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Randall Jarrell was a poet who made painstaking efforts to reproduce in his writing a total sense of reality. He was an interpreter and a translator. His artistic interpretations of the demands of life are an extraordinary way of defining the ordinary, so that even tedium can become interesting and despair can have its own dignity. His translations are chiefly from the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, a German poet with whom Jarrell had much in common as to style, despite the separation of time and locale.

What one thinks of as characteristic of Jarrell's poetry includes a style which works with the vocabulary and diction of everyday life, and with themes which never quite get away from the poignance of lost things--loss of one's youth, of loved ones, of love itself, of a desire even for living. This kind of loneliness is found in both Jarrell's own choice of themes as well as in his choice of poems which he translates into a language he himself spoke--that of a well-educated middle-class American.

A sampling of the poems Jarrell never published, until they were collected posthumously in his Complete Works, should be illustrative of his characteristic choice of language and theme, and should demonstrate how Jarrell served as an interpreter of ordinary living. His worksheets for a translation of Rilke's "The Widow's Song" further demonstrate Jarrell's meticulous efforts not only to translate the sense of the poem faithfully, but to put into his own language what Rilke had said so well in German. Through all these poems the reader will find the artist at work explaining life with the simplicity and truth it deserves.

REALITY AND THE ARTISTIC VISION: A STUDY OF RANDALL JARRELL'S POETIC STYLE

by

Jean Rodenbough

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INTRODUCTION

A dominant characteristic of Randall Jarrell's poetry is his preoccupation with the commonplace in his vocabulary, imagery, and thematic material. Jarrell describes everyday experiences in a corresponding simplicity of everyday language, so that the "dailiness" of his writing is his conscious effort to explain his vision of the real world in a simple but artistic tongue. Through the personae of the child, the soldier, and the aging man and woman, Jarrell peoples his poems with speakers who are predominantly from an educated middle class, sensitive to life and perhaps puzzled or dissatisfied by what it means. His language is easily understood because it seldom falls into esoteric or slang expressions. It is his use of an artistically presented, understandable vocabulary that speaks of human experience in its hopes and despair, achievement and loss, which insures for him a lasting place in literature.

This thesis will examine style and subject matter in those poems of Jarrell's which were not published until they were collected in The Complete Poems. An awareness of how he treated themes dealing with life, death, aging, art, reality, and loss in what might be called his "practice poems," can aid in a greater understanding of his completed work. In addition, his worksheets of the translation of Rilke's "The Widow's Song" will be examined for what they can reveal about Jarrell's careful search for the best words. What may seem to a casual reader to be effortless writing by Jarrell is really the fruit of pages of revisions and sincere

artistic endurance. It is hoped that the study will provide for the reader a greater appreciation of Randall Jarrell's ability to translate reality into artistic but comprehensible language.

Chapter I discusses Jarrell's use of language and thematic material as they belong to a tradition of the artistic blending of the poetic and commonplace vernacular. Chapter II includes explications of some fifteen or more poems which formerly had not been published because of their fragmentary or unfinished nature. These poems demonstrate Jarrell's treatment of his characteristic themes, and the explications explore his attitudes about the relationship between art and reality. The worksheets for one particular poem, a Rilke translation, is examined in Chapter III, to provide a specific example of the manner in which Jarrell's skill at artistic expression makes for a moving description of the real situation of human loneliness and emptiness.

CHAPTER I

JARRELL'S PLACE IN A LITERARY TRADITION

Randall Jarrell greatly enriches the tradition established by poets like Wordsworth, Whitman, and Frost, with his poetry in the common vernacular. Affirmation of the commonplace is Jarrell's strength. He was no innovator in his writing in the sense of breaking new ground or setting precedents, but he was a master at taking what was already at hand in regard to literary style and renewing it so that the ordinary word takes on richer meanings.

Because his poems reflect the conflicts of life in deceptively plain speech, one may think this poetry is really prose in metrical disguise. It is more likely that his prose--the essays, the stories, and the novel--is unmetered poetry, because his writing is rhythmic whether it is an essay or a poem. In writing of Marianne Moore, Jarrell discusses this relationship of prose to poetry. "And even if the rhythms were those of prose--these are not--wouldn't we rather have poetry in prose than prose in verse?"[1] It is risky to single out comments separate from their contexts, but two statements Jarrell makes about Whitman and Frost on subject matter and language reveal what Jarrell admired and what he achieved in his own poetry. To Jarrell, Walt Whitman was a significant contributor to an American tradition of writing about common events: "Sometimes Whitman will take what would generally be considered an unpromising subject . . . and treat it with such tenderness and subtlety

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[1]Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 168.

and understanding that we are ashamed of ourselves for having thought it unpromising."[2] His intense admiration for Robert Frost comes largely because of the New Englander's contribution to this tradition: "Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech. . . . There are real people with their real speech and real thoughts and real emotions."[3]

Karl Shapiro, another contemporary of Jarrell, defines the middle-class poem and vernacular in poetry as it has evolved by the mid-twentieth century:

> This is the camera with the built-in lie. This is the lens that defies the truth. There's nothing for it but to write the large bad poem in middle-class magic. Poem condemned to wear black, be quoted in churches, versatile as Greek. Condemned to be unsung by criminals.[4]

Shapiro himself belongs to the tradition of the poet of the everyday, and understands well what Jarrell has accomplished. Of his writing style, Shapiro says that Jarrell "fears loftiness and bombast like the plague. . . . Charm is overwhelming in all his writing."[5] He goes on to explain how that charm worked through a commonly understood language: "Jarrell is the one poet of my generation who made an art of American speech as it is, who advanced beyond Frost in using not only a contemporary idiom . . .

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[2]Jarrell, p. 110.

[3]Jarrell, p. 28.

[4]Karl Shapiro, The Bourgeois Poet (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 47.

[5]Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, Library of Congress Lecture (Washington, D. C., 1967), p. 2.

but the actual rhythms of our speech. Here Jarrell is unique and technically radical. No other poet of our time has embalmed the common dialogue of Americans with such mastery. And because he caught our bourgeois speech he caught our meaning."[6] Randall Jarrell chose to write about contemporary life not because he thought it to be the best of all possibilities, but because it existed. Shapiro explains, "He recoiled from the boredom and the horror and the glory of the day-to-day life. But what he did in his poetry, which had never really been done before, was to face the modern scene and to--what more is there to say--to face it. He faced the music of the American Way of Life."[7] A succinct and accurate description of Jarrell's writing style is found in Shapiro's prose poem to Jarrell:

> Randall, I like your poetry terribly, yet I'm afraid to say so. Not that my praise keeps you awake--though I'm afraid it does. I can't help liking them. I even like the whine, the make-believe whiplash with the actual wire in it. Once when you reviewed me badly (you must) I wrote you: "I felt as if I had been run over but not hurt." That made you laugh. I was happy. It wasn't much of a triumph but it worked. When people ask about you I am inclined to say: He's an assassin (a word I never use). I'm inclined to say: Why are you always yourself? Your love of Rilke--if it's love--your intimacy with German and God knows what all, your tenderness and terrorization, your prose sentences,--like Bernini graves, staggeringly expensive, Italianate, warm, sentences once-and-for-all. And the verses you leave half-finished in mid-air--I once knew a woman who never finished a sentence. Your mind is always at its best, your craft

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[6]Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, p. 14.

[7]Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, p. 22.

> the finest craft "money can buy" you would say with a barb. I'm afraid of you. Who wouldn't be, But I rush to read you, whatever you print. That's news.[8]

In her comprehensive study, The Poetry of Randall Jarrell, Suzanne Ferguson concurs with Shapiro's view of the poet: "Like Wordsworth, Jarrell wanted to define and express the beauty and significance of ordinary life in a language actually spoken by men."[9] She says of his style, in using a middle-class vernacular:

> Jarrell's compulsion to teach his readers about the world resulted in a poetic rhetoric oriented toward the presentation of that world rather than the presentation of a "poet." His style is distinctive, but it is characteristically a colloquial, even homely style, blending the syntax of ordinary American discourse with the romantic color of American dreams. Except for its extravagant allusiveness and wit, it uncannily imitates plain American speech.[10]

In conjunction with his "homely style," she notes this about his subject matter:

> . . . a great part of his work presents the lives of his civilian peers--middle-class, middle-income, moderately intelligent, moderately neurotic, moderately good; those whom American politicians call "the silent majority," who are born, grow up, get jobs, get married, have children, grow old, and die; they make neither trouble nor joy outside their immediate environment. They are downtrodden not by poverty or physical suffering or any obvious oppressor, but only by the ordinary psychological hazards of living in the modern world.[11]

Professor Ferguson would agree with the critical evaluation that Jarrell's

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[8]Shapiro, The Bourgeois Poet, pp. 90-91.

[9]Suzanne Ferguson, The Poetry of Randall Jarrell (Baton Rouge, Louisiana S. U. Press, 1971), p. 229.

[10]Ferguson, p. 4.

[11]Ferguson, p. 5.

style, while distinctive, is part of the same tradition as that of Wordsworth or Whitman or Frost: "I have referred a number of times to Jarrell's interest in creating a style that, like Frost's or [John Crowe] Ransom's, would accurately but poetically reproduce the idioms and rhythms of contemporary speech. This ideal was difficult to achieve and hard to sustain, but the best poems are astonishingly convincing."[12]

Closely tied in with Jarrell's use of ordinary diction is his examination of the relationship of art to reality in both his poetry and his prose. Jarrell explained this relationship in Aristotelian terms, pointing out that "Art lies to tell us the (sometimes disquieting) truth."[13] For example, he says, "You often feel about something in Shakespeare or Dostoievsky that nobody ever said such a thing, but that it's just the sort of thing people would say if they could--is more real, in some sense, than what people do say."[14] Jarrell can wonder if there is indeed such a thing as literary fantasy or art removed from the real: "how _can_ anybody write about unreality?"[15] An emotional element is involved in gauging reality, for "if reality is not necessarily what we feel it to be: to be is to be _felt_."[16] With Jarrell, it is the ordinary, predictable language of the contemporary middle-class life that is his way of translating reality into art. To use some of his own lines in a

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[12]Ferguson, p. 231.

[13]Jarrell, _A Sad Heart at the Supermarket_ (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 81.

[14]Jarrell, _A Sad Heart at the Supermarket_, p. 120.

[15]Jarrell, _Poetry and the Age_, p. 139.

[16]Jarrell, _Poetry and the Age_, p. 137.

different context, it is through a "dailiness" of language, the "well water / Pumped from an old well at the bottom of the world," that Jarrell fuses art with reality for the resulting truth about life. His poetry is art focused upon the agony of reality. His "dailiness" is a clear reality; his reality is built upon experience; and his experience teaches one the truths of life.

CHAPTER II

A STUDY OF JARRELL'S BLENDING OF ART WITH REALITY

To understand more fully the close relationship between Jarrell's choice of vocabulary and his choice of subject matter, it will help to examine a representative sampling of his poetry. These poems should demonstrate what Jarrell was trying to do in describing experience through aesthetic means. In the last collection of his work, The Complete Poems, there are forty-five poems and poem fragments written between 1935 and 1965 which have not been published before, although some sections or lines did become part of his permanent poems.[17] These poems, often incomplete and unpolished, in effect provide insight into thematic motivations and attitudes about life, art, and reality because of their "raw" quality. The emotions of the poet often come through without disguise and one is shaken by the force of his despair in his comparisons of life and death, and in his apparent unresolved bewilderment about how one responds to frustrations and happiness. It is possible to find in these unpublished poems the same humor, the same sense of loss and absence, the same nostalgia, and the same close look at nature as in Jarrell's other poems, but perhaps in a more melancholic key. The difference is only in degree--the technique and treatment of subject matter is in more limited dimensions; the poet's world has more despair, more to say about lost and found love, and it takes a long look at the state of nothingness and death.

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[17] The section, entitled "Unpublished Poems (1935-1965)," is found in Jarrell's The Complete Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 461-91.

In this section, some poems should be classified as predominantly humorous to differentiate them from the more seriously oriented. The humorous ones have few parallels in his earlier published work, but they do exhibit the same wit and smiling insight that is found in his novel, _Pictures from an Institution_. These poems characteristically begin with a serious premise, only to pass under the merciless and revealing light of the absurd, winding up as truth too real sometimes to be funny any more. "Randall Jarrell, Office Hours 10-11" is based on an English Office memo to him about students who cannot find his office. The theme is a familiar one for Jarrell, that of loss. In the poem, the English Office, as speaker and sender of the original memo concludes:

> Each of them is lost, and neither hunting;
> And they stand still around a crazy door
> That tells a truth, or lie, that no one learns.
> Here is a name, an hour for you to use:
> But name, or come, or come not, as you choose.

Things are not as they should be, even if the matter is dealt with lightly. Humor is not bestowed freely in "(A Seductive Piece of Business)" or "The Sign," because love or virtue or some other essential is given up--the sweetness of the stolen bridecake or the dearness of the kittens depends upon the implications of absence. In contrast, the whimsy of the poem on turnip greens is delightful nonsense. "Prologue to Wiley . . ." has the humor of the inside joke, this one about professorial matters. Again, the theme of loss is involved: Miss Wiley has lost her research manuscript.

The other, serious poems in this section contribute more specifically to the Jarrellian themes of absence, loss, death, and middle-class acceptance of a life which is not as it ought to be. Jarrell's people

in these poems, as in his others, lead routine lives and wish for a transcending something to happen, even if it is death itself which is the extraordinary event waiting for them. The study of these poems, and not all of them will be examined, follows the chronological order used in the book, so that one can see themes developing which parallel those of his formerly published poems. In fact, some of these are forerunners of those poems, exhibiting Jarrell's early experimentations. The maturation of his use of language in expressing his ideas demonstrates the skill of his clear and understandable speech rhythms.

Not only do these poems look at life and art, but there is present a sense of loneliness and an apparent longing for death. The voices in these poems seem to say in one way or another that death, after all, is better than life, even if it appears on the surface to be no different (from the point of view of the speaker). Sister Bernetta Quinn comments on this characteristic:

> Jarrell frequently looks to death as to the end of loneliness--not in the sense of a permanent loss of consciousness but rather as a transfiguration wherein the hope cherished during life will shine forth justified.[18]

> Both poetry and prose portraits reveal not just a poet wearing his heart on his sleeve, nursing a private Weltschmerz, but rather an artist who can dramatize effectively what is, in a radical sense, the human condition: loneliness.
> For man is essentially lonely on this planet. Sooner or later, all poets celebrate his isolation.[19]

Her remarks are particularly true of Jarrell's mature, post-war poetry, but the suggestions are there in all the poems. These unpublished poems

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[18] Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F., "Jarrell's Desert of the Heart," Analects 1 (Spring 1961), p. 24.

[19] Quinn, p. 28.

bear the same characteristics just as clearly, and often more intensely.

For example, "A Summer Night" (1938?) is an obvious predecessor to "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," but the poem, written in a blank verse typical of Jarrell's later poems, has a maturity of style which prevents it from being considered solely as an exercise. Structured around contrasts, duality, and paradox, the tightness of conflict supplies cohesion much like the surface tension that holds water above the brim of a glass. The central image deals with kinds of sight: inner-vision, hindsight, comprehension, objective observances of the world from the perspective of both man and creature:

> Your specter floats up from the back of sight,
> I shut my eyes. The crickets shriek on: <u>See</u>.
> I see you, now that you aren't here. Before
> You were and I saw nothing....I shut my eyes.

In a contradiction of essences, the speaker says, "A year ago I owned you like a chair." Objects and people should not be regarded in the same way, but the contradictions are what guide this poem. The speaker "sees" now that there is no reality to see; the world is made up of faces which bring flesh to "that last dream the waking call a world." The speaker's face protected this person he addresses from the world, and serves as contrast to the "big face" with uncontrolled tears rolling down it. This summer night brings to mind the speaker's ambiguous feelings: "Your face . . . / That I loved and tried to love and could not love" causes him to shut his eyes in order to "see." It is the absurd man who cannot feel but merely observe pain. It is a person such as the one to whom the narrator speaks, who senses man's agony: "'We don't see. We don't <u>mind</u>. We hurt.'" It is the creaturely world, represented by the crickets, that urges man to "<u>See</u>. <u>See</u>. <u>See</u>. <u>See</u>." There is an

absurdity, in that "dumb" creatures can teach man to "see." The fact of the crickets' short life span--they will be gone by autumn--heightens the urgency of their message to man, although man does not exist for such a brief time, and must continue to cope with his puzzling world long after the crickets and those who were formerly loved have gone. At the end, the speaker is also enabled to "see" because he has experienced the absence of what he once could not see when it was actually present. Summertime is appropriate to the poem because the cricket sounds evoke sensations of heat, a languid evening, and a time to reflect as one senses the approaching autumn.

Jarrell's admiration for Robert Frost's poetry is perhaps revealed in "The Tree" (1939?), a short poem with hints of Frost's nature poetry. One thinks vaguely of "Tree at My Window" when reading the Jarrell poem. The tree here is not identified with the speaker in the same manner as is Frost's, but there is a communion between nature and man, especially through the operation of memory:

> When I looked at the tree the bough was still shaking,
> So surely there was a bird
> That lit for an instant and left its motion
> To the dead wood.

Conflict between the living and the dead is here resolved by the bough's continuing movement caused by the now absent bird, so that life and death are, in a sense, merged. Had the poem been written with the bird still on the bough, this would be a different poem--a pleasant nature scene. Jarrell's treatment brings the reader to a concept of the transient, fleeting quality of life--a flickering impression of having experienced something twice.

Constancy is felt in the second stanza, a static unchangeableness which is in marked contrast with the opening lines where motion dominates,

even if it is a motion held in bounds by the tree's lack of mobility. Use of the past tense in the first stanza is set against that of the present tense in the second, as if to point out that motion belongs to the past, and now all that remains is a stillness and a waiting. The word "still" in the last line can mean both endurance and an absence of movement: "I am waiting still." One can sense an aural imagery of the swift whirr of bird wings which has occurred just before the poem begins. Energy as found in sight and sound is a necessity for the poem, compressed into a tightness where both completed and potential motion are combined into one poem. The wonderful quality of this poem lies not so much in what thought it presents, but in the aesthetic achievement of capturing motion with words, to make a clear visual image of past action which continues through man's memory. This poem resembles a Japanese brush painting in its treatment of movement.

Night, darkness, loss, and death converge in the dream-like state of mind in the untitled poem beginning "I loved you, too. There was no use. I had no time . . ." (1940?). Life is defined by hopelessness, despair, and isolation, continuing in the presence of death described here where dimensional concepts are rearranged so that the dying boy and the fall of Canton occur simultaneously not only in time and space, but also in syntax:

> The boy is dying, dead now; here, too, Canton falls,
> One by one the lights are going out.

It is within this continuum that absurd man must live and dream of death. In sleep/death he finds reality--new bones and real blood; in waking/life he finds the dreams and the lives of two isolated people, each "in a separate womb." There is also implied in the line about the lights going out an allusion to Sir Edward Grey's famous remark in 1914, "The lamps are

going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our life time."

This poem also speaks of the disappearance of love into a nothingness. Its absence causes boys to die, countries to be ravaged, and the man in this poem to lie in a hospital ward feeling the approach of death--not only physical death but death in an existential sense, where life is an absurdity leading to despair and a fear of non-being. The speaker is plagued by lights going on and off beyond his control while he sleeps and wakes. Love is what can make one survive the night; without it the self denies all but its own absurd existence. The speaker does not fully understand what love is, and he is equally confused about the meaning of a virtuous life:

> I said the truth: no love can last
> That locks our lives up in a separate womb.
>
> That cries to any blood: not mine, not mine.
> Love says to it all night: O my own blood!
> To be good for one instant in this universe
> Means--how do I know what it means?
> The boy dies and Canton falls; here while I sleep
> The lights come on, the lights go out.

The idea is reminiscent of that in the poem, "90 North," when Jarrell says, "Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain."

Even so, not all is total despair. Wherever there is tension or pain or weeping, life remains and hope flickers. The speaker reveals his own hopeful glimmerings when he says: "I thought that I could never cry again; I'm crying now." Life is nothing when man no longer weeps. Life lingers in this poem, almost involuntarily, because the speaker insists that someone care about the boy's death, about the fall of Canton so far away, and about two people who ought to love but who are absent from each other physically and emotionally. There is no solution offered, simply a

statement of what is. The rhythm of despair in the last line, "The lights come on, the lights go out," is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," and this association heightens the effect of the poem.

In a change of setting, this time to a pastoral one, the confrontation of the natural with the artificial man-made world stresses the absurdity of competing with what is both real and natural. "The rabbit hurries to the brim of its wood . . ." (1942?) points out that it is only by coming face to face with the natural world that one understands at least partially that it is in nature where the real blood flows and the real heart beats.

> The rabbit hurries to the brim of its wood
> In three lolloping jumps, and I stop sorry
> And personal and tired, in the firm new spring
> Of the wood and the farmer and the regular beauties
> I can't understand and badly love.

Because it is the rabbit's wood, not man's, his lolloping jumps are effortless, while in contrast man must be "sorry / And personal and tired," because he cannot follow. "Personal" is used to explain man's consciousness of his separation from the creaturely world. " Regular beauties" can be loved, although inadequately, even if they are incomprehensible to man. The speaker cannot even feel satisfied by attempting an analogy of his new clothes with the new season; they "are a poor success" in their artificiality. The speaker's walk by the farmhouse has a labored, sculptured effect: the exaggerated, arduous journey to the house takes "years and years." His appearance is an interruption in the paralleled setting containing the farmer's son and the horse, the farmer's wife and the sow. He has come into a natural world as an alien, yet here are genuinely natural reactions to him, without artifice or façade.

> You won't see me again. And you can forget
> That you ever saw me; if you ever saw me.

> But the boy doesn't know about that and waves,
> And the pig grunts at me.

The speaker expects to be ignored, but learns that in this natural world he is recognized and welcomed.

At this point the poem breaks and the remainder is reflection upon what the event means in terms of reality. "My wife said to me, / 'I'm real and you're real': meaning, only a story / Has joy as simple." The simplicity of existing is so paradoxically complicated that art, after all, is the only way to understand the reality of the universe. In art one sees the "steady feature" of love, as in the farm scene. "Here no one sees or cares. Love is nothing but a drug that stimulates "for its instant." The word "love" is probably used here in the way Yeats meant it in "Among School Children," as meaning love in the physical sense of a reproductive act. It is then like a honeyed drug which causes forgetfulness of life as it existed before one's mortality. The concluding idea of Jarrell's poem is that reality escapes "the desperate arms" where there is no acknowledging wave from fellow creatures and the speaker decides that this kind of love is not real enough to sustain life as it ought to be experienced.

One of Jarrell's poems about death, "To be Dead" (1942), is a puzzling one. Whether it should be in a longer poem so that the context is clearer is debatable; ambiguity may lend itself to the total statement about the condition of death. The poem contains almost the same stark confrontation with death as in Jarrell's translation of Rilke's "Washing the Corpse." The central image is the corpse: "'Woman,' men say of him, and women, 'Man.'" With the relinquishing of life, its identity has vanished so that the body is nothing, stripped of all

categories, good and bad, which defined it as a living person. This, says the speaker, is what it means to be dead. Usefulness is a quality of the living, while the value of a corpse is defined as "the bulb / The boy smashes when it gives no longer light." Earlier the corpse is likened to "a disused word," and these two images have the effect of stressing the finality of death where dignity is denied and there is nothing left of existence. Everything is sealed permanently.

A companion piece to that short poem might be "The Farewell Symphony" (1947?), which deals with that instant before actual death, the moment of dying. The apparent reference is to Haydn's symphony, where the players leave the stage one by one; Jarrell carries the analogy further, to the death of everyone. In the poem, both distance and time, and sight and sound, are blurred:

> A few miles ago, a year, a year,
> They were all playing
> It is all there in my head. . . .

Everything is disappearing on tiptoe into the darkness until "song, light, listener" become one in a final tremble and departure. The effect of this poem is similar to that of "The Tree," where motion lingers, suspended forever in the poem. The "something" that is beating, "the notes / Slow in the plunging night;" is the reality and the necessity of death. The poem is an after-image, and through this statement one comprehends the reality of death, as the reality of anything, by its absence.

For Jarrell, even birth can be a reminder of death, and in his one poem about birth in this group of poems, it is not presented as a joyful beginning but as an ominous hint of violent endings. "The Birth of Venus" (1952) may not be anti-feminist, but it is indeed less idyllic than Boticelli's sensual but lovely vision of Venus' birth, in its real but

unflattering portrayal of female eroticism. There is some similarity between Jarrell's poem and Rilke's "Birth of Venus," in the progression of movement from sea to land.[20] But Jarrell's is shorter and less complicated, with a swiftness of action which Rilke's slower and more explicit poem does not have. Fury and violence accompany Venus' birth in Jarrell's poem:

> The thunderbolt strikes the ocean.
> A furious wave
> Tosses her from the depths to the shore.
> . . . .
> The thunderbolt strikes the fishing-village
> . . . .
> . . . The heavens have annihilated
> The witnesses of her shameful birth.

The sea imagery is left behind in the first stanza, and it is rain which cleanses the sea from Venus. Her nature is not washed of its mystery, however. "Smiling to herself," she does not share her private joke, nor does she waste time in performing what is essential to her existence:

> . . . she walks from the beach
> To the nearest tavern where, with some passing
> Merchant, even tonight, she will begin her merry, dirty,
> Brimming-with-incalculable-triumphs
> Life on earth.

Venus is as earthy and as real as art permits her to be, despite the unearthly quality of her beauty, "incandescent" and veiled by clouds. That Venus walks from the beach to town at the end of the day after being washed "In the light of the setting sun," suggests the parallel images of birth and a prelude to death. This kind of love, like that referred to in "The rabbit hurries to the brim of its wood . . ." cannot promise morning, but instead brings night with it, deceptively appealing.

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[20]Rainer Maria Rilke, "Birth of Venus," Selected Works: Poetry, Vol. II (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1960), pp. 193-95.

Jarrell's statements about physical, erotic love are generally veiled ones; this poem by contrast is relatively frank and almost brutal in its implications. The objectivity of the speaker guards it from emotionalism; perhaps that is a flaw. To say that physical, erotic love leads only to death might be more convincing if the tone were less detached.

In "The School of Summer" (1952), death is again the subject, this time dealt with through both natural and technological simile and metaphor. The fleshy heat of summer nights, when disembodied sounds float through the air, promises strong sensual imagery. The first stanza is almost painfully evocative:

> Out somewhere in the middle of the crickets
> By voices, anybody's voice; out in the air
> Set to my face like anybody's flesh,
> Something is running down the night like sweat
> --Out there, somewhere, a piano plays
> Like what-spoils-everything, that a vein stands for by beating.

These sounds are "specialities," uneasy, dissatisfied, categoried by license-plates. The opening similes end with one about life: "like uneasiness / Unable to bear itself," which must escape into special categories to avoid meeting disturbing complexities. Two conditions are set up for the reader: to look at the license-plate in order to find the specialty, and to "come back from the living to the dead" to be examined. That is, this is the scientific age which examines life so objectively that people are seen as categorized experiments and "finish floating / In a jar in the Department of Miraculism's / New cork-floored, air-raid sheltered laboratories." Nevertheless, as carefully as one may be exhibited and explained, there is still no way to define life: "life is--why, life." This is its very absurdity, that life _is_. Death, a nothingness or non-being, might seem to be less absurd, but if it is not an ill,

nor a happiness, nor a satisfaction, then death is--why, death.

Here again is a poem which finds the absence of life's complexities to be a good thing. Death is constant and predictable so that it provides the easiness which can bear itself, unlike the poem's statement about life. To become nothing more than a specialty to be studied by modern science makes that kind of life only slightly different from death, except that death might be a preferable alternative. Thus in a negative or opposing statement implied within the poem, this can be an affirmation of that life which refuses to be documented and labeled--an argument in favor of the individual and non-conformity. One should come back from the dead to the living and say nothing, so that one exists as an affirmation of the creative life without being murdered for dissection. (This may be a contradictary situation for a poet, who must say something to affirm his creative life.) This is clearly a mid-twentieth century poem, conceived in the age of bureaucracy and socio-psychological studies. Summer is the school, the middle time of life when man is beset by the problems of living with his class values. Summer is an "early stage" of death, promising winter while emerging from the freshness of spring and birth; summertime also implies maturity when one begins to see the darkness in life. And, one realizes in the process, that without any problems there is . . . satisfaction? . . . happiness? . . . death?

In one of the Rilke translations, "Faded" (1952), the aging woman of many of Jarrell's poems is found drifting through her life more as the ghost of a young girl than as a woman on her own merit. She is a close relative of the Marschallin in "The Face," and also of those middle-class women in "Next Day," "Woman," and "Woman at the Washington Zoo," as well as the woman in "Seele im Raum." The nostalgic pain of a lost past is

provided by evoking the sense of smell:

> The odor of her dressing-table
> Smothers the scent she loves--
> The scent she knew herself by, once.

There is something suggested here of the hygienic care she must now take of herself in her fading days; it overpowers the youthful, genuine freshness she once could accent with a touch of perfume. Yet this woman in some outlandish way hopes she may still be the same girl under the wrinkling skin; if she can retain something of her past beauty she can survive. She does not dare ask herself her identity--she pretends she is some "distant relation," but deceives only herself. She does not want to know reality.

> Fretting over the poor anxious room
> She must care for and set in order
> --Because the very same young girl
> May be, after all, still living there.

The pain in this poem lies in its sense of absence, this time the absence of a sweetly-remembered past. What has been lost then, is time.

In another Rilke translation, "The Widow's Song" (1960), the only one in this group which uses a woman as speaker for the entire poem, the losses have increased to include now not only the woman's best friend, her remembered youth, love, the purpose of life, but also her husband. In the succession of poems about this woman, she has had to suffer, but she has gained some wisdom, at least of hindsight:

> I didn't know what life was.
> All at once it was just year after year,
> Not good any more, not new any more, not wonderful any more,
> Torn right in two.

And she learns that no one possesses anything; death, "so cheap, so vile," takes what it will. Death and fate are almost synonymous in this poem, and just as death takes away people, fate takes back all else, including

one's very essence, until nothing is left but a shell which must continue to exist. The tone of this poem is tired; there is despair in every phrase; action centers around the removal of things. Loss and absence are in a current, continuing process, and while the woman may have found that life with her husband was caught up with tedium, at least it was _something_. The absence even of boredom is now to be mourned.

> Fate was there and got for a song
> Every expression of my face,
> Even the way I walked.
> Every day there was a sellout,
> And when I was sold out, it quit
> And left me standing there open.

The widow is vulnerable, exposed, without hope, and the poem conveys a feeling of total despair--of life that is all crucifixion and no resurrection. Extreme loneliness is the ultimate condition for this widow until her own death.

"The Wild Birds" (1950?-1964) depends upon repetition and paradox almost to the point of gimmickry. It is a word game of sorts, and an experimentation with meanings. But once the reader goes beyond the inhibiting effects of the word-play, what comes across again is a Jarrellian concern with the world of the absurd as it points to . . . nothing beyond its absurdity.

> Explaining the inscrutable, denying the unbearable,
> Bespeaking for us, in life, in death, a clear
> Salvation

are those whose business it is to deceive. Those who would explain life are "the advertisers / Of the commodities of their and our / Existence." In opposition are those who speak truth for what it is, making reality an honest condition even when one speaks in the darkness of dreams:

> Those who call death death, life life,
> The unendurable what we endure:

> Those who beat all night at our bars, and drop at morning
> Into our tame, stained beaks, the poison berry--
> O dark companions,
> You bring us the truth of love: the caged bird loves its bars.

The advertisers of the world have not yet understood the truth about self-interest: man's wants imply what he is. Some have found that in the darkness of life, in the dream world which mirrors them, reality is not what one has been conditioned to accept as real. The absurdity is that people are tamed and conditioned to believe whatever the "advertisers" say is so, and the consumer wants it that way or else he would not permit it to be.

The very fine poem, "Man in Majesty" (1958-1964), bears some resemblance to "The Bronze David of Donatello," but here the tone is philosophical rather than aesthetic. Man is here in flesh, breathing and feeling and creating, in contrast to man as a work of art, whose existence is enough in itself: the created and the beautiful. The speaker of the poem says that there is integrity in substances: stone is stone and should be molded into that beauty best achieved by the stone.

> . . . _I close about myself in bliss,_
> _But what is bliss? To be is to be beautiful,_
> _The statue says_, shut-mouthed, stone-nippled, silent.
> . . . .
> . . . the maker, man, in majesty,
> Touches the stone with his hand, to make it stone.

The ultimate limitation upon the stone is that it cannot live, even though it seems to be able to become flesh. Statues can only imitate the living; art can only imitate life. But imitation can sometimes speak more accurately of reality than the real itself. Here the statue and its companion piece may tell the world the final truth about man, who can create statues. Implied is a merging of man with art:

> Long ago the stone wished, and was flesh.
> The flesh wishes itself back, wishes the wish
> Unwished.

The process of creation here is represented by sight:

> He looks. Looks. Looks in rapture,
> . . . .
> His spirit has gone out into his sight
> And the rest, when the light has set, is darkness:
> . . . .
> To look is to make; what I have made I see.
> What I have made I love; or love, almost, would love
> Except that--
> He says each day, to each new statue, Stay,
> And his hand goes out to it: to make a statue.

Art has to be completed, made whole, by the conscious recognition of the creator. As did Michelangelo, the sculptor "sees" what he will bring out of the marble so that this may not be creation but the fine expression of the marble in what is already there. He, man, gives the essence of the stone its highest form--the stone already existed, created by the originator of all existence. What the poem is saying is that man must find the way to develop what already exists--stone or flesh. And when man achieves an artistic imitation of life, he develops himself to his highest expression of existence.

In "Women on a Bus" (1964), the subject matter is entirely different from that of the preceding poem, but the underlying theme is similar: giving to the human being its highest expression--giving to essence its truest form. Here the controlling image of the bus carries samplings of aged humanity suspicious of death but wrinkled and tired of life. The speaker of the poem is not clearly identified; at first it seems to be one of the women on the bus, but then it ends in what appears to be an objective, third person speaker who may have been assuming the role of the woman: what she might have said had she thought to say it. After observing the pilgrimage of the aged in "their third sex"; too old now to be anything but neuter in gender, the speaker offers a prayer (to whom?):

> May I die, not on the day
> When it no longer matters that I'm a woman,
> But on the day that it no longer matters
> That I am human:

The proper time to finish life is at the moment when the quality of its humanity slips, and what remains is the absence of what distinguished the kind of humanity it was, as in the case of "To Be Dead." One should cease to exist when "they put into me more than they get out of me." The objective speaker approaches the problem differently:

> So I say, in human vanity: have they ever
> Got out of me more than they put into me?
> May I die on the day the world ends.

Thus he argues with the earlier premise, and says that man has never been fully realized in his majesty, but to exist is important, and living is an end in itself. The last statement asserts that society must not judge the terms for anyone's existence. The idea is reminiscent of "The School of Summer," because man's individuality is a necessity.

The four-line "Prayer at Morning" (1952-1963) is a poem which could not have been written without the maturing and experience which accompanies the sensitive man's attempt to understand life. The speaker here has known what it is like to find no taste and no sleep; otherwise this prayer would have no meaning:

> Cold, slow, silent, but returning, after so many hours.
> The sight of something outside me, the day is breaking.
> May salt, this one day, be sharp upon my tongue;
> May I sleep, this one night, without waking.

One-day-at-a-time living may seem dull, but when one tries to cope with all the complexities of life and finds no simple answer to anything, there is an urgent need to find a simplicity in existence. Implied in this poem are the frustrations of sleepless or half-sleeping nights, dream-scarred, when the senses are in neutral and nothing elicits a response.

Such an existence is little different from being dead. The simplicity of language, the brevity of statement, give this poem its force. It is sharply contrasted to the usual morning prayer full of joyous thankfulness for a world of delights. This is a dark, night prayer seeking light, where only a glimmer of hope remains to express itself in this simple, but deep, need.

Another four-line poem, untitled (1965), seems to break a little with Jarrell's earlier existential approach; there is a hinge for the doorway to faith here:

> Let's love each other for what we are
> And for what we happen to become,
> Not for what we can make of ourselves.
>
> No one makes anything of anyone but God.

There is no such thing as a self-made man, and it is a waste of energy to try to take control of one's own destiny. Existence in itself is sufficient; one "happens" to acquire an essence peculiar to his individuality, which is what must be loved. This poem asks that man strip away all layers of pretense and falsehood in order to be himself. It is absurd to think it is possible to exist by man's own control.

Despite the entertaining word-play about riddles in the final poem of the collection, "What's the Riddle . . ." (1965), beneath the light-hearted mood lies this same hint of loss, confusion, and doubt which has been running through most of the poems. The speaker of the poem may be talking to himself or to another; it does not matter. The last line supports the poem and accomodates any question, even the Riddle of the Sphinx:

> "What's the riddle that they ask you
> When you're young and you say, 'I don't know,'
> But that later on you will know--

> The riddle that they ask you
> When you're old and you say, 'I don't know,'
> And that 's the answer?"
>
> "I don't know."

The question is what will man become, what has he become, and again, what will he become? . . . "I don't know."

These poems as a whole are generally representative of the heretofore unpublished group, and while the reader may not expect them to be among Jarrell's best efforts, they indeed cannot be called "bad poems." They have beauty and integrity and are well worth reading. Whatever flatness there may be to these poems could be explained by the lack of poems with women speakers. Jarrell is at his best when assuming the role of the middle-class, aging seeker of reason, especially when the speaker is a woman. Only one of these, "The Widow's Song," has an explicit woman monologist, although "Women on a Bus" has a woman speaker for at least part of the poem, and the woman's point of view is seen in a few others. What comes across because of the lack of women speakers is a feeling of incompleteness, as in a gathering where women are excluded; there is some threat of sameness and a lack of an indefinable necessity.[21]

What is sought through a study of these poems is an increased understanding of what Randall Jarrell has to say about life and death and reality, and the art which attempts to explain it all. In the process of reading through this section of poems, a maturing through time and experience becomes evident. The later poems most fully reflect the spirit of a middle class taught to recognize the value of the past and the

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[21]Mrs. Mary Jarrell, in a letter of July 5, 1972, explains that the lack of poems with women speakers in this section "is due to the earliness of so many of these poems . . . the woman as Monologist did not come until later."

necessities of the present. Very little is said about the future; what is important is what happens now. Jarrell suggests that identity comes through metamorphic change, but then he concludes that only God can do the creating and changing. About all that man can expect from himself is that he try to achieve the fullest expression of his own essence--the particular quality that makes him what he is. Just as the stone must be revealed by the sculptor as to its true nature, so must man be revealed to himself according to his genuine character. For Jarrell, that meant a constant and disciplined approach to the use of language, to strip life down to its truest form; thus the poet may enlighten and satisfy others. As with all real poets, he wrote in order to be true to himself and to his conviction that not only is art necessary to reality, but that love must be a coordinate of truth. As he says in "There Was Glass and There Are Stars":

> Remember that all these, that even these
> Are a dream from which we wake;
> These last but not forever;
> Remember that after pain, that after loss
> There is only love.

Jarrell makes the point through his poetry that life unfiltered by art is too raw for one to experience it and live as a complete human being. He says in "The Times Worsen" that "When Art goes, what remains is Life"; there is little that man can do to soften the glare of reality. Nothing can be planned because man does not control anything: "The accidents are too much in the end." ("The Northern Snows.") But one can remember, and hope for, the love that can remain when all else is lost in man's struggle with life. It is the poet's duty to reverse the real process and keep stripping away at Life until what remains is Art (and love?). This then points back to the kind of existence man faces.

Implied by Jarrell is the philosophy that life experienced naturally and honestly is the only way to live. Artificiality ruins the quality of existence. Occasionally he includes the hint of a small wish for something beyond mortality, but it is a wish expressed without much hope for fulfillment. The agony of existence comes from the recognition that life is not often exalting--only confusing and paradoxical--yet who dares to exchange it for death? There is, even so, the idea in many of his poems that death and life are somehow interchangeable by definition, both pointing to a dull sameness. As Jarrell expressed this in "Woman," a careful study of the domestic female, "'Life / Is life . . . Life is not life,' / She says. It sounds the same." Even the humor and optimism in his poetry are modified by contrary undercurrents of poignancy and loss. Whatever he says about life or death, sadness or humor, his emphasis is on the present, which must be faced in spite of what one can remember from the past. As he puts it in "A Variation on 'To Say To Go to Sleep'," "I would sit by you and be." In that context, the artist must try to give a naturalistic representation of life, not only to satisfy his readers, but to satisfy his own insistence upon a correct image.

CHAPTER III

HOW JARRELL USES LANGUAGE IN TRANSLATION

Moving into a specific study of Jarrell's skill in handling diction, this last chapter seeks to provide a clearer understanding of what Jarrell saw as the relationship between words and the situations those words symbolize. Words are not the poem, without the addition of a poet's intentions and meanings, but words do translate the poet to the reader; thus language must play the central role in a poem. Jarrell's words reach the reader through a diction characteristic of men like himself--aging into the night without much hope of afterlife, only the knowledge and awareness of present life which is often much the same as death. Evidence of the importance Jarrell placed upon getting the right words into a poem may be found in an examination of his worksheets. Fortunately for those interested in knowing more about his method of writing, Jarrell wrote down almost every revision rather than re-writing in his head, and there is a wealth of these worksheets and manuscripts to help one study his development of an idea through to its completion.[22] (Publication was not necessarily the end of re-writing for him. He was such a meticulous writer that he sometimes revised poems and essays right on the published copy.)

A very good example of Jarrell's writing methods is found in the worksheets of his translation of the Rilke poem, "The Widow's Song."

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[22]The problems related to locating and studying the worksheets is carefully explained by Mrs. Jarrell in her "Reflections on Jerome," from *Jerome: The Biography of a Poem* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), pp. 9-18.

Attention can be concentrated on his choice of vocabulary and style of presentation, because Rilke has already worked out the theme and controlling images to say what he wants said. What will show up then is Jarrell's ability to find the most accurate yet most poetic way of putting the poem into contemporary language. The poem must be transferred from early twentieth-century German into a modern "American" poem where Rilke's style is not lost but where Jarrell adds his own artistic touch. Not only is this translation exemplary of Jarrell's attentive emphasis upon language, but it also echoes much of his own treatment of the themes of loneliness and death, loss or absence, as seen through the eyes of a woman. The inexorable grasp of death (or fate) brings on the sense of despair and complete emptiness experienced by those who have suffered some kind of loss. In working with Rilke's ideas, Jarrell must manage to find the proper expression to convey the mood of despair and loss in all the horror and agony Rilke intended. The extensive experimentation with words dealing with such an agony as Jarrell's worksheets demonstrate, reflect his precise and careful concern with the tone and subject matter of this poem.

In studying Jarrell's worksheets, one needs to become familiar with his method of writing and revising. Otherwise, some of his pages may seem to be unnecessary because of the few and seemingly insignificant changes, or the repetitions may become tedious to read. However, it is good to remember that the translation was not worked out at one sitting, and it is often helpful for a poet to repeat a previously worked out passage in order to get into the proper frame of mind, or to see if other ways of expressing a thought may seem preferable. There will at times seem to be an almost literal translation made of the lines, but this only

appears to be so until one takes a closer look at the many revisions. The earliest versions may also reflect some influence of other translations, but as the work develops, Jarrell's own style begins to dominate until the poem is as much his as it is Rilke's.[23] It is impossible to reproduce the worksheets in typescript. The pages are full of crossed-out words, capitalized letters, starred lines (usually indicating final choices), private signals to himself (triangles, arrows, etc.), lists of synonyms, stress markings, and other kinds of experimentations with words. For clarity and for greater ease in following the development of the poem, the stanzas will be broken down into small units and arranged in what seems to be the most likely order of composition. Some aids to the reader are provided, such as slash marks to separate different choices of words and phrases, and occasional short explanations about what is going on in the course of the poem's translation. Jarrell usually listed variations on a line, word, or phrase in vertical columns, but in most cases these will be presented lineally here. Because the final version of the poem is included, words which were crossed out during the experimenting stage are not usually noted as such. The reader can see for himself what was finally kept and what was discarded.

In going to the worksheets, then, it is noted that the title does not appear in the first versions. When it does show up on the worksheets, it is written as "The Song of the Widow" first, and after a few times of this Jarrell crosses that out and decides on "The Widow's Song." Once he made the decision, the title does not appear again. This is characteristic, in that in the writing of the stanzas, he does not continue to

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[23]See the Appendix for the different translations of the poem.

repeat lines he has come to some decision about, but goes on to the next section. There are four stanzas to the poem; the first one has eight lines, the other three have six lines each. The entire poem, as it was in Jarrell's final published version, reads:

> In the beginning life was good to me.
> It humored me, it encouraged me.
> It does that to all the young--
> But how could I know that then?
> I didn't know what life was.
> All at once it was just year after year,
> Not good any more, not new any more, not wonderful any more,
> Torn right in two.
>
> That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
> We both had nothing but patience,
> But death had none.
> I saw him coming--oh, so cheap, so vile--
> And I watched him while he took and took:
> It wasn't any of it mine at all.
>
> Then what was mine--my own, mine?
> Wasn't even my misery
> Only lent me by fate?
> Fate wants back not just the joy,
> It wants back the torture and the screaming,
> And it buys the wreck second-hand.
>
> Fate was there and got for a song
> Every expression of my face,
> Even the way I walked.
> Every day there was a sellout,
> And when I was sold out, it quit
> And left me standing there open.

Breaking down the poem into smaller units will make comparisons easier. To begin with the first four lines, as quoted above they read:

> In the beginning life was good to me.
> It humored me, it encouraged me.
> It does that to all the young--
> But how could I know that then?

These opening lines will be studied together as they were worked out by Jarrell, with the last four lines studied also as a group. There are some

fourteen versions of these lines; most stanzas run about ten revisions. They will be presented below in what is probably the order of composition, and numbered accordingly:

1) Life was good to me, at first. It kept me warm
It kept me warm, it made me brave/strong/cheered me up?
It does that to/for all the young
But how could I know _____/that? I didn't know

When question marks or other punctuation appear in places which ordinarily would not have anything, they should be interpreted as being marks Jarrell made to himself about a word. For example, the question marks here after "cheered me up" and "that" are his own questions about the choice of word or phrase.

2) Life was good At first life was good to me.
Life was good to me at first. It kept me warm,
It made me strong. It does that for/to all the young
Life was good to me
But how could I know that then? I didn't know

3) In the beginning life was good to me.
Life was good to me at first.
It kept me warm, it made me strong.
It does that to all the young
How could I know then
It does for all the young
that it does that to all the young?

4) In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it made me happy
It does for all of us, when we're young
for all the young
But how could I understand/know that then?

5) In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm,
It made me gay, it kept me warm
It kept me warm, it made me strong/gay
It does that for all the young,
But how could I know that then?

6) In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it made me brave.
It does for/that to all the young
That is what it does
It does to/for
But how could I know that then?

7) In the beginning life was good to me at first.
In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it encouraged/made me brave/strong
Kept me warm, encouraged me
How could I know then
That's what it does to all the young
That It does that to all the young?
But How could I know that then?

8) Life was good to me at first; it warmed me,
it cheered me up/encouraged me. It does that to all the young,
but how could I know, then/that? I didn't know what life
What life was and all at once

9) In the beginning life was good to me
Life was good to me, in the beginning
Life was good to me at first
It kept me warm, it made me brave.
At first life was good to me
It does that for anybody young/to all the young--
But how could I know that then?

10) It kept me warm, it cheered me up
In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it made me strong/brave.
It does that for/to all the young
But how could I know that then?

11) In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it made me strong--
It does that to all the young,
But how could I know that then?

12) In the beginning life was good to me.
It kept me warm, it made me brave./strong
It does for/that for all the young.
But how could I know it/that/that then?

13) In the beginning life was good to me.
It humored me, it/it? encouraged/heartened me.
It does that to all the young.
But how could I know that then?

These lines are all starred, and in the margin starred and capitalized is the phrase, "ENCOURAGED ME."

14) In the beginning life was good to me.
It humored me, it encouraged me.
It does that to all the young,
But how could I know that then?

This last version is as it finally appeared, with minor variations in the

punctuation. The published version of the last four lines of this first stanza is as follows:

I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was just year after year,
Not good any more, not new any more, not wonderful any more,
Torn right in two.

Again, in what seems to be the order of composition are the variations as they developed in these lines:

1) But how could I know that then? I didn't know
What life is--all at once it was only year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful.

2) I didn't understand/know what life was--like--
All at once it was only year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful

3) I didn't know what life was--
All at once it was only year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,

4) I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was just year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,

5) All at once I did not/didn't know what living/life/it was,--
All at once it/life/it was only year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,
As if torn in two in the middle

6) I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was only year after year
No more good, no more new, no more brave/wonderful-
It was torn in two in the middle-

7) I didn't know what life is--All at once

8) I didn't know what living/life was--
All at once it was only year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,
--- torn in two.

9) I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was just year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,
Like something torn in two in the middle
ripped right in two
like us hopes torn right two torn/broken right in two
It was torn right TORN RIGHT IN TWO

10) I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was just year after year,
Not good any more, not new any more, not wonderful any more,
? TORN RIGHT IN TWO.

This version is starred, as is the following one:

11) I didn't know what life was,--
All at once it was just year after year,
No more good, no more new, no more wonderful,
It was Torn right in two. as if it were
It was as if it was

12) I didn't know what life was.
All at once it was just year after year,
Not good anymore, not new any more, not wonderful any more,
Torn right in two.

Jarrell worked extensively with the last two lines. On several sheets there are notes with the German phrases and English expressions as he experimented with ways to write these lines.

The second stanza will be studied as a whole, in its development into the final version, which is:

That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
We both had nothing but patience,
But death had none.
I saw him coming--oh, so cheap, so vile--
And I watched him while he took and took:
It wasn't any of it mine at all.

The stanza builds from a single line to its eventual six lines:

1) It/That wasn't his/its fault, it wasn't mine;

2) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
Both of us/ We both had all the patience in the world
nothing but patience
But Death had none.
I saw him coming-- how cheap/vile/mean it was so vile
And I watched him as he took and took
None of it was mine at all not at all by no means NEVER
it was just/yet/surely not at all/never mine/my own

3) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
Both of us had nothing but patience,
But Death has/had none.
I saw him coming (how _____ he came),
And I watched him as he took and took:
It wasn't mine at all.
None of it was mine at all my very own

4) It wasn't his fault; it wasn't mine-
We had all the patience in the world.
But Death has none
I saw him coming

5) I saw him coming--oh, so vile--
And I watched him as/how he took and took:
Why, it wasn't mine at all.

6) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine
Both of us/ We had nothing but patience,
But death has none-

7) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
Both of us had nothing but patience,
But death had none.
I saw him coming--it was so vile--
And I watched him as he took and took:
it was/None of it was mine at all.
Why, it wasn't mine at all.

The last line is starred, although it is changed again before the final form. The next version runs the first two stanzas together with a line which ends up later in the poem:

8) Torn right in two. Fate wants back not just the joy,
that wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
We both/Both of us had nothing but patience,
But death had none.
I saw him coming--
And I watched him as/while he took and took:
taking and taking: and taking
It wasn't any of it mine at all.
-------mine.
None of it at all was mine.

The last line is starred, and the two lines preceding it are crossed out. In the third line above, "We both" is starred, and "Both of us" is marked out.

At this point in the stanza development there are listed experimental phrases in the margin, some of them underlined, describing Death:

so mean, so vile mean and vile so vile and mean
oh, so mean, so vile so mean, so vile-- -so vile,so abject--
so vile, so mean

In what may be an earlier version because it seems to parallel other early

stanzas, some phrases have been added to it with the first three lines starred. It seems best to include it at this stage:

9) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
(We were both so patient.)
We both had nothing but patience
But death was not/wasn't
But death had none
I saw him coming--
oh, so hated/mean, so vile how treacherously/vilely he came
oh, he was so vile-
And I watched how he took and
him as he took and took:
Why, it wasn't mine at all
It wasn't any of it mine at all.
Why, it wasn't any of mine at all.
none of it was mine at all.

Again, more experiments on the page:

so cheap, so vile oh, so vile-- awful? terrible vile

Before the next version is written the line:

(so cheap, so vile)-- oh, so vile/wrong

And as found in a few other places, there is a triangle near some of the words with the letter "R" in it. Some triangles have "G" in them, but it is not clear just what Jarrell meant by these. These letters perhaps are his way of differentiating between phrases which are characteristic of Rilke, and those which involve a translation of a German phrase which needs care in translation.

10) That wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
We both had nothing but patience,
But death had none.
I saw him coming--oh, so mean, so vile
how vile he was/looked he was so vile--
And I watched him while he took and took:/take; all take
None of it at all was mine.
was mine at all.

The phrase in the last line, "at all was mine," is crossed out, and the one below it is starred. The last version of the stanza is as it was finally written, with the exception of the word "there" instead of "It,"

in the last line:

11) that wasn't his fault, it wasn't mine.
We both had nothing but patience,
But death had none.
I saw him coming--oh, so cheap, so vile--
And I watched him while he took and took:
None of it was mine at all.
There wasn't any of it mine at all.

The first version of the last line here is crossed out.

In examining the next stanza, three lines at a time will be taken, and then the final, published version given after working with all six lines in the stanza. There are some phrases in this stanza which gave Jarrell particular difficulty in choosing which ones to use, and a look at the completed version after becoming involved with his many variations will be more valuable than seeing the final form first.

1) then what was mine; my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Just something Fate lent/loaned me?
Just lent/loaned me by Fate?
Wasn't even my misery mine
But just loaned/lent me by Fate
something Fate lent me?

Jarrell indicated by an arrow that the first version here of the third line is his choice, except that he had not decided between "lent" and "loaned."

2) What was mine then; my very own/my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Only loaned me by Fate?

3) Then what was mine-- my own, mine?
Was/Wasn't even my misery
Only/Just lent me by Fate?

4) then what was mine; my very own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Just lent me by Fate?

The following is probably an earlier version, but because of revisions on the page it is placed here; the lines are starred:

5) then what <u>was</u> mine--my own, <u>mine</u>?
Wasn't even my misery
Only lent/loaned me by fate?

6) then what <u>was</u> mine; mine, my own, mine?
my very own, mine?
then what <u>was</u> mine; my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Just charged/lent/loaned me by Fate?

The second full-line version of the first line is starred.

7) then what was mine--my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Only lent me by Fate?

8) then what was mine--my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Only loaned me by fate?

Here Jarrell finally chooses version #7, with the word "lent." This is a better choice phonetically. "Lent" and "Fate" pair up better, and "Fate" is the significant word here. The use of "loaned" with "only" provides a lonely sound with the long "O" but of the two, "lent" seems better here. The other three lines in this stanza presented more problems:

1) Fate wants not just the happiness,
It wants back the anguish/torture/torment/agony and the ____
And it sells the _______ secondhand.

2) Fate wants back more than/not just the happiness
It wants back the hurting/pain and the cries/crying
And it buys the ruin/wreck/ruins/debris/junk second hand
the pieces second hand USED

The last phrase is starred here although it does not remain in the final version.

3) Fate wants not just the happiness.
It wants back the torture, and the screaming,
And it buys the ruin second hand.

4) Fate wants back not just the joy/happiness
It wants (back) the pain/torture (back) and the ____
THE ____ BACK, AND THE ____________ /screaming,
And it buys the ruin/wreckage/wreck secondhand.

This page contains triangles with the initial "G" or "R" inside. At this point in the translation, Jarrell has a worksheet with lists of synonyms. They are seen below, not necessarily in the same visual form as on the manuscript. He works again with many of these same words on subsequent pages:

pain	wound	swearing	screaming
suffering	rack	howling	screeching
torment	lacerate	groaning	wailing
torture	wring	whine	shrieking
agony	convulse	crying	howling
anguish	writhe	sobbing	bawling
desolation		moaning	groaning
heartache		sobs	
laceration		moans	screams
		groans	screaming
			screeching

And then also are the words, "poor soul, the howling center." This may not be the intended connection of the words; they are placed in a way that several choices are possible in bringing them together.

On the same workpage, following the lists of words, are more versions of these lines:

5) It wants back the torture and the screaming
Fate wants back not just the joy/happiness
It wants the torture/pain back
It wants back the torture/pain/torment/agony
It wants the pain back, and the screams,
It wants back the torment, the shrieks/shrieking/screeching

6) Fate wants back not only/just the happiness,
It wants returned/back the torment/torture and the
screaming/crying
And it buys the wreck/ruin secondhand.

The first and third lines here are starred.

7) Fate wants back not just the happiness,
It wants... . . . .
And it buys the ruin secondhand.

Another worksheet is devoted to these lines, much of the writing marked out, with more lists of synonyms and phrases. The words are scrawled all

over the page; what is shown below is not a visual reproduction, but it should indicate the kind of experimenting Jarrell was doing. His system of starring words and phrases is used on a number of lines and words, but are not ones which are ultimately included in the poem, so for the sake of clarity they will not be indicated here.

8) Fate wants back not just the joy,
Fate wants back the torment/torture
it wants back the screeches
It wants back the torture, and the screeches,/shrieks,
what's wrecked/ruined/destroyed/wasted
it sells secondhand
ruin/wreck/desolation/ (wilderness)
Fate wants back
Fate wants back not just the joy/luck/fortune/success/prosperity/
happiness
It wants back the torment/torture and
not just the joy, the shrieks/howling/shrieking/screams
And it sells the WASTE/RUIN/WRECK torn down secondhand
It wants back
Fate wants back not just the luck,
It wants back the torture,
wants back the screams/screaming/screeching/screeches/howls/
howling/shrieks/shrieking
It wants the torture back, it wants the screams/howls/shrieks/
screeches back,
and it sells the wreck/ruin secondhand.

9) Fate wants back not just the joy/happiness/luck
and the
It wants back the torment,/torture
It wants back the torture/torment
back the screaming/screeches/screeching,/shrieks/shrieking
and the screeching/screaming/shrieking/disaster
And it sells/buys the ruin/wreckage secondhand.
It wants back the torture, and the screaming,/screeching/
screeches/shrieks,/wreck

The lists of words here are starred, or underlined, or circled, or marked with a triangle, or accompanied by a question mark. On the last page of the manuscript are found the still unresolved lines. Somewhere Jarrell must have made a final version of the poem, but it is not with these sheets.[24]

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[24]According to Mrs. Lola Szladits, Curator of the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library, the only typescript there is the same as that published in The Complete Poems (in a letter dated July 21, 1972).

These lines are starred, even though they are not finished:

10) Fate wants back not just the joy,
It wants back the torture,/torment, and the screaming
And it buys the wreck secondhand.

The published version of this entire stanza is as follows:

Then what was mine--my own, mine?
Wasn't even my misery
Only lent me by fate?
Fate wants back not just the joy,
It wants back the torture and the screaming,
And it buys the wreck second-hand.

The last stanza will be studied as a six-line unit, and the published version shown at the last.

1) Fate was there and got for nothing
Every look of my face
Fate was there and got for (next to) nothing
Every look of my face,
The way I moved/walked, even
there was a daily selling-out/an auction every day/ sale every day
And when I was empty it gave me up
And left me standing there open.

2) Every
Fate was there. Every look of my face,
the way I walked, even,
Fate got for nothing
There was an auction every day
And when I was sold out- Fate gave me up
And left me standing there open.

On a page that seems to be an early worksheet on all the stanzas, there are more variations on these lines. Some are starred, but they do not appear in the published version and so will not be indicated here. There are some German phrases on the page, and this indicates that Jarrell is still at the point of finding the best translation.

3) take/seize/grasp/lay hold of

Every look of my face,
tne way I walked, even.
Every day there was a clearance-sale
There was a daily selling-out

And when I was vacant, it dropped/quit me
abandoned/discontinued/gaveup/broke with
And left me standing there open.

4) Fate was there and got for a song
Every way I looked/ look of my face,
Even the way I walked.

5) Fate was there and got for a song
Every look/expression of my face,
Even the way I walked/moved.
Every day there was a clearance sale every day
And when I was vacant/cleared out
it/Fate/fate walked out on me/it quit
And left me standing there vacant/open/open
And when I was vacant/empty/cleared out Fate quit/stopped?
And left me standing open.

The first two lines are starred here. Also starred is the one line in the next version:

6) Fate was there and got for nothing/a song.

7) Fate was there and got for a song
Every look of my face,
Even the way I walked.
Every day it sold me out
I was sold out daily/every day
And when I was vacant
And left me standing there open.
Every day there was a clearance sale
And when I was cleared out Fate quit me

8) Fate was there and got for a song
Every expression of my face,
Even the way I moved/walked
the way I did everything, even-
Even the way I walked, even
Every day there was a clearance sale/selling out
And when I was cleared out, Fate/it quit
And left me standing open.
Every way I looked,
Even the way I walked
Every day there was a sellout
AND WHEN I WAS SOLD OUT, IT QUIT/Quit?
And when I was empty, it walked out on me
And left me standing ?there? open-

The third and fourth lines from the end are starred in the manuscript.

9) Fate was there and got for a song
Every expression of my face,
The way I walked, even.
Every day there was a sellout
And when I was empty, it walked out/sold out/it quit
And left me standing there open.

At the foot of the page is the beginning of a rhyming chart with this list:

strong wrong long along belong

The last version has the first three and the last three lines starred:

10) Fate was there and got for a song
Every expression of my face
the way I did everything,/ walked even.
Every day there was a closing out/sellout/closing-out sale
And when I was closed out, it quit
And left me standing open.
Every day there was a sellout
And when I was empty/sold out, it quit/walked out/IT QUIT
And left me standing there open.

This is almost the same as the published version of the stanza:

Fate was there and got for a song
Every expression of my face,
Even the way I walked.
Every day there was a sellout,
And when I was sold out, it quit
And left me standing there open.

The final simplicity of these words, simple as Rilke's choice of German vocabulary for the poem, is deceptive if the reader concludes that little effort went into the translation. But it is that very simplicity which constitutes the art of the statement. To be consistent in adapting the Rilke poem to American speech, Jarrell not only was careful to choose a vocabulary suitable to American usage, but he managed to retain the essential directness of Rilke's German. He also altered syllabic stresses to suit American speech rhythms. Rilke's poem is not in a strict meter, but it has a predominance of four stressed syllables per line. Jarrell's

translation varies from this pattern to such an extent that it would be unwise to assign a metric or accentual pattern to his version. Rather, Jarrell sets up his lines to correspond with Rilke's meaning--sense rather than sound is the dominant element carried over into the translation. The sound patterns are Jarrell's own contribution to the "Americanization" of the poem.

In all of Randall Jarrell's writings is found the same meticulous attention to phrasing and vocabulary as is exhibited in his work on the Rilke poem. Jarrell was both artist and critic, and he gave his own work a keen-eyed scrutiny so that it is almost flawlessly executed, and has something important and understandable to say to his readers. Art cannot be complete without the final link with those who receive the images, and Jarrell worked consciously for clarity of meaning in his writing. And too, as with any poet, he wrote to satisfy something within himself: the creative spirit. When he was successful in doing so, then he could hope he was reaching others, for he did not try to write for fellow critics or poets so much as for anyone who might gain some insight about reality from his words.[25] To reach out for immortality through responsive readers provides one way for the poet to transcend adversities of the physical world with its anguish and despair. Jarrell thus touched the infinite through his poetry.

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[25] Mrs. Jarrell writes (also in the July 5 letter) that Randall Jarrell "did not want to write FOR the world's approval. He hoped as any artist does that what he made would be something that mattered to people, spoke to them and would enrich their lives and help them to understand their lives."

CONCLUSION

Randall Jarrell, a poet and spokesman for the middle-class American, is most closely a part of the poetic tradition shared by Whitman, Frost, Marianne Moore, Karl Shapiro, and other American poets writing about ordinary life. His vocabulary, imagery, and subject matter deal primarily with those situations commonly shared by all people: death, suffering, loneliness, despair, and the paradox of both accepting life whatever it may offer and doubting the value of ordinary experiences. Jarrell sees art as a means for defining the realities of life, and so his poetry picks up the ordinary, translates the experience into a sharply focused comment, to give one a clearer picture of things as they really are.

The poems included in this study are characteristic of his style and thematic emphasis even if they do not as a whole exhibit the finished qualities of his previously published work. The absence of a traditional or affected poetic language brings the poems close to real life; one finds little use of inversion, forced rhymes, or other devices common to verse writing or less accomplished poetry. In the Rilke translation of "The Widow's Song," Jarrell painstakingly reproduces the rhythms of conversational American diction in a departure from Rilke's use of accent and rhyme. Yet somehow he succeeds in being faithful to the original sense of the poem so that his translation becomes an integral part of Rilke's statement as it describes the tone of loneliness and loss expressed by the widow.

Finally, by implication Jarrell stresses in all these poems the very real need to adhere to simplicity in art and in life. An appreciation and understanding of simple things provide the stability and sanity for coping with the paradoxical, complex life one cannot escape. Because of his competence in handling complexities through simplicities, Jarrell captures the essence of things in his words. By doing so he has made his enduring contribution to the arts by demonstrating the artistic potential of that language which Marianne Moore would call, "plain American which cats and dogs can read!"

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APPENDIX

Three versions of Rilke's poem, "The Widow's Song," are included in this appendix. First is the original German poem as Rilke wrote it, then two translations, one fairly literal and one in traditional poetic form. The Rilke version and the first translation are found in Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Publishers, 1938), pp. 120-21. The second translation is by J. B. Leishman in the collection of Rilke poems, Selected Works, Vol. II: Poetry (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1960), p. 133.

Das Lied Der Witwe

aus Das Buch der Bilder

Am Anfang war mir das Leben gut.
Es hielt mich warm, es machte mir Mut.
Dass es das allen Jungen tut,
wie konnt ich das damals wissen.
Ich wusste night was das Leben war--,
auf einmal war es nur Jahr um Jahr,
nicht mehr gut, nicht mehr neu, nicht mehr wunderbar,
wie mitten entzweigerissen.

Das war nicht seine, nicht meine Schuld;
wir hatten beide nichts als Geduld,
aber der Tod hat keine.
Ich sah ihn kommen (wie schlecht er kam),
und ich schaue ihm zu, wie er nahm und nahm:
es war ja gar nicht das Meine.

Was war denn das Meine; Meines, mein?
War mir nicht selbst mein Elendsein
nur vom Schicksal geliehn?
Das Schicksal will nicht nur das Glück,
es will die Pein und das Schrein zurück,
und es kauft für alt den Ruin.

Das Schicksal war da und erwarb für ein Nichts
jeden Ausdruck meines Gesichts,
bis auf die Art zu gehn.
Das war ein täglicher Ausverkauf,
und als ich leer war, gab es mich auf
und liess mich offen stehn.

The Song of the Widow

from The Book of Pictures

Life was good to me in the beginning.
It kept me warm, it gave me zest.
That it does so to all the young,
how could I know that then?
I did not know what living was--,
suddenly it was just year on year,
no more good, no more new, no more wonderful,
as if torn in two in the middle.

That was not his fault and not mine;
we both had nothing but patience;
but death has none.
I saw him coming (how mean he came),
and I watch him as he took and took:
it wasn't mine at all.

What then was mine; my own, mine?
Was not even my being wretched
only loaned me by fate?
Fate wants not only the happiness,
it wants the pain back and the crying,
and it buys the ruin for old.

Fate was there and acquired for a nothing
every expression of my face,
even to my way of walking.
That was a daily selling out,
and when I was empty it gave me up
and left me standing open.

The Widow's Song

from The Book of Images

Life was kind to me at the start.
It kept me warm, it put me in heart.
That with all who are young it has that art,
how could I then be aware?
I didn't know what life could be,--
it was nothing but years quite suddenly,
with no kindness or wonder or novelty,
as though torn in two pieces there.

That was neither its fault nor my own;
we both were left with patience alone,
but Death has not a whit.
I saw him coming (in what a way!),
and watched him taking and taking away:
I had no claim to it.

What was my own, mine really?
Was not even my misery
only a loan from Fate?
Fate doesn't merely want happiness,
but pain back as well and outscreamed distress,
and buys ruin at a second-hand rate.

Fate was there and obtained for a sou
every expression that came into
my face or away would glide.
A clearance sale was held each day,
and when I was empty it went away
it left me unoccupied.