An elective affinity

Jarrell and the Germans

Richard K. Cross

"I CAME INTO Randall's life," recalls Mary Jarrell, "after Salzburg and Rilke, about the middle of Mahler; and I got to stay through Goethe and up to Wagner."

Her readiness to mark stages of her husband's life in terms of people and places German finds an echo in Karl Shapiro's remark that Jarrell's Selected Poems might take as its subtitle "Hansel and Gretel in America." The world of Grimm's Märchen: that is in fact the substrate upon which the poet's response to German history and culture, as well as much else not specifically German at all, rests. "He was completely at home in the strange and intense poetry of German folk tales," notes Hannah Arendt, to whose apartment Jarrell came to hear German spoken. "I often thought that the country the German language represented to him was actually where he came from . . . it was as though he had . . . emerged from the enchanted forests in which we spent our childhood, bringing with him the magic flute." Compare that evocation of Jarrell with these lines from his "Deutsch durch Freud":

Dearer to me than all the treasures of the earth
Is something living, said old Rumpelstiltskin
And hopped home. Charcoal-burners heard him singing
And spoiled it all. . . And all because —
If only he hadn't known his name!

In German I don't know my name,
I am the log
The fairies left one morning in my place.
— In German I believe in them, in everything.

Just as the poet savors the mystery at the heart of the Märchen, so too he drolly insists on the obscurity of the tongue: "Till the day I die I'll be in love with German — If only I don't learn German" (C 268). Mary Jarrell and Hannah Arendt confirm that he refused to speak the language and only half-understood what he heard. Thus German words retained for him a metaphorical freshness that allows him in "The Night before the Night before Christmas," for example, to engage in a bilingual pun on Engel:

white
As the down of the wing of an angel;
white
As the beard of Friedrich Engels (CP 50).

A related form of word-play occurs in "Seele im Raum," where the speaker associates the adjective elend with an imaginary eland, which is both a symptom of her chronic unhappiness and a compensation for it. The eland gives a meaning with some relish of the unicorn tradition to suffering for which a world grown blankly secular can offer only clinical diagnoses.

As poems like "The Carnegie Library, Juvenile Division" and "Children Selecting
Books in a Library” make plain, Jarrell’s fascination with German folk tales is anterior to and deeper than his concern with the language. In the former poem,

beasts loom in the green
Firred darkness of the märchen: country the child thought life
And wished for and crept to out of his own life (CP 98).

That alternate homeland does not, of course, represent unalloyed pleasure. “Their tales,” he reminds us in “Children Selecting Books,”

are full of sorcerers and ogres
Because their lives are: the capricious infinite
That, like parents, no one has yet escaped
Except by luck or magic (CP 106).

And why does the child — the small boy alive and fearful in each of us — prefer to take his trouble in fairy-tale versions? “Because we live,” Jarrell concludes, “By trading another’s sorrow for our own; another’s/Impossibilities, still unbelieved in, for our own” (CP 107). That fictive other seems so beautifully fated in comparison with one’s own ragtag existence. Since the miraculous empowering of desire evident in the tales seldom or never occurs outside them, its appeal, in moments of half-suspended incredulity, is all the more potent. What one wishes for, finally, is self-transcendence: “change me!” is the cry that sounds explicitly through “Children Selecting Books,” “The Märchen,” “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” and implicitly through a host of other poems.

By Suzanne Ferguson’s count, Jarrell invokes no fewer than thirty-six of the Grimms’ tales, his concern with them peaking in The Seven-League Crutches where roughly a fourth of the poems in some measure derive from Märchen. More prominent than any other motif — Shapiro was right — is the Hänsel and Gretel story, which figures in at least five poems, ranging from a parenthetical reference in “The Night before the Night before Christmas” through the poet’s unfolding of the psychological implications of conflict between mother and child in “A Quilt-Pattern” and of their eventual reconciliation in “The House in the Wood” to his intricate elaboration of the theme in “The Märchen,” where Hansel becomes the hero of a monomyth. Jarrell’s sometimes very free adaptations reflect his sense of the proximity of folk narrative to dreamwork. “The Märchen” in particular depends upon such oneiric devices as condensation and displacement, as the following lines bear witness:

Hänsel, to map the hard way, cast his bones
Up clouds to Paradise; His sparrows ate
And he plunged home, past peat and measures, to his kin
Furred in the sooty darkness of the cave
Where the old gods nodded. How the devil’s beard
Coiled round the dreaming Hänsel, till his limbs
Grew gnarled as a fakir’s on the spindling Cross
The missions rowed from Asia: eternal corpse
Of the Scapegoat, gay with His blood’s watered beads,
Red wax in the new snow (strange to His warmed stare);
The wooden mother and the choir of saints, His stars;
And God and His barons, always, iron behind.
Gorged Hänsel felt his blood burn thin as air
In a belly swollen with the airy kine;
How many ages boiled Christ’s bark for soup! (CP 82-83).

This is Jarrell at his most gnomic, his verse as gnarled as those fakir’s limbs. In the end troglodyte-Hänsel and Christ-Hänsel yield to Hänsel the protagonist of the Grimms’ “Fisherman and his Wife,” who

Said to the flounder for his first wish,
Let me wish
And let my wish be granted (CP 85).
The ultimate desideratum, it would seem, is to live in a realm where volition is king and where one is no longer bound by an enduring shape or essence. We may think of Jarrell himself as a Hansel, unfortunate in his parents and early circumstances, who as an adult tried, through imagination, to understand and forgive and thus to lighten the burden of identity, even if he could not slip out from under it altogether. Rather than repressing his childhood, the poet employs fairy tales to help release its extraordinary energies. "Without innocence," he quotes Hofmannsthal as saying, "no one creates or enjoys a work of art."6

What Jarrell owes to Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm may be the largest of his German debts, but there are others nearly as great. Consider, for instance, his Wahlverwandtschaft with Goethe, "the last of the Old Ones"; to compare even the most accomplished of our contemporaries to him, Jarrell declares, is to become "saddened and frightened at how much the poet's scope has narrowed."7 He invokes Goethe's authority more than thirty times in the four volumes of collected essays, never perhaps more memorably than in "Poets, Critics, and Readers" when he quotes Goethe to the effect that "all great excellence in life or art, at its first recognition, brings with it a certain pain arising from the strongly felt inferiority of the spectator; only at a later period, when we take it into our own culture, and appropriate as much of it as our capacities allow, do we learn to love and esteem it."8 Love is certainly Jarrell's way of coming to terms with his "own favorite daemon" (CP 267), as he calls Goethe in "Deutsch durch Freud." In comparison with his criticism or with Pictures from an Institution, in which both the narrator and the Austrian-Jewish composer Gottfried Rosenbaum are fond of citing Goethe, Jarrell's poems contain few direct references to him or signs of his influence. There are several Faust echoes. The late poem "Hope" intones: "Back far enough, down deep enough, one comes to the Mothers" (CP 310). A characteristically Jarrellian inversion of Faust's pact with Mephistopheles occurs in "A Conversation with the Devil":

"If ever I don't say To the hour of life that I can wish for: Stay, Thou art so fair! why you may have my — Shadow."

One makes a solitude and calls it peace. So you phrased it; yet — yet — one is paid: To see things as they are, to make them what they might be — Old Father of Truths, old Spirit that Accepts — That's something (CP 30).

Goethe the aphorist remains accessible; Goethe the poet, however much one admires him, is harder to scale. Jarrell's greatest tribute to him is his translation of Faust, Part One. Since I have discussed Jarrell's Faust (and his other translations) in some detail elsewhere, I shall confine myself here to pointing out that it is one of the most readable versions we have of a work notoriously difficult to render into English.

The other poet writing in German toward whom Jarrell felt a peculiar bond was, of course, Rainer Maria Rilke, whom he regarded as quite simply the finest poet of our century, superior even to Yeats. Jarrell calls up the Bohemian master in the essays as often as he does Goethe, usually as a benchmark he can use to take the measure of contemporary poets. I am by no means alone in seeing Jarrell's translations of Rilke — eighteen of them in the Complete Poems — as among the best we have; one can only regret that he did not live long enough to undertake the Duino Elegies. Goethean elements may be hard to find in Jarrell's verse, but one sees evidence of Rilke everywhere, especially in poems like "The State" and "Come to the Stone..." that are seen through the eyes of children or those with female personae like "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" and "Seele im Raum,"
the last of these Rilkean in title as well as treatment. The challenge with which Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," with which any art that cuts sufficiently close to the bone, confronts us — Du musst dein Leben ändern — is, as we have seen, the leitmotif of Jarrell's poetry.

In speaking of Jarrell's involvement with the Germans, one should not forget that he came of intellectual age at a time when the word "German" brought to mind not only a land of Dichter und Denker, but a political order that had turned its back on them, choosing instead to wed sophisticated technology to barbarous instinct. One recalls Goering's dictum that whenever he heard somebody mention Kultur he reached for his pistol. The poems for which Jarrell first became known concerned the war. These tend to focus on its corruptive impact on Americans:

In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school,
as he says in "Losses" (CP 145). There are several poems that do, however, deal with its effects on Germany, including such powerful ones as "The Angels at Hamburg" and "A Camp in the Prussian Forest." In the former we see Hamburg caught up in a firestorm that makes it appear "no longer a city" but rather an adumbration of the last day:

Here at midnight there is no darkness,
At day no light.
The air is smoke and the earth ashes
Where he was fire (CP 191-92).

This condition, the poet indicates, reflects a process of dehumanization so thorough-going that men no longer respond to conscience, "the fiery judge/Who walks like an angel . . . within the laboring breast." In the consequent void, the bombs that rain upon Hamburg translate themselves into falling angels, "their message: There is no justice, man, but death"; indiscriminate, mechanical terror has so brutalized the populace that they can do no more than dumbly watch, "not loving, not hating their judges, who neither love nor hate" (CP 191). The poem offers us the vision of a Dies Irae in which all parties have the experience but miss the meaning.

Next to the involuted meditative strategy of "The Angels at Hamburg," "A Camp in the Prussian Forest" has the stark immediacy of a documentary film. And yet its homely figures and emphatic rhymes, some yielding grimly witty surprises, confer a dignity beyond the reach of cinema upon the victims. Moved by the dreadful spectacle, the speaker, one of the liberators, recounts:

I paint the star I sawed from yellow pine —
And plant the sign
In soil that does not yet refuse
Its usual Jews

Their first asylum (CP 167-68).

This touching gesture is mocked, though, by the smoke and ash from the crematorium that, still hanging in the air, deposit a sooty shroud upon the star and the surrounding woods. The question this appalling residue raises is whether the horror that "A Camp in the Prussian Forest" depicts is anything peculiarly German. What happened in a country whose traditions of civility stretch back a millennium could, one cannot but think, occur anywhere. We have it in us, Jarrell's poems remind us, to bring Armageddon upon ourselves with no recourse to the supernatural.

If one believes that art merely imitates, rather than is an intimate part of, the life it expresses — Jarrell would not have subscribed to the former view — then the poet's German experiences were all secondhand until 1948, when he traveled to Europe for the first time in order to teach at the Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization. Judging from a majority of the poems that came out of this stay and subsequent travels in Middle Europe, what he chiefly encountered was art, although with the stress on opera, painting, sculpture, and architecture rather than on literature. 10 Consider, in this con-
nection, “The Knight, Death, and the Devil,” a wonderfully precise evocation and brilliant reading of a Dürer engraving or, better still, “An English Garden in Austria,” a hybrid bred from the sight — it hardly matters whether actual or imagined — of a carefully disarranged plot of real estate and Hofmannsthal’s libretto for Der Rosenkavalier. In it the poet engages in a high-spirited meditation on a medley of themes drawn from the words and deeds of eighteenth-century musicians, philosophes, kings, and litterateurs, concluding with a diminuendo that features Marx, Stalin, Hitler, and Lincoln Steffens. Knowing that this jeu d’esprit would make hard going for many readers and not wanting to leave them out of the fun, Jarrell the teacher cheerfully supplies nearly a page of gloss in Selected Poems.

That “Hohensalzburg: Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Romantic Character” is compounded of dreams and folk tales everyone agrees; that its romantic theme might have roots as deep in reality as they are in fantasy has not, however, been generally acknowledged. An exception is Parker Tyler, who long ago noted that the poem “blends the Sleeping Beauty motif with what seems a contemporary amour set in the milieu of Fascist-tempered Europe.” That amour, the germ of it, was Jarrell’s liaison with Elisabeth Eisler, a student at the Salzburg Institute during the summer of 1948. “Hohensalzburg” might be regarded as the poet’s valediction, permitting a degree of mourning, for she had, by the time he published it in Poetry magazine the next spring, ceased to be an actual presence in his life — “In the end one wakes from everything” (CP 91) — and become one of his ghosts, albeit a still lively and potentially dangerous one. Shortly before her death, Fräulein Eisler told Mary Jarrell that the affair had, out of respect for the poet’s married estate and perhaps, one suspects, for other reasons too, never been consummated. In the poem, the speaker, summoning his last strength, extends his arms and cries:

“I want you”; and the words were so heavy
That they hung like darkness over the world,
And you said to me, softly: You must not so.
I am only a girl.
Before I was a ghost I was only a girl
(CP 89).

Here it is the ghost, the Dornröschen figure, who demands abstinence. In “The Sleeping Beauty: Variation of the Prince,” it is the protagonist who, in a Jarrellian version of Liebestod, eschews sexual fulfillment, laying Death’s sword between himself and the beloved.

One last poem stemming from Jarrell’s sojourn in Austria, “A Game at Salzburg,” deserves mention, not because it requires much elucidation — the only item that might need explaining, the little ritual of reassurance played out between adults and children, Jarrell himself takes care of in a note — but because it brings together so poignantly several of the poet’s characteristic themes: war and its aftermath, mostly bitter; the attractions of an old, high civilization, even — or perhaps especially — in a humbled condition; the exquisite vulnerability of childhood. With this last he identifies himself and, more strikingly, the world, which must one feels be somebody’s prodigal offspring. “A Game at Salzburg” is much less mannered, far more direct, in its treatment of these subjects than his other poems with a European focus. Robert Lowell praises it for having “the broken, charmed motion of someone thinking out loud,” as well he might, for it is an early and distinguished instance of the confessional mode of which he and Jarrell are the co-creators. It is also a prime example of the extent to which its author had succeeded in assimilating European sensibility to a nature at bottom profoundly American.

“The Orient Express” is another such poem. Its speaker, who evinces the familiar combination of child-like freshness of perception and mature powers of discrimination, remarks that at evening
As the lands darken, a questioning precariousness comes over everything (CP 65).

Just this sense of "questioning precariousness," evident in German and Austrian art, philosophy, folk tales, politics, and mores, draws Jarrell to these evening lands in the heart of das Abendland, for it corresponds to the anxious, skeptical humanism that seems native to his temperament. Jarrell's is the sort of skepticism that interrogates itself as rigorously as it does the rest of existence and finds, ultimately, not the void but, as he says later in the poem,

something, the same thing

Behind everything: all these little villages,

A passing woman, a field of grain,
The man who says good-bye to his wife —

A path through a wood full of lives (CP 66).

For two or three centuries now men have called that path, somewhat nondescriptly, Europe; before that they would have given it a more precise name: Christendom. That older order — not its theology or institutions but the mythos expressed in its art — retains for Jarrell considerable power. In "The Augsburg Adoration" we see him enjoying the sights, aligning himself with the past, in Ulm and Augsburg, the latter still offering reminders of its Roman foundation:

Travellers, we come to Rome, Ulm, Augsburg,

To adore something: the child nursing at the stone
Breast beside a stone ox, a stone ass, a flesh-and-blood
Sparrow who nests in the manger.

The Three Kings
Bring him stones and stones and stones, the sparrow
Brings a straw (CP 346).

The child's appeal to this poet, the latest magus, is self-evident; the sparrow provides the surprise. And yet the sparrow belongs in the Nativity scene, belongs indeed everywhere, for, as Jesus said, "One of them shall not fall/On the ground without your Father" (CP 346; Matt. 10:29). The immanent force that attends the sparrow, could that be "the same thing/Behind everything" one might believe in? In "Bamberg," written during the troubled final year of his life, Jarrell meditates on a tympanum depicting the Last Judgment. "The blest and the damned," he reflects.

Both smile exactly alike
At remembering so well
All they meant to remember
To tell God (CP 490).

We may wonder if, for once, Jarrell has left his irony at home. Or perhaps he expects der liebe Gott will understand.
