

Random Thoughts on Randall Jarrell

by [Samuel Hux](#) (June 2019)



Randall Jarrell, Betty Watson

I spoke to Randall Jarrell only once. He gave a reading at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill where I was a student. At the reception—hors d'oeuvres and wine—I asked him a question I'm happy not to remember, and he patiently did not embarrass me. I recall the event was not sponsored by the English department and I remember wondering why he was not a member of that faculty but instead a professor at the Woman's College of UNC (now UNC-Greensboro). (Nor was a sensational reading by e.e. cummings sponsored by English; with all the Victorians dead there was no one for the department to host). But Jarrell was a fairly consistent presence in Chapel Hill, not only at the UNC Hospital in his later years. While a grad student I lived in "Victory Village," leftover buildings from World War II naval pre-flight training ("alma matter" by the way to one Ted Williams, "Teddy Ballgame") and one of Jarrell's step-daughters lived across the street. At least once a month he'd arrive in his sports-car convertible for a visit.

I would like to say my primary attraction was to his poetry—although all I recall was "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"—but I confess that, primarily, I wished I looked like him: dapper Ivy League dress (I could do that), handsome (I've had a complement or two from the visually-challenged), full and shapely beard (mine too scraggly).

The magnificent beard! In his last months he had shaved it off. There's one photo online *sans* beard. He doesn't look like Randall Jarrell. He wasn't. I'm not sure what I mean by that.

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By the way, Jarrell's self-inflicted nickname was "Random." So there's something appropriate in the organization of these *pensées*.



May 6, 1914–October 14, 1965. Suicide or accidental death at 51? According to the state of North Carolina (police and coroner) and Jarrell's wife (Mary von Schrader Jarrell, *Remembering Randall*): an accident; according to literary history and logical extrapolation: a suicide. It took me a long time to agree, more or less, with lit and logic: first, I did not want to believe it, and, second, if you want to kill yourself with an on-coming automobile you throw yourself in front of the car, not into its side. Nonetheless, Jarrell had been deeply depressed for more than a year at the least when he went to Chapel Hill for treatment of a hand injury and then took a walk, at night, not on the pleasant UNC campus but on a highway a mile and a half outside town. Suspicious behavior for a man who had bungled a slit wrist (hence the hand injury) six months before. If his death was an accident, it was the accident of a suicide.

The unsuccessful attempt was soon after he'd read a devastating review in the *New York Times Book Review* of *The Lost World*, whose title poem was a recollection of his youth. Some have thought it ironic that Jarrell, an extremely demanding poetry critic himself, should have been so suicidally thin-skinned, himself. But when Jarrell was tough in a review there was usually a kind of softening humor, as

when he wrote of some poems of Oscar Williams that they sounded as if “written *on* a typewriter *by* a typewriter.” (OK, maybe that’s not so soft.) But his criticism was always an aesthetic judgment of the poems themselves and not a mean-spirited attack on the poet and his character.

There was no excuse for Joseph Bennett writing the review he wrote or the *Times* publishing it. Bennett, a founder and editor of *The Hudson Review*, liked a few of the poems but dismissed everything else in the most irresponsible manner, referring (incomprehensibly) to “Jarrell’s familiar, clanging vulgarity, corny clichés, cutenesses, and the intolerable self-indulgence of his tear-jerking bourgeois sentimentality”—which is in no way descriptive of Jarrell’s work. Furthermore, “His work is thoroughly dated. Prodigiousness encouraged by an indulgent and sentimental Mama-ism”—well, Jarrell was recalling his youth, which has to include a mother if one is not an orphan!—“its overriding feature is doddering infantilism.”

I will never understand why Jarrell—a confident man if there ever was one, as people who knew him, Robert Lowell for one, knew him to be—could be so vulnerable to an attack that was so obviously absurd and suspiciously ill-motivated. Besides, Jarrell was a good enough critic to know, he had to know, that one of the poems Bennett so vilely dismissed was his perhaps best poem, “Next Day” (about which more later).

And I wish *Sergeant* (!) Jarrell had had the self-protectiveness or strength to judge Bennett as I would: as James Carville said of someone, “I wouldn’t piss down his throat if his heart was on fire.” In any case, Bennett’s was seven years later at the age of 50—for which I feel no

retroactive mourning. Perhaps Bennett had a Mama who cared.



The previous thought should not be taken as praise for *The Lost World*. In spite of the fact that it contains as its introductory poem "Next Day," *The Lost World* is Jarrell's weakest book by far. When Robert Lowell wrote after Jarrell's death that it was his best work, he was writing nonsense—which is clear when you note that the two poems he discusses (one of them "Next Day") were completely atypical of the rest of the book. And there is no excuse for Robert Penn Warren writing, maybe to counter Bennett's review, maybe in mourning, "I have read *The Lost World* and reread it with great and growing pleasure, and I am sure that it is at his best level—and his best level is something the future will join us in being grateful for." There is no excuse for such a judgment (if that's what it is instead of a friend's white lie) because it devalues the excellent to great poetry Jarrell composed.

This the way "Next Day," the monologue of a woman a day after a friend's death, begins:

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All,

I take a box

And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.

The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical

Food-gathering flocks

Are selves I overlook. Wisdom, said William James,
Is learning what to overlook. And I am wise
If that is wisdom.

The three-part title poem, "The Lost World," begins (and continues for eleven pages) in what Edmund Wilson once called "a kind of broken-up prose" without a lyrical line to be found:

On my way home I pass a cameraman
On a platform on the bumper of a car`
Inside which, rolling and plunging, a comedian
Is working; on one white lot I see a star
Stumble to her igloo through the howling gale
Of the wind machines.

OK, let me say it: in spite of "Next Day" and a couple more items. *The Lost World*, if not a bad book, is nowhere near a good one. And is it possible that Jarrell's depression was the result of his knowing that something was happening to his gift? And the something happening was not a "decline" over the period of many years (although there could be an occasional dud among the splendors). "Next Day" and the title poem are both dated 1963, but the space between them was not a slow devolution but like a falling-off-a-cliff. And nothing composed in 1964 or '65 was reminiscent of the heights achieved before. This is a mystery to me. Depression because he fell off a cliff? Falling off a cliff because depressed?

I don't expect the radically poor level of Jarrell's *The Lost World* to be obvious to most of the contemporary literary world because "poetry" as a *kind of broken-up prose* has become the standard embraced by English departments and editorial boards. And to a degree Jarrell is in some small way responsible. I have no doubt that Jarrell was one of the great poetry critics in English, especially when generalizing, as in his marvelous essay on the poet's isolation, "The Obscurity of the Poet" (1951). But I did not find all of his individual enthusiasms worthy of his praise. William Carlos Williams, for instance (whom Edmund Wilson was specifically talking about), I think a usually competent writer of *prose*. So it is sad that the author of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" ends his career as the equivalent of Williams.



Thinking again about his criticism, I reiterate that I appreciated his wide-ranging generalizations about the state and/or nature of *poetry* much more than I did the judgments of specific *poets*. But thumbing through *No Other Book: Selected Essays* recently, edited by Brad Leithauser, I realize that aside from efforts like his recognition of Robert Frost's excellence (not a difficult task!) I find some of his enthusiasms and reservations baffling. William Carlos Williams again, for one (while I realize my detestation of WCW a minority view). That he had no enthusiasm for Conrad Aiken I find hard to forgive. The author of "Senlin: A Biography," "And in the Hanging Gardens," "Tetélestai," "Discordants," and "Preludes for Memnon" was a treasure. While Aiken may be the most under-appreciated great poet in the twentieth century, Jarrell should have risen above the pettiness of superficial editors and critics. To give stingy recognition to Elinor

Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay and prefer their “successors” so to speak, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, seems perverse to me, an insult to lyricism.

So I confess an occasional anger. Yes, nothing less than anger at Jarrell.



Lecturing on the philosophy of art over the years I have often used Jarrell to make this or that point. Here’s one exercise:

Listen, I say to me students, I’m going to read you a poem I assume you don’t know. Anyone know a poem called “Next Day” about a woman in a supermarket? None do, so I read the poem very deliberately, not rushing through it. Then I read it again and ask the students what they think. I know these students are afflicted with the disease of identity politics to the degree that it effects their view of culture as well as everything else.

They describe the woman, the speaker in the poem. They know she’s white and upper-middle class: she has a maid and obviously lives in the suburbs and her daughter and sons are “away at school,” which doesn’t sound like the local high school. It takes a little nudging for me to get them to judge her level of education. They know what *Cheer* and *Joy* and *All* are, but don’t necessarily know who *James* is who defines *wisdom*. A philosopher? So she must have gone to college. And so, no problem so far.

They don't know I have been subtly misleading them, for whenever I mention the poet, I call tell they equate the poet and the narrator, the woman. We all refer to the poet as "she." Furthermore, the poem itself *has to be* autobiographical. So they are stunned when I reveal the truth to them (although a couple are suspicious that I had never used the poet's name).

The poet was a heavily bearded man, I tell them, a man who watched NFL football every Sunday in the fall—who because he was an artist was not defined or limited by your identity-politics assumptions and did not have to *live* a certain kind of life to be able to *imagine* it, could even get inside the mind of someone of the opposite sex. So you can take your politics, I say to them, and instead of allowing it to color the nature of art and culture you can shove it up . . . Well, I say instead, you can stick it where the sun don't shine—as I always preferred to maintain a certain decorum in my classes.

Here's another exercise to which I invite anyone. Read "Next Day" at a normal pace. Then without looking at the text answer this question. Does the poem rhyme or is it rhymeless? Whenever I have tried this with students the answer is rhymeless. But in fact . . .

There are ten stanzas in the poem, all sestets. So 60 lines in all. Roughly a third of these lines rhyme—12 in fact. And beyond that there are nine lines with internal rhymes. That's a lot of rhyming. Were my students just deaf? Well, no. The rhyming is disguised to a degree since there is no rhyming pattern as in a sonnet or ballad stanza or any other of the

fixed forms of verse. So the rhyming doesn't call attention to itself as in (remember your childhood) "Rose are red, violate are *blue*, sugar is sweet, and so are *you*." Furthermore, the meter of the poem is irregular in that it is now and then dactylic or anapestic (every third syllable stressed), often spondaic (two or more stresses in a row), but usually trochaic or iambic (every other syllable stressed), and that pattern of fifty percent of stressed syllables can approximate the rhythm of common speech, as in a normal sentence ("I *think* I'll go to *town* today").

Now since the speaker of "Next Day" has an everyday diction, no poeticisms, the musical rhythmicality of the poem soothes but not call attention to itself . . . Well, there we are. In summary: We have a poem that rhymes quite a lot and is rhythmical enough and at the same time sounds indeed like a woman thinking to herself in a conversational tone, and since we all know that in such circumstances we all speak "prose" and do not rhyme when we think . . . then that's the cause. But my major point in all this is the following.

This is a radical achievement, to make a poem which is highly poetic and sounds at the same time like just conversational thought. Robert Frost among other true and truly great poets can do this . . . and so can Randall Jarrell. Which raises the question for me: why doesn't he do it more often?

I love Jarrell. So it surprises me that he disappoints me so often. But I get ahead of myself. Which poems justify his reputation, and justified the awards he received during his lifetime? A Guggenheim, National Book Award for Poetry, and of course selection as Poet Laureate? He was surely the best World War II poet among Americans. The excellence of "The

Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is undeniable, as close to perfection as a poem can get. So much so that it rather obscures the excellence of others of the period such as "Losses," "Eighth Air Force," "A Front," "The Dead Wingman," "A Pilot from the Carrier," "A Camp in the Prussian Forest," and especially "Jews at Haifa.

But afterwards, "Next Day" excepted? As much as I would like to enthuse about "A Girl in the Library," praised by so many, and "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," ditto, I have never felt more than dutiful when reading them. Does this matter, really, so very much?



Whether fully admired or admired with reservations, Jarrell seemed to be thought of as "The Poet": quality aside and however one judged it, "*This was a poet if there ever was one*" so many seemed to judge. As if to say, "The man himself was a poet, the particular poems themselves aside." His great and good friend the philosopher Hannah Arendt implied something like this in her essay on Jarrell in *Men in Dark Times*. "Randall Jarrell would have been a poet if he had never written a single poem—just as the proverbial Raphael born without hands would still have been a painter." And, "The moment he entered the apartment I had the feeling that the household had become bewitched. I never found out how he actually did it, but there was no solid object, no implement or piece of furniture, which did not undergo a subtle change, in the process of which it lost its everyday prosaic function." Arendt could have said, making an analogy with Kant's *das Ding-an-sich* (the thing in itself) that Jarrell was "the poet in itself" (*das Dichter-an-sich*).

The point is that it was apparently impossible to think of Jarrell as anything but *Poet*. And perhaps that's too bad. For he was much more—which is not to imply ironically somewhat less; for he should have been thought of as a *Man of Letters*. I have seen “man or woman of letters” defined as scholar or writer—but that's absurd. What it signifies is a writer who excels in more than one genre, one of them “creative.”

Edmund Wilson, for instance, although primarily a critic and intellectual historian, also wrote poetry, drama, and fiction. Allen Tate, although primarily a poet, wrote a novel, biographies, and much literary criticism. George Santayana, famed as philosopher, also wrote memoir, fiction, poetry, and criticism. The great historian Thomas Babington Macaulay was also a critic and poet. George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) was of course a great novelist, but also a passable poet and excellent critic and occasional philosopher and translator.

And what shall we call Samuel Johnson? Dr. Johnson wrote, hitting only a few spots, the novel *Rasselas*, gobs of course of poetry, biography (*The Life of Mr. Richard Savage*), plenty of criticism, including *Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare* and *Lives of the Poets*, the play *Irene, a Tragedy*, and of course as lexicographer *A Dictionary of the English Language*. Truth to be told, none of these works were truly great, no matter how cranky-charming some, especially the *Dictionary*. (Ironically, perhaps his “greatest” literary work was as conversationalist, his “collaboration” with James Boswell on *The Life of Johnson*). But accumulatively he was a truly great Man of Letters. Man or Woman of Letters: a great tradition.

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Randall Jarrell wrote the best college-campus novel ever, *Pictures from an Institution*, several books of children's literature, translation (of Goethe for instance), and of course to go with the eight books of poetry published in his lifetime, more pages of literary criticism than there were of poetry. He was a man of letters. And if one thinks of him this way, the many pages of inferior poetry which contrast so radically with his true poetic achievement need not compromise his reputation. Randall Jarrell, excellent Man of Letters.



I have called "Next Day" perhaps Jarrell's greatest poem. "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" I judged near perfect. Which is the highest praise? Is *great* greater than *near perfect*, *perfect* more nearly perfect than *great*? I'll think about it some other time.

And it's clear to me that amidst Jarrell's oeuvre there is a poem I've not mentioned which may rival the two above, so I have not exhausted my Jarrellian thoughts and perplexities. Later, perhaps?

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

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