

CURRENT BOOKS

The Poet-Critic

NO OTHER BOOK: Selected Essays.

By Randall Jarrell. Edited by Brad Leithauser.

HarperCollins. 376 pp. \$27.50

REMEMBERING RANDALL:

A Memoir of Poet, Critic, and Teacher Randall Jarrell.

By Mary von Schrader Jarrell.

HarperCollins. 173 pp. \$22

by Jay Parini

The poet-critics continue to hold our interest, especially by contrast to more academic critics—the poststructuralists, in particular, whose writing has been ascendant during the past two decades. The poet-critics' essays, like their poems, are “news that stays news,” to borrow a phrase from Ezra Pound. One still reads, for example, the criticism of Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Samuel Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot. One occasionally rereads essays by John Crowe Ransom or Robert Penn Warren. More academic critics, by contrast, rarely survive their time. Who but historians of criticism now reads even the best of Cleanth Brooks, Walter J. Ong, Louis L. Martz, or W. K. Wimsatt, all strong critics in their time?

Randall Jarrell (1914–65) was the best poet-critic of his generation. Although he was by far a better critic than poet, his criticism gained its uncanny power from the fact that Jarrell understood what was at stake in the writing of poems. He knew that poetry was, if properly conceived and executed, a central form of culture, and that if the standards for poetry deteriorated, a general deterioration of thought and feeling—of expression—would follow. As a result, one still

reads his essays as if they were bulletins from the front.

Jarrell was only 51 when he died, yet he left behind a diverse body of work, including the first-rate essays gathered in this comprehensive selection by Brad Leithauser, himself a wonderfully intelligent poet, novelist, and critic. *No Other Book* is especially welcome because the original editions of Jarrell's essays have lapsed from print.

Taken together, these pieces represent one of the most alluring critical projects of this century.

What set Jarrell apart was good taste, broad learning, uncommon sense, and a passion for clarity.

Reading him, one

feels completely confident that what he says is what he means, and that he will not put on airs or play falsely. This does not, of course, mean that he will not use every device available to the critic, including certain forms of indirection. Jarrell is subtle, and the more readers know, the more they will get from him. Still, one cannot quite hope to know as much as Jarrell: he seems learned in unlikely ways and confident of his opinions. That is part of his allure.

Leithauser wisely puts “The Obscurity of the Poet,” a lovely and wide-ranging piece, first in his selection. Consider an early,



memorable sentence in that essay: "If we were in the habit of reading poets their obscurity would not matter; and, once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help." Jarrell was used to hearing people decry the obscurity of Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Edward Thomas, and others. He was frustrated by this situation, noting with disdain the disappearance of a public used to spending time with poetry: "You need to read good poetry with an attitude that is a mixture of sharp intelligence and of willing emotional empathy, at once penetrating and generous." In effect, he was describing himself.

"To the Laodiceans" remains the most influential essay ever written on Robert Frost, mostly because Jarrell understood that Frost was a terrifying poet well before this became a commonplace. Frost had never lacked for an audience that appreciated his work, but he did—at least by the late 1940s and early 1950s—seem to be slipping among the critics, who preferred the difficult poems of Eliot and Stevens to his blunt, plainspoken work. Jarrell declared "Provide, Provide" an "immortal masterpiece," and offered an explication of "Design" that would shape the view of Frost taken by future critics such as Lionel Trilling and Richard Poirier.

Like W. H. Auden, whom Jarrell the critic resembles—indeed, Jarrell often strikes me as an impersonator, but a brilliant one, of Auden's critical voice—he is good at a certain form of abstraction. Jarrell brilliantly turns the Audenesque tone on Auden, in "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry," when he offers an exhaustive list of Auden's stylistic characteristics in the rhetoric of his early poems—and the list runs to 26 entries! Like many readers (myself included), he prefers the earlier to the later Auden, where the poet's rhetoric tends to degenerate. With eye-catching cogency, he writes: "Auden wished to make his poetry better organized, more logical, more accessible, and so on; with these genuinely laudable intentions, going in the right direction from his early work, he has managed to run through a tremendous series of

changes so fast that his lyric poetry has almost been ruined." Jarrell wrote this in 1941, well before his subject launched into what we now think of as "later Auden."

Like Leithauser, I have admired Jarrell for years, and found him particularly bracing and exemplary when I first began to write criticism myself. My impression was that Jarrell gnawed at the poem before him, tearing away the flesh to reveal glistening bone. What surprised me, on rereading these essays, was how rarely Jarrell gets close to an individual poem; rather, he selects the poems he deems worthy, often the less familiar ones, then stands back and admires them, inviting the reader to gaze beside him. In the manner of the New Critics, he adores quoting. "To show Whitman for what he is," he writes, "one does not need to praise or explain or argue, one needs simply to quote."

Jarrell's prose often seems rushed but never sloppy. The writer appears to feel under immense pressure because he has so much to say with so little time, so little space, to do justice to his arguments. Unlike Eliot's essays, Jarrell's feel shapeless, ad hoc, and impulsive; yet they quiver with life, with perceptions one is grateful for, with formulations that seem exact, even exacting, as when he writes of Pound: "A great deal of the Cantos is interesting in the way an original soul's indiscriminate notes on books and people, countries and centuries, are interesting; all these fragmentary citations and allusions remind you that if you had read exactly the books Pound has read, known exactly the people Pound has known, and felt about them exactly as Pound has felt, you could understand the Cantos pretty well."

In the end, Jarrell's readings of specific poems seem less significant than his tone. Jarrell loved poets and poetry, and his work teems with affection and sympathetic understanding. But that is only part of the tone. There is also a cultivated distance, a sense of fierce judgment, unreservedly rendered, as when he writes that "Melville's poetry has been grotesquely underestimated." The stance is bold, intimate, and authoritative—

and time has proved Jarrell right. We hear the characteristic tone again at the end of his great essay on Robert Lowell, “From the Kingdom of Necessity”: “One or two of these poems, I think, will be read as long as men remember English.” This was in 1947! Lowell had a long, tortuous path ahead as a poet, but Jarrell was already making shrewd judgments, predicting developments in Lowell’s work that would become obvious only a decade or so later.

Admirers of Jarrell will want to know more about the conditions under which he wrote, but little help will come their way from Mary von Schrader Jarrell, his widow. Her *Remembering Randall* consists of nine essays, none of which seems especially shrewd or perceptive, although each has moments of interest or charm. Mary and Randall met at the Rocky Mountain Writers’ Conference, where he was on the faculty and she was a student. The teacher-student relationship seem never to have quite been put behind them, and Mary’s obvious adoration retains a slightly immature feel. She obliquely describes Jarrell’s sad descent into depression, as if (understandably) she cannot quite look at the terrible thing directly. She maintains that a bad review in the *New York Times* provoked Randall to slice his wrists, but that his death seven months later, when he was struck down by a car in Chapel Hill,

North Carolina, was an accident.

In the end, the criticism is what matters. For contemporary poets, Jarrell has tossed out bones still worth chewing on, as in “On Modernism,” where he puts the situation of the poet in the latter half of the 20th century quite nakedly: “It is the end of the line. Poets can go back and repeat the ride; they can settle in attractive, atavistic colonies along the railroad; they can repudiate the whole system, à la Yvor Winters, for some neoclassical donkey caravan of their own. But Modernism As We Knew It—the most successful and influential body of poetry of this century—is dead.”

Poets are left, as it were, stranded. Jarrell believed that, and this doubtless added to his despair. But his essays are so full of life, so rippled with perceptions, shafts of acute vision, neatly framed contrasts, and witty formulations, that one cannot but hope his death was genuinely an accident. The man in the essays—that familiar voice—does not sound like someone who would kill himself; he appears wry and full of wisdom, a model of sanity. *No Other Book* comes at a good time to remind us of who he was and what he gave us. It should grace every serious reader’s bookshelf.

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Laying Down Arms

THE SOUL OF BATTLE:

*From Ancient Times to the Present Day,
How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny.*

By Victor Davis Hanson. Free Press.

480 pp. \$30

by Andrew J. Bacevich

This is a book about citizen armies, military genius, and wars of liberation. It posits a specifically democratic tradition of martial greatness—of mighty armies raised out of seemingly unlikely material, entrusted

to the command of eccentrics, and embarking “on a moral trek into the heart of slavery.” Called upon to fight not for glory or conquest but for freedom, citizen-soldiers become fierce, implacable warriors, a