Moore. His discussion of What Are Years? has already been mentioned as one of his first opportunities to write an appreciation. His second, of Nevertheless, contained much that was favorable and which was later included in his review of her Collected Poems, "Her Shield." It also contained a surprisingly harsh discussion of her war poem 'In Distrust of Merits.' He denounced her willingness to see the Second World War as populated by heroes rather than by dying and suffering beings overcome with misery. She was genuinely "caring about the rest of the world," but betrayed by "lack of facts, or imagination" into writing abstractly, emotionally, generally about war. Jarrell said "I wish she had--as the world has--

taken her little animals . . . and shown them smashed willy-nilly, tortured, prostituted, driven crazy . . ."13 His own emotion about the war may have betrayed him here because by the time he reviewed her Collected Poems this poetic "mistake we sympathize with" had managed to infiltrate his list of her best poems. On the other hand, Miss Moore seems to have shared his view to some extent saying that "In Distrust of Merits" was not a poem but "testimony"; "emotion overpowered me."14

Both the first review from 1942 and the last from 1952 were included in Poetry and the Age and serve the same function as the two Frost essays. The first describes the poet's attractive personal qualities, the second her poetic nature. In the first "The Humble Animal," he discusses Miss Moore's morality, her observation, imagination, interest in precision and intricacy, and humility. As in the case of Jarrell's criticism of Frost, the second essay is the more important.

And here, as with the other poets who may be said to have begun as imagists, Jarrell is a little weak. He also repeats the trick of taking on some of the traits of the poet under discussion. In this case, he becomes a trifle general, uncharacteristically abstract, less than precisely accurate in his summations. He begins, as usual, with an attack on those who have thought Miss Moore's poetry not poetry at all and quotes some samples that show her to be "even at first glance a poet." He next complains of those who reject her

for writing poetry that is too modern and offers a few examples that seem to him not modern at all but "plainspoken, highly formed . . . the worthy continuation of a great tradition of English poetry" (PA:188). But here an unaccustomed vagueness enters. He asks: "Wouldn't the poet who wrote the Horatian Ode" admire "Propriety," "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing," and others? Perhaps, but is that the great tradition he refers to? I can imagine the Pearl Poet, Skelton, Spenser, madrigal writers, Donne, Browne, Burton, Blake, Hopkins all admiring various qualities in Miss Moore, but contradictory qualities, and we do not quite arrive at her essence in this way.

Jarrell is better when he discusses her "New York," but it is the only poem he treats at length, perhaps because most of her best poems are too long (and narrow) to be accommodated in a review of this size. And, queerly, most of his praise is not for her admirable formal characteristics, but for her tone, with its wit, precision, intelligence, irony, forbearance. He says she is the poet of general moral statement but gives no examples. He praises her for discovering new subjects for poems, but really doesn't succeed in showing her Picasso-like ability to turn someone else's bicycle into a bull. And his earlier remark that her forms "have the lacy, mathematical extravagance of snowflakes" is pretty and one knows what he means, but it seems subtly off the mark. Her snowflakes often seem to have been made with an erector

set--they are curiously solid snowflakes that you can cut yourself on.

Another atypical flaw involves a paragraph of complaint concerning Miss Moore's cutting of "The Steeple-Jack" in the Collected Poems. Jarrell seems to presume that the readers he is ostensibly introducing to Miss Moore are so well aware of the earlier version of the poem as to be able to follow him when he says "where is Ambrose the student, with his not-native hat? and the pitch, not true, of the church steeple?" (PA:196). The reader for whom this review was intended is likely to be muttering, "who is Ambrose the student, with his not-native hat?" Perhaps this is an unfair complaint, since by 1961 Jarrell had gotten his way: in a revision Ambrose and his hat came back.

By the time of this later review Jarrell seems of two minds about the morality in Miss Moore's work he found distressing in "In Distrust of Merits." He complains that, turning from our own world so much of which is evil, "she has transformed the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm into a realm of good." In short, she has by spurious means found Nature to be "in favor of morality": "she sent postcards to only the nicer animals." And yet, he likes her for doing so, admits the tendency reflects her own character. And yet, again, doesn't she rely "too surely upon this last version of pastoral?" (PA:198-99). In the end, he grudgingly allows her too naive preoccupation with good and evil rather than

trickier questions of greater and lesser evils, because it is artistically useful, being "simpler and more beautiful than . . . life" (PA:204).

Two final subjects interested him in discussing Moore. First--as also in his studies of Frost, Stevens, Graves and others--her general direction of development. Jarrell thought she had begun as too nearly an imagist which led to "a contained removed tone," a "cool precise untouchedness," an abstraction from the "live vulgarity of life," a too completely armouredness, a reliance on "not a tone but a manner, and a rather mannered manner at that." In short, she began as a rather sterile, "modernist, special-case, dryly elevated and abstract" poet (PA:197). Her movement was toward greater openness of feeling and was signalled by a change in style. By the '30s and '40s her poems had ceased to be so idiosyncratic and had come often to have "that anonymous excellence the best poets sometimes share" (PA:198).

Finally, he praised, again rather less concretely than usual, her love of difficulty in formal terms, her "sureness of execution," her originality, her exactness and concision. He said: "such unnecessary pains, such fantastic difficulties! Yet with manners, arts, sports, hobbies, they are always there--so perhaps they are necessary" (PA:202). Certainly Jarrell had a real bias in favor of tricky, difficult, technical poets who challenged the reader to exercise some

cleverness, and poets like Frost who viewed every poem as an opportunity for "some sort of achievement in performance," for a feat of prowess. Lowell, Ransom, Auden, Frost, Graves and Moore all certainly appealed to Jarrell in part because they would have subscribed to this attitude.

### Stevens

It was during the years following World War II, when Jarrell was most active as a critic, that the elevation of Stevens to the first rank of poets was consummated. No doubt Jarrell's two long reviews had a part in that revision of opinion. These two reviews from 1951 and 1955 were of The Auroras of Autumn and the Collected Poems. Their joint argument may be easily summed up. The Stevens of Harmonium was a wonderful poet who, by the time of The Auroras, had fatally emphasized his vices, not his virtues, so that he had become a monotonous, contrived, characteristic philosopher-in-verse. This development had a happy sequel in that the poems of The Rock showed him to have passed through this period and transformed himself, once more creating something new, different, and majestically final in his poems of old age.

In 1951, Jarrell began by once again emphasizing the plight of American poets early in the century. They found their homeland so difficult "that they emigrated as soon as they could, or stayed home and wrote poems in which foreignness, pastness, is itself a final good." Stevens created the



"travel poster" of Harmonium in this mood, in an attempt to supply from elsewhere the necessities of his spirit for "delicacy, awe, order, natural magnificence and piety . . . everything that is neither bought, sold nor imagined on Sunset Boulevard or in Times Square" (PA:134). At the same time he engaged in this exotic souvenir collecting, he criticized the plainness and paucity of America in poems like "The American Sublime," "The Common Life," "Loneliness in Jersey City," "Disillusionment at Ten O'Clock." And, triumphantly, he managed to find in the nothingness he regretted a bare new something on which to build: "man without myth, without God, without anything but the universe which has produced him." He described this "in the last purity and refinement of the grand style" with "pure and touching grandeur" in poems like "Sunday Morning" and "Esthetique du Mal" (PA:139).

At almost the end of the long evolution that created these poems, however, came The Auroras of Autumn, in which Stevens increasingly indulged in a weakness for philosophizing by "thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths" (a method which ran counter to that praised as early as the thesis on Housman of allowing general propositions to flower out of particulars, and even then to avoid explicit general statements in favor of implicit ones) (PA:140). Combined with the one gift Stevens lacked, "the dramatic," this produced a poet who seemed "a fossil

imprisoned in the rock of himself." He ceased to be "possessed by subjects . . . shaken out of himself, to have his subject individualize his poems" (PA:144-45). Instead he wrote poems "less and less differentiated," that became "lost in rhetoric, in elaboration and artifice and contrivance." In an allusion to Oz via Kafka, Jarrell says Stevens' "green spectacles show us a world of green spectacles" (PA:145). And this world is "monotonous" and "characteristic"--two words Jarrell reserves for poets who have ceased to imagine poems and have only come to will them.

Jarrell said Stevens often tried to obscure some of these defects behind a superficial liveliness of language, but he found some of these tricks even more objectionable--"all his tunk-a-tunks, his hoo-goo-boos" were "fun for the tooter, but get as dreary for the reader as do all the foreign words" (PA:192). He did manage to excuse Stevens' falling off by the unattractive home truth that mature poets do not necessarily go on to produce late masterpieces.

A man who is a good poet at forty may turn out to be a good poet at sixty; but he is more likely to have stopped writing poems, to be doing exercises in his own manner, or to have reverted to whatever commonplaces were popular when he was young (PA:147-48).

It must have given Jarrell a good deal of satisfaction in 1955 not to take all of this back but to rejoice in Stevens' avoidance of these melancholy fates, his unexpected production of those late masterpieces after all. Jarrell

began his review of The Collected Poems by concentrating on the new poems which seemed to come "from the other side of existence," poems "calmly exact, grandly plain" (TB:57-8). Foremost among these were "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "The World as Meditation," "The Rock," "Seventy Years Later," "Madame La Fleurie," "Prologues to What is Possible." In them Jarrell said Stevens' had abandoned old bright tones for low, grave new ones" (TB:62). And Jarrell concluded this third final bare style had been worth the overelaboration of the intermediate one which had been necessary to produce it. Jarrell still could not approve the "monotonously meditative" middle style with its "monumental wastes," but concluded "a tree is justified in its fruits" (TB:64-5).

He attempted to discover how these late fruits had come about and suggested two explanations. First, Stevens' habit of "just fooling around," of waiting for poems, writing poems, had the advantage of finding him prepared when this final "period of the most marvelous inspiration" arrived (TB:66). Second, and more important, were some traits of character. Beneath the brio of Harmonium there always lurked a certain inhumanity in Stevens, a stark rationality, "a certain indifference" to the object which he proposed to exploit for the sake of his poem, little of "the narrative, dramatic, immediately active side of life" and a lot of "the freedom of removedness, of disinterested imagining." All of this led to a poetry "of qualification, of concession, of

logical conclusion" (TB:61, 63). In one of his best metaphors, Jarrell says "Stevens didn't want the poetic equivalent of sonata form," instead went back "to earlier polyphonic ways, days when the crescendo was still unvented" (TB:65). At their worst all of these traits led to the meditative, philosophical monotony of The Auroras of Autumn.

But in The Rock, Stevens had found something real and inescapable in old age to meditate on and "the unwanted inescapable indifference of age" took the place of "conscious indifference" allowing his meditations on the plain sense of things to be "as much in their manner as in his" (TB:61). Stevens had become humanized by the imminence of his death, had eliminated his rhetorical kaleidoscope, which often allowed him to be "clear, bright, complicated" while working with "little content and less emotion."

This narration of Stevens' development toward the last poems seems quite accurate to me, but Jarrell was so delighted by the surprising appearance of this late, spare, quiet humanity that he probably overstressed it. There is a rightness about Jarrell's saying that Stevens has

under the translucent glazes, a Dutch solidity and weight . . . surrounded by all the good things of this earth, with rosy cheeks and fresh clear blue eyes, eyes not going out to you but shining in their place, like fixed stars (TB:67).

But is Stevens really "the poet of well being?" I will grant him a "large mind," but wonder about his "free spirit." Jarrell praises him for making a Europe of his own and inventing "many new tastes and colors and sounds," for speaking "with the authority of someone who thinks of himself as a source of interest," for not feeling "it necessary to appeal to us, to make a hit with us . . . to sweep us away, to overawe us" (TB:71). All reasonable descriptions, but is it true that the man who wrote many poems which look "greyly out at 'the immense detritus of a world/That is completely waste'" is also the same fellow who never "sold man and the world short?" Finally, is Stevens "that rational, magnanimous, voluminous animal, the elephant . . . ." (TB:67)? Jarrell insists on that magnanimity often, but the elephant of Stevens seems to me as likely to look self-absorbed. But this is only a quibble about Jarrell's already acknowledged habit of attributing some of his own ebullience to others. When he sums up Stevens as having dignity, elegance, intelligence, it is unnecessary to quibble. And when he concludes by comparing some of Stevens's lines to others of Rilke's, we see how high he has been elevated in the critic's pantheon.

### Lowell

Lowell was the only poet of Jarrell's own generation upon whom he lavished his full treatment, the only poet he praised highly who was his personal friend. He eventually

met Stevens, Graves, Moore, Williams, and Auden, but only after he had already written on them.<sup>15</sup> Ransom and Frost he knew before writing on them--but the one as a paternal figure, the other as self-erected monument. Lowell was his near contemporary, roommate, correspondent, student, rival.

The two poets lived together their first year at Kenyon on the second floor of Ransom's house. Over the next twenty-five years they corresponded and competed unceasingly. They reviewed each other with generosity. We have seen that in his year at The Nation Jarrell printed twelve of Lowell's poems to two of his own. For Jarrell, Lowell was the best poet to appear since Auden. For Lowell, Jarrell was "the most brilliant critic of my generation."<sup>16</sup> And, "the most heartbreaking English poet of his generation" (RJ:103).

Jarrell's reviews were of Lowell's first three books, The Land of Unlikeness in 1945, Lord Weary's Castle in 1947, The Mill of the Kavanaughs in 1951. Because of their friendship, he had already been watching Lowell's evolution for six years when the first book was published. He thus was in a good position to point to Lowell's sources in Milton, Hopkins and Tate and to point to what was strongest in the poet--his language and his picture of what "could not have been said, guessed at, or tolerated before . . . our world--political, economic and murderous . . ." He praised Lowell's "harshest propositions" for flowering "out of facts." And he respected the poet for aspiring not to be an irresistible force, but

an immovable object whose violence at its best stemmed not from effects but from "an obstinacy of temperament" (PA:215). These virtues were accompanied by defects--parodies of quotations which at times became "a senseless habit," a "severe crudity that suggests Michael Wigglesworth," "harsh and arbitrary . . . exercises" in a seventeenth century manner. But Jarrell thought these likely to be temporary flaws. He chose "The Drunken Fisherman" as the best poem of this first volume and anticipated great things to come.<sup>17</sup>

Three years later when Lord Weary's Castle incorporated some of these poems and added new ones, Jarrell was able to incorporate parts of the earlier review in a new one that announced that his faith in Lowell had been justified. The review is built around Jarrell's contention that Lowell's poems all have behind them the combat between "the realm of necessity," that "blinds or binds," and a realm of freedom where everything is "free or open" (PA:208-9). He suggests these poems exhibit one or another of two possible movements--from freedom to constriction, from necessity to liberation. As late as 1970, R.J. Fein, who thought Jarrell Lowell's "best critic," called this observation "one of the most perceptive and useful statements ever made about Lowell's work for it applies both to the entire range of Lowell's career and to sections of it."<sup>18</sup> Berryman, who also wrote on this volume and called it "one of the stiffest books to review that has ever appeared," praised Jarrell for

"the most masterly initial review of an important poetic work . . . of this century so far" (RJ:11-12). Kazin has said much the same, remarking that when he read it he knew that he was reading "something that Coleridge might have written about Wordsworth" (RJ.95).

Steven Axelrod's recent study of Lowell suggests that this comparison was especially apt. In his Paris Review interview Lowell was asked if he sent his work to friends for advice before publishing and said "I always used to do it, to Jarrell and one or two other people."<sup>19</sup> Now, Axelrod's study shows that, in the case of Lord Weary's Castle, Jarrell's editorial aid was particularly important.

Jarrell carefully went over the manuscript of Lord Weary's Castle, providing Lowell with a heavy marginal annotation which explained and evaluated individual poems, lines, and words with marvelous subtlety and rightness. Although Jarrell never suggested particular changes (except occasionally in the matter of punctuation), Lowell systematically altered lines and words disapproved by his friend, thereby strengthening his poems immensely.<sup>20</sup>

This strengthening took two forms, according to Axelrod. First, Jarrell knew Lowell's debt to Tate well and "had to caution Lowell to delete the more blatant 'Allen' effects." On the other hand, "like Tate, he insisted that Lowell test his ideas by experience."

Jarrell demanded that the propositions flower out of "facts," that ideas be firmly grounded in particular details, and that the details be



accurately and convincingly described. In sum, Jarrell helped to save Lowell from imitation, doctrinaire thinking, and obliviousness to brute reality.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, some of what Jarrell finds to praise in this book was there because he played the role of midwife to it. Other qualities that he is enthusiastic about are by now familiar. He praises Lowell's knowledge of history, and his use of period pieces as a way of "getting a varied, extensive and alien experience into his work," though he is troubled by Lowell's tendency to turn out tours de force (PA:215). And he admires the matching of Lowell's intensity with the mitigating factor of his interest in organization. He thinks the poems traditional in this respect as compared with "semi-imagist modern organization," but enriched by "stream-of-consciousness, dream, or dramatic-monologue types of structure." He calls this mixture of traditional forms and interior consciousness "a unique fusion" that deserved to be called "post- or anti-modernist . . . ." (PA:216). Finally, he again praises Lowell's strength of language, the factual reality of things in the poems and the usefulness of Lowell's Catholicism as a "frame of reference" whose terms are "human, affective and effective as literature" (PA:218). Ultimately, and characteristically, he regards Lowell at his best as a dramatic poet.

Jarrell's few words of censure in this review have to do again with Lowell's violence, "grim, violent constriction only partially transcended," "savage satiric effects," a

muscularity which is sometimes "mechanical or exaggerated" (PA:213). This does not prevent him from concluding by saying "almost any living poet would be pleased to have written" some of the poems. Jarrell's choices as the best in the volume are "Colloquy in Black Rock," "Between the Porch and the Altar," and "Where the Rainbow Ends." He thinks ten more worthy of mention. "One or two," he says, "will be read as long as men remember English" (PA:219).

Having written this rave, Jarrell was to stress some of his reservations in his last review of Lowell four years later. He finds two of the poems from The Mill of the Kavanaughs "mannered" and objects again to violence and idiosyncrasies "so peculiar to Mr. Lowell" that "David and Bathsheba in the Public Garden" is spoiled by them (PA:254). These complaints represent a refrain that runs throughout the review. Lowell too often does "All the Things He Does Best," that is, allows his will to bully his imagination or occasionally the opposite, "is either having a nightmare or else is wide awake gritting his teeth and working away . . . ." (PA:260). This demand that a writer harmonize will and imagination: the yin and yang of poetic composition, was, of course, one of Jarrell's invariable themes. And Lowell's reliance on will leads him to be surprisingly "academic and clumsy" at times. The other extreme of nightmare could create, in "The Mill of the Kavanaughs," "monotonous violence and extremity . . . as if it were a piece of music that

consisted of nothing but climaxes." In it, too, people act "in the manner of Robert Lowell"; the poem was "a sort of anthology of favorite Lowell effects." Ultimately Jarrell concludes that the narrative effects Lowell is straining after are "beyond his powers and knowledge," but politely admits that they are also beyond every other living poet, though Frost had been up to them thirty years earlier (PA: 258-59). Years later in the Paris Review, Lowell agreed that "what Jarrell said is true; nobody except Frost can do a sort of Chaucerian narrative poem that's organized and clear."<sup>22</sup>

Despite all these reservations, Jarrell finds two poems in the collection awfully good, "Mother Marie Therese" and "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid." He says the first was Lowell's best poem and the second better. He particularly admires "Mother Marie Therese" for being a success just where these other poems fail, for being

The most human and tender, the least specialized,  
of all Mr. Lowell's poems; it is warped neither  
by Doctrine nor by that doctrine which each of  
us becomes for himself; in it, for once, Mr.  
Lowell really gets out of himself (PA:255).

Similarly "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid" manages to make a virtue of some characteristic Lowell vices "the harshness and violence, the barbarous immediacy, that often seem arbitrary . . ." And here those qualities are set off by passages which are "tender and beautiful" (PA:257).

Jarrell did not again review Lowell, but at first he apparently disliked Life Studies, thought its change of

direction a mistake, and (at a period when he was finally, after a dry spell, about to publish a volume of his own verse), may have been more than a little envious of its reception.<sup>23</sup> If so, he recovered himself by 1962 when he reserved the final place of honor in his lecture "Fifty Years of American Poetry" for his old friend. He then commended Lowell's ability to shock, to make "even quotations and historical fact a personal possession," to make life into poems. He praised "his wonderful poem about Boston Common" and "the pathos of the local color of the past" in Life Studies (TB: 332-33). And he said Lowell's astonishing ambition and willingness to learn had permitted him to move from his early tours de force, "monotonously wrenched into shape," to later poems "allowed . . . to go on leading their own lives." To the two poems cited above from The Mill of the Kavanaughs, Jarrell added "For the Union Dead," "Ford Madox Ford," and "Skunk Hour." He concluded with a remark typical of his generosity to his chief contemporary: "You feel before reading any new poem of his the uneasy expectation of perhaps encountering a masterpiece" (TB:333-34).

### Graves

Robert Graves' poems are pleasant, rather interesting, nicely constructed, noticeably his own; he is agreeable, sensible and able; so it is really unpleasant to decide that he is not a good poet, that even his best poems

just miss. There is too much comment, fancy, anecdote; one thinks, 'sensible.! rather witty! nicely put!' but never how moving or extraordinary or right.<sup>24</sup>

I have quoted the above because it is Jarrell's entire review of Graves's first Collected Poems in 1940. That might have been the end of Jarrell on Graves if the latter hadn't written "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," which Jarrell as editor ran in The Nation and which he called, in a review of Poems: 1938-45, "one of the most beautiful poems of our century" (PA:223). It would be an exaggeration to say that one good poem was enough to make Jarrell your partisan for life, but it could certainly win you his regard and keep him interested. One feels, for example that Marianne Moore's remark that what was important about America was "not the plunder,/but 'accessibility to experience!'" bought her Jarrell's good will in perpetuum. The same might be said of "To Juan." In reviewing the volume containing it in 1946, Jarrell said no other poem of Graves's was so good, that he hadn't "withered into truth, but has been gnarled and warped and furrowed into an extraordinarily individual rightness that is sometimes 'true' as well." He concluded that Graves was "one of the few poets alive who can write a first-rate poem, and one of the very few who are getting better as they get older" (PA:223-24). That last was a trait always endearing to Jarrell, especially after his disillusionment with Auden's development. The publication two years later in 1948

of The White Goddess certainly did nothing to harm Graves in Jarrell's eyes.

All of the above means that by 1955, when a new Collected Poems appeared, Jarrell was primed to write one of his longest and liveliest essays on "Graves and The White Goddess." It is in two parts, the first concerning "what his poetry seems to me," the second "how his life . . . has made his poetry and his understanding of the world into the inimitable, eccentric marvels that they are" (TB:77). Thus, Jarrell proposes to treat the complete Graves in two senses--as poet and as analyst. He reveals his reason as well as his credentials for doing so by remarking that he had read thirty of Graves's books, beginning with Good-bye to All That when he was fifteen, and that the variety of his output made it "foolish to talk only of the poems" and the contents of some made it "foolish to talk only of the writing" (TB:77).

Jarrell thought Graves's poems fell into natural categories--in descending order of importance: White Goddess poems; "poems about extreme situations; expressive or magical landscapes; grotesques; observations . . .; love poems; ballads or nursery rhymes." He found The White Goddess poems Graves's "richest, most moving, and most consistently beautiful" and described them as "different from anything else in English" (TB:90-1). Unsurprisingly he thought "To Juan" best represented them. Next most important were poems of "extreme situation" and Jarrell said "To Graves, often the most

extreme situation is . . . the mere seeing of reality" (TB:83). The same, of course, might be said of other poets Jarrell admired--Lowell, Frost, Auden, a part of Ransom, Hardy, Housman. And, as in many of them, what made Graves's treatment of the nightmarishness of reality admirable was his "objectively summarizing, held-in, held-back lines," the contrast of manner and matter (TB:83). These poems of extreme situation often overlapped both observations and grotesqueness because "much of life comes to Graves already sharpened into caricature." And, Jarrell says, such poems force the reader to say: "If I weren't looking at it I wouldn't believe it" (TB:86).

Among Graves's less extreme poems, his observations, "witty, detailed, penetrating, disabused, tightly organized, logical sounding," and his landscapes which "express . . . emotional or physiological states" are admired. Often they are "tidier, certainly, than life and our necessities," but they do, "with elegance and dispatch, all that they set out to do." Jarrell concludes that such "complete, small-scale successes are poems in which Graves excels. Few poets have written more pretty-good poems" (TB:89). Finally Graves is congratulated for being strong where Auden was weakest, for being "the best rewriter and corrector of his own poetry that I know . . . Usually the changes are so exactly right . . . that you're puzzled at his ever having written the original" (TB:88).

Several of the above traits--the rewriting, the steady improvement, the late advent of The White Goddess poems, the combination of dry terseness and tortured extremity--bring Jarrell to ask how Graves had done it, what Graves is, and so to the second half of his essay. One can easily imagine the author of "Woman," and "A Quilt-Pattern," being particularly gleeful about getting a chance to bring his psychological training to bear on the excavator of the White Goddess.

He begins by acknowledging the importance of a distinction Graves makes between his two-sided nature. From his father's side, which he scorns, he acquires his mask as "the terse, professional, matter-of-fact, learned Head of the Regiment--Colonel Ben Jonson of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, so to speak." From his mother's side he imagines himself to have acquired "all that is spontaneous and emotional in his own nature," as well as his poetic and historical skills. Jarrell, however, detects beneath this distinction "a kind of family romance projected upon the universe" to create the theory of The White Goddess, an "objectively grotesque account of reality" which has nevertheless produced "some of the best poems of our time" (TB:99).

To show how this has come to pass Jarrell undertakes a long psychoanalytic reading of Graves aided by Good-bye to All That which allows him at last to say that Graves's theories, when compared with other psychological observations --the unconscious, myths and so on--are "not astonishing



at all, but logical and predictable." In short, Jarrell's examination of Graves's family, schooling, war experiences, marriage to a feminist, and long relationship with Laura Riding allows him to conclude that "few poets have made better 'pathological sense'" (TB:99). He concludes that Graves has projected his "anima upon the world" and identified himself with it, that all affect, libido, mana have been concentrated in "The Mother-Muse" and that "love and sexuality" have been "inseparably intermingled with fear, violence, destruction." Jarrell remarks that The White Goddess is thus "as real as the unconscious which she inhabits" (TB:109). By projecting her upon the universe "The once-torn-in-two Graves becomes sure, calm, unquestioning" and can

Think of himself as representing the norm,  
as being the one surviving citizen of that  
original matriarchal, normal state from which  
the abnormal, eccentric world has departed (TB:111).

It also allows Graves "to show with impersonal historical objectivity" that all this is so, that the disliked father is really an usurper and that "everything has an original matriarchal core" (TB:111).

Whether this is all so, whether Jarrell's analysis is correct must be left to the reader, but it is a great deal of fun, does offer one way of "explaining" Graves, and, what's more amusing for our purposes, is yet another appearance of Jarrell's favorite conception of a poet stranded in modernity

who has invented a way of making poets right, and all who disregard them wrong.

Not surprisingly, the victim of this analysis was not as delighted as the reader is likely to be. He was in America about a year later when Jarrell was at the Library of Congress, met him, was grateful for the praise of his poems, but took exception to Jarrell's description of his relations with *The White Goddess*.<sup>25</sup> In a 1957 lecture on this subject in New York, published in Five Pens in Hand, he defended himself against Jarrell and Freud, launching a wonderful tu quoque assault against the latter as having himself projected "a private fantasy on the world."<sup>26</sup>

His defense is full of the "extraordinary erudition" Jarrell ascribed to him as well as a good deal of irrelevant red herring dragging and rebuttal as when he says Jarrell must not be too healthy himself if he regards Graves as being the victim "of a sort of schizophrenia in thinking so highly of women."<sup>27</sup> It does not, at last, dispose very adequately of Jarrell's analysis but is a charming and revealing piece of work, and one must be delighted that Jarrell's essay called it into being.

It may also be said in favor of Jarrell's analysis that he does not attempt to diminish Graves by it, a frequently succumbed-to temptation in this sort of work. Rather, he ends by deliberately asserting that Graves "furnishes an

almost incomparably beautiful illustration of the truth of Freud's 'The power of creating myths is not extinct . . . !' (TB:112).

### Conclusion

One reviewer of Poetry and the Age complained that it was really only a collection of reviews masquerading as a comprehensive survey of modern poetry, and that this was proved by the inclusion of reviews of people like de la Mare and the lack of any assessment of Eliot and Yeats. While this view applies, to some extent, to Jarrell's first book, the addition of his Auden pieces, his early work on Yeats and late work on Graves and Stevens means that he did, in fact, treat most of the important poets in English of the first half of the twentieth century. And Jarrell's long lecture, "Fifty Years of American Poetry," fills in a number of remaining blanks. I have neglected to discuss it in detail because it is essentially a brilliant scissors-and-paste job compiling remarks from earlier essays. It is notable, however, for some new remarks on Pound, Eliot, Roethke, Lowell, and others.

Still, though it can be argued from Jarrell's complete critical works that he deals comprehensively with poetry in English up to 1950, it is true that he rarely wrote an independent essay unless he could convince himself there was a genuine need for it. When he did discuss Eliot, he did so

in one witty page remarking that the reasons the period gave for valuing Eliot may have been wrong but that the poet was the right one and that the age could be satisfied with itself. This lack of any need to exalt Eliot is probably the reason Jarrell never finished or published an essay on Eliot he began in the middle fifties. (He did call Eliot the most interesting poet of the century "from a psychoanalytic point of view," and one can only regret Jarrell's failure to subject him to such an analysis) (TB:314).

A related point has to do with the spasmodic and occasional nature of Jarrell's criticism; of the above reviews and essays, eight appeared between 1945 and 1947, chiefly when he was allied with The Nation. During the next three years he wrote only two pieces. Then in 1951-52 when he was lecturing and about to collect Poetry and the Age, he produced seven more. In 1953-54, none. Then, recruited at the recommendation of Brooks and Warren as poetry reviewer of the Yale Review, he ended with four important pieces in 1955.

All this points to the fact that Jarrell wrote criticism chiefly when asked to, went through periods of critical activity which were externally motivated and also went through periods of discouragement about criticism, got bored with it, and produced none. Mrs. Mary Jarrell has said even when he had an assignment he would procrastinate endlessly, make notes but refuse to sit down and write until the last minute when, in a marathon session, he would finally produce

the required review. Even worse about lectures, he would typically leave them unfinished so that when the deadline arrived, he would be forced to extemporize the finales.<sup>28</sup> And to produce a piece, real enthusiasm on his part was also required. Toward the late fifties there were few poets he hadn't treated that he still wanted to. He did contemplate the piece on Eliot and two on Larkin and Berryman but never wrote them. One can bemoan this fact and the lack of articles on Goethe, Rilke, Proust and others he loved, but to wish Jarrell a more productive, systematic critic is to wish him a different critic.

Though he always began with the premise that the bulk of any poet's production would be of little worth, there had to be a solid, inescapable residue of loved and admired poems to generate an essay or review, which meant Jarrell could not or would not write endlessly on just anyone. And there was an accompanying distrust of the necessity of any criticism that finds expression in his work on Whitman, Frost, Stead, Kipling. He really did believe that any considerable work of art would sooner or later find its place with readers regardless of criticism and so could afford to wait confidently-- just as he could afford not to write a criticism. The better the art, the less need to recommend it.

Still, there was such empathy in Jarrell, not only for works of art but their lonely creators that he could rarely resist the chance to try to do neglected living artists a

service. The art could wait, the artists couldn't. It was these for whom he reserved his criticism. And this points to another fact. His criticism really did in many cases perform the rare function of getting the work under discussion read, of prodding taste in new directions. His audience was not essentially other critics but other poets, reviewers, readers. Berryman remarked at Jarrell's death that he expected a spate of bad poetry to be published now that it was safe from Jarrell (RJ:15). The other side of that remark is that he really did help living poets improve--Lowell and Adrienne Rich have said it was true for them.

Finally, it is no surprise that some of the best day-to-day reviewers of a variety of things learned from Jarrell. He has been quoted by William F. Buckley, Sydney Harris, Pauline Kael, John Leonard. Professionals like these, who must convey the sense of something new in limited space to a large and diverse audience, could clearly learn something from Jarrell about how to do that with style, dash, and individuality.

Something like the same point can be made about the remark of Andrews Wanning, who taught the undergraduate lecture course in poetry at Harvard between 1946 and 1951, that he "borrowed most from Jarrell." Surely over the years Jarrell's criticism has taught a number of teachers how to convey to neophytes a sense of the excitement and adventure to be found in modern poetry. And beyond critics, reviewers,

poets, teachers, there are surely numerous readers who know few other critics who came because of Jarrell to say with him --at least sometimes--"poets are best." That is because there is something perpetually attractive about the critic who invites the reader, who says, "Here's something admirable. Here's what I admire about it. You read it too and see if you don't agree." Such criticism seeks to include, not exclude the reader. It is a style of criticism that is timeless, that founds no schools but is always welcome, the work of a poet first, and critic after.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER EIGHT

<sup>1</sup>Personal Interview with Mrs. Mary Jarrell, Apr. 10, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Poetry Made Exciting," The Nation, 177 (Sept. 5, 1953), 196.

<sup>3</sup>James M. Cox, "Introduction," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Cox, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Mariani, William Carlos Williams: The Poet and His Critics (Chicago: American Library Assc., 1975), p. 120.

<sup>6</sup>William Carlos Williams, "Poets and Critics," Partisan Review, 7 (Summer 1940), 247-48.

<sup>7</sup>Mariani, pp. 70, 96-7, 120.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Davie, "Theme and Action," Parnassus, 6 (Summer 1978), 64.

<sup>9</sup>William Carlos Williams, Selected Letters (New York: McDowell-Obolensky, 1957), p. 159.

<sup>10</sup>Mariani, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup>Louis Simpson, Three on the Tower (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975), pp. 300, 231.

<sup>12</sup>David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1976), p. 595.

<sup>13</sup>Jarrell, "War and Peace," p. 122.

<sup>14</sup>"Marianne Moore," Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 74.

<sup>15</sup>Interview: Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>16</sup>"Robert Lowell," Writers at Work: Second Series, p. 340. See note 14 above.

<sup>17</sup>Jarrell, "War and Peace," p. 125.



<sup>18</sup>R.J. Fein, Robert Lowell (New York: Twayne, 1970), p. 149.

<sup>19</sup>"Robert Lowell," Writers, p. 351.

<sup>20</sup>Steven Gould Axelrod, Robert Lowell. Life and Art (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 50.

<sup>21</sup>Axelrod, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup>"Robert Lowell," Writers, p. 366.

<sup>23</sup>Interview; Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>24</sup>Jarrell, "Dry Season," p. 166.

<sup>25</sup>Interview: Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>26</sup>Robert Graves, Five Pens in Hand (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), p. 62.

<sup>27</sup>Graves, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup>Interview. Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>29</sup>Letter received from Andrews Wanning, July 27, 1978.

## CHAPTER NINE: LAST THINGS

I have become sick of criticism. When I read a critique I become horrified. Are there really on this earthly sphere so few clever people that there is not one able to write criticism?. . . . I even begin to think we have no critics because criticism is not necessary.

Chekhov

Polemics

As Jarrell was fond of observing of various poets' work, "There is one story and one story only" at the heart of all his polemics. In one way or another all of them discuss literature in the modern world, literature after World War II, literature now. And all express a belief in the isolation of the artist or intellectual in this world. They deal once more in an opposition of Morlocks and Eloi--a pitting of past against present, the few against the many. They approach this problem either directly by paying attention to the poet's plight, as in "The Obscurity of the Poet," "The Intellectual in America," "Poets, Critics and Readers" or indirectly by assaulting the enemy, as in "The Age of Criticism," "The Taste of the Age," "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket."

Considered together these polemics constitute, as Lowell said, Jarrell's Culture and Anarchy, but might also be said to be his Civilization and its Discontents, his Decline of the West, or Anti-Intellectualism in American Life. Of course, these essays are not intended to be original

speculation, nor a scholarly working out of proofs, as these remarks might suggest. They are home truths illustrated, commonplace complaints reinforced with wit and style, cries from the heart. Kazin has criticized them for "taking on so many large social issues" without assuming responsibility for their "minute particulars" (RJ:93). But there were social scientists, such as Ernest van den Haag to whom Jarrell alluded as one of his sources, ready to orchestrate a full-scale analysis of popular culture. Jarrell's intentions were different.

All seven of Jarrell's polemics were written during the decade of the 50's and their immediate source was in simple observation of cultural trends of the time, particularly the rising power of popular culture. His awareness of what cultural life was like for the average American was probably increased by a number of factors. In 1947 he ceased being a New York magazine editor and became a professor at a North Carolina women's college, which placed him in contact with academics and eighteen-year-old girls instead of professional writers and publishers. Also, his marriage to his second wife in the early 50's made him the father of two growing young girls, and that provided him with experiences which appear in the polemics--talks with high school teachers and Christmas caroling expeditions. And the polemics were certainly influenced by his own experience of what it meant to be a poet and intellectual in America.

However, as much as these essays belong to and paint a picture of postwar America, some of the factors which brought them into being may be traced to an earlier time. For example, the decade that formed Jarrell was the nineteen-thirties, and it was a period filled with social activism and intellectual commitment. The times were sufficiently dire that a supine acceptance of things as they were was exceptional. By contrast, the status quo mattered in the nineteen-fifties. Stage fright accompanied America's emergence as a leading player on the world scene. This and the witchhunting of the period seem to have contributed to a certain intellectual timidity and claustrophobia. Success, as symbolized by safety in the suburbs, became the period's ideal, and was to be won by fitting into a system. Jarrell, like many formed in the turmoil of the thirties, found the fifties bland and stultifying.

One further influence on the creation of the polemics may exist. Jarrell's childhood was spent in a family taking sides, with parents separating. He sought escape in the "one cure for Everychild's diseases/Beginning: Once upon a time there was," sought it in literature where it was possible to trade "another's sorrow for our own" (CP:106-7). But that necessarily led to or stemmed from another isolation or estrangement because, as Jarrell has noted, the artist is different. "It is ugly ducklings, grown into swans or into remarkably big, remarkably ugly ducks, who are responsible

for most works of art" (TB:19). And the duckling's beginnings may be "magical," but they are also "miserable, embarrassing." Thus, for Jarrell, the world was early seen in terms of unhappy division. On one side were himself and all other ugly ducklings who were, in secret, swans allied against all the parents who did not even think to give their ugly ducklings books or piano lessons, who were wrong and too foolish to know it and against whom there was no revenge possible, from whom no recourse existed except to escape deeper into the ideal land of art and imagination.

For these reasons, it is no surprise to find Jarrell enamoured of thinkers who cut the world the same way, into night and day, into culture and civilization. And the artists who especially appealed to him were those in whom he found similar sides taken. It is also unsurprising to find him inventing a community or kingdom of art in which all the inhabitants are good. In his assassinations, Jarrell is the archangel who guards the gates of this realm from interlopers. In his poems of the war, it is not the sides the adults take that matters. The real division is between large, impersonal forces that kill, as represented by The State, and those powerless ugly ducklings who are killed.

When these various factors coveredged in the fifties, Jarrell's polemics became all but necessary. So he began to protest the anxious conformity and homogeneity of the time. The neglect of the artist in favor of the celebrity was bad:

the fact that "true works of art are more and more produced away from or in opposition to society" was worse. But in such a war it was still possible to take sides. In a speech at the National Book Awards in 1958, he put it more crudely and starkly than in any of his published polemics.

If you'd rather read Wouk than Frost, say so, do so. But you can't rather read both: you can be for God or you can be for Mammon, but you can't be for God and Mammon both at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

And he urged his audience to enlist actively.

It's better to read Proust or Frost or Faulkner than to read 'Peyton Place.' Better in every way; and we ought to do all that we can to make it possible for everybody to know this from personal experience. When we make people satisfied to read 'Peyton Place,' and satisfied not to have read Proust, we are enemies of our culture.<sup>2</sup>

What really frightened Jarrell about the fifties was the power of the enemy, of popular culture and its paraphernalia. He feared the loss of "the body of common knowledge that educated people (and many uneducated people) once had," a blurring of the distinction between art and trash (SH:32). What was at stake, he thought, was not just art, but the reality it was concerned with. "Seeing is believing; and if what you see in Life is different from what you see in life, which of the two are you to believe?" (SH:78).

The polemics are very good at making such points and were necessary 'for Jarrell, I think, in one other way. He needed to go through the process of understanding the new

world he found himself in, not just in order to protest against it, but in order to find the material of his later creative work. After his war poems (roughly speaking) came a long dry spell in which he seemed not to know what to do next. Having produced the criticism of the 50's he was ready to picture, in poems, the new environment he deplored in the polemics, and to return to the earlier world that was lost. He did the former in poems like "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" and "Next Day," poems which say: "In the suburbs there you feel nothing or lost or alone." He did the latter in "The Lost World" and "The Player Piano." And in "The Bat-Poet," he presented a bat unable to be like all the other bats, unable to like "Peyton Place and South Pacific and Liberace and What's My Line."<sup>3</sup> In much of his last work, Jarrell implied what the polemics said, that it is

better to be alive and maladjusted on the margin of things than dead and adjusted in the middle . . . Better to be a Peeping Tom, and enjoy it, than to sit with your minister in front of the 64,000 Dollar Question till your eyes glaze, and the mortician comes for you, and the long day is done. . .<sup>4</sup>

To Jarrell the contemporary scene after the war looked a good deal like a Sumerian description of the land of the dead: "The house where people sit in darkness, with dust as their food."<sup>5</sup> Discovering that this was so and deploring it in polemics eventually allowed him to make use of it artistically.

The excuse for treating the polemics as a group rather than individually has already been implied--they do tend to run together, to be interchangeable because they are all aspects of one protest. In them there are recurrent strains: --the enforced isolation of the artist-intellectual from the rest of life, the belief that the past was better in this respect than the present, the belief that a characteristic of the age was the processing of words in an industrial manner--the use of language to lie, coerce, to categorize and narrow experience, pleas for standards, traditions and (in a seeming paradox) for individuality and truth rather than conformity and platitudes. The recurrent enemies in this vision are homogeneity, advertising ("The great new science of beating the sense out of words"), the media, sociological manipulation of society, critics, normalcy.<sup>6</sup>

The best of the polemics are probably "The Age of Criticism" and "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket." Both are wonderfully organized with nothing superfluous, and maintain an even, masterly, comic tone of voice. The first two-thirds of "The Taste of the Age" are marvelous, but it then falls into repetitiousness. "The Intellectual in America" is nothing more than an extended, dramatized joke, but a marvelous one. "The Obscurity of the Poet" has wonderful moments but is marred by what can look like dips into bathos or self-pity and by a lame attempt at a clever, highbrow, pseudo-obscure poem that ends being a pseudo-poem so awful



it undermines the argument of the piece. If this is a poem, perhaps the rabble is right in scorning poets. "The Schools of Yesteryear" is amusing but also suffers from a kind of arch-coyness and abounds in apparent fallacies that one would like to force Jarrell or his gruesome, lemonade-commercial mouthpiece Uncle Wadsworth to defend. "Poets, Critics and Readers" has its moments but is really a rehash of the matter of the first two polemics--"Obscurity" and "The Age of Criticism."

Still, if only two of these pieces are wholly satisfying in structure, all have fetching moments and abound in wit. Few such essays are able, as these are, to make the reader laugh aloud. And if the observations seem commonplace, that does not mean they are dated or invalid. Much literary criticism continues to seem machine-made. There is more than ever a tendency to dispose of troublesome individuals by categorizing them out of consciousness, to convert them into nasty stereotypes. The Instant Lit. business is bigger than ever, as is the marketing of aesthetic standard brands. And if, as many have said, the 70's have been intent on recapitulating the 50's they have certainly done so in regard to the joyless, materialistic hedonism Jarrell found at the heart of the earlier decade. It is also stunning to find so much that made up Jarrell's list of deplorable popular culture artifacts still alive and well--game shows, Liberace, Herman Wouk, the Reader's Digest, TV Guide, Elvis, Elizabeth Taylor.

And for every little example that has dropped off his list, there are replacements by the battalion--for Peyton Place, hordes of Jackie Susanns, for Bishop Sheen, whole networks of evangelists, for Norman Vincent Peale, the self-help industry, for the lowly Charge-A-Plate, plastic credit unlimited. The tendencies Jarrell feared in their fairly benign beginnings have come to full malignant flower, as he saw was inevitable.

As in his poetry reviews, what is best in these polemics is not so much the familiar general arguments, but Jarrell's facility with telling little details like those above, his eye for the specific image that can serve as metaphor for the ghastly whole, along with the style and tone of presentation that makes the everyday object seem suddenly like something he has invented--too inherently witty and grotesque an object to be true. Examples could be multiplied at will, but some cry out for mention. The fantasy that makes up the bulk of "The Intellectual in America" is typically imaginative. Here the tale of Diogenes and Alexander the Great is retold in American terms with General Eisenhower as Alexander trying to recruit Diogenes as a speechwriter, and the crowd looking askance at the egghead in the marketplace. The idea is charming, and little touches such as the House Committee on Un-Macedonian Activities even better. Equally wonderful is the use Jarrell makes of Queen Victoria as a symbol of the past in "The Taste of the Age," the way she recurs throughout.

Victoria on a D.C. 7 looks unbeatable, until she returns on a quiz show. In the same essay is the invention of

the children's book of the future: a book that, pressed, says I'm Your Friend; teaches the child that Crime Does Not Pay; does not exceed thirty words; can be used as a heating pad if the electric blanket breaks down; and has three-dimensional illustrations . . . flavored with pure vanilla (SH:31-2).

A ready-to-hand image Jarrell makes his own has an important place in "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket." It is from Life or Look, "a double-page photograph of some family standing on the lawn among its possessions: station-wagon, swimming-pool, power-cruiser, sports-car, tape-recorder. . ." and so on for a long list.

It was hard to get everything on two pages, soon it will need four. It is like a dream, a child's dream before Christmas; yet if the members of the family doubt that they are awake, they have only to reach out and pinch something. The family seems pale and small, a negligible appendage, beside its possessions; only a human being would need to ask: "which owns which?" (SH:70).

In the same essay a stand-by generator comes to stand for all those possessions, perfect in its expensive pointlessness. This essay also features a lively metaphor for a Gresham's law of aesthetics, the cheap thrills and sensory overload of pop everything driving out Herrick and Henry James.

If a man has all his life been fed a combination of marzipan and ethyl alcohol--if eating, to him, is a matter of being knocked unconscious by an ice cream soda--can he, by taking thought, come to prefer a diet of bread and wine, apples and well-water? (SH:82)

And, as usual with such central images, this one recurs later in a clinching position when Jarrell in the guise of a tourist says to Americans,

as for your dinners, I've never seen anything like them; your daily bread comes flambe. And yet--wouldn't you say--the more dinners a man eats . . . the hungrier and more uncomfortable some part of him becomes. . . . (SH:88).

Jarrell's ability to draw the reader on, to make him want to quote and quote these examples, which piled on one another make up the polemics, to lure him into satisfaction with so much style and wit and technique, brings us once more to the objection that he never really argues anything, never proves.

Were all other times really so much happier? Did rustics really sit around reading Spenser while their contemporary counterparts are mindless at the disco? Even Jarrell's favorite source of the deplorable bad news about popular culture, Ernest van den Haag, admitted that Shelley's unacknowledged legislators "wrote for a few who would take the trouble to understand them," and that in Dante's day "there was no mass market for anything, good or bad."<sup>7</sup> Isn't Jarrell, a great populist at heart, a victim of the rising (or at least widening) expectations of mass culture? Isn't this desire for a mass audience for "the good" a product of the development he deplors? Probably. And Kazin has said this logical flaw and others like it produced "philistine derision" when A Sad Heart at the Supermarket was proposed

for a National Book Award, "for Randall was complaining to his audience about itself--almost as if to be justified by its unfriendliness" (RJ:93). This may be true, but it may be almost unsporting, too, to ask him to be reasonable and orderly and logical. Some have thought these essays shrill, but at their best they are hugely alive: jumping-up-and-down acrobatics full of outrageous hyperbole and cascading effect after effect. At his best, Jarrell did make it all go so fast that nobody noticed the fallacies or not until they were long gone. His intention was not the logician's, to get you to agree with his propositions one by one, but the satirist's, to get you to the point where you blink at the quotidian world as if waking from a dream and say: "My God, how did I get into this crazy place." And that is not achieved by a tidy presentation of syllogisms but by the force of technique and personality. Jarrell's motto as polemicist is Whitman's "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, we convince by our presence."

If the polemics are as charismatic as I have maintained (and as hilarious), if they are, as Lowell said, "dies irae sermons, strange ones that cauterized the soul, and yet made us weep with laughter," why did the book which contains most of them, A Sad Heart at the Supermarket, fail? For it did fail. As Lowell said, it "had a condescending press." It did not sell particularly well and, alone of all Jarrell's work, has been allowed to go out of print. Lowell's answer

was that "a banal world found them banal" (RJ.107). Mrs. Mary Jarrell believes a falling out between Jarrell and his then editor, Hiram Haydn, meant that the book was less promoted than it otherwise would have been.<sup>8</sup>

I think one other possible explanation is worth considering as well. The essays in the book appeared between 1955 and 1960. But the book was published in 1962. I think it possible that the natural audience for the book may well have considered the essays witty and accurate during the second term of Eisenhower, but somehow unkind and foolish in the heady early days of the cultural renaissance of Camelot. It is easy to forget, after twenty years more of popular culture, and in the wake of the great disillusionment with the best and the brightest, how thoroughly the world seemed changed at that time. Even Jarrell was not above enthusiasm for the new frontier. In accepting a National Book Award in 1961, he said:

It is good to have Fred Waring in the jukeboxes, but it was sad to have Fred Waring, nothing but Fred Waring, in the White House too. It is a pleasure to think that for the next four or eight years our art and our government won't be complete strangers.<sup>9</sup>

Like most such pleasures, that was a fleeting one. But the pleasure to be derived from the polemics remains, if anything enhanced by the cultural landscape of the aging century. It is hard not to believe that there is still an audience for these essays. There is much in them which was

true for their time, much more that remains true, and funny, and wildly imaginative. At least one reviewer has remarked that people like Jarrell and Ortega Y. Gasset and others do better than sociologists what sociologists are supposed to do for their culture.<sup>10</sup> And there is a fact I have neglected to mention to recommend these essays. They were courageous in a time when it was dangerous to be different. To make even gentle fun in print of Eisenhower, McCarthy, anti-intellectualism, loyalty oaths, Robert Hillyer (hunter of poetic witches) was no small thing in these years. And, in truth, there may be seen behind Jarrell's attacks on literary critics who exalt themselves above creative artists, an implicit attack on all the McCarthys, J. Parnell Thomases, Gordon Grays who presumed to judge screen writers, physicists, foreign service professionals. Jarrell, in effect, was saying that it was not poets but critics who locked poets in mental institutions, denied security clearances, held men standing on constitutional rights in contempt of congress, instituted blacklists. If criticism was "the poetry of prosaic natures," witchhunting was the government service of prosaic natures (SH:108).

### Fiction

Jarrell's first review in 1935 was of fiction. He also reviewed Kafka's Amerika in 1940, and then wrote on virtually no fiction until the last years of his life. Between

1958, when he left the Library of Congress, and his death in 1965, Jarrell experienced a creative renewal which produced two volumes of poetry, children's books, translations. This meant that he wrote little criticism at the end of his life. He was all but finished with poetry criticism by 1956 and wrote his last polemic in 1960. However, as an editor of anthologies for Anchor Books he did return, thirty years after his start, to fiction. There are six introductions to fiction from this period worthy of attention. "Stories" from the Anchor Book of Stories came first in 1958. Three introductions to Kipling stories followed: "On Preparing to Read Kipling" in 1961, and "The English in India" and "The English in England" from 1963, companion volumes of early and late stories. Also in 1963 came "Six Russian Short Novels." Finally there was a long introduction to The Man Who Loved Children by Christina Stead. The reissue of this novel in 1965 was more or less a personal triumph for Jarrell, who had promoted it untiringly since its first appearance in 1940, when it was ill-received. And he would, no doubt, be much gratified to learn that this book, forgotten until its 1965 reissue, figured by 1979 on lists compiled by Lillian Hellman and Denis Donoghue of the greatest works of the century.<sup>11</sup>

All of these volumes represent personal enthusiasms of Jarrell's. His fondness for Kipling dated back to his childhood when he'd imagined himself to be Kim. Toward the end of his life he'd begun teaching a Russian literature class. Of



these introductions, the best are probably "Stories," "On Preparing to Read Kipling," "The English in England," which is characteristic in its championing of Kipling's neglected late stories and late style. They are filled with customary wit, allusiveness, glee. The Kipling piece once again allows Jarrell to revalue a neglected writer. The later pieces are less spirited, less filled with unique personal knowledge, and occasionally too long.

"Stories" gives a view of the impulse toward fiction and the limits of fiction that by now will come as no surprise. It is of a piece with Jarrell's theory of poetry, and is expressed in Freudian terms. A story for Jarrell "tells the truth or a lie--is a wish, or a truth, or a wish modified by the truth" (SH:140). As he says of Kipling's stories: "If the reality principle has pruned and clipped them into plausibility, it is the pleasure principle out of which they first rankly and satisfyingly flowered" (TB:282). And this formulation is good not just for the direction of Kipling's development as a craftsman, but also expresses the limits within which stories operate. Jarrell insists that since stories are written by and in order to satisfy "a doubly or triply-natured creature," most will be "compounds almost as complicated as their creators" (SH:141). A story that is all id or all reality principle will be rare. But the polarities implied by such a process will abound. So stories will contain knowledge about the world or compensate for that

knowledge. They will imagine the best or tell the worst or will take pleasure in "repeating over and over, until we can bear it, all that we found unbearable" (SH:143). And that contradiction of dark and light in stories or their intermingling means to Jarrell that they will be "as much haunted by the chaos which precedes and succeeds order as by order" (SH:145).

The complexity and contradictions of the sources of art also means that stories will come in all shapes and sizes, but that at the extremes will either approach to a view of the world where nothing is important, where everything simply is, where life simply lives--Sterne, Twain, Rabelais, Cervantes are some of Jarrell's examples--or to an opposed view of a world "in which everything is a happening,"

where everything that occurs is either a dream told as if it were reality, or reality told as if it were a dream, and where the story is charged up to the point at which the lightning blazes out in some nightmare, revelation, atrocity. . . . (SH:159).

At this end of the continuum Jarrell places Doestoevski, Tolstoy, Kafka.

Finally, Jarrell, in this essay and others on fiction, reiterates a view from Ruskin that one who expects perfection in a work of art knows nothing about art. It seems clear from various remarks that Jarrell felt the longer a work of literature became the less perfection was likely, the more contradiction. Thus poems, which he says may be "the bones

of stories," have most chance of perfection, novels the least (SH:148). He goes so far as to rewrite an old definition of the novel into "a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it" (TB:50). In the same vein he remarks that good writers

are going to write it their way, not ours, that they are never going to have the objective, impersonal rightness they should have, but only the subjective, personal wrongness from which we derived the idea of the rightness (SH:121).

Or, as he says of Kipling, the immortals "oversay everything" (SH:138).

The anthology which accompanies this view of fiction is satisfyingly idiosyncratic. It is heavily weighted in favor of continental literature: of thirty-one selections only nine are English or American. It also includes, along with the expected short stories, poems by Frost, Blake, and Wordsworth, "The Book of Jonah" from the Bible, an Andersen and a Grimm tale, anecdotes from Chuang T'zu.

One reason the introductions to Kipling, Stead and the Russians are less high-spirited and combative than the standard Jarrell essay or review has to do with their being introductions. For once, in these essays, Jarrell is not engaged in an effort at getting the reader to go out and buy a book. The reader has presumably already bought the book if he is reading the introduction. This means the essays are less highly charged than usual.

In "On Preparing to Read Kipling," Jarrell does begin with a few pages of argument concerning the neglect into which Kipling had fallen, and these remarks are arguably the best of Jarrell on Kipling. The rest of this first article is built around the notion that Kipling "was a great genius; and a great neurotic; and a great professional" (SH:119). Jarrell spends some time on his genius and professionalism, but is most interested in tracing the influence of his neurosis on his work. And to do so he draws heavily on Kipling's autobiographical volume, "Something of Myself." This same emphasis is also apparent in the introductions to the early and late stories. In all three Jarrell is at pains to show how Kipling, after an idyllic early life in India, became "someone who had spent six years in a concentration camp as a child" (SH:126). And the influence of that division in messages-the-world-sent-him influenced his subsequent creative life. This is clearly familiar and congenial ground for Jarrell, and we expect great things of him as he proceeds to show how the split in Kipling is apparent in his crudely great early stories, his plain, and often inhuman middle work, his narrowed, specialized, obsessive, but "extraordinarily skilled" late stories (TB:292).

The surprise is that his three pieces do not really begin to compete with Edmund Wilson's "The Kipling Nobody Reads," published twenty years earlier. Jarrell's pieces cover the same ground and make almost the same psychological

argument about the effect of Kipling's dual childhood on his work as Wilson's essay. Wilson's is more detailed, particularly in regard to the middle, authoritarian, imperialist Kipling. The only place at which Jarrell might be deemed superior is in his discussion of the late English stories and that is probably because he feels "many, even most, of Kipling's best stories are stories of the English in England" (TB:279). Even here the list of stories the two writers choose as best are nearly identical. (It might be noted that if Jarrell didn't beat Wilson at his own game when writing on Kipling, he did invent, for his time, the game Wilson played in "Fruits of the MLA" and other similar anti-critical essays.)

Still, if these essays on Kipling are not the best criticism of Kipling nor among Jarrell's best criticism, they and the essay on the Russians do, in what they stress, reaffirm some preoccupations of Jarrell's. Kipling and some of the Russians interest Jarrell for dealing with the Freudian family romance, for projecting private obsessions with striking verisimilitude onto the world (a trait he also admired in Auden and Graves). Likewise, the lists he gives of themes in Kipling are as informative about Jarrell as about Kipling. Jarrell loves these stories in which "revenge, love, disease and death, the supernatural, extreme situations" predominate (TB:281). Many of these themes are familiar from Lowell, Graves, Frost, Auden--poets with whom

he felt a special kinship. It is unsurprising that Jarrell admired an author whose work is filled with "tortures, hauntings, hallucinations, deliria, diseases, nightmares, practical jokes, revenges, monsters, insanities, neuroses, abysses, forlorn hopes, last chances" (SH:127). Nor is it surprising that he admired Gogol, whom he said Kipling resembled, a writer who, under the guise of writing about "everything that is petty, uninteresting and insipid," wrote fairy tales (TB: 235-36). Similarly his Turgunev is a man who has been "made to feel himself superfluous" and who has a "passive gloom" (TB:251).

In all of these writers and in Stead there are themes of inescapable importance to Jarrell. Kipling is commended for his knowledge of women and so might be many of these writers. And, of course, that was a good for Jarrell, who so often wrote of women's lives in women's voices. These writers also commonly treat childhood and especially all that is worst in it, all that adults have forgotten and don't want to be reminded of. There is also an emphasis in these authors on "a family's private life" which is "immoderate and insensate," an understanding that children don't know what it's like to be adult, and adults "have forgotten what it is like to be a child. . . . Children shout and play and cry and want candy; grownups say Ssh! and work and scold and want steak" (TB:31-2).

Jarrell in his criticism of critics approvingly quotes Eliot's remark that

I see that I wrote best about poets whose work had influenced my own, and with whose poetry I had become thoroughly familiar, long before I desired to write about them. . . . The best of my literary criticism . . . is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop (SH:l03).

If Jarrell's work on fiction is not necessarily his best, it did deal with authors whose themes were those of his late poems and tales--women's lives, children's lives, tortured families, the narrowness of life, extreme situations. Perhaps these criticisms of fiction are in a way more nearly a by-product of his poetry workshop than his criticism of poetry.

His last introduction, to The Man Who Loved Children, is an exhaustive piece of work which discusses the characters of the Pollit family in turn--Henny, Sam, Louie, the younger children--the book's style and structure, its virtues and defects. There is much to admire in the essay, particularly offhand, brilliant, throwaway remarks that suddenly illuminate an aspect of the book or of the world. For example, Jarrell says that the reader is moved to say of the incomparably self-centered Sam: "Oh, please don't let me be like Sam!" (TB:l2). That is quite right, as is Jarrell's contention that the book's last one hundred pages are surprisingly and unconventionally the novel's best pages. They almost make the preceding three hundred unnecessary.

There is also Jarrell's judicious view that this book is plainly good and more, that "it does a single thing better than any other book has ever done it . . . makes you a part of one family's immediate existence" (TB:51). The particularity of this favorable judgment is of a piece with some others in these fiction essays. For instance, he admits that the Kipling he so loves obviously can't compete (really) with Tolstoy and Turgenev but Jarrell can commend his last stories because they "have set up a kingdom of their own, a little off to the side of things, in which they are incomparable" (TB:292). And if Kipling's changes weren't always happy, Jarrell still admires him for the ability to change, to go through stages rather than stagnate, a trait he also admired in Auden, Moore, Graves, Stevens.

And finally, a trait shown in the above remarks is one endearing in a critic. Though faced by logic and objectivity and rational comparison to admit so-and-so is not as great or large or comprehensive as such-and-such, Jarrell is always willing to take it back in love. "There are greater writers than Turgenev, better books than A Sportsman's Sketches as long as we are not reading it; but for as long as we read, it is beyond comparison" (TB:252). That is, I suspect, the tone in which all critics talk to themselves about some favorite book or author. But, how seldom they talk that way aloud.

Nevertheless, there is a loss in Jarrell's last fiction pieces of his most characteristic tone--a certain sagging,





a less taut, comic, carefree feeling to these pieces. He falters now and then and qualifies more, and is abstract. This may have been caused by his writing about fiction rather than poetry. Or it may have simply meant that Jarrell was no longer young. It is hard to go on being an enfant terrible or a lethally innocent enthusiast at fifty. A resignation creeps into some of these essays--painfully. Instead of being combative or deadly about the neglect of The Man Who Loved Children, Jarrell says simply in a subdued way that

it has been out of print for many years, and Christina Stead herself is remembered by only a few readers. When the world rejects, and then forgets, a writer's most profound and imaginative book, he may unconsciously work in a more limited way in the books that follow it; this has happened, I believe, to Christina Stead. The world's incomprehension has robbed it, for twenty-five years, of The Man Who Loved Children; has robbed it, forever, of what could have come after The Man Who Loved Children (TB:49).

There is some of the flat terribleness in this that Jarrell found in several of the Russians he wrote on and in Kipling, and which haunts his own late poems.

Reading these last fiction criticisms one cannot help thinking of Hannah Arendt's memoir of Jarrell, which she ends with the observation that he

had nothing to protect him against the world but his splendid laughter, and the immense naked courage behind it.

When I last saw him, not long before his death, the laughter was almost gone, and he was almost ready to admit defeat. It was the



And yet sometimes  
 The wheel turns of its own weight, the rusty  
 Pump pumps over your sweating face the clear  
 Water, cold, so cold! You cup your hands  
 And gulp from them the dailiness of life (CP:300).

The poet and critic, who despaired of the world and wanted it changed comes at last to a place where a sentiment he admired in Rilke becomes his motto: "In the end the only defence is defencelessness." This may have had the effect of silencing the critic, but it produced a poet who could say:

Really I began the day  
 Not with a man's wish: "May this day be different,"  
 But with the bird's wish: "May this day  
 Be the same day, the day of my life (CP:353).

And the step from that resignation that becomes acceptance into the favorite realm of any Freudian or worn-out combatant in the daylight world is a short one. The work of the critic done, the man forgets antagonism, right, and wrong and lapses into poetry where all begins and ends and:

All the bright day, as the mother sleeps  
 She folds her wings about her sleeping child (CP:315).

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER NINE

<sup>1</sup>Randall Jarrell, "About Popular Culture," National Book Awards, New York, Mar. 11, 1958. Ms. in Jarrell Collection, Library, Univ. of North Carolina, Greensboro.

<sup>2</sup>Jarrell, "About."

<sup>3</sup>Jarrell, "About."

<sup>4</sup>Jarrell, "About."

<sup>5</sup>The Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. N.K. Sandars (Balt., MD.: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 89.

<sup>6</sup>Henry James, The Ambassadors (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1960), p. 204.

<sup>7</sup>Ernest van den Haag and Ralph Ross, The Fabric of Society (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957), pp. 177, 179.

<sup>8</sup>Interview: Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>9</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Acceptance Speech," National Book Awards, New York, Mar. 14, 1961. From Collection of Mrs. Mary Jarrell.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Fein, "Jarrell's Critical Insights," Southwest Review, 47 (Autumn 1962), 348.

<sup>11</sup>"Immortal Nominations," New York Times Book Review, June 3, 1979, pp. 13, 51.

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