cism Jarrell gave us vibrant readings of individual poets, Frost, Williams and others, but no theoretical statement of importance. In the last twenty years of his poetry, although the dream poems and a few others are interesting, he fell more and more into fragmentary utterance, false starts, scraps and notes, and into set pieces—"story poems" and "character poems," updated Robert Frost—that lacked the verve of his youthful work. Then, too, there was the endless translating and retranslating of the German poets, especially Rilke. What Jarrell needed, apparently, in order to write successfully, was an occasion which gave him not only the reality of an episode and the framework in which to place it but a certain distance from the complexity of the ordinary world; and the only sustained occasion of this kind which occurred in his life was World War II. Jarrell's war poems are his best in every sense. They are the most alive poetically, the most consistent thematically.

All this is what I have thought for some years, and in reading *The Complete Poems* I find it confirmed. The book would be a melancholy monument at best. Here is Randall Jarrell complete and completed, the same Randall Jarrell who so enlivened our literary and social consciences only a short time ago; at least the time must seem short to readers of my generation Now he is stuffed in a great fat tome, for the dusty corner of a low shelf, to be looked at once and then forgotten. Well, the poems deserve far better. Some of them are great.

The book contains all Jarrell's poems from his previous books, plus three additional sections: one for new work written between his last book and his death, a second for poems published in magazines but not previously collected, the third for earlier unpublished poems. It is, we are made to understand, complete But curiously it is the only book of its kind that I know in which we discover no hint of the person upon whose authority we are to accept either its completeness or its other attributions; it has no editor; which accounts for the unusual form of the headnote to this review. I have given the bibliographical data as they appear on the title page, and nothing further can be learned from the book or its dust jacket

We have, then, a considerable bulk of poetry, in which the war poems make a distinct, superior unit They are not many, perhaps thirty or forty altogether. but even if they were fewer they would be a remarkable achievement. How anyone could write while soldiering is difficult to understand; as one who went through the war unable to write a word, I can only marvel. But Jarrell had been writing for nearly ten years before America entered the war. His early poems are sometimes mannered or imitative, and often artificially opaque; but from the first, as nearly as one can tell, he wrote with ease, and suffered none of the verbal embarrassment customary among young poets. When the war came he already possessed a developed poetic vocabulary and a mastery of forms. Under the shock of war his mannerisms fell away. He began to write with stark, compressed lucidity.

Nowadays we commonly hear critics declare that World War II produced no memorable poetry. Even a critic as acute as George Steiner has said that the poetry of 1940-45 is without "the control of remembrance achieved by Robert Graves or Sassoon" in 1914-18 (*The Death of Tragedy*). To this I can only reply that if I know what "control of remembrance" means, in my experience the poems of Jarrell have it, and they have it pre-eminently I am certain that other readers of my age, those who were there, find in these poems of soldiers and civilians, the dead, wounded and displaced, the same truth that I do.

Warfare gave Jarrell the antagonist he needed; not fate, not history, not the state, not metaphysical doubt but all these rolled into one—The War—that brute momentous force sweeping a bewildered generation into pathos, horror and death. Today our young dissenters and resisters sometimes ask us why we didn't resist too, why we were willing to go along with the militarists Shamefacedly and unsuccessfully, we try to explain that willingness had nothing to do with the matter. But we needn't try, it is all there in Jarrell's poems. Cannot they be republished separately—and *cheaply*—with a proper introduction and editorial notes where needed? It would be a benefaction to all concerned. The irresistibility of the war, the suffering of its victims, Americans, Germans, Japanese—Jarrell wrote it all with equal understanding, equal humane sympathy. And he wrote it then, there, at that time and in those places, with power, spontaneity and perfect conviction Against what I have already said about his poetry, I must in basic honesty conclude with an amendment· in his powerful war poems Randall Jarrell did rise, as if in spite of himself and at the command of a classical force outside his own consciousness, to his moment of tragic vision.

Pieces of a Broken Mirror

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER. *By James Wright. Wesleyan University Press. 43 pp. $4. Paper $2.*

THE NAOMI POEMS. *By Bill Knott Follett Publishing Co. 64 pp. $3.95. Paper $2.45.*

PAUL ZWEIG

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A generous fantasy has enlivened American poetry during these past years. With the help of our poets, and of writers like Norman Mailer, we have come to recognize, shudderingly, that what we see writ large in the brutal events of the day is but a shadow of the personal script of our shyest secrets. A traffic jam blurred by exhaust clouds becomes a mental event, a political demonstration, a place to live out dream gestures; a war, a bog of secret self-discoveries.

I think of the river James Wright describes in his new book. It has two shores, "The one in hell, the other/ In Bridgeport Ohio." We straddle the river between hell and Ohio. Between our personal carbon monoxide, and that dull street in America where we are waiting for all the lights to change. But what if we are the river, flowing between the inner and the outer shore? Is that perhaps what Mr Wright is telling us? Like any likely river, we need both shores if we are to have a name, a shape, and a hope to bear up our end of civilization, which needs bearing up.

So many of the poems in James Wright's new book are attempts at prayer: enormously quiet, as if they hoped to pass *underneath* the jarred noises of the rooms, fields, streets and cities where they are spoken. They plead and thank, but for uncertain gifts. The grace they implore has a hard, almost bitter edge to it: "Men have a right to thank God for their loneliness." Wright's poems are the prayers of a man longing to be forgotten; for whom the emptiness of the Midwestern heaven has become strangely, unexpectedly consoling

> *The Sixth Day remained evening, deepening further down,*
> *Further and further down, into night,*
> *a wounded black angel*
> *Forgotten by Genesis*

The book's title, *Shall We Gather At The River*, brings to mind an old prayer meeting: people huddled near a prairie stream, made small by the endless flat spaces and by the uncomplicated hugeness of the sky Their prayers will have a long way to travel. Under such a sky

more faith will be needed than in some intricate church building. But the title also asks a question. Shall we gather at the river? What is it worth to pray when my voice can only measure the blank space it has failed to penetrate? "I am afraid of my own prayers," says Wright, perhaps because they draw close to him, for a moment, the windy emptiness that has consumed them. The poem, "A Prayer To The Lord Ramakrishna," ends:

No!
I kneel down, naked, and ask forgiveness,
A cold drizzle blows into the room,
And my shoulders flinch to the bone.
You have nothing to do with.
Sleep on.

The God will not wake up. Wright will continue to inscribe his prayers, wishing they were "grass," scraping them "on the wall of the drunk tank," with a "raw fingernail." Never will he know if his prayers are reaching far; if his despair has taken wing or if, instead, it has become a mirror in which he discovers the persona of his poems: a skeleton, a "full blooded Sioux Indian," a "red spider," a bum drowned in a suck hole: the unknown faces of himself.

Wright's imagination is most comfortable in this world of surreal explorations. The solid answers of heaven may be doubtful; but the other eye—the spiritual, third eye—flickers quietly open in this space of lyrical secrets.

The most successful poems in *Shall We Gather At The River*, make quiet, freewheeling movements between Wright's private space of "white birds," a space piled high "with the secrets of the wheat and the mysterious lives/ Of the unnamed poor," and those angular streets of Minneapolis or Chicago where, he tells us, there are men "who labor dawn after dawn/ To sell me my death." Faced with the emptiness of the God who "sleeps on," Wright turns timidly toward the abyss, toward those dread companions, his own fearful identities. And they do not fail him. His search is painful, and the poems set a mood of quiet despair. When the poet looks outward, he sees a place where "a cop's palm/ Is a roach dangling down the scorched fangs/ Of a light bulb." It is the haunted public place, shaped like a dream of paranoia. And yet it is not a dream, for the fears are real. America has enlarged the intricate madness, giving us "Highschool backfields (that) search under benches/ Near the Postoffice. Their faces are the rich/ Raw bacon without eyes."

But when Wright opens the spiritual eye, it too sees deadly images, as in "Three Sentences For A Dead Swan," part of which I quote:

Now one after another I let the black scales fall
From the beautiful black spine
Of this lonesome dragon that is born on the earth at last,
My black fire,
Ovoid of my darkness,
Machine-gunned and shattered hillsides of yellow trees
In the autumn of my blood where the apples
Purse their wild lips and smirk knowingly
That my love is dead

The machine guns, the shattered hillsides have detached themselves from the gross warnings of newspaper, TV and radio, becoming part of an inward language. They describe how the poet has rediscovered all the wars housed in his own small world. America and he understand each other, as they lay waste the land. And yet the poet's voice contains an art of survival, for it has reopened the connections between the inner and the outer violence.

Poems like "The Minneapolis Poem," "Before A Cashier's Window In A Department Store," "Willie Lyons," "In Memory Of Leopardi," "To The Muse" (these are only a few), cross between the two worlds with ghostly smoothness. They explore both shores of the river that flows between hell and Bridgeport, Ohio; between personal madness, and "the rich raw bacon without eyes."

Shall We Gather At The River is, in many ways, James Wright's strongest book. By dint of sheer labor—the kind of spiritual labor Kierkegaard meant when he wrote: "He who does the work becomes his own father"—he has hardened and shaped the despairing moments described by his poems. What might have been self-pity has undergone a change into clear, strong poetry. Also impressive is how Wright has managed, so often, to rise above the modish style of surrealist pastoral elegy which he himself, along with Robert Bly, had done so much to create. How far beyond it he has moved can be seen by comparing the few poems in this new book where the old style still appears with the many poems I have cited.

To write poetry today is to hold up pieces of a broken mirror. The believable forms have been ground to bits by a century of millstones. Now fragments of the self crawl over a living rubble of culture. To taste the wholeness of his experience, the poet must carry the mirror very close, dangerously close. What he sees in it will be scarcely visible: not a procession of worldly forms but the hub of a spiritual wheel whose center is *me*, and whose outer rim is everywhere. His poem will be "fantastic," "surreal," "metaphoric," "fragmented" or dubiously "unpoetic"; a jagged yet necessary fiction, like a chemical element still to be discovered, though a gap in the psychic chart tells us it must be there. The poem is a tentative theory of the missing element, a sketch of what it would be like if the void were filled. (Do we yet understand the role of "emptyness" in poetry? Baudelaire's ennui, the stoic ataraxy, i.e., that mysterious Eastern ability to *wait and see*, when the psychic wheels have exhausted their inertia and, for a moment, are still, before the horses of the blood have kicked them into motion again.)

Bill Knott's first book, *The Naomi Poems*, is one of the most elusive and unusual collections by a young poet. It is elusive because Mr. Knott holds the sharp edges of the mirror so close to the reader and to the world that we do not recognize at once what we are seeing. Elusive also because Knott's poetry is uneven, though in the way of honesty. We are given the whole experiment to undergo: the sharp lyricism, but also, intermingled, the clumsiness, the poetic afterbirth. In a way, *The Naomi Poems* is not a good book, if by that we mean

a solid achievement of rhetoric and sensibility. It does not always reshape the language it has unsettled. Its best moments are often fragmentary. a stanza, some unforgettable lines. But Knott can reach further in a line than many poets can in a book. The mill wheels have ground his language, his life perhaps, into the smallest pieces. But he has learned—at what cost?—to gather images from the broken world, and to recompose them with a kind of visionary wisdom:

Bloodspurts lessening . . . hoofbeats
of animals
stalked to their birth by the sun, fade.
It is a bright
edgeless morning, like a knife that to
be cleaned
is held under a vein.

. .

Isadora I write this poem
On my shroud, when my home village
walks out to harvest.
Bread weeps as you break it gently
into years

Not many poets have *seen* so simply, so convincingly! Many of Knott's best poems flicker briefly in the psychic emptiness, and then withdraw, shaped by their momentary insight. They are some of the finest short poems I know. Grappling with fragments, Knott has discovered a form sensitive to the smallest movements of the psyche. I quote a few of the short poems·

Poem

Alright if I have to be famous let it be
for this great
starfish-shield I made
And the sands of her face drift over
her body

Death

Going to sleep, I cross my hands on
my chest
They will place my hands like this
It will look as though I am flying into
myself

Hair Poem

Hair is heaven's water flowing eerily
over us
Often a woman drifts off down her
long hair and is lost

The Naomi Poems, subtitled "corpse and beans," are attributed on the cover of the book to St. Geraud, a pseudonym, but also a character whose existence *is* the poems he wrote. Paul Carroll, in his preface, tells us that St Geraud was originally a character in an anonymous piece of 18th-century French pornography. It is a troubling irony, for the new St. Geraud's poems are chaste, so chaste that they create a kind of fear in the reader, a feel of vulnerability, as if the voice of the poems were dying, as if these were his last words Each poem is like an epitaph What is more, we are told that St. Geraud is dead. Bill Knott's next book will have to be written by someone else. A dream of self-destruction moves through *The Naomi Poems*, as if the book itself had killed St. Geraud, perhaps in order that Bill Knott may survive. I like to think that "Widow's Winter," one of the finest poems in the volume, is Bill Knott's adieu to St. Geraud, and his quietly spoken welcome to the world:

Outside,
the snow is falling into its past. . .
I do want this night to end.
In the fireplace,
a section of ash caves in.

The fall day you were buried
birds went over,
south,
thick enough to carry someone
They took my gapes of breath
—their fuel?
We are together in some birds, who
fail?

I didn't even want to look at your
grave,
its heroic little mound
like the peck of dirt we hope to eat in
our life . .

It is a bitter, realistic welcome. Yet the harshness of the last stanza describes an act of recognition which will arm the poet Bill Knott is at his strongest in such poems which survive like bulwarks in a dream of suicide.

Sojourner of the Self

NOTEBOOK 1967-68. *By Robert Lowell Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 161 pp. $6.*

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Some years ago, Robert Lowell complained to Alfred Alvarez of "the monotony of the sublime" in American culture. "Even the minor poet," he indicated, "reaches for the sublime." A year later, as part of the same complaint, he told Stanley Kunitz: "You wouldn't write poetry unless you felt it had some chance of lasting. But if you get too concerned about posterity, you're in danger of becoming pompous and fraudulent. The poet needs to keep turning to something immediate and alive . . . something impertinent, engaging, un-Olympian." *For the Union Dead* was supposed to have been that turn, but, even more than it, *Notebook 1967-68* represents the corrective for Alexandrian postures.

It chooses for its form the journal and, like Gide's, Lowell's fourteen-line, blank verse entries "represent considerably more than a notebook filled with confessions, acts of literary repentance and raw material for future works." As far as his scrupulous revising permits, they represent an exercise in "spontaneous rapid composition" This composition, he explains in his "Afterthought," though intended as neither chronicle nor almanac, "rolls with the seasons": the separate poems and sections opportunist and inspired by impulse, the subjects accidental, and the whole a single poem "jagged in structure" The result is a remarkable book—one of Lowell's three best and one which should greatly influence the direction of poetry to come.

The subjects of the book are not new. They deal with the decline of the West in general biographic terms paralleling the seasons and the ages of man, the failure of the idea of progress, the loss of Christianity, the mechanization and dehumanization of the modern world, the tensions of family life. In this connection, he reprints "In the Cage" from *Lord Weary's Castle*, revisions of "Night Sweat," "Caligula," and "New York 1962: Fragment" from *For the Union Dead*, revisions of "1958" and "For Theodore Roethke: 1908-1963" from *Near the Ocean*, and includes lines and half-lines from many earlier poems. And though, as Lowell writes, he seems to have felt mostly "the joys of living," what he records, "thanks to the gift of the Muse" along with an assist from Freud's "reality principle," is the pain. As one of his voices announces in "Rats," "Only man is miserable." Out of this misery come love, war and art.

Here, one might argue, the influence of Randall Jarrell's Arnoldianism is less couched than in other volumes. For it is out of misery, too, that Jarrell in "Seele im Raum" draws his inclinations to the future and, like Jarrell, Lowell proffers as the future's key a secular imitation of Christ, "our only king without a sword." The imitation may be accomplished imaginatively through art since Christ is the Word or, as "Joinville and Louis IX" suggests, through Christly acts Like the ghosts that haunt Jarrell's poems, those who succeed remain as guides for those struggling.

For both poets, the struggle is part of an assumed evolutionary drift toward less imperfection wherein man, ignorant