

## *At Whim*

**Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964**, by Randall Jarrell, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980. xii + 381 pp. \$17.95.*

THE DUST JACKET says that implicit in Randall Jarrell's *Kipling, Auden & Co.* is "a theory of poetry." I should be interested in knowing what the author of that statement conceived the theory to be. Against the claim we might set Jarrell's comment on Kipling: he "was a professional from the day he first said to his ayah, in the vernacular — *not being a professional myself*, I don't know what it was he said..." (italics supplied). Jarrell is clearly correct about himself: he was not a professional, and in that negative lies the charm of this remarkably readable collection. He has about him something of the ironically self-effacing British amateur; his comments on poetry are less remarkable for constituting a theory than as a series of appreciations of the sort which British critics excel in. In reading this new (and unfortunately final) collection of Jarrell's essays I am reminded at times of C.S. Lewis' capacity to relish a poem for its own sake, without regard to

theory, literary or otherwise. The tone is genial, frequently biting but never without humor; and what Lewis said of Spenser (and what might be applied to Lewis) is true as well of Jarrell: reading him is good for our mental health.

Jarrell understood himself and art: if a theory of poetry does emerge in these essays, it is a justification of doing without a theory—in Jarrell's metaphor, approaching a poem naked. He urges us to read and write not for the sake of preconceptions but purely for the worth of the subject and the pleasure of reading and writing. "The true reader 'listens like a three years' child:/The Mariner hath his will.' Later on he may write like a sixty-three-year-old sage, but he knows that in the beginning, unless ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of art. "Jarrell's heart goes out to a critic who "once a year...read *Kim*; and he read *Kim*, it was plain, at whim: not to teach, not to criticize, just for love..." Jarrell ends the essay ("Poets, Critics, and Readers") with the exhortation: "*Read at whim! read at whim!*"

*Kipling, Auden & Co.* does not convey the impression of having been written at whim; the prose is as subtly shaped throughout as the buried rhyme on *Kim* and *whim*. One does, however, receive the impression that Jarrell practiced his own preaching and wrote less to teach or to criticize than for the pure love of his subject (though a great deal of art and careful craftsmanship go into conveying that impression). Indeed the book's most memorable quality is its verbal vivacity—the sort of rhetorical exuberance which stems from a relish for the thing said. Here are a few examples—a few of many.

Of Yeats' early lyrics Jarrell remarks that "the poetry is intolerably pure; the qualities that make Yeats' later poems notable are exactly what these lack.... They are an odd combination of pre-Raphaelite and *fin de siècle* poetry—the pre-Raphaelite corpse possessed by the decadent spirit." The judgment is admittedly a commonplace, but what oft was thought

has seldom been so well expressed. Of Ernie Pyle, in whom Jarrell clearly saw something of himself: "His condemnation of war seems to the reader more final than any other, because in him there is no exaggeration, no hysteria, no selection to make out a case, no merely personal emotion unrecognized as such; he has nothing to prove"—no preconceived theory to expound. Jarrell says almost nothing about religion, but his comments on Robert Lowell imply an attitude: "a good religious poem, today, is ambergris, and it is hard to enjoy it for thinking of all those suffering whales; but martyrs are born, not made," and Lowell "is a Christian, and consequently knows that Christianity is true, just as physicists used to know that physics is true." Certainly there is no theory here as such, but the *used to* in reference to physicists tantalizes us with the possibility that theologies and ideas about history are latent. We detect the same mystery in a comment on Robert Frost's "Directive": Frost understood "that each life is tragic because it wears away into the death that it at last half welcomes—that even its salvation, far back at the cold root of things, is make-believe, drunk from a child's broken and stolen goblet hidden among the ruins of the lost cultures." Jarrell would not care to be more explicit; to specify the intellectual grounds of such remarks would be to commit Yvor Winters' error, who, when his "taste is at its best...is an immediate contact with the reality of the poem." Unfortunately Winters too frequently allows theory to usurp upon innocence; then his criticism is "purely dogmatic and theoretical, proceeding not from his experience but from his standards."

In such a feast of enthusiastic yet precise articulation to complain of any lack seems ungrateful; yet I do feel at moments the lack of such standards. There is almost too much *experience*, too much *taste*; one wishes Jarrell would sometimes wear clothes. Being theoretical when theory is in order does not entail being "purely dogmatic." The greatest of our critics, while not evading "immediate contact with the reality of the poem," do transcend that

immediacy. One thinks especially of T.S. Eliot, whom Jarrell considers the best critic of the century and who, without losing the experiences of poems, pulls those experiences into a conceptual shape. In these essays we move through thirty years of our rich and terrible history and of our even richer and equally terrifying literature. We see it all in Jarrell's words, but we never see it whole. The major writer even in an age of fragments, "among the ruins of the lost cultures," discerns patterns which embrace and redeem the chaos. Yeats, Eliot, Auden—the writers, save Kipling whom Jarrell most admires—saw such patterns and transcended experience. Jarrell's criticism would ultimately be more rewarding if he showed us what he found with Frost "at the cold root of things."

Reviewed by HAROLD L. WEATHERBY