

Randall Jarrell: On "Design"

This is the Argument from Design with a vengeance; is the terrible negative from which the eighteenth century's Kodak picture (With its Having wonderful time. Wish you were here on the margin) had to be printed. If a watch, then a watch-maker; if a diabolical machine, then a diabolical mechanic? Frost uses exactly the logic that has always been used. And this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such "designed terror and heartbreak, such an awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world. Frost's details are so diabolically good that it seems criminal to leave some unremarked; but notice how dimpled, fat, and white (all but one; all but one) come from our regular description of any baby; notice how the heal-all, because of its name, it the one flower in all the world picked to be the altar for this Devil's Mass; notice how holding up the moth brings something ritual and hieratic, a ghostly, ghastly formality, to this priest and its sacrificial victim; notice how terrible to the fingers, how full of the stilling rigor of death, that white piece of rigid satin cloth is. And assorted characters of death and blight is, like so many things in this poem, sharply ambiguous: a mixed bunch of actors or diverse representative signs. The tone of the phrase assorted characters of death and blight is beautifully developed in the ironic Breakfast-Club-calisthenics, Radio-Kitchen heartiness of mixed ready to begin the morning right (which assures us, so unreassuringly, that this isn't any sort of Strindberg Spook Sonata, but hard fact), and concludes in the ingredients of the witch's broth, giving the soup a sort of cuddly shimmer that the cauldron in Macbeth never had; the broth, even, is brought to life?we realize that witch's broth is broth, to be supped with a long spoon. For sweet-sour, smiling awfulness snow-drop spider looks unsurpassable, until we come to the almost obscenely horrible (even the mouth-gestures are utilized) a flower like froth; this always used to seem to me the case of the absolutely inescapable effect, until a student of mine said that you could tell how beautiful the flower was because the poet compared it to froth; when I said to her, "But?but?but what does froth remind you of?" looking desperately into her blue eyes, she replied: "Fudge. It reminds me of making fudge."

And then, in the victim's own little line, how contradictory and awful everything is: dead wings carried like a paper kite! The dead and the Wings work back and forth on each other heart-breakingly, and the contradictory pathos of the carried wings is exceeded by that of the matter-of-fact conversion into what has never lived, into a shouldered toy, of the ended life. What had that flower to do with being white,/The wayside blue and innocent heal-al?expresses as well as anything ever has the arbitrariness of our guilt, the fact that Original Sin is only Original Accident, so far as the creatures of this world are concerned. And the wayside blue and innocent heal-all is, down to the least sound, the last helpless, yearning, trailing-away sigh of too-precarious innocence, of a potentiality cancelled out almost before it began to exist. The way- side makes it universal, commonplace, and somehow dearer to us; the blue brings in all the associations of the normal negated color (the poem is likely to remind the reader of Melville's chapter on the White- ness of the Whale, just as Frost may have been reminded); and the innocent is given a peculiar force and life by this context, just as the name heal-all comes to sad, ironic, literal life: it healed all, itself it could not heal. The kindred is very moving in its half-forgiving ambiguity; and the Biblical thither in the night and the conclusive steered

(with its careful echoes of "To a Water-Fowl" and a thousand sermons) are very moving and very serious in their condemnation, their awful mystery. The partly ambiguous, summing-up What but design of darkness to appall comes as something taken for granted, a relief almost, in its mere statement and generalization, after the almost unbearable actuality and particularity of what has come before. And then this whole appalling categorical machinery of reasoning-out, of conviction, of condemnation?it reminds one of the machine in The Penal Colony?is suddenly made merely hypothetical, a possible contradicted shadow, by one off-hand last-minute qualification: one that dismisses it, but that dismisses it only for a possibility still more terrifying, a whole new random, statistical, astronomical abyss underlying the diabolical machinery of the poem. "In large things, macroscopic phenomena of some real importance," the poem says, "the classical mechanics of design probably does operate?though in reverse, so far as the old Argument from Design is concerned; but these little things, things of no real importance, microscopic phenomena like a flower or moth or man or planet or solar system [we have so indissolubly identified ourselves with the moth and flower and spider that we cannot treat our own nature and importance, which theirs symbolize, as fundamentally different from theirs], are governed by the purely statistical laws of quantum mechanics, of random distribution, are they not?" I have given this statement of "what the poem says"?it says much more?an exaggeratedly physical, scientific form because both a metaphorically and literally astronomical view of things is so common, and so unremarked-on, in Frost. This poem, I think most people will admit, makes Pascal's "eternal silence of those infinite spaces" seem the hush between the movements of a cantata.

From *Poetry and the Age* (Knopf, 1953). Copyright © 1953 by Randall Jarrell

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Robert Frost [2]

Author:

Randall Jarrell [3]

Poem:

Design [4]

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/randall-jarrell-design>

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