"Levels and Opposites" in Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*
by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge, blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experiences dished up for midnight listeners... I exaggerate, of course.

—Robert Lowell, 1960 National Book Award Acceptance Speech

The late 1950s and early 1960s were marked by a profound schism in the world of adult poetry. During this time, Randall Jarrell was one of the preeminent critics of American poetry and was certainly well established as a poet. He attended closely to the contemporary scene and in no small part helped write the canon of American poetry.1 While several adult poets were beginning to write for children in this period—notably John Ciardi, whose first book for children, *The Reason for the Pelican*, was published in 1959—Jarrell’s forays into children’s poetry are considerably different from most.2 Whereas Ciardi, Theodore Roethke, and, later, X.J. Kennedy primarily use their children’s books as venues for intensified language play, Jarrell uses his children’s books—specifically *The Bat-Poet* (1964)—to work through his theoretical notions of poetry, exploring the postmodern tendencies of contradiction and opposition that are apparent also in his adult work. In *The Bat-Poet*, Jarrell’s poetic investigations specifically center on navigating the schism evident in the so-called anthology wars, the opening skirmish of which was the publication of Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s anthology *The New Poets of England and America* (1957).

The poets included in this anthology, as Harvey Shapiro notes in a 1960 review, represent a sampling of those “working in the kitchens of the ‘cooked’ school” (6). This anthology, largely conservative poetically, was answered three years later with the publication of Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960), representing the “raw” school—a group of poets who, in the words of Kenneth Koch, proclaimed, “GOODBYE, castrati of poetry! farewell stale pale skunky pentameters (the only honest English meter, gloop gloop)! [Allen 236]. On March 23, 1960, during his National Book Award acceptance speech, Jarrell’s good friend Robert Lowell, who appears in Hall’s anthology, delineated these two competing types of poetry: “a poetry of pedantry and a poetry of scandal” (qtd. in Mariani 282). Borrowing his terminology from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lowell quipped that the cooked poetry was “expert and remote,” resembling a metaphoric “mechanical or catnip mouse for graduate seminars.” The raw poetry, on the other hand, “jerry-built and forensically deadly,” was “often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro” (qtd. in Mariani 282). Bitterly sarcastic about the cooked school, Koch characterizes the “young poets” of the school in his poem “Fresh Air,” calling them “worms” who “tremble[e] in their universities...bathing the library steps with their spit... / wish[ing] to perfect their form” (Allen 230). This poetic war heralded a spectacular shift in North American poetry. It would be an oversimplification to say that these anthologies and the two major camps they represented polarized North American poets. Nevertheless, many poets and schools of poets began to be assigned allegiances based on the poetics implied in the Hall, Pack, and Simpson anthology, and explicitly—if briefly—stated in the final section of the Allen anthology. Even today, so-called Language and post-Language poets trace their lineage to the New American school, just as the New Formalists look to the Hall, Pack, and Simpson anthology for their forebears.3

Born May 6, 1914, in Nashville, Tennessee, Jarrell was three years too old to appear in Hall’s anthology, for the 28-year-old Hall included only writers “who [were] under forty” (9). It is more likely that Jarrell would have appeared in Hall’s anthology than in Allen’s, since, despite his affinity for the work of William Carlos Williams, Jarrell had little affinity for the work of the Beats, Projectivists, Black Mountain, and New York School poets who were featured in *New American Poetry*. However, as I will argue, his poetic is more open to the play between the raw and the cooked than one might expect, and certainly he did not see fit to take sides in the debate. In 1958, for example, he wrote Karl Shapiro, “I wish all the San Francisco poets would eat all the University poets and burst, so that Nature, abhorring a vacuum, would send one plain poet or cat or rat to take their place” (Letters 436).

Yet as early as 1942 Jarrell was producing a body of work that resisted the binary logic that would come to be implied by the so-called anthology wars. This resistance can be seen in Jarrell’s well-known essay “The End of the Line” (1942), in which he dismantles the then popular thesis that “modernist poetry is a revolutionary departure from the romantic poetry of the preceding century” (Kipling 76). The essay collapses the romantic/modernist binary, blatantly stating that “It is the end of the line” for modernist poetry, that modernism, rather than being a departure from romanticism, has, in fact, carried romantic “tendencies to their limits” (81, 82). Furthermore, the
essay implies that it was time for a new, post-modern poetic. Indeed, Jarrell explicitly called for this poetic two years earlier in “A Note on Poetry” (1940), where he writes, “During the course of the article, the reader may have thought curiously, ‘Does he really suppose he writes the sort of poetry that replaces modernism?’ Let me answer, like the man in the story, ‘I must decline the soft impeachment.’ But I am sorry I need to” (Kipling 51).

This remark prompted John Crowe Ransom to claim that if Jarrell, in 1940, was not already “post-modernist,” then he “probably...will be” (“Constellation” 15), giving, as Thomas Travisano reminds us, the “earliest documented use of the much debated term...in a literary context” (“Randall Jarrell” 695). Travisano notes that, until recently, most critics assumed Jarrell’s poetic—as suggested by his criticism and embodied in his poetry—was “solely the product of intuition” and ultimately “lacked a theoretical center” (695). However, in Jarrell’s recently rediscovered and posthumously published talk “Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry” (1942), Jarrell outlines a dialectical theory of poetry, one that makes the startlingly postmodern claim that “there are no things in a poem, only processes,” that a poem is a dynamic function that hinges upon opposition, that it is as “static as an explosion” (697).³

Jarrell’s views on poetry were radical for his time, as they reject the myopic views of the New Critics, whom he saw as a species of what might be called neo-neoclassicism.⁵ In “Levels and Opposites,” Jarrell critiques the New Critics’ desire for unity in poetry, arguing that “some piece of Sunday-school didacticism and abstraction, limp, static, entirely lifeless, may nevertheless be beautifully unified” (699). He continues with characteristic wit, writing, “the critic with neoclassic leanings will look at its neat correct logical structure, that fits its neat correct metrical and stanzaic structure so exactly—he will stare at these perfections, as proper as those of a Spenser sonnet—and he will wonder why, in spite of all its morality and logic and unity, it cannot affect even him” (699). His radical views undoubtedly led to the cold reception his Princeton talk received, the reception Travisano speculates may have led him to jot “Crit. is impossible” atop the manuscript he used for his presentation (“Randall Jarrell” 692-93). The New Criticism had by the 1940s begun its ascendancy, and already Jarrell was finding it shortsighted. Primarily interested in the explication of Modernist American poets, the New Critics concerned themselves with the analysis of poems as unified “verbal icons” unfettered by historical and social concerns.⁶ Even before New Criticism had naturalized itself as the method of interpretation, Jarrell was criticizing its “tremendous emphasis on the irony and ambiguity of poetry” (704). Jarrell found the New Critical insistence on the preeminent value of irony, paradox, and poised ambiguity limiting. In “Levels and Opposites,” Jarrell writes, critics like I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and William Empson have pushed these partial, and extremely valuable, views to the limit. But ironic or ambiguous structures are merely special varieties of dialectical structures.... I have tried to avoid the mistake of saying poetry, or good poetry, or the best poetry, is always dialectical; and it seems to me a worse and narrower mistake to say or to imply that poetry or good poetry or the best poetry is always ironic. (704-05)

Jarrell’s criticism—and poetic practice—was informed by a theory much more dialectical than that of his New Critical mentors John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate.

Take, for example, Jarrell’s poem “A Quilt Pattern.” This piece concerns a young boy negotiating psychological crisis through a dream. As in “A Sick Child,” the child protagonist of this poem has been home all day, confined to bed:

The blocked-out Tree
Of the boy’s Life is gray
On the tangled quilt: the long day
Dies at last, after many tales. (1-4)

The day dies; night approaches; twilight grays his quilt. His mother—there is no father in the poem—has been reading him fairy tales all day. The tales, particularly “Hansel and Gretel,” provide a narrative pattern through which he can make sense out of what Jarrell suggests is the boy’s unresolved Oedipal desire. He falls asleep, “falls / Through darkness... / Into the oldest story of all” (8-10), presumably the story of Eden, the story of innocence lost, the story of family romance. In “Levels and Opposites,” Jarrell likens the process of reading a poem to that of a snowball rolling down a hillside: “most of the snow clings only for a moment and is thrown off, but some keeps rolling, more is added constantly, and quite a respectable snowball (or total impression) arrives at the bottom of the hill” (697). “A Quilt Pattern” operates in this fashion. Rather than striving for a tightly unified poem, Jarrell crafts a poem of impressions, a surreal dream sequence that complicates the already fragmented identity of the child.

The child is divided into “good me,” “bad me,” and “the Other,” which Jarrell writes is analogous to the Id (Letters 303). The child’s identity is complicated by its relationship to his mother. In the dream, the child’s mother is the edible house of “Hansel and Gretel,” a source of childhood desire. The boy is the morphologically similar “mouse,” who “breaks a finger / From the window and lifts it to his—” (45-46). This phrase, with its omitted
word—perhaps “mouth,” suggesting desire—is echoed later in the lines, in which “mother” is omitted:

The taste of the house  
Is the taste of his— (58-59)

Mouth and mother are lashed together in syntactic and semantic structures. Just as the word other recalls mother, the Id recalls its forbidden desire. At the climax of the poem, it is the “Other” that finally thrusts the mother into the oven, in a scene fraught with sexual imagery and disturbing impressions:

[The house] whispers, “you are full now, mouse—  
Look, I have warmed the oven, kneaded the dough:  
Creep in, ah, ah, it is warm!—  
Quick, we can slip the bread in now,” says the house.  
He whispers, “I do not know  
How I am to do it.”  
“Goose, goose,” cries the house,  
“It is big enough—just look!  
See if I bend a little, so—” (63-71)

Richard Flynn suggests that the relationship between the mother and child is abusive. He recalls Parker Tyler’s argument that the poem’s title is a pun on “guilt-pattern” (143), maintaining that the boy believes that “his Oedipal wish has been realized”; he has no father and feels guilty (certainly conflicted) about his relationship with his mother (55). Certainly something has happened to the boy. He dreams: “My mother is basting / Bad me in the bath-tub / /...A washcloth is turned like a mop in his mouth” (38-41). However, whether it is sexual abuse or, as Suzanne Ferguson argues, the boy feeling “imprisoned by [the mother’s] solicitousness” is debatable (128). Indeed, of the poem, Jarrell writes, “if I made a dream that could be interpreted, plainly, in only one possible way, that would be the undreamiest of dreams” (304). In short, the poem is anything but the “limp, static, entirely lifeless, [and] nevertheless...beautifully unified” poems he critiques in “Levels and Opposites.” The poem is dialectical, contradictory. It is a snowball rolling down the hillside.

Yet there is no doubt that “A Quilt Pattern” is a well-crafted poem, one that utilizes dialectical structure to create “a system of developing tensions, of opposites struggling against each other” (“Levels” 702). The female speaker of Jarrell’s “Seele im Raum” also speaks of struggling opposites. Cured of her delusions, she maintains that there is a difference between the “skin of being” that “owns [and] is owned / In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears—” and “that raw thing, the being inside it / That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child” (63-66). In The Raw and the Cooked, Lévi-Strauss makes a point that resonates with the housewife’s, positing that

The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediated through the intervention of cooking fire, whose normal function is to mediate the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time cooked and socialized. (336)

We have an opposition between the natural “raw,” that which is not part of society, not acculturated, that which has “neither a wife, a husband, nor a child,” and that cooked “skin” that “owns, is owned,” that is “cooked and socialized.” This opposition is at the heart of the raw/cooked debate of the late 50s and early 60s, and has been made analogous to form and content, subject and craftsmanship. Craftsmanship had no stronger advocate than Jarrell. Writing of Gregory Corso, Jarrell makes clear his belief that poetry demands craftsmanship, that some degree of “cooking” is required, that Corso’s first-thought-best-thought mentality would never facilitate great poetry: “Failure to select, exclude, compress, or aim toward a work of art...makes it impossible for even a talented beatnik [i.e., Corso] to write a good poem except by accident” (Letters 418).

Jarrell’s use of form and regimen, his tendency to “select, exclude, compress,” to “cook” his poetry makes a good deal of sense in light of Lévi-Strauss. The ingredients for Jarrell’s verse are natural ones, emotional ones, perhaps, at times, sentimental ones. Lowell writes that The Lost World (1965), Jarrell’s last book of poetry, concerns “solitude, the solitude of the unmarried, the solitude of the married, the love, strife, dependency, the indifference of man and woman—how mortals age, and brood over their lost and raw childhood, only recapturable in memory and imagination. Above all, childhood!” (109). The forms and structures Jarrell employs act as the “cooking fire” that mediates the conjunction of these “raw” themes (the “raw product” in Lévi-Strauss’ terms) and the reader (the “human consumer”). In his self-dialogue, written as a tribute to Jarrell, James Dickey has his “A” persona rightly recognize that the “real” world is Jarrell’s rather raw subject. He says, “[Jarrell] writes about things we know; that is, he writes about cats, common soldiers, about the dilemmas of children, and...and the small man, the man ’things are done to’” (36). Yet his “B” persona replies, “But these are poems he is trying to write. If you ignore that, you substitute sentimentality and special pleading...for the poet’s true work” (39). The dichotomy between raw subject and cooked structure is one that preoccupied Jarrell.
throughout his career. Yet he most openly confronts this dichotomy in The Bat-Poet, his second children's book, the work that, in the words of Mary Jarrell, “triggered” The Lost World (Remembering 123), what Robert Lowell called “his last and best book” (109).

Many critics have argued that the predominant mode of poetry written in contemporary North America is the scenic mode, also referred to as the poetics of “voice” or the poetry of “official verse culture.” Jarrell, undoubtedly a member of the literary establishment, is often uncritically married to this poetics of voice, to the scenic mode of poetry, a mode that evokes the liberal humanist tradition by implying a coherent, whole, and self-knowing author, or, perhaps better, a “lyric speaker.” It disguises the conflicting, unconscious, and socially contingent self of the author posited by postmodern theories, while simultaneously disguising the artificiality of poet’s language. This mode, it has been argued, masks what might be called its more “cooked” elements. It strives to sound “natural,” when the “natural” voice it achieves is in fact a highly tooled and revised linguistic artifact. As Charles Altieri argues in Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry, “the desire [in the dominant mode] for sincerity or naturalness, for poetry as communication, seems continually in tension with the highly artificial means required to produce the desired effects at the level of intensity adequate for lyric poetry” (15). In Poetry as Discourse, Antony Easthope anticipates Altieri’s thesis, arguing convincingly that the dominant mode of poetry, particularly that revolving around the pentameter so disparaged by Koch and his fellows, works to disguise its constructedness by evoking a “proper” poetic voice, a “class dialect” (69). This dialect, he argues, “precluded shouting and ‘improper’ excitement,” the very elements so common in the lyrics of Ginsberg and other Beats (69). Instead of the excited yawp of the Beats, the dialect “enhances the poise of a moderate yet uplifted tone of voice, an individual voice self-possessed, self-controlled, impersonally self-expressive” (69). One has but to peruse any issue of Poetry to hear this “self-possessed” voice expressed, even if the line that speaks it is not pentameter. This mode is the poetry primarily of the cooked scene, the poetry lampooned by Koch, the poetry critiqued by the Language poets.

In children’s poetry, one might turn for examples of this poetic to Myra Cohn Livingston, David McCord, or any number of voice poets. Jarrell’s poetry is certainly highly structured with decidedly formalistic tendencies. Yet, in contrast to, say, the sonnets of Richard Wilbur, whose early work exemplifies the cooked school, Jarrell’s poems, especially those in The Lost World, do evince an extraordinary quality of what Mary Jarrell calls “conversational directness,” although they are nowhere near the conversational quality of a Ginsberg or Frank O’Hara (Remembering 121). Jarrell’s work resists both sides of the binary, and his poems often reject the “self-possessed” voice so commonly found in the work of Wilbur and his acolytes, depicting selves that are incoherent and divided, selves in crisis like the housewife of “Seele im Raum,” the child of “A Quilt Pattern.”

Though childhood had always played a part in Jarrell’s poetry (Lowell called Jarrell “child Randall”), it was not until he was hospitalized for hepatitis in 1962 that Jarrell began writing for children. Spurred on by new Macmillan employee Michael di Capua, Jarrell began translating the brothers Grimm. Jarrell had not been producing many poems during this period. In fact, during the early fifties Jarrell had been writing mostly prose, including Pictures from an Institution (1952) and Poetry and the Age (1953), and it seems he found his work on the Grimms’ translations therapeutic. Once Jarrell regained his health, di Capua invited him and his wife to New York to discuss further projects. Mary recalls, “Jarrell was saying ruefully what a long time it had been since he had written any poems and at that di Capua made his move. ‘What about writing for children, Randall?’ he asked so smoothly. ‘Have you ever thought of that?’ And Jarrell, the children’s writer, was invented” (Children’s Books 3). The Gingerbread Rabbit and The Bat-Poet, Jarrell’s first two children’s books, were both published in 1964, four years after the release of Allen’s anthology. Illustrated by Garth Williams, The Gingerbread Rabbit was moderately successful, but it was his sophomore effort that proved Jarrell’s mettle as a children’s book writer. In an interview with Aaron Kramer, Jarrell claimed that The Gingerbread Rabbit “wasn’t a ‘real’ book” (qtd. in Mary Jarrell, Remembering 95). Rather, it seemed to be an exercise that Mary characterizes as something “a master chef cooks up…for his child on a day off” (96). She concludes, “It did not feel like a ‘real’ book [to Jarrell] because in his innocence of the genre Randall had underrated it” (95-96). He lost this innocence by the time he began crafting The Bat-Poet, a complex fairy tale that concerns Jarrell’s two favorite subjects: childhood and poetry. As Flynn notes in Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood, the book deals with a unique, talented child (bat though he may be) who simultaneously wants to be exceptional and accepted. Flynn argues that Jarrell, who never had a stable family of his own, develops in his children’s books a consistent theme: we have “the need for happy yet improbable families that do not exist in the real world but have to be invented” (102). Though this theme is certainly a primary focus of The Bat-Poet’s narrative, Jarrell is simultaneously working through his notion of poetics. The Bat-Poet is an explicit embodiment of the poetics theorized in “Levels and Opposites,” an embodiment that Mary claims “triggered” The Lost World and broke the writer’s block that kept him from writing poetry.

Jarrell’s The Bat-Poet demonstrates some of the contradictions apparent when constructing poetry in the dominant mode discussed above. The narrative that
frames the poems in *The Bat-Poet* provides an interesting occasion for scrutinizing complications in the poetics of voice, and the complications and contradictions inherent in ascribing to a binary logic. The bat skirts the line between conservative and experimental, between the cooked and the raw. The complexity of the bat becomes apparent at the story's beginning, when the bat demonstrates his peculiar conservatism. Jarrell writes,

> Toward the end of summer all the bats except the little brown one began sleeping in the barn. He missed them, and tried to get them to come back and sleep on the porch with him. "What do you want to sleep in the barn for?" he asked them.

> "We don't know.... What do you want to sleep on the porch for?"

> "It's where we always sleep," he said. (2)

His longing for familiarity is apparent. He does not want to violate what has "always" been; he wants to maintain the customs he is familiar with. The bats cannot offer any reason for their relocation, so the bat, despite his loneliness, stays on the porch, for as he says, "If I slept in the barn I'd be homesick" (2). Paradoxically, it is his desire to maintain tradition that leads him to violate custom in a much more startling way.9

Before, sleeping amidst the furry group of bats, whoever the little bat had awakened, "he'd pushed himself up into the middle of them and gone right back to sleep" (2). However, now, alone on the porch, he does not go back to sleep; rather, he "just hang[s] there and think[s]" (2). Recalling Plato's allegory of the cave, the new world of daylight inspires the bat—but it is the mockingbird who introduces the bat to the world of poetry. The bat's emergence from night into the world of daylight—the waking world we all know—is much like the emergence of the dreamer into reality. In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," for example, the unnamed gunner wakes "to the black flak and the nightmare fighters," just as Travisano notes that the housewife speaker of "Next Day" "wakes into realities of loneliness, aging and earth that, until now, she has managed to 'overlook'" (*Midcentury* 62). However, the bat's lot is not nearly as bleak as that of Jarrell's gunner and housewife. As Mary Jarrell writes in *Remembering Randall*, Jarrell's children's books set their heroes "on the road marked Happy Ending" (96). Rather than waking, in that horrifying paradox, "to the nightmare fighters," Jarrell's bat wakes instead to a world of "green-and-gold-and-blue" (5). Unlike the child in "A Quilt Pattern," who falls into a black nightmare after "the long day / Dies" (3-4), the bat emerges into the bright light of day, a world filled with the mockingbird's song.

The bat realizes that he can never sing like the mockingbird (he does not have the range), and so begins making up poems, understanding that "If you get the words right you don't need a tune" (5). The bat's respect for the mockingbird recalls Jarrell's respect for Robert Frost. During an encounter with Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and William Burroughs, Jarrell was asked to "demonstrate 'excellence' in poetry." Jarrell recited "Home Burial" (*Letters* 418). As Frost's work did for Jarrell, the mockingbird's songs represent "excellence in poetry" for the little bat. In "The Group of Two" Mary writes that "In Life, Frost and Cal [Robert Lowell] were Mockingbirds.... Bob Watson and Randall were Bats" (290). Frost and Lowell are closely tied to the cooked school of poets. Hall's first edition of *New Poets of England and America* featured an introduction by Frost, as well as thirteen pages of Lowell's verse. In *The Children's Books of Randall Jarrell*, Jerome Griswold notes that "the resemblance between Frost and the mockingbird is unmistakable to those familiar with Frost's personality and idiosyncrasies" (56). Moreover, Griswold observes that Jarrell gave the mockingbird "Frost's peremptory and authoritative way which abashed younger poets, [and] his affectation of adopting a studied pose when listening" (56).

In his interview with Kramer, Jarrell says, although the "mockingbird is pretty bad... he's a real artist" (qtd. in Griswold 57). Unlike the Beats who Jarrell claims can only "write a good poem...by accident," the mockingbird understands the craft of poetry (*Letters* 418). Unfortunately, Jarrell does not transcribe any of the mockingbird's songs; we hear only the verse of his little protégé. Jarrell aligns the bat-poet against the mockingbird, giving the bat only an intuitive understanding of verse. Yet the bat's first fragment of poetry displays a tendency for the formal "cooked" verse of Hall's anthology:

> At dawn, the sun shines like a million moons
> And all the shadows are as bright as moonlight.
> The birds begin to sing with all their might.
> The world awakens and forgets the night.
>
> The squirrels begin to— (5)

Although unfinished, we can see a highly structured and formally intricate pattern emerge from the lines. The poem's organization revolves around quatrains of iambic pentameter, which feature an unrhymed first line and a triplet following. Also, the last word of the first line, "moons," echoes with "blue" of the fifth line. The fragmented, five syllable sixth line chimes perfectly with "blue," giving the poem formal closure even though it is contrived to be a fragment: "blue" and "begin to." The
poem is formally complex in other ways as well. The tripl-
etlet rhyme is subtle: the unaccented second syllable of
“moonlight” downplays the couplet following and adds
strength to the internal rhyme “bright” in line two. Yet the
narrative that surrounds the poem suggests that the bat is
unaware of his technical prowess, that the bat’s poetry is
“natural,” not artificial. Most voice-lyrics strive for such
“natural” poetry that disguises its artificiality. In this case,
Jarrell even has his bat resent any admiration of his ability
at formal versification.

Because the bat’s audience did not enjoy his first frag-
ment, the bat moves on to different audiences, the first
being the mockingbird. Jarrell included this next poem in
his final book of poetry, The Lost World, calling it “The Bird
of Night.” Untitled in The Bat-Poet, it reads,

A shadow is floating through the moonlight.
Its wings don’t make a sound.
Its claws are long, its beak is bright.
Its eyes try all the corners of the night.

It calls and calls: all the air swells and heaves
And washes up and down like water.
The ear that listens to the owl believes
In death. The bat beneath the eaves,

The mouse beside the stone are still as death—
The owl’s air washes them like water.
The owl goes back and forth inside the night,
And the night holds its breath. (12)

An often anthologized children’s poem, “The Bird of
Night” tackles the idea of death, of being preyed upon,
taking the point of view of smaller, weaker creatures—
creatures much like children. On the metaphoric level, the
owl becomes “the capricious infinite / That, like parents,
no one has yet escaped / Except by luck or magic” that
Jarrell writes of in “Children Selecting Books in a Library”
(14-16). Also, as Perry Nodelman notes in his cursory read-
ing of “The Bird of Night” in The Pleasures of Children’s
Literature, the poem “encourages us to think about the re-
lationships of sound waves and waves of water; about the
possibility of drowning and the possibility of death;
...about the stillness of death and the act of keeping still
in order to prevent death” (207). On the formal level, the
poem is a marvelous example of craft, of the bat-poet’s
ability “to select, exclude, compress, [and] aim toward a
work of art” (Jarrell, Letters 408). It also subtly shows the
bat’s evolution as a poet. In “The Bird of Night” the bat
uses formal structures similar to his first work. The poem
is composed in loose iambic quatrains, the first stanza us-
ing the same rhymes found in “At Dawn the Sun Shines
like a Million Moons”: “moonlight,” “bright,” and “night.”
Also, we see the bat again working with triplets, yet in
this poem, the bat—unconsciously, of course—realizes that
the rhymes may become overwhelming, so he inserts an
unrhymed line between the first and second line of each
triplet, enjamb the rhyme in the second stanza, and in-
corporates an interesting slant/sight rhyme in the last
quatrain which calls attention to the theme of the poem:
“death,” “night,” and “breath.”

The mockingbird, “cooked” craftsman that he is,
notices the formal beauty of the poem, saying, “Why, I
like it.... Technically it’s quite accomplished. The way you
change the rhyme-scheme’s particularly effective” (14). It
is here that we realize the bat-poet composes these poems
in ignorance: he responds, “It is?” And when the mock-
ingbird acknowledges the “clever[ness]” of having “that
last line two feet short,” the bat is dumbfounded—he does
not know meter (14). Jarrell, however, does. In the bat’s
exchange with the mockingbird we encounter an interest-
ing tension in Jarrell’s poetic. Obviously, we are supposed
to sympathize with the bat, the hero of the story. The mock-
ingbird, pompous and self-important, understands craft
on an intellectual level. He notices the very traits that
Jarrell, in “Levels and Opposites,” rejects as relatively un-
important: “metre, stanza form, rhyme, alliteration, quan-
tity, and so on” (697). In “Levels and Opposites” Jarrell
“neglects these without too much regret: criticism has paid
them an altogether disproportionate amount of attention—
partly, I suppose, because they are things any child can
point at, draw diagrams of, and count” (697). The bat, who
functions as the child of The Bat-Poet, cannot “point at,
draw diagrams of, and count” these formal traits—he does
not realize he is employing them. The mockingbird, how-
ever, does. He correctly notes that the shortened final line
gives “the effect of the night holding its breath,” and he
explains the effect in terms of the poem’s interesting met-
rical and syllabic variations, whereas the bat maintains he
“just made it like holding your breath” (14). In fact, the
bat, upset at the analytical mockingbird, later fumes, “Why,
I might as well have said it to the bats. What do I care how
many feet it has? The owl nearly kills me, and he says he
likes the rhyme-scheme!” (15). The tension lies in the fact
that Jarrell, the actual composer of “The Bird of Night,”
understands how the poem works formally, and most
probably—perhaps most certainly—composed the verse
with the formal structures in mind. The two characters
represent the two competing schools of poetry and, per-
haps, the two sides of Jarrell’s poetic—the bat approxi-
mating the raw, and the mockingbird suggesting the
cooked.

In the chipmunk, the bat finds an audience who re-
sponds to his verse emotionally rather than intellectually,
to the content rather than the form. After hearing “The
Bird of Night,” the chipmunk “gave a big shiver and said,
‘it’s terrible, just terrible! Is there really something like that
at night?’” (17). The bat is pleased by this response, and
later reflects, "He didn't say any of that two-feet-short stuff ...[.] he was scared!" (19). The bat writes his newfound friend a poem, "The Chipmunk's Day," a poem that is situated between the two poles of formal verse and free verse. Prefiguring his final poem, "Bats," “The Chipmunk's Day" appears rather loose in construction. Starting with a perfect line of trochaic pentameter, the poem vacillates between iambic and trochaic meter, sometimes losing its metrical feel altogether. The lines begin with a fairly regular syllabic pattern, but the pattern is varied to such a degree that the exception becomes the rule. The poem does rhyme, but only the second and fourth line of each stanza. Yet form mirrors content, for the poem’s peculiar mix of long and short lines and their varied placement echoes the subject, the harried and quick chipmunk. The chipmunk recognizes this fact, remarking that “It goes all in and out, doesn’t it?” (22).

The next poem in the book speaks directly of the mockingbird. Untitled in The Bat-Poet, Jarrell placed it second in The Lost World and titled it simply, “The Mockingbird.” The poem at once exalts the bird and deprecates it. In this poem, too, the bat works with triple rhymes, employing an ABAABCD rhyme scheme throughout. The meter is loose, and the lines vary between nine and thirteen syllables. But the poem’s loose form gives it an organic quality. The rhymes are not forced, and the bat uses slant rhymes to good effect, rhyming “down” with “lawn” and “yard” with “bird.” Many of the rhymes are enjambed, affording them a quiet power not heard in his first fragmented poem. But ultimately the content makes the poem stand out. The poem’s final line asks, “Which one’s the mockingbird? which one’s the world?” (28). The question resonates with the poem’s form, for the poem is about poetry—about the power of words to imitate life. And the form of the poem appears organic, pliable, living.

Speaking of poets and mockingbirds, Jarrell once said,

I’ve known a lot of artists and poets...and...I write poetry myself—or anyway, I write verse myself.... Several times when I’ve talked with writer friends about this book I’m amused to see how they immediately identify with the mockingbird. (Laugh) But the hero of the book is a bat who is really quite nice.... Territoriality at its strongest is in mockingbirds.... (pause) So, it seemed to me that...mockingbirds are not only more like artists than other birds, they’re more like people, too. (qtd. in Griswold 57-58)

Griswold sees this statement as one cautiously criticizing Frost “through Jarrell’s gambit of acknowledging the same faults in himself” (58). Jarrell’s interviewer asks Jarrell about this “territoriality,” saying, “Well, you’re certainly not that kind of poet, Jarrell” (58). To which Jarrell answers, “Oh...but...but if I’m not...I’m not a poet, I’m afraid. I mean...I mean...(Laugh)” (58). The mockingbird, then, brings to the surface some of Jarrell’s deep-rooted concerns about poetry, and perhaps concerns about his own poetic. Jarrell says, “I write poetry myself—or anyway, I write verse myself” (57). This distinction between verse and poetry is an important one. In Rhyme’s Reason, John Hollander makes a similar distinction, saying, “Poetry is a matter of trope; and verse, of scheme and design...which is why most verse is not poetry” (1). The mockingbird, representing the cooked, acculturated, formal poets, drives out life to imitate it, and his poetry, as Flynn observes, is “mostly artifice” (109). However, the bat seeks to join with the life he writes about—he wants to be accepted by a society, a family, the family, perhaps, that Jarrell never had. As Flynn writes, Jarrell “dissociated himself from those he loved the most because he feared losing them” (3). He continues, noting that Jarrell’s childhood was complicated by the divorce of his parents and the resultant—and for Jarrell, too-brief—move to his grandparents’ home in Hollywood. Flynn maintains that this “abrupt separation from [his grandparents], combined with the onset of adolescence and the pain of his parents’ divorce[,]...created a sense of betrayal” in the young Randall (4). If, as Mary remembers, Jarrell felt that his “family [was] a disaster,” then The Bat-Poet makes clear both Jarrell’s and the bat’s ultimate desire to be accepted by a family, an acceptance predicated on poetic knowledge (qtd. in Flynn 3). Poetry, for Jarrell and his bat, must imitate life without killing it—without driving it away.

But as we have seen, the bat’s poetry does not reflect the completely raw verse of the Beats and New York school poets. Rather, The Bat-Poet reveals a complicated, postmodern poetic, one that rejects easy binaries and embraces contradiction. The bat’s compositional process mirrors the raw school, but his product is formal, if only accidentally. Jarrell writes in “Levels and Opposites,” “A poem is made inexhaustible like a thing, an organism, a perception, instead of exhaustible like a generalization, primarily by means of the many dialectical contradictory relationships I have mentioned—structural ones are particularly important” (703). In this respect, The Bat-Poet as story is quite a lot like a poem, for it suggests “The generalizations most akin to poetry” that Jarrell outlines in “Levels and Opposites,” those that “tend to be paradoxical, contradictory, ambiguous, in form as well as in content” (703). For instance, the bat’s poems are not formal by design, for the bat is ignorant of the forms he employs, yet they do display the conventions of formal verse: rhyme and meter. Jarrell crafts the bat as representing the individual, natural genius, one who practically invents poetry because of his inability to sing like the mockingbird, for “his high notes were all high, and his low notes were all
high and the notes in between were all high” (5). Though he models his poems throughout the book on the mockingbird’s song lyrics, the bat is intuiting conventions without realizing that they are part of a larger, socially contingent discourse of poetry, a discourse that Jarrell, like Koch and, indeed, all of the poets in Donald Allen’s anthology, studied quite closely. Jarrell’s bat is not implicated in the paradox that Koch is: the rejection of tradition while remaining steeped and informed by it. However, Jarrell is not the bat, and Jarrell as cultural critic and poet revels in the fact that he is steeped in and informed by tradition. Initially, it seems Jarrell assumes either that children are not ready to understand what makes Jarrell the kind of poet he is, or he is unaware of the socially constructed nature of himself and of poetry.

For example, the bat says, “The trouble isn’t making poems, the trouble’s finding somebody that will listen to them” (15). However, Jarrell’s own experience with composing verse was quite different from the bat’s. Jarrell had been writing few poems during the early fifties and continued to write poems only in spurts throughout the remainder of the decade, sometimes going years without completing a draft. Mary Jarrell notes his completion of “In Montecito” in 1960 as being “his first poem in two years,” and in his National Book Award acceptance speech Jarrell himself admits, “Sometimes a poem comes to me—I do what I can to it when it comes—and sometimes for years not one comes” (Letters 445, 448). Of course, we should not disparage Jarrell for writing a fantasy instead of an autobiography, but it seems worthwhile to note that his book reinforces for child readers problematic notions of individual genius. Although the bat claims, “The trouble isn’t making poems,” he nevertheless has a bout of writer’s block later in the book. The bat finds himself unable to craft a poem about the cardinal, despite his promise to do so.11 The scene highlights the painstaking level of observation that is necessary (although not always sufficient, Jarrell suggests) to compose poetry. The bat observes the cardinal, noting the odd “way [he] cracked the sunflower seeds; instead of standing on them and hammering them open, like a titmouse, he’d turn them over and over in his beak—it gave him a thoughtful look—and all at once the seed would fall open, split in two” (24). We can read this image as a suggestion of how to read poems, turning them “over and over” in one’s mind rather than hammering at them “like a titmouse.” However, we can also read it as a suggestion of the difficulty of writing poetry, of treating subjects, of turning experience into poetry. We can read it as a comment on the “thoughtful” activity involved in crafting poems. Here the bat is no first-thought-best-thought O’Hara, hammering out poems on his lunch break. Unlike the poets presented in Allen’s anthology, Jarrell resists the Romantic construction of the poet as a genius whose first thought is the best thought, while showing the limitations poets—like himself, like the bat—can encounter when treating diverse subjects, even the most compelling subjects. The book embraces the dialectic theory outlined in “Levels and Opposites,” setting against each other irreconcilable tensions, tensions that are not working toward “a simple unity,” but which operate in a more heterogeneous manner, accentuating “opposing forces” (699).

Another of these tensions lies in the fact that, despite Griswold’s insistence that the mockingbird represents Frost, elements of Jarrell are found in both the bat and the mockingbird. In Remembering Randall, Mary Jarrell suggests that “‘The Mockingbird’ is a caricature drawn from Randall’s knowledge of Lowell’s and Frost’s, and his own, self-obsession, acute sensitivity, and fierce territoriality” (103). Certainly, Jarrell sounds more than a little like the mockingbird in his reviews. For example, in a 1950 omnibus review, Jarrell turns his critical eye to Elizabeth Coatsworth’s The Creaking Stair, a collection of children’s poems. His response is rather tepid, yet Jarrell finds occasion to compliment Coatsworth’s line “skimming the broth or pouring that thick tea” in mockingbird fashion: “The extra foot in the last line—no other line in the poem has five—helps to make that thick tea a triumph” (Kipling 158). However, in the same review, after proclaiming that “There isn’t a good poem” in Louis Simpson’s new book, Jarrell advises the poet, “Whatever you do, don’t pay any attention to critics” (157). Jarrell’s review of John Ciardi’s As If
further complicates Jarrell’s status as a mockingbird figure. In this review, Jarrell finds fault with John Ciardi’s tendency to copy—to mock—other poets. He writes, “[Ciardi] uses Steven’s, or Shapiro’s, or half a dozen other poets’ tricks and techniques as easily, and with as much justification, as a salesman would use a competitor’s sales talk—it works, doesn’t it?” (26).

At times, then, the bat seems one of these new poets, tutored and critiqued by a Jarrell-like critic. Jarrell’s advice to Simpson seems equally well to the bat: “Mr. Simpson seems genuinely wild: sometimes he sounds like himself, a surprising creature in a surprising world” (157). And this “surprising creature” is a poet who grows and changes, who apparently is learning—even if intuitively—new methods for crafting verse, new subjects for treatment. His final poem, “Bats,” which also appears in The Lost World, is the most like free verse of all the bat’s poems, and in it the bat, that “surprising creature,” “sounds like himself,” for he learns to write of himself, of his own kind. Flynn notes that the bat-poet “taps [childhood’s] poetic resources and through the nature, articulate means of the adult artist, transforms them into poetry” (109). The narrator tells us that the bat found this poem “easier [to write] than the other poems, somehow: all he had to do was remember what [childhood] had been like and every once in a while put in a rhyme” (35). “Bats” then exemplifies Jarrell’s brief comments on rhyme that preface his work in John Ciardi’s Mid-century American Poets (1950): “Rhyme as an automatic structural device, automatically attended to, is attractive to me, but I like it best irregular, live, and heard” (183). The bat moves from the rhymed triplets in his first fragment, to the irregularly rhymed “The Chipmunk’s Day,” and finally to the “automatic[,]...irregular, live, and heard” rhymes present in “Bats,” the bat-poet’s best work, rife with internal oppositions.

The bat’s first fragment had formal perfection; its triplets aligned neatly, its last, truncated line still rhyming despite its premature end. Yet it is in “Bats” that we find evidenced the contradictions in structure and content which, Jarrell argued, make for great poetry. Structurally, the bat’s rhymes are unobtrusive, establishing no consistent pattern. The line breaks are dictated by the integrity of the line and not by predetermined formal structures. The first line is iambic dimeter, “A bat is born,” and stands in contrast with the variant rhythms of the second, “Naked and blind and pale.” The rhythmic strength of the line lies in the accented first syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. The final two iambs lead smoothly into the next line where we hear the first rhyme. Yet the rhyme is enjambed, subduing the perfect, accented rhyme of “pale” and “tail.” In fact, the first three lines are a broken couplet: “A bat is born / Naked and blind and pale” form the first hidden line of pentameter, “His mother makes a pocket of her tail” the next. However, the bat is not interested in the conventions of heroic verse, so from the beginning the form is broken—at least on the page—just as the first line of pentameter is broken. Perhaps the bat would agree with Koch’s sentiments, “farewell stale pale skunky pentameters.”

The poem represents a dialectic between the raw and the cooked, both in its form and its content. The bat is “born / Naked and blind and pale”—raw, untouched by civilization and culture (1-2). The mother’s body is the only clothing, the only protection he needs. The baby bat “clings to her long fur / By his thumbs and toes and teeth” as she “dances through the night” (4-6). In The Raw and the Cooked, Lévi-Strauss mentions some of the many idioms that inform the concept of the raw; two of them interestingly are danser à cru (“to dance raw”) and monter à cru (“to ride bareback”), and both the young bat and his mother participate in these activities (335). In fact, the entirety of the poem participates in the world of the raw. As the chipmunk notes, the bats “sleep all day and fly all night...and eat while [they’re] flying and drink while [they’re] flying” (40). The only light comes from the distant stars and the heatless moon, and as day breaks the mother “holds her wings about her sleeping child” and joins him in repose. Yet the poem also participates in the world of the cooked. Although the bats eat their food raw and drink while “skim[ming] across” the water, the poem depicts a process of acculturation, a process which mirrors the process of cooking Lévi-Strauss speaks of. Their midnight activities act “as a mediating activity between heaven and earth, life and death, nature and culture” (65).

The bat’s childhood has so thoroughly acculturated him he still yearns for the company of his fellow bats just as Jarrell wished for a happy family. Although presently independent, the bat very soon “yawned” and “snuggled closer to the others,” the very last words of the book (43). It is “Bats” that allows him to reenter the culture his day-light activities have estranged him from. It is a tool that facilitates his return, and once he enters the barn and finds his way into the throng of bats, he discovers he “couldn’t remember the words” of his poem (43). Beginning to drift into hibernation with the others, the bat’s only concern is “I wish I’d said we sleep all winter” (43). With that, he closes his eyes and falls to sleep, surrounded by the warmth of his family. The bat is not a versifier, as Jarrell called himself; he is a poet. Yet despite Jarrell’s self-deprecation—his insistence that he writes verse, not poetry—Jarrell too is a poet whose work, like the bat’s (for the bat’s work is his), embraces contradiction and opposition. The Bat-Poet implicitly encourages children to resist imagining poetry as merely technical prowess, as mere syllable counting. The Bat-Poet constructs poetry as a cultural artifact that does something in the world. Through poetry, the bat forge new relationships and comes, through poetic knowledge, to better understand himself and his place with the other bats. It is the bat’s ability to resist
Lévi-Strauss’ binaries—and the somewhat artificial binary suggested by Hall’s and Allen’s anthologies—that ultimately wins him that which Jarrell desired more than anything else, acceptance by his family, a happy return home. It is The Bat-Poet’s similar resistance to these binaries that makes it such an insightful work of literature, an antidote to our proclivity to choose “camps” and draw poetic lines in the sand. In this respect, The Bat-Poet is a rare book, one teaching that opposing tendencies and internal contradictions make for interesting poetry, that poetry is more complex than the simple binaries of “raw” and “cooked.”

NOTES

1. In “The Other Frost” (1947), for example, Jarrell complicated the popular conception of Robert Frost, arguing that beneath Frost’s seemingly tranquil poetry there lies a dark undercurrent, intensifying Frost’s reputation. Jarrell also charted with amazing acumen the poetic landscape of twentieth century American poetry in his talk “50 Years of American Poetry” at the 1962 National Poetry Festival, a lecture well attended by prominent critics and poets (and reprinted in his The Third Book of Criticism [1963]). In Poetry’s Catbird Seat, William McGuire quotes Karl Shapiro’s reflection on the talk: “All the poets sat on the edge of their seats while Jarrell, who everybody had to admit had earned the right to do so, put together the jigsaw puzzle of modern poetry in front of our eyes. When I was finally fitted into place, with a splash of color, I felt a relief that I fitted, and a regret that the puzzle had been solved” (239). Jarrell also re-invigorated the failing reputation of Walt Whitman. In “Some Lines from Whitman,” an essay requested by John Crowe Ransom for the Kenyon Review (reprinted in Poetry and the Age [1953]), Jarrell, in the words of William Pritchard, “immortalizes lines by Whitman which, ever and only since his essay celebrated them, have been quoted and requoted” (212-13).

2. X.J. Kennedy argues that Cardi “was responsible to a large extent” for the “change in climate” that allowed poets writing for adults to publish children’s verse without shame (61).

3. Juliana Spahr notes in Everybody’s Autonomy, language writing, while sharing the leftist leanings and formal experimentation of the New American school, differs fundamentally in its theoretical underpinnings. The New American school “speaks against the system, yet remains voice- and personality-centered” (57), whereas language writing is generally “anti-individualistic and anti-ego-centered” (73).

4. Thought to be lost, “Levels and Opposites” was a Measures lecture given by Jarrell at Princeton in April 1942 at the request of Allen Tate. The essay was rediscovered in the midst of Jarrell’s papers by Travisano, and was subsequently published in the winter 1996 issue of The Georgia Review.

5. For institutional histories of the New Criticism, I refer the reader to William Cain’s The Crisis in Criticism and Gerald Graff’s Professing Literature. Alan Golding also discusses the impact of New Criticism on formation of the American poetry canon in chapter three of his From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry.

6. In an interview for the Paris Review, Robert Penn Warren rejected the term “New Criticism” as being too vague to have any real meaning. Noting the methodological differences in approaches by New Critics like “Richards, Eliot, Tate, Blackmur, Winters, Brooks,” and others, Warren points out that, ultimately, the term is, in one sense, a term without any referent—or with too many referents. It is a term that belongs to the conspiracy theory of history. A lot of people—chiefly aging, conservative professors scared of losing prestige, or young instructors afraid of not getting promoted, middle-brow magazine editors, and the flotsam and jetsam of semi-Marxist social-significance criticism left stranded by history—they all had a communal nightmare called the New Criticism to explain their vague discomfort. I think it was something they ate. (17-18)


8. Note that poetries that give voice to other, marginalized voices call into question the “class dialect” constructed by the dominant mode of poetry. The poems of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyyn Brooks, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni, for example, implicitly interrogate the dominant poetic voice, which, as Easthope argues, is a bourgeois class dialect, even as they sometimes employ the pentameter.

9. This paradox is also apparent in the raw poets of the 1950s and 60s. For example, even as Koch lambastes the intellectual poets of the academy (and let’s remember, Koch was a professor at Columbia, a student of Harvard), he is also implicated in that tradition, steeped in “the great poets of our time... / Years of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence...” etc. (Allen 231).

10. This poem, along with “The Chipmunk’s Day,” appeared in The New Yorker, and of the pair Jarrell said, “[They] were pretty much like grown-up poems—anyway, The New Yorker printed them. I didn’t tell them they were children’s poems” (qtd. in Mary Jarrell, Remembering 101).

11. Mary Jarrell explicitly ties this scene to Jarrell’s biography, noting that “This minor episode... came from Randall’s attempt to write a book on Hart Crane for Holt and Company. Although Randall admired Crane, was extremely interested in him, and had accepted a $2,000 advance to write about him, he could not” (Remembering 102-03).

WORKS CITED


Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., is currently working on his dissertation at Illinois State University, where he teaches children’s literature and creative writing. His research focuses on the intersections between contemporary American children’s poetry and poetry for adults.