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Randall Jarrell and Adrienne Rich: A Found Guide to Mutual Appreciation

This young thing, who knows what it may be, old?
—Randall Jarrell reviewing *The Diamond Cutters*
in *The Yale Review*, Autumn 1956

For many of us, if asked that old question: “To what or whom do you address your poems?” the truthful answer would be:
“To the mind of Randall Jarrell.”

—Adrienne Rich, “For Randall Jarrell”
in *Randall Jarrell: 1914–1965*

THE QUOTES ABOVE ARE FROM TWO SHORT ESSAYS written ten years apart, one by the critic (and poet) Randall Jarrell, and one by the poet Adrienne Rich. The essays read as much like letters as if they had been handwritten and mailed, yet as far as I know, the two pieces have never been put together. What the critic and poet say to each other in these essays is such a sweet, intimate, and fateful moment in literary history (albeit a moment spread over ten years) that it deserves to be appreciated. And although we think of young writers hoping for reviews that praise their virtues and gloss over their failings, a critic’s dissatisfaction can, we see, be exhilarating—even a lifetime inspiration. To the young Adrienne Rich, it was. Of course, Randall Jarrell was not just any critic.

That the Poetry Foundation has established a “Randall Jarrell Award in Criticism” is a clue to his preeminence. The best poetry critic of his generation, and, to me, ours as well. Read him shaking Robert Frost out of his mid-century, cracker-barrel Yankee geniality (“a sort of Olympian Will Rogers out of *Tanglewood Tales* . . . neglected or depreciated by intellectuals”) and marching him straight to the front of the canon, a great poet whose best poems “are extraordinarily subtle and strange, poems which express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism seem a hopeful evasion” (“The Other Frost” in *Poetry and the Age*¹). Read him on Richard Eberhart and Selden Rodman’s anthology, *War and the Poet*, declining to give a polite pass to two major powers in the poetry world of the time: “After reading prefaces that are gushing and eccentric, notes that are random and gossipy, and war poems that are sometimes good, sometimes bad, and sometimes not war poems at all, you know a great deal about the emotions and ideals of the editors, but you have no idea whether either of them can tell a good poem from a bad” (“A Verse Chronicle,” originally in *The Nation*²). Of how many anthologies and anthologists could that be said, and how rarely it is!

There is no received wisdom in Jarrell, only his own eye and ear, and

¹ Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York, 1953).

² *Ibid.*

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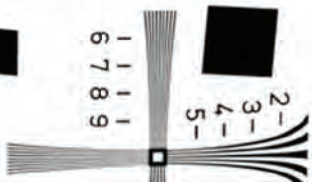
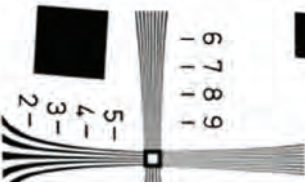
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at times whole body, reading poetry as if our lives depended on it. What other critic brings to each newly-considered work an almost childlike faith in its potential importance? And while he is sometimes disappointed, he is almost never dismissive or condescending, or dull.

I find the effect of Jarrell's writing much like that of James Agee's equally fresh and distinctive film criticism: If he likes it, you want to read it (or see it), too—but in a vastly different way than if you had come to it cold. So when Jarrell writes, again of Frost, "Nothing I can say about these poems can make you see what they are like, or what the Frost that matters most is like; if you read them you will see," you will, now that you have Jarrell at your side, whispering, pointing.

In the 1950's, Jarrell was a regular critic for the *Yale Review*, turning out, among other things, an essay reviewing four or five new poetry books each season. In 1956, Adrienne Rich, twenty-six years old and five years out of Radcliffe, published her second book, *The Diamond Cutters*. Four years before, she had won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award with her first, *A Change of World* (W. H. Auden's selection), and although *The Diamond Cutters* was nominated for a National Book Award in 1956, in later years she said she wished it had not been published.

I don't know why she said that, but had it not been, we would not have had Jarrell's review of it nor Rich's gratitude for that review, each the source of the quotes at the beginning of this piece.

In the *Yale Review*, Spring 1956, Jarrell had run out of space in his "Recent Poetry" essay, promising to write about Rich's book in the next issue: "And now I have so little space, and so much enthusiasm, for Adrienne Cecile Rich's *The Diamond Cutters* that I can only make boiling and whistling noises like a teakettle" (until he can write at greater length).

Could you imagine any contemporary critic risking their dignity with an image like that? Not just admitting to the wordless, bubbling-over helplessness that certain new-found poetry brings on, but showing it to us so we feel a little bubbling-up ourselves? The openness can strike the reader as tender—Jarrell of course the older, mid-career poet writing of someone just starting out—as does the inclusion of her middle name, which I realize was not Jarrell's addition but the name she used then: "Adrienne Cecile Rich." Coming to know her first as the strong and stalwart, four-syllable, two-word "Ad-ri-enne Rich," with the middle name added, I hear something delicate and sweet, perhaps a mother calling in a child from the Baltimore twilight: "*Adrienne Cecile!*" That echo underscores the intimacy I sense between these two people.

As promised, Jarrell leads off his "Five Poets" Autumn essay with her book: "Adrienne Cecile Rich is an enchanting poet, everybody seems to admit it," but in fact he is not as enchanted as everybody, and the easy enchantment is part of the problem. He quotes lines that are "like getting one of Auden's old carbons for Christmas." Near the end of the review, he says, "Her poetry so thoroughly escapes all of the vices of modernist poetry that it has escaped many of its virtues too." It is a very

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A close-up, black and white photograph of a pencil tip, showing the sharp lead core and the surrounding wood. The pencil is oriented vertically, with the tip pointing downwards.

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mixed review, but precise and concrete enough in its praise and its criticism that the poet has something substantial to think about, and reason to do so. Above all there is the prescient gift I excerpted at the beginning and now quote in full:

The reader feels that she has only begun to change; thinks, “This young thing, who knows what it may be, old?” Some of her poems are very different from others, some of her nature is very far from the rest of it, so that one feels she has room to live in and to grow out into; liking her for what she is is a way of liking her even better for what she may become.

I find these words from sixty years ago deeply moving. For we do know, now. What Jarrell then could only imagine, we have been allowed to witness. How did he know? Whatever one thinks about what her poetry became, Rich led a writing and thinking life of unquestionable consequence. (I can’t help wondering what she thought of the gender-neutral “it,” necessitated by “thing,” which we are accustomed to hearing in a gendered, feminine way as “young thing,” but which takes on a different, capacious presence in “what *it* may be, old.”)

Ten years later, we find out what the review meant to Rich. In a collection of essays written by admirers after Jarrell’s death, she describes him with a tenderness and humor, affection and respect similar to his for her. In her two-page “For Randall Jarrell,” she tells us, and him, what his review evoked. She also captures what makes this man enduringly essential to poetry:

My personal sense of Randall Jarrell began more than ten years ago when he reviewed, to my astonishment, an early book of mine. Reading that review was like getting a letter from someone, a letter of love and exhortation, drenched, like all of Randall’s criticism, with concern for unfulfilled possibilities, for the life of those poems and all future poems by the same hand. One felt that this brilliant, caustic, affectionate stranger had suddenly involved himself in one’s fate—not for his own reputation, or for the sake of purveying a personal influence, but because he was a kind of conscience of poetry . . . I was too shy to write and tell him, then, how much his dissatisfaction with my book exhilarated me . . .

But I will always go on writing for Randall: that is, for an attention, ear, and spirit on which nothing was wasted, and which nothing escaped . . . He entered a strange poem as a great naturalist might enter a strange forest, every nerve awake—but as a naturalist who was himself part bird, part liana, part jaguar. His influence on the poetry of his time has yet to be fathomed . . .”

And then she ends with the quote I began with:

For many of us, if asked that old question: “To what or whom do you address your poems?” the truthful answer would be: “To the mind of Randall Jarrell.”

Rich wrote this at early-mid-career—1966. The time of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, the beginning of a turn from the early work to poems of a life passionately lived. Seven years before *Diving into the Wreck*, before the indispensable *Of Woman Born* that fell like a meteor into her readers’ lives. Rich still had many decades to go to become old. In her life through many wars, the rise of second-wave feminism and its later agitations, changes in her poetry and possibly her very concept of the project of poetry, I wonder, did her “always” remain true?

What we pledge ourselves to early on rarely stays our guiding star through disillusion, dissolution, life’s exigencies and trials, but in this case, I believe it possible that not only what she wrote, but what she did, was, and became, consciously kept the promise. And would have been pleasing to him indeed. After all, he saw and celebrated this:

Some of her poems are very different from others, some of her nature is very far from the rest of it, so that one feels she has room to live in and to grow out into; liking her for what she is is a way of liking her even better for what she may become.

Perhaps there are writers and critics today who have experienced such a mutual appreciation with poetry as their conscience and without regard for reputation. Or perhaps what Jarrell and Rich find in each other, in this exchange, is the special province of two extraordinary minds and natures. Or, finally, perhaps 1956 was simply an extraordinary year. Looking up the National Book Award reference, I discover that one of Rich’s competitors that year was Randall Jarrell himself, for his *Selected Poems*. Who would have suspected that, from his wholehearted, if not wholly laudatory, review of her book? Also on the nominee list: Elizabeth Bishop for *Poems, North and South*; John Ciardi, for *As If*; Isabella Gardner, for *Birthdays from the Ocean*; Donald Hall, for *Exiles and Marriages*; William Carlos Williams, for *Journey to Love*; and the winner, W. H. Auden for *The Shield of Achilles*. A piece of carbon paper from any one of those books would delight many of us as a holiday present, as the finding of these two essays, and this remarkable mutual appreciation across time, has delighted me.

HILDE WEISERT