

Randall Jarrell's "Eland": A Key to Motive and Technique in His Poetry

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The growing critical interest in the work of Randall Jarrell reveals two things: his reputation as one of the most perceptive and helpful literary critics of the last three decades continues to flourish, while his own poetry remains the center of intense controversy. Judgments of its overall value and place alongside the work of contemporaries like Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke vary radically, and even his admirers seem unable to relate his poetry conclusively to any of the major critical or methodological "schools" of this century. For friend and foe alike he is the most "idiosyncratic" of modern poets, for the one consistent element in the diverse collection of strategies and subjects found in the poems from "The Rage for the Lost Penny" (1940) to *The Lost World* (1965) is an insistence on unfettered improvisation, an absolute refusal to be systematic or provide a theoretical or symbolic paradigm for his own work. This attitude is also clearly operative in his criticism, and, ironically, is chiefly responsible for its fresh and innovative approaches to writers like Whitman and Frost. Nothing like Stevens' "Supreme Fiction," Frost's characteristic idioms and landscapes, or Pound's consistent use of private sources is available to the reader of Jarrell, for the core of his work, the announced *purpose* for its existence, is emotional and quasi-mystical rather than theoretical or aesthetic.

What unifies the poems modeled after German Märchen and dreams, the dramatic monologues on war and supermarkets, and the tortuous, syntactically dense considerations of life and death in the "Modern Age" is the attitude behind them, the belief that they all provide specific answers for the same vague question and sponsor recognition (not necessarily understanding) of the human condition in its primal form. Necessary manifestations of this belief in the poetry are an ongoing, painfully sympathetic tone and an overt hostility toward absolute definition of any kind or "that traumatic passion for Authority, any Authority at all, that is one of the most unpleasant things in our particular time and our particular culture."¹ Once one recognizes the fundamental character of Jarrell's sensibility and its insistence that poetry function as a "location" where the effects of experience are most dramatically presented, the common purpose behind much of Jarrell's experimentation with the dramatic monologue and the vital presentation of scenes of childhood, warfare, and modern culture becomes clearer. His characteristic use of syntactically complex stanzas, heavy with apposition and qualification, his love of paradox and his "muscular identification with his subject matter" (a

¹ Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York, 1955), p. 90.

phrase Jarrell used to explain his special admiration for Rilke's lyrics), are all designed to show the "real and difficult face" of human experience *and* to promote sympathy for those who suffer its effects.

Many critics have either failed to recognize the importance of this emotional nexus or dismissed it as sentimental and self-indulgent. The latter is an easy judgment often applied to the work of recent poets, but it is particularly damaging to Jarrell's since the intensity of tone and underlying plea for emotional recognition are not simply poetic devices or alternatives but recurring indications of the vague yet constant aims behind all his poetry. Stephen Spender feels, "Jarrell is very difficult to 'place' or even describe as a poet," because he "seems to complain against most of the human condition without . . . much discrimination."² His critique is predicated on what he sees as a lack of selectivity, of "self-control," in subject matter joined with a tedious, unchanging tone and approach. "B.," the "Opposing Self" of James Dickey's article on Jarrell, sharply dismisses his poetry on more theoretical grounds as lacking conscientious "technique" and too dependent on mere presentation of a generalized, domesticated reality.³ Both critics quarrel as much with the intentions of Jarrell's poetry as with its aesthetics or how successfully those intentions are realized, and base their major objections on personal views of what poetry "should do." Jarrell partisans have tended to reply in kind, proclaiming how well Jarrell creates direct, moving visions of modern life free of personal prejudices and the pointless verbal gymnastics of more formal poetry.

It is my intention not to join in this general debate about the "true function" of poetry, but to define as precisely as possible that central attitude behind all of Jarrell's poems responsible for both their diversity of content and consistency of approach. One can at least gain a clearer understanding of Jarrell's real aims and accomplishments by briefly charting his development of a mature technique which he felt best expressed the basic motivations and themes behind all his work and then examining in more detail one of the finest examples of his mature verse, a dramatic monologue entitled "Seele im Raum."

Jarrell's earliest work, the poems published in "The Rage for the Lost Penny"⁴ and *Blood for a Stranger* (1942), encompasses an astonishing variety of subjects, strategies, and influences. Clearly the young poet was searching among the various methods and idioms of his contemporaries for those he could best adapt to his own themes and poetic needs. The early poetry of W. H. Auden seems to have had the most dramatic effect on Jarrell's own experimentation. Early efforts like "A Little Poem" and "On the Railway Platform" adopt Auden's conversational, economical mode of address and also employ the domestic and travel imagery associated with much of Auden's best early poetry. Above all, Auden's

² Stephen Spender, "Randall Jarrell's Complaint," *New York Review of Books*, ix, No. 9 (Nov. 23, 1967), p. 28.

³ James Dickey, "Randall Jarrell," *Randall Jarrell / 1914-1965*, ed. Robert Lowell et al. (New York, 1967), pp. 33-48.

⁴ *Five Young American Poets* (Norfolk, Conn., 1940), pp. 81-124.

ability to build a complex mood with a progression of concrete images, often vigorously idiomatic in nature, seems to have impressed Jarrell. He explained his special admiration for Auden's language in a critical essay on the poet:

They [Auden's images] gain uncommon plausibility from the terse understated matter-of-factness of their treatment, the insistence (such as that found in the speech of children, in Mother Goose, in folk or savage verse, in dreams) upon the "thingness" of the words themselves.⁵

Jarrell continued to use concrete, descriptive imagery in his dramatic poetry in order to "locate" their events and themes in scenes with their own sense of dramatic immediacy and "uncommon plausibility." His development of the dramatic monologue in the war poems of *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948) and his ceaseless revision of earlier poems suggest a common impulse, an insistence on poems with their own autonomous settings and internal developments, on a total elimination of the didactic authorial voice. Jarrell's subsequent rejection of his early Audenesque models seems an outgrowth of this same basic concern, for although he first adopted Auden's brusque, declarative mode of authorial address along with his sharp, idiomatic imagery, he later abandoned it as too didactic and "omniscient" in tone and perfected a narrative approach that is more conditional, iterative, and often mildly rhetorical in its general assertions and "judgments." Auden's allegorical landscapes and his occasional tendency toward straightforward social commentary are too one-dimensional and declarative for Jarrell's purposes in his later, more investigative verse.

His rejection of the early, more assertive tone of his own poetry is clearly a factor in his personal selection of the poems to be included in the *Selected Poems* edition of 1955. Of the forty-odd poems of *Blood for a Stranger*, only ten were included, and most of those had either been revised structurally or were similar in strategy and tone to Jarrell's later poems. Perhaps the best poem from that first volume, "Children Selecting Books in a Library," is the most instructive of all in indicating the motives and effects of Jarrell's revisions. A quick comparison of the first stanzas of the original and revised versions will show what Jarrell was about:

The little chairs and tables by a wall
Bright with the beasts and weapons of a book
Are properties the bent and varying heads
Slip past unseeingly: their looks are tricked
By our fondness and their grace into a world
Our innocence is accustomed to find fortunate.

Our great lives find the little blanched with dew;
Their cries are those of crickets, dense with warmth.
We wept so? How well we all forget!
One taste of memory (like Fafnir's blood)

⁵ Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York, 1969), p. 155.

Makes all their language sensible, one's ears
Burn with the child's peculiar gift for pain.⁶

With beasts and gods, above, the wall is bright.
The child's head, bent to the book-colored shelves,
Is slow and sidelong and food-gathering,
Moving in blind grace . . . Yet from the mural, Care,
The grey-eyed one, fishing the morning mist,
Seizes the baby hero by the hair

And whispers, in the tongue of gods and children,
Words of a doom as ecumenical as dawn
But blanched, like dawn, with dew. The children's cries
Are to men the cries of crickets, dense with warmth
—But dip a finger into Fafnir, taste it,
And all their words are plain as chance and pain.⁷

The second version not only has a greater complexity and ease of rhythm and imagery but also transforms the comparatively stiff personal address of the original into a more lyrical, direct observation of characters who are involved in a process rather than serving as mere “illustrations” for a series of declarative, general remarks. The first line of the revision is more syntactically complex and manages to convey most of the raw information of the first two lines of the original. This movement toward more complex and condensed phrasing and syntax is perhaps the most consistent and characteristic stylistic development in all of Jarrell's poetry. As in these lines, the use of syntactical pauses and inverted phrases became a favorite device of Jarrell's, for they allowed syntactical rhythms that were sonorous while remaining conversational in tone. In the words of Denis Donoghue, Jarrell had a special understanding of “the relation between silence and speech, the flow of feeling between them,” and could do “wonderful things with a full stop, a colon, a question mark.”⁸

But even more important for our purposes is the abrupt change in the mode of address, for it is a sure technical clue to the motives behind Jarrell's mature style. The speaker in the original, who seems to control so insistently the “meanings” of his narration, withdraws to a greater distance in the revised version and refuses to generalize about the scene until it has worked itself out. The imagery likewise moves toward greater specificity and dramatic autonomy. The general category of “bent and varying heads” becomes “The child's head . . . / Moving in blind grace.” The rather stuffy commentator disappears, and the “wordly wisdom” he supplied is expressed by another “character” involved in the drama, by the fantastic figure of “Care,” who belongs to the scene itself and does not

⁶ Randall Jarrell, *Blood for a Stranger* (New York, 1942), p. 15.

⁷ Randall Jarrell, *Selected Poems* (New York, 1955), p. 97.

⁸ *Randall Jarrell / 1914-1965*, p. 55.

intrude upon it with extraneous generalizations. In short, Jarrell transforms a mere "example" into a self-realized and dramatically intact scene. The change partially relieves the author of his responsibilities as an omniscient interpreter, a stance Jarrell finds particularly uncomfortable. The worst examples of such awkward commentary and "public" imagery occur in the following lines and explain their total deletion from the revised poem:

They are not learning answers but a method:
To give up their own dilemmas for the great
Maze Of The World—to turn in all their gold
For the bank-notes of the one unwithering State.

Such major revisions throughout the poem show the key technical effects of Jarrell's later revolt against the relatively complacent moralizer who often narrates Auden's early poetry and much of Jarrell's own. The ever-increasing use of personae and dramatic scenes in the war poems of Jarrell's middle period and the adoption of the dramatic-monologue strategy almost exclusively in his most mature poetry seem a direct consequence of the attitudes and aims behind the extensive revision of "Children Selecting Books in a Library." Although Jarrell never overtly defined these aims in philosophical or critical terms, we have clear evidence of consistent and intense motives behind his revisions and the characteristic strategy he develops in his later poetry. His "speakers" become participants in concrete, dramatic situations—as wounded fighter pilots, tired housewives, or aging government employees—and Jarrell speaks *for* them if he speaks at all. Increasingly he expresses general themes *through* specific personae or the confusing, "unexplainable" circumstances which often entrap them. The ponderous "explanations" in early lines, like "Our great lives find the little blanched with dew," are strenuously avoided, are changed through a less declarative approach to specific subject matter.

Jarrell channels his general themes into intricate symbolic and syntactical patterns that express their "own" meanings through the interaction of characters and key phrases, producing less didactic but more subtle and complex expressions of emotional themes that are themselves often vague, intricate, and paradoxical. The more successful war poems, like "Eighth Air Force," where the moralizing speaker is inevitably drawn into his own judgment of soldiers who are both children and murderers at the same time, are those where the distinct, often bizarre scenes of World War II and its participants are allowed to sort out the paradoxical, absurd meanings of their own actions and machinations. The combatants, as unique representatives of human kind, are usually the real subjects of such poems and are always shown to be both victimizers and victims with equal cogency.

A wide reading of Jarrell's work begins to reveal a recurrent attitude behind the diverse events and scenes, the sense that explanation itself, as a pat, logical generalization about what human life "means," is the greatest absurdity of all. The motives behind Jarrell's own movement away from the didactic voice are

best explained by the constant undercutting (and often downright parodies) of the didactic, positivist approach to experience in the later poems themselves. In his best criticism, the praise of poets like Whitman and W. C. Williams for courageously *presenting* the world of human experience with all its contradictions and absurdities intact helps us understand his own attitude. Ultimately his poetry seems designed to present specific examples of the "human condition," not in general, abstract terms, but through the direct, often consciously colloquial description of individual lives. Jarrell's final development of a personal style can best be understood as an attempt to find an approach which best *allows* such presentations. In one of his finest essays, "Some Lines from Whitman," Jarrell almost certainly speaks for his own poetics as well:

There is in him almost everything in the world, so that one responds to him, willingly or unwillingly, almost as one does to the world, that world which seems both evil beyond any rejection and wonderful beyond any acceptance. We cannot help seeing that there is something absurd about any judgment we make of its whole—for there is no "point of view" at which we can stand to make the judgment, and the moral categories that mean most to us seem no more to apply to its whole than our spatial and temporal or causal categories seem to apply to its beginning or end.⁹

Jarrell's avoidance of absolutes or "categorical judgments" in the few comments on his own poetry and his frequent dismissal of them as useless within the poems themselves is surely related to such critical praise of the same attitudes in the work of other poets. Although I have only been able to give the most cursory attention to the development of Jarrell's mature style, it is clear even from the briefest examination that the strategies related to the dramatic monologue so widely and effectively used in Jarrell's final collections, *The Seven-League Crutches* (1951), *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (1960), and *The Lost World* (1965), are designed to permit the most direct, concrete presentation of "things and lives" as they are in the modern world *and* thereby sponsor recognition of the human predicament. The latter can only be "judged" by the sum of its parts, and the particular characters and scenes of the final volumes compose a "gallery" of unique instances which defy logical summation.

I would now like to turn to one of the finest examples of these later poems, an interior monologue entitled "Seele im Raum," for it also expresses, perhaps more overtly than any other poem, the essential emotional motivation and quasi-mystical "beliefs" responsible for its own form. Like so many of the better late poems, it describes a person's confused yet concrete sense of personal being and its apparent fate in a hostile culture and environment. Yet, unlike most of her "fellows," the protagonist of "Seele im Raum" manages to prevail rather than submit to "the world's one way" of defining public reality. Thus her tale becomes one of the few encouraging instances of human existence among other more despondent portrayals of personal failure like "A Girl in a Library," "The Face," and "Next Day." And in expressing those feelings and the awareness of personal

⁹ *Poetry and the Age*, p. 114.

being which allow her to escape the common fate, the speaker becomes especially useful to us. She becomes one of the few effective “spokesmen” for an attitude consistently fostered in Jarrell’s poetry and their true “raison d’etre.” In short, “Seele im Raum” enunciates Jarrell’s completed vision of ideal human consciousness. If there is a unifying element in all of his poetry, it is the emotional plea for this comprehensive awareness of life and the sense that it must be protected and encouraged (and especially by poetry itself) with special care in a harsh, impersonal, mechanistic age.

“Seele im Raum” begins with a typical, domestic dinner scene. Yet the setting is also “like a dream” since a place is set for a mysterious visitor who is materially invisible yet seen:

It sat between my husband and my children.
A place was set for it—a plate of greens.
It had been there: I had seen it
But not somehow—but this was like a dream—
Not seen it so that I knew I saw it.
It was as if I could not know I saw it.
Because I had never once in all my life
Not seen it. It was an eland.¹⁰

The halting, contorted syntax is, as I have noted, characteristic of Jarrell’s later verse. It is designed to function dramatically as well as structurally and usually denotes a sense of desperation and helplessness in the speaker who attempts to explain away the absurdities of his own actions and experiences. Yet here the confusion is less desperate, for the speaker wishes to describe a familiar yet fantastic vision. She shows all the apprehension of people who fear their listeners will think them insane. Yet her “vision” is not that of a schizophrenic, for she “sees” and doesn’t see a part of her own being precisely because it is so familiar to her. She characterizes it as an “eland,” a part of her earliest consciousness of self, and “feels” its presence at her table without undue alarm. Her “eland” seems strange, not because it is unfamiliar, but because it is an eland.

As in “Children Selecting Books in a Library,” Jarrell presents rather than defines his concept of “Seele” by making the exotic creature an active participant in the scene. The woman recalls, “Many times / when it breathed heavily (when it had tried / A long useless time to speak”) and she “touched it” and found the eland “of a different size / And order of being.” And this is really the animal’s function as a concrete image in the poem. It represents directly a subliminal awareness of human life that is both organic and mystical; incapable of logical articulation, it simply “breathes.” In his introductory notes for the *Selected Poems* Jarrell explained that the title, “Seele im Raum,” is taken from “one of Rilke’s poems; ‘Soul in Space’ sounded so glib that I couldn’t use it instead.”¹¹ Yet it is

¹⁰ *Selected Poems*, p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

clear that Jarrell is attempting to present with special conclusiveness his own sense of that spiritual entity in this poem, and the eland serves as its dramatic representative. A paradox, it embodies both an expansion and a reduction of human consciousness. In the context of the poem it serves as a "domesticated incarnation," mystical yet innately personal, rather than as the traditionally fearsome manifestation of a deity. Its condition invokes sympathy rather than reverence. Its exotic nature is also intentional. In the same introductory notes Jarrell suggests his reasons for choosing the animal:

An eland is the largest sort of African antelope—the males are as big as a horse, and you often see people gazing at them, at the zoo, in uneasy wonder.

Its "wondrous" identity is important, for, like other such fabulous characters in Jarrell's poems, its physical form expresses the strange yet concrete nature of the "other self" it embodies. Jarrell's personae, like "die alte Marschallin" in "The Face" and the narrator of "A Ghost, a Real Ghost," often see in their mirrors the image of another being, comparable to the mysterious "Doppelgänger" of German Märchen, who incorporates "wraithlike" elements of human existence from which they feel estranged. For Jarrell such apparitions embody personal senses of self most evident in the child's imagination and clearly operative in dreams, myths, and imaginative literature. As such, they are no less "real" as expressions of human reality than more empirical, objective descriptions. Such "beings" appear in the poems not as mere poetic devices but as literal representatives of deeper, more irrational levels of human consciousness. Mrs. Mary Jarrell recalls that "Randall (so it seemed to me) had an affinity for what he thought of as his Other: that One he saw in ponds and photographs and mirrors."¹² So for Jarrell, children's "tales are full of sorcerers and ogres / Because their lives are." In this sense, the woman's fantasy is "childlike," but in Jarrell's view this marks her as exceptionally fortunate. She has not lost her "soul," her sense of complete and mystical being, like most of the "adults" of Jarrell's poetry.

The dramatic conflict of "Seele im Raum" does not spring from the woman's own doubts but from the necessary relationships with "the others," with her family, who make jokes about her setting a place for the beast, and "my whole city," which, "after some years . . . came / And took it from me—it was ill, they told me." The persona of "Seele im Raum," like the mother in "Second Air Force," the "Woman at the Washington Zoo," or Jarrell himself in "Thinking of the Lost World," wrestles with the disparity between public reason and private vision, and the essential conflict responsible for the intensely sympathetic tone and air of advocacy in most of Jarrell's poetry is overtly dealt with in her internal debate. After the loss of her eland the woman's tone becomes elegiac, and in the remainder of the poem she attempts to generalize about its "meaning." In so doing she expresses precisely, not what the eland "was" (again, such generalizations are avoided in Jarrell's late poetry), but what it meant *to her*, and her ruminations assume the quality of a personal credo.

¹² *Randall Jarrell / 1914-1965*, p. 279.

Jarrell's use of the repeated subjunctive in the following passage reinforces the conditional, uncertain tone already established in the syntax, for the woman struggles with the absurdity of her "faith":

It is as if someone remembered saying:
"This is an antimacassar that I grew from seed,"
And this were true.
 And, truly,
One could not wish for anything more strange—
For anything more. And yet it wasn't *interesting* . . .
—It was worse than impossible, it was a joke.

And yet when it was, I *was*—
Even to think that I once thought
That I could see it is to feel the sweat
Like needles at my hair-roots, I am blind

—It was not even a joke, not even a joke.

The issue remains unresolved, as such issues must in Jarrell's poetry, but the woman's remarks indicate a strength of belief and, even more important, of imagination which hold the world's rationality and derision at arm's length. Jarrell's organization of the first sentence in the second group helps show this, for the last prepositional phrase quite suddenly asserts a general attitude about the value of the "strange" beast which remains unshakable. The woman's tenacity in defending her private vision becomes the main subject of this poem and certifies her status as one of Jarrell's heroines. She defends a form of subjective mysticism, for the martyr she worships is neither "holy" in the conventional sense, nor public, but a destroyed part of her own psyche. Her faith is completely private and presumes nothing beyond itself; it is simply both an indication and a fulfillment of personal needs. The woman's imaginative memory, which allows her to *feel* the eland's presence at the slightest suggestion, saves her from the dull, lonely "reality" of less open and responsive personae in Jarrell's poems.

It would also seem at this point that she comes as near as one can to expressing Jarrell's own feelings. A prose passage describing his favorite elements of John Crowe Ransom's poetry also illuminates in remarkable detail the purposes of "Seele im Raum":

His poems are full of an affection that cannot help itself for an innocence that cannot help itself—for the stupid travellers lost in the maze of the world, for the clever travellers lost in the maze of the world. The poems are not a public argument but personal knowledge, personal feeling; and their virtues are the "merely" private virtues.¹³
In such a context, the woman's "blind" persistence in defending her "merely

¹³ *Third Book of Criticism*, p. 313.

private” and terribly fragile vision is both courageous and a rallying point for the “honestly defenceless.” Her very admission of personal confusion is a sign of her special enlightenment. In the following passage she states her case in terms that sum up Jarrell’s own fundamental attitudes as well as one could hope:

Yet how can I believe it? Or believe that I
Owned it, a husband, children? Is my voice the voice
Of that skin of being—of what owns, is owned
In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears—
Or of that raw thing, the being inside it
That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child
But goes at last as naked from this world
As it was born into it—

And the eland comes and grazes on its grave.

This is senseless?
Shall I make sense or shall I tell the truth?
Choose either—I cannot do both.

The key alternatives of self-definition are stated here, and the “normal,” factual, social self is seen as “that skin of being,” a material shell for “that raw thing, the being inside it.” The former is finite, visible, and easily categorized by referring to its organic and practical activities in time, whereas the latter is unaffected by the temporal realm, is a “naked” and “raw thing,” untouched by the abstract dualisms of human society and its impersonal “definitions.” Inspired by its example, the woman puts a very Jarrellian ultimatum to the reader, for she distinguishes between “making sense” (in normal, rational, empirical terms) and “truth.” They are judged mutually exclusive, and she, like a child or a mystic, must deal in fantastic beings and paradoxes to explain what is most important to her. Her comprehensive awareness of two opposed levels of existence keeps her, like most of Jarrell’s enlightened personae, in a state of constant indecision. Yet the conclusion of “Seele im Raum” shows how well the integration of her “eland self” has helped her both judge and live with her life, and *that* is the real purpose and succor of such awareness in Jarrell’s poetry. She also understands the folly of didacticism and egotism, even when defending the existence of a personal “Daemon,” and that too makes her “tale” one of the most optimistic in tone among Jarrell’s poems and one of the surest indications of the motives behind his own distrust of the declarative mode. She concludes, not with a logical proof, but with an enthusiastic, “childlike” cry of faith:

I tell myself that. And yet it is not so,
And what I say afterwards will not be so:
To be at all is to be wrong.
Being is being old

And saying, almost comfortably, across a table
From—

from what I don't know—

in a voice

Rich with a kind of longing satisfaction:

"To own an eland! That's what I call life!"

What sits, or sat, at her table remains beyond identification, yet her awareness of "owning" it allows her to be old "almost comfortably." One does not encounter the word "satisfaction" very often in Jarrell's poetry unless it is used ironically, but here the atmosphere and the woman's voice are "rich" with it.

It is the plea for this special awareness of personal being which lies behind most of Jarrell's poetry; his mature technique is designed to present "plausible" scenes and characters in which either its presence or, more often, its loss is shown to have specific existential consequences. The desperate tone this underlying plea promotes in many poems, along with its vague emotional outlines and Jarrell's refusal to give it conclusive theoretical or aesthetic definition, is what seems to annoy the critics who consider Jarrell's approach either too unvaried or effusively sentimental. Yet, as Douglas Dunn notes in a recent essay on Jarrell, "When poets are accused of sentimentality it is sometimes an indication that feeling in their poems has been misunderstood."¹⁴ Such objections are based more on taste than on direct analysis of technique or the aesthetic realization of emotional yet definite intentions. Jarrell's own aims in his poetry seem remarkably constant, as we have seen in the ceaseless development of a personal style over a twenty-five-year period, and in terms of its own goals, "Seele im Raum" works extremely well. Its dramatic strategy integrates the fantastic figure of the eland and the normal, domestic setting so well in the woman's mind that they seem to bear out her final judgment and exist in a precarious but natural union. One must either judge "Seele im Raum" as the charming confession of a genuine neurotic or see it as a remarkably comprehensive explanation of the self by one who has learned to straddle its two worlds simultaneously. Jarrell characteristically refuses to step in and decide for the reader; in fact the poem's technique is designed to make such an intrusion appear artificial and unnecessary. Like so many of Jarrell's late poems, "Seele im Raum" is intended as a parable, and assessments of the speaker's "case" must themselves be subjective. Of course, by adopting a persona whose sense of the "facts" of daily life is consistently strong and who undercuts any charge of general insanity with her thoughtful, understated, self-analytical mode of address, Jarrell slants the argument in his protagonist's favor. The real intention of the poem, in both its form and content, is the direct involvement of the reader in a dilemma he may recognize as his own, and in this it succeeds admirably.

In any case, it is clear that Jarrell is often more interested in the emotional impact of his poems than in their formal artistry, and that this places him at odds

¹⁴ Douglas Dunn, "An Affable Misery: On Randall Jarrell," *Encounter*, xxxix, No. 4 (October, 1972), p. 43.

with much of the practice of recent years. His increasing use of the dramatic monologue and straightforward, descriptive imagery in his last years seems a natural outgrowth of this demand for recognizable, accessible "portraits" of modern life in America. His developed style is clearly intended as a means to an end, and "Seele im Raum" suggests with special clarity the philosophical source of this shift in emphasis from "objective technique" and general assertion toward more subjective, impressionistic explorations of "private lives" and personal experiences. The concrete experience is primary; its aesthetic articulation is evaluated by its ability to *transmit* the physical and emotional outlines of a "single life" as directly and comprehensively as possible.

In developing a style capable of expressing such attitudes in the poems themselves, Jarrell drew on a wide variety of sources he felt shared his intense concern for non-rational, intuitive states of awareness. His poetry and criticism are filled with references to Freudian psychology, American Transcendentalism (of the "applied" Whitmanian school), German Märchen, and Proust's analysis of memory in *Remembrance of Things Past*, to cite only a few examples. Jarrell's extensive allusions to such diverse and wide-ranging sources, despite their single-mindedness of purpose, are a new phenomenon and suggest more about the wide-open, cross-cultural eclecticism and the explosion of "subjective" poetic conventions and systems of the last three decades than they do about the "purer," more codified theories of the Imagists or Surrealists. But because Jarrell's emotional description of ideal human awareness demands the inclusive vision of all mystical systems and feeds on paradox and unchecked observation, it is extremely difficult to define with any precision or selectivity. I have seized upon Randall Jarrell's "eland" simply because it is a distinct manifestation of this attitude with the temerity to express it literally and in precise language.

Jarrell's "eland self," as a soul or source of being, cannot be related to the Christian conception of that entity, for the Judeo-Christian soul is involved in its own linear, temporal progress toward some finite moment of redemption and is subject to all kinds of moral and existential categories and judgments. As Jarrell's speaker tells "A Girl in a Library," "The soul has no assignments . . . / it wastes its time."¹⁵ Its functions and value for each individual must be *recognized* rather than understood; as the woman in "Seele im Raum" explains, she had "Not seen it so that I knew I saw it." These are some of the reasons I have identified Jarrell's "Soul in Space" as essentially mystical in conception; it defines enlightenment as a state of comprehensive and intuitive awareness rather than as the complex organization of logical and empirical hypotheses. In fact, the latter are impediments to a direct and unified recognition of true self. Near the end of "Seele im Raum," the speaker can only suggest the nature of her eland by defining what it "is not." In so doing she employs the process of "negative definition" found in the writings of many mystics when they describe the character of God or the soul. In like manner, Jarrell's own refusal to provide a

¹⁵ *Selected Poems*, p. 4.

theoretical definition for his aesthetic or philosophical intentions should not be judged as irresponsible or self-indulgent, but as a necessary extension of the attitudes expressed in the poems themselves. Attempts to objectively define rather than simply present the “beliefs” behind such feelings are always self-defeating, like the speaker’s attempt to define what he seeks in “A Sick Child”: “If I can think of it, it isn’t what I want.”¹⁶ But in “Bamberg,” a short poem written the year of his death, Jarrell uncharacteristically employs simple religious imagery to suggest the depth of his belief in the unifying “powers of concentration”:

You’d be surprised how much, at
The Last Judgment,
The powers of concentration
Of the blest and damned
Are improved, so that
Both smile exactly alike
At remembering so well
All they meant to remember
To tell God.¹⁷

As Jarrell’s “representative,” the eland mocks the world’s logical dichotomies (visible and invisible, material and spiritual, life and death) by adopting both alternatives simultaneously and timelessly; it “grazes on its own grave.” It expresses the insistently emotional, anti-logical view of human life around which Jarrell’s poetry must be unified. The varied interests and sources which influenced his own practice, his intense interest in Freud and the nature of dreams, his admiration for Rilke’s surrealistic imagery, and his insistence on dealing with contemporary American scenes in American idioms, all relate to the subliminal nature yet concrete personal relevance of a “state of mind” his poetry is designed to encourage. His poems are instructional without being prescriptive or undercutting the responsibility for personal recognition of one’s own condition. His tone is often desperate and painfully sharp because he feels modern culture besets his enlightened personae on all sides, insisting on a lobotomy of the consciousness and fragmented, unfocused perceptions. The world defines “real knowledge” only as the accumulation of objective, impersonal data—“divides itself into facts,” according to Jarrell’s positivist Satan¹⁸—and demands that one “make sense.” Yet, as the persona of “Seele im Raum” knows, such knowledge is fundamentally *useless* in helping her live her life. It is, in fact, destructive to the soul, to the emotional, imaginative sense of being that is her birthright. In a poem called “The Lost World,” one of Jarrell’s last works, he makes clear his own feelings about the world’s wisdom with images similar to those of “Seele im Raum”:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems* (New York, 1969), p. 490.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

In my
Talk with the world, in which it tells me what I know
And I tell it, "I know—"how strange that I
Know nothing, and yet it tells me what I know!—
I appreciate the animals, who stand by
Purring. Or else sit and pant. It's so—
So agreeable.¹⁹

And in an essay from *Poetry and the Age* Jarrell provides an effective description of those embattled beings he wishes his poetry might encourage and protect:

Children are playing in the vacant lots, animals are playing in the forest. Everything that the machine at the center could not attract or transform it has forced out into the suburbs, the country, the wilderness, the past: out there are the fairy tales and nursery rhymes, chances and choices, dreams and sentiments and intrinsic aesthetic goods—everything that doesn't pay and doesn't care.²⁰

Again, the ultimate "utility" Jarrell strives for in his verse is akin to that of the parable or the spiritual exercise. The poems of his late period, the products of endless technical experimentation and revision, are intended as psychic "catalysts," and their direct, often highly emotional approaches to their subject matter are part of their design. We, of course, are still faced with the ongoing controversy about them, yet it seems that Jarrell's critics must at least deal with those elements of his work they find excessive as integral components of an overall method. It seems too easy to react to any consistently strong emotion in modern poetry as mere lack of artistic control, and this is certainly not the case in Jarrell's practice. Sister Bernetta Quinn, in discussing Jarrell's last book, *The Lost World*, suggests the real source of the debate over Jarrell's poetry:

There is a great tenderness here, with a willingness to present emotion without apology, unique among poets today.²¹

Perhaps, ironically, Jarrell simply worked his design too well. We must be content, like so many of his personae, to take sides. Yet it is hoped that both Jarrell's advocates and his detractors will at least know what they are fighting about. In yet another of his critical essays Jarrell probably described the best criteria for those who would judge his own poetry:

To have the distance from the most awful and most nearly unbearable parts of the poems to the most tender, subtle, and loving parts, a distance so great; to have this whole range of being treated with so much humor and sadness and composure, with such plain truth; to see that a man can still include, connect, and make humanly understandable so *much*—this is one of the freshest and oldest of joys.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁰ *Poetry and the Age*, p. 99.

²¹ *Randall Jarrell / 1914-1965*, p. 147.

²² *Third Book of Criticism*, p. 302.