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Poetic Justice

Reviewed by Jon Tribble, Post

RANDALL JARRELL ON W.H. AUDEN

*Edited by Stephen Burt with Hannah Brooks-Motl
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Poets hold a tenuous place in the popular imagination, if they hold any place at all. W.H. Auden has been a recent exception to this rule with the inclusion of his "Funeral Blues" ("Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone. . .") in the 1994 film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and the appearance of "September 1, 1939" ("The unmentionable odour of death/ Offends the September night . . .") all across the Web following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Though Auden disavowed the latter poem and excluded it from his *Collected Poems*, the resonance of his words on both of these recent occasions intrigued, comforted and confounded readers around the world -- and demonstrated the lasting power of a major poet whose works often wed a far-reaching intellect, a tremendous poetic gift and a desire to connect with readers.

In *Randall Jarrell on W.H. Auden*, editor Stephen Burt has collected six lectures that Jarrell delivered at Princeton University in the spring of 1952 "on the poetry, prose, and career of W. H. Auden." These lectures were delivered before an invited audience -- Auden could have attended but did not -- and, as the New Yorker's Adam Gopnik writes in the foreword: "To read Randall Jarrell on W.H. Auden is to read the best-equipped of American critics of poetry of the past century on the best-equipped of its Anglo-American poets, and we rush to read, perhaps, less out of an academic interest in fair judgment than out of a spectator's love of virtuosity in flight. . . . For all that these rescued lectures are in principle an 'attack' by one poet on another, the effect is less of a battle joined than of two virtuosi playing side by side. . . . It is a cutting contest without cuts."

Jarrell began his lectures with this odd conceit: "Imagine a man on an island, a desert island. He loves poetry and has none. . . . One morning, walking along the beach, he sees a packing box; he pries it open with a bone; there inside, in oil-cloth, is everything Auden ever wrote." This conceit is an appropriate place for Jarrell to begin, since the lectures are -- like most of his critical work -- an invitation to read and read closely, to engage Auden's writing in an active and demanding fashion. Jarrell treats Auden's work here like the single sustaining force for a reader starved of nourishment. This is the way most writers would dream of their works being read -- and fear their works being read.

Jarrell most likely assumed he was speaking to a group who admired Auden -- too much, in Jarrell's estimation. Today's audience must remember *this* context and read his harshest criticisms with the understanding that tearing down an iconic figure often requires an excess of enthusiasm, sarcasm, dismissiveness and even bile. Gopnik may be right; Jarrell is engaged in "a cutting contest without cuts," but not because Jarrell failed to bring a weapon. He strikes at Auden's development as a writer: "Auden's desire to get away from the eternal rejection of much modernist poetry managed to make the worst sections of the poems he wrote late in the 1930s no more than well-meaning gush." He attacks Auden's methods: "He has bureaucratized his method as completely, and consequently as disastrously, as any efficiency expert could wish." He even stabs at

particular phrases and lines: " *All the fun under/ Liberty's masterful shadow* (Here words fail me -- few men, few women, and few children have ever written anything as silly, as shamefully silly, as *amazingly* silly as this) -- under the masterful shadow of this line things like *the hour of the pageant-master* and *the poets exploding like bombs* look like nothing but ordinary tripe."

But perhaps some of the harshest remarks are leveled as Jarrell is complimenting Auden as "a genuinely humane, humanistic writer": "Auden knows comparatively little about families, about ordinary private lives, anyway; he has had an extraordinary public life himself, and when he talks about these ordinary public lives ordinary human beings have, he is almost always talking down, nature-faking, telling you how Mama Grizzly feels about little Wob, her backward cub."

Jarrell's lectures can be funny, too. While considering the stages of Auden's work, Jarrell states: "Auden first slipped in to this dark realm of Faerie . . . on the furtive excursions of the unbeliever who needs some fake photographs of the Little People for a new edition of *Peter Pan* , but who ends up as a cook's boy helping the gloomier dwarfs boil toads and snails, in preparation for the love-feast that celebrates the consummation of their mysteries." Whether this is right or not, you can't fault the enthusiasm.

So if Jarrell's criticisms of Auden are off-base and excessive, or inconsequential and empty, or (most problematic of all) *right* , why spend time reading these lectures? For one thing, this collection is first-rate scholarship, with extensive notes for every lecture. For another, Jarrell is more than a virtuoso performing here; he is a writer learning from his sense of the failures of another writer. And it is these failures that provide a window on the incompleteness of our experience of the world. The lectures contain both joy -- sometimes a diabolical glee -- and acceptance as well: "We make our poetry, but we make it what we can, not what we wish." We can only wish that Jarrell's sometimes humorous, sometimes vicious, always serious critiques of Auden might serve as an invitation to a lifetime of reading poetry, with the satisfactions and discontents such a life contains. ·

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