

RANDALL JARRELL'S WAR



Driven on the one hand by his large doubts about the ethics of twentieth-century war, and on the other seduced by the glitter of the high heroic style, Randall Jarrell in his war poetry stands pivotally between Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who came before him, and the American poets of the Vietnam War, who came after. Sassoon and Owen memorialized the Great War soldier by counterpointing his agony against the callousness and indifference of the chateau generals who sacrificed him. As middle-level officers who had actually inhabited the No Man's Land which, by policy, was emptied of the presence of high-level command, Sassoon and Owen each, in his own way, stopped short of any project to abort the military altogether. Finally, the earlier poets merely shifted glory away from the generals and onto the shoulders of the bloodied brotherhood of the combat soldier. Later poets like Bruce Weigl and Yusuf Komunyakaa, veterans of the Vietnam War who dismantle glory, reported instead on a troubled soldier brotherhood bonding over rape, pillage, and arson, as well as the pity and terror of combat.

Unlike these soldier poets, Randall Jarrell served entirely in a noncombatant capacity, mostly as a stateside flight instructor. Mute on wartime sexuality, but articulate on military cruelty, Jarrell wrote both shame and glory into his view of his mates. Perhaps only an airman with an outlook both cerebral and idiosyncratic could maintain the contrary measures of distance and intimacy to the soldier clans that would produce Jarrell's tender celebrations of murderous innocence. In Great War poetry, the soldier is the dominant victim, hostage to the plans of others. But in WWII, Jarrell makes a crucial alteration, making room for the suggestion that the soldier is as much agent, as pawn of his society, although eventually, the responsibility for prosecuting and accepting war reverts to all of us, combatant and

noncombatant. It is Jarrell's accomplishment— before, during, and after WWII— to stretch the war poem to accommodate the larger civilian politics gestating it.

Beside Jarrell's explorations of the ethics of war, set at the distance where temperament and circumstance installed him, I'll briefly pose another set of responses. Most notably, Elizabeth Bishop's "Roosters" (35) and Marianne Moore's "in Distrust of Merits" (136) contrast the different poems that noncombatant women, neither encased in uniform nor in the direct track of war as victims, might produce by way of either heroic elegiac (Moore) or anti-militarist myth (Bishop).

His nearly fifty war poems did not come smoothly or evenly to Randall Jarrell. The least successful poems most directly approach battle, in dramatic settings concentrating not on character but on dilemma. As an instance of what I mean, consider the opening of "A Pilot from the Carrier" (153)¹, where all the war words wind up tight to boost the protagonist into an atmosphere commensurate with ennobling elegy. The poem begins Jarrell's *Little Friend, Little Friend*, a book written during the war, but published at war's end. In the opening lines of "A Pilot from the Carrier," a fine image is nearly brought down by the weight of detail wrapping it:

Strapped at the center of the blazing wheel,
His flesh ice-white against the shattered mask,
He tears at the easy clasp, his sobbing breaths
Misting the fresh blood lightening to flame,
Darkening to smoke; trapped there in pain
And fire and breathlessness, he struggles free
Into the sunlight of the upper sky—
And falls, a quiet bundle in the sky,
The miles to warmth, to air, to waking:
To the great flowering of his life, the hemisphere
That holds his dangling years.

It is an image Jarrell will use again: an airman-fetus born into the new life of death into which danger, injury, and extremes of suffering have catapulted him.

In this poem's fussy over-qualification, even the nervous straining to get flight details and all the mechanics of carrier

combat right cannot destroy the sweep of the initial conception. That the pilot should be centered on that wheel, that the sky at that altitude is not lower but upper, that the clasp should be easy, the cycling precise by which the blood lightens, fires, then smokes— all these touches do not manage to blunt the image, as the description finally clears and steadies:

a lonely eye
Reading a child's first scrawl, the carrier's wake—
The travelling milk-like circle of a miss
Besides the plant-like genius of the smoke
That shades, on the little deck, the little blaze
Toy-like as the glitter of the wing-guns,

Swung between immensities of sky and water, and high above the sharply miniaturized landscape of his launching point, the hurt pilot is reduced to a child's helplessness. At just that invocation of the child, the bite of description becomes direct, accurate and simple. Yet the finish never meets the initial stake raised by the beginning, and the terminal couplet settles for an elegant, aestheticized irony:

Shining as the fragile sun-marked plane
That grows to him, rubbed silver tipped with flame.

Later poems like "Pilots, Man your Planes" (154) and "The Dead Wingman" (157) share the same faltering and stalling out. Even in the '50s, other war poems similarly struggle for altitude, as Jarrell splits between two antithetical attitudes towards soldier death. In the heroic economy, death is a large but justifiable expense, affirming our belief in bravery and existential daring, although Jarrell consistently shows the bitterness of the sacrificed in preference to any resigned pride and acceptance. But in the non-heroic economy of the war-resistant, soldier death is horrifying waste, and a re-immersion in the blood mesh of violence that the armed state perpetuates.

Jarrell's need to glaze the war event, to sustain that "great flowering" of the heroic, is reflected in the composition of *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which opens with "A Pilot from the Carrier," but finally denies heroic economy by closing with "The Death of

the Ball Turret Gunner" (CP 144). In the last bald, anti-heroic, and utterly unforgettable fetal image, the gunner flowers only as a corpse born into meaningless death:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Blind and helpless, part child-warrior, part neglected pet, he is the whelp of a cowed nature colonized by totalitarian politics.

From "The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner" to the writing of "Losses" (145) and "Eighth Air Force" (143), Jarrell made a still bigger leap away from glorifying heroic sacrifice to projecting killers killed, and to writing about boy-pilots who were both victims and makers of victims. From the 1940s on, Jarrell labors for an ethical reconciliation with a war his reason regarded as justly anti-Nazi and anti-fascist, and that his principles showed him led to the murderous Allied bombing campaigns of industrialized war. Often it is the jar of stateliness against individual rage and suffering, the smack of the aureate against the vernacular diction, that clues us into Jarrell's ambivalence about this war.

The best poems reject the solemn, highminded style, costive with unuttered reference, and take on a diction capable of the ingenious and striking fusion of formal and colloquial that served Jarrell so expressively elsewhere. As an older homefront soldier whom combat had bypassed, Jarrell's anxiety over his own masculinity may have pushed him towards a vicarious celebration of the glory and suffering of the combatant. Ultimately, however, his own lived life as a soldier began to supply more and more data for work that kicked free of reflex patriotism, even as war *did* link him to larger communities, giving him an immense and fruitful subject away from "that short disease, myself."

In a letter to Robert Lowell, Jarrell writes:

I've never written a poem about myself in the army or war; unless you're vain or silly you realize that you, except insofar as you're in exactly the same

boat as the others, aren't the primary subject of any sensible writing about the war. (RJ *Letters* 151)

But keen insight into issues did not automatically guarantee his putting into his poems something fuller than newspaper anecdote or newsreel symbol.

From the very beginning, character in Jarrell's poetry tended to flatten. Delmore Schwartz complained that Jarrell saw his people from the distance of an opera glass (184). It is certainly true that the force of the image in which the dead tail gunner is flushed out of his ball turret by a hose does not lie in the memorable particulars of the gunner's person. He, and the other child-warriors subject to the greater and lesser injustices of the State are merely vessels to the poem's thought. But that thought, neither boring nor irrelevant, is very much an evolving part of Jarrell's politics of the war poem.

Even in 1943 at the outset of his service, Jarrell built from his own experience in barracks, but to imply a larger war, nested within a larger history. "A Lullaby" croons: "He learns to fight for freedom and the State ; / He sleeps with seven men within six feet. // He picks up matches and he cleans out plates; / is lied to like a child, cursed like a beast." And finishes: "his dull torment mottles like a fly's / The lying amber of the histories" (169).'

In all of these poems generated by Jarrell's enlistment, he shares a common sense of the army and the state fusing to produce an inherently totalitarian institution. Within it, individual identity and moral agency are torn away by mass crowding within narrow space, demeaning labor, institutional clothing, and control by a command hierarchy indistinguishable from prison, also an experience of fixed service. Within such a prison, a terrible longing grows to waken beyond the nightmare term, only then to feel disconsolately that the endless doldrum of the military sentence makes civilian life the dream into which one escapes from the army.

Unlike his friend Robert Lowell, Jarrell was not a pacifist, and chose to enlist. But as a poet whose memory clung to the helplessness of childhood fears and losses, Jarrell fits with pre-determined ease within the anti-militarist recognition that industrial, mechanized warfare returns the soldier to a child's fatal dependency. In the army's rigid hierarchy, the tiny cog moves

within the wheels of a giant engine, itself only remotely, if murderously, connected to field operations. The passive, suffering figures that rise from Jarrell's poems are first, orphans within the family, then orphans within the bowels of the army. Eventually, however, even such a child, so negligently reared, must awaken to the consequences of his own moral choices.

As a three-year part of the great predatory mechanism of the army, Jarrell was not silent about being pinioned within it. The English poet Keith Douglas described the view from inside a tank column as what "a body would look to a germ riding in its bloodstream" (17). Pritchard notes that Jarrell, when writing to his first wife, Mackie, uses a similar figure: "Being in the army is like being involved in the digestive process of an immense worm or slug or something—[. . .] it doesn't seem terribly stupid or at all malicious, just too big to have any sense or meaning—a mess rather" (99). In another letter to his wife written during the last frantic months of his army career, trying to expedite his re-entry into civilian life, Jarrell was less temperate:

the atmosphere was entirely one of lying, meaningless brutality and officiousness, stupidity not beyond belief but conception—the word for everything in the army is *petty*[.] (*Letters* 120)

Jarrell's impatience with military regimentation fits what the English historian Michael Howard marks as a difference between European and American perspectives on war. In the pre-WWI literature of Britain and Europe, cultural roots are sunk in "a bellicist past" little eroded (184-5). It is a tradition "at once terrible and comforting"; in it lies the European idea "that in the endurance and overcoming of suffering there is something that is ennobling, an idea that had reconciled the Christian and warrior ethic since the end of the Dark Ages" (185-6). Howard notes that "together with the yet older tradition of the classics that man should maintain dignity and serenity in spite of the wildest caprice of the gods—all this has disappeared" (186). For Americans, dignity and serenity don't necessarily emerge from submission to gods or god surrogates dressed in uniform.

Nor did Jarrell identify the gods with the state. Toward the end of the war, and during the postwar years, like everyone

learning more about the realities of Nazi atrocity, he moved towards a greater acceptance of the necessity of the war—everybody’s war—but struggled perpetually to find the dignity of a sacrifice called for by a grinding industrial mechanism devaluing and degrading the process of rendering it.

Along with Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore show the raw ends of war logic as it played out for American poets who flourished or came to maturity during WWII. The historical reality penetrating discussion of WWII poetry names an enlarged theater of war eliding the boundaries between civilian and soldier, as soldiers bombed and civilian populations worked, and survived or died, within the arc of their missions. Inside the circle of that mobilization, the customary distinctions between what men and women do also shifted. Women, still in defeat treated as sexual booty, nevertheless slid out from under protected, neutral status to active defense work.² While total civilian fatalities in WWI were fifteen percent of the whole of what Wellington called “the butcher’s bill,” in WWII civilian fatalities, including Holocaust victims, shot up to sixty-five percent (Ehrenreich 206).

Correspondingly, as more civilians were threatened, more soldiers were not: the majority of soldiers—like Jarrell, like many soldier poets—who were posted in increasingly extended rear echelons, or even stationed in occupied countries, rarely or never saw actual combat. In Charles Carrington’s memorable phrase: “The teeth of a modern army are more formidable than they were in 1916 but the tail is much longer” (15).

World Wars I and II saw further alterations in the class and status of the soldier. As Paul Fussell has observed, the writing and fighting classes were no longer separate, and mass conscription took over modern armies (*Thank God* 237). But changes in gender coding are harder to read. Traditionally, the war elegist from Wordsworth to Kipling to May Wedderburn Cannan gratefully applauds the doughty soldier’s efforts from the shelter of the first-person plural “We.” Any lesser acknowledgment of what the third-person singularly heroic “He” is spilling for “Us,” looks meanminded. But now the “He” is split into a himself commenting on the terms of his sacrifice, and a “He,” hidden as “Us,” receiving it. Only the “She” part of that deserving “We” appears to be staying in place.

All protest against war still crashes into this division between fighters and fought-for, protecting and protected, so long as those seen receiving fire are male, whatever their class. Surely the desperate adoration that the soldier grants mother, wife, sisters, or daughters must be tinged by the apparent female exemption from war, his parting tears to be mutinously balanced somewhere in the mind against any too-ready female encouragement for him to leave, to fight. But in a twentieth-century war, the boundaries re-configure, in the opening years of WWII especially, the various duties and feelings incumbent on each side melted and changed, as men and women alike developed convictions about war in ways that revealed the particularities of their own exposure, or lack of it.

While the '30s saw Moore publish staunchly anti-militarist pieces like the one ironically entitled "To Military Progress" (82), by 1943, with "in Distrust of Merits," Moore knelt in a guilt-tinged fealty to the heroic "fighting, fighting, fighting." In 1940, her younger friend Elizabeth Bishop, still footloose as a recent college graduate on an independent income, wrote "Roosters" in devastating opposition to imperial codes of masculinity. Randall Jarrell dropped his burgeoning career as a writer and cultural journalist, like Moore, for a life in the army that initially bumped along from one low-level position to another. At least in part, the distinctive features of his anti-militarism emerged in response to his subsequent military experience, alongside an ingrained skepticism mostly denying the heroic. Nonetheless, Jarrell finished his army service as a flight instructor and trainer in celestial navigation, by then persuaded of the modest, practical utility of his service. The war continued only indirectly to touch either Moore or Bishop.

Living at the edge of combat operations, Jarrell was never a Luddite opposed to the machine. In 1938, he startled Robert Lowell by discoursing glibly on the superiority of British planes to German equivalents, and showed Lowell how a bombing attack might plausibly work over Kenyon College (Lowell, Taylor, Warren 107). Late in life his passion turned toward sleek, expensive racing cars. But his first, early fascination with the airman is in perfect harmony with the visionary-ecstatic mode about flight familiar in American poetry since Hart Crane on the Wright brothers in *The Bridge*, or Muriel Rukeyser's celebration of

them in *The Outer Banks*. Jarrell's poetry quickens to say what it means to send earth-hugging flesh upward in the exhilaration of flight, but also moves towards understanding the Faustian daemonic inherent in those planes and engines.

In *Fields of Battle*, the military historian John Keegan divides America's romance with the airborne into one strain of boyish exaltation lifting Americans skyward, and yet another and darker in which the lift holds a payload of destruction, that lift constituting a bargain always tinged with our least-confessable urges for dominion:

The madness which seized Europe in 1940-42, the madness of nihilism, ultimately seized the U.S. Army Air Force also, and at the end of the war it bombed and bombed as if bombing were an industrial process, a form of work, the human activity at which America excels above all other nations. (332)

But beside his penchant for the elegiac, Jarrell shared the leftward politics of the journals in which he published. In 1941, Jarrell's view of "The war aim," or what he paraphrased from his newspaper reading as "Great Britain and the United States as the armed police force of the world—" was something "surely beyond any parodist's talents or dreams" (*Letters* 49).

Although the younger Jarrell readily flung out opinions about capitalist excess, life in the Air Force checked his tendencies to apostrophise or abstract. In the titles alone of certain poems—"The Sick Nought," "Mail Call" (170), "The Lines" (198), and "Absent with Official Leave" (171)—one can see the growth of a homely, deflationary realism about army life, at variance with the battlefield detail or pastoral filler of Great War poetry. There is a heartfelt candor about what it means to go to sleep in a crowd of other beds, someone breathing or sighing audibly all night long, or to stand around for hours to wait in line for shots or to fill out forms; or especially, to be the bored or restive member of a herd of men only partially assenting to their captivity.

Being in the Air Force and reading Ernie Pyle instead of Allen Tate only pushed Jarrell's poems away from the brassy generality. Where Great War poets like Ivor Gurney saw mother

England in leafy embrace (51), Jarrell glimpsed an overmastering State. At work beside the many other men shipping out for active duty in Europe, for him, the familiar pieties of soldiers as honorable ransom for the continuities of civilized life withered, and doubts grew about the necessity or value of their sacrifice.

Both Jarrell's distance from and compassion for these men and the "commodity" of their lives is visible in so many poems. Living within a sense of his own life as suspended for the duration of the war, Jarrell saw the soldier's life as an otherness, a dream of being in which glimpses of different and better realities were intermittently and aching present. As a poet, Jarrell turned inordinately to liminal being, and a remarkable number of his poems rest in the turn between sleep and waking, night and day, where palpable and impalpable fuse and drift. Not surprising, then, that his war poems on airmen, prisoners, and concentration camp inmates should follow the contours of these states, adding a sense of the fantastic against the commoner drive towards naturalistic representation.

In poems of the mid '40s like "The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner" and "Second Air Force" (177), war betrays all optimism, operating from within a crucial deception about the nature of its politics. As one answer to Clausewitz's famous dictum about war as an extension of politics by other means, "A War" says (208):

There set out, slowly, for a Different World,
At four, on winter mornings, different legs . . .
You can't break eggs without making an omelette
— That's what they tell the eggs.

But already in "Losses" (145), originally published in 1944, Jarrell is not simply responding to the pilot as victim; here, compassion and keen insight blend into the muddled distributions of guilt and innocence that characterize everyone drawn into wartime event:

We read our mail and counted up our missions—
In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school—
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among

The people we had killed and never seen.
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;
When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."
They said, "Here are the maps"; we burned the cities.

It was not dying— no, not ever dying;
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,
And the cities said to me: "Why are you dying?"
We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?"

Critically, there is a distinction between the victimage of the soldier and the civilian, even if the politics embedded in these poems tends to the diffuse. Jarrell never resolved— as if it could be resolved—the morality of our behaviour in the bombing firestorms of Dresden and Tokyo with his own sense of the larger justice of the Allied position in WWII, a justice which he acknowledged directly and simply in 1961 at a reading of "Eighth Air Force" at Pfeiffer College in North Carolina (*Randall Jarrell Reads*). Speaking with immense sympathy for the pilots, he says quietly: "These people were our saviours. I mean if people like this hadn't murdered other people and died why we would be under a Nazi government and there would be a concentration camp over at High Point and so on."³ By this time, when Jarrell appears to have switched wholly to thinking of WWII as the good war, what soldiers do still stands under the name of "murder."

Jarrell did not see his gift in poetry as necessarily discursive, and described his own mind as "poetic and semi-feminine" (*Letters* 19). At the edge of war, both within and without it, he found in himself the womanly loving-kindness which he denied first to government and then to nature itself, meting out a stingy, largely sentimentalized tenderness to the actual women in his poems. "Second Air Force" looks with affection and wry clarity at the planes, which have the same property of a clumsy humanity as the soldiers climbing into them:

Fortresses, all tail
Stand wrong and flimsy on their skinny legs,
And the crews climb to them clumsily as bears.
The head withdraws into its hatch (a boy's)
The engines rise to their blind laboring roar,
And the green made beasts run home to air.

But the watching mother in this vivid, dusky scene remains numb and speechless in the world in which for the boy-bears "the bombers answer everything."

Arrogating all feminine forgiveness to himself as disembodied speaker, Jarrell holds wives and mothers at a stern distance from emotional sustenance. In his war poetry, a brooding, maternal tenderness for boy pilots is matched by his tenderness for the cities that went up in flames under them. Yet when women appear in poems like "The Sick Nought" (174) or "Protocols" (193) they and other civilian survivors present a featureless passivity. "The Truth" (195) burns with vivid circumstance: here, a displaced, fatherless boy calls up Jarrell's acute empathy for a childhood of denial and betrayal. But in a return to traditional war lyric, it is usually Jarrell's young airman who flares in memory, as Christ and hero, damaged, damaging, and consecrated.

From another kind of tenderness, stemming from traits temperamentally, historically, and psychologically different, Wilfred Owen in an earlier war draws the parallel between Christ's and the soldier's sacrifice in ways that later soldiers were bound to modify. In a much-cited letter to Osbert Sitwell on July 4th, 1918 Owen unburdens himself, while he helps in the training of troops and prepares himself to return with them to the Front:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were not complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day,

and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. (*Letters* 337)

Dominic Hibberd in *Owen The Poet* documents in Owen's art his *fin de siècle* despair, and its fatalistic resignation; Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* comments as well on the theme of the love-death, or *Liebestod*, for which such a view of an officer's charges provided the psychological underpinning, in so many of these poems, the noble, eroticized death of the handsome soldier demonstrably has its roots in the underground Uranian, or homosexual, literature which Owen had discovered before the war.

This apotheosis of the doomed youth becomes the broader story of the holy company of the dead which living women enter only as mourners of a more and more masochistic and death-driven Christian hero. But when Christ appears as soldier in WWII, as he does in Randall Jarrell's "Eighth Air Force," the ambivalence and ambiguities of the parallels knot them with ironies of a lesser splendor. Here is the first stanza:

If in an odd angle of the hutment,
A puppy laps the water from a can
Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving
Whistles *O Paradise!* — shall I say that man
Is not as men have said: a wolf to man? (143)

In four stanzas, Jarrell sets a deliberately and cozily domestic scene. The puppy laps water from the flower can in one of the minor indiscretions of the dog world, and the sergeant drunk in his own minor indiscretion whistles "*O Paradise!*"⁴ The whole set-up undercuts the major darkness of the poet's query, meant to vibrate throughout, posing animal innocence in answer to animal brutality. At this still innocuous moment, these bomber pilots stationed in England are by implication not so very wolf-like. And yet, by the second stanza:

The other murderers troop in yawning;
Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one
Lies counting missions, lies there sweating

Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.
O *murderers!* . . . Still, this is how it's done:

Jarrell puts us exactly where he wants us: confronting “murderers” who troop in yawning not like soldiers but like Boy Scouts playing games back at the den, until the poem slews around finally to the sweating insomniac turning over and over on his cot who counts the missions left that he has to fly. (Jarrell’s note explains that this man has “one to go before being sent home.”)⁵ But it is as if piccolo notes were being replaced in the score by deeper brass, as guilt and distress occupy the remaining lines about the exiled playfellows of the poem. Here are the final stanzas:

This is a war. . . .But since these play, before they die,
Like puppies with their puppy; since, a man,
I did as these have done, but did not die—
I will content the people as I can
And give up these to them: Behold the man!

I have suffered in a dream, because of him,
Many things; for this last saviour, man,
I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?
Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:
I find no fault in this just man.

For Owen and Jarrell, the boy status of the soldiers is held in mitigation of their blood guilt; but for the distressed, lying, and complicit speaker, boyishness inevitably becomes a property of infantilization, a retarded sense of responsible agency.

Initially for Jarrell, this quality has been the clear outgrowth of the menacing control that the super-state imposes on a diminished, Orwellian citizenry. Jarrell’s later poem allows a critique of boyhood, a part of the larger critique of the impact of cultural codes of masculinity, wholly absent from Owen’s work.⁶ For Jarrell, to an even greater extent than it does for Owen, blood guilt appears as an issue, both for the primary actors, *and* for the witnesses and pledges of that action. “This is a war”; and still resembling Owen’s tender and tormented officer who sells out his charges to their time on Golgotha, the poet of WWII

steps inside Pilate, washing his hands of, and sending on his way, the murderous God-man to be himself crucified and killed. Quite differently from Owen's passage, Jarrell's final lines, with a terrible irony, echo Christ's presentation to the people, unsoftened by Jarrell's own explanation of what he intends. Jarrell's note (8) says: "The phrases from the Gospels compare such criminals and scapegoats as these with that earlier criminal and scapegoat about whom the Gospels were written." The complicated set of synoptic references render the bomber pilots as one with Christ.

And yet—there is no denying that men's hands are washed in blood, not water; or that Pilate's hand-washing in the Biblical text symbolizes a cowardly evasion of judgment; no denying the premise that whatever justification for murder that there is lands in human courts, not holy ones, and erupts there with undermining force. If Christ and man are one, and spilled blood and the water of absolution and abandonment are one, crime and sacrifice still join, reverberating in hopelessly dissonant chords of meaning. Wolf/dog/man, and soldier/Christ, the triplet and the pair, fuse in a tense balance of elements that the poem asks us to question and pleads with us to resolve.

Jarrell's poem echoes the query about man's wolfish behaviour that he found in Moore's "In Distrust of Merits," although his reading of her poem was both trenchant and cruel. Wilfred Owen, writing "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" ["it is sweet and noble to die for one's country"] and scolding Jessie Pope for her patriotic invocations, assaulted her with his irony. Dealing a similar blow, Jarrell seems to punish Moore for being a sheltered bystander daring to write about war at all. Moore charges herself in these lines:

I must
fight till I have conquered in myself what
causes war, but I would not believe it.
I inwardly did nothing.
O iscariotlike crime!

What seems to have set Jarrell off are these lines:

If these great patient
dyings— all these agonies
and woundbearings and blood shed—
can teach us how to live, these
dyings were not wasted (138).

For Moore, indirectly honoring a brother on active duty in the Navy, soldiers hold their ground in acts of “beauty.” Like Owen, Jarrell takes particular offense at ascriptions of nobility in war, of “beauty,” and for a too-ready civilian acceptance of wasteful dying. The question of waste, of course, has been particularly burdensome. Thundering at Moore that “passive misery” is the sum “of that great activity. War,” he says:

she distrusts her own merits, but trusts, accepts almost as if she were afraid to question, those of the heroic soldiers of her poem. She does not understand that they are heroes in the sense that the chimney sweeps, the factory children in the blue books, were heroes: routine loss in the routine business of the world. She sees them [. . .] *fighting fighting fighting*; she does not remember that most of the people in a war never fight for even a minute—though they bear for years and die forever. (Jarrell, *Kipling* 129)

Indignantly, with a confidence born of his army vet status, Jarrell sweeps away the distinction between front line and rear line, and shoos Moore away from war and back to her animal Baedekers, pointing to her morality as a weakness of her politics: “We are surprised to find Nature, in Miss Moore’s poll of it, so strongly in favor of Morality; but all the results are implicit in the sampling—like the Literary Digest, she sent postcards only to the nicer animals.” He ends crushingly:

Both her economic practice and moral theory repeat wistfully, *Laissez faire, laissez aller*. Poor private-spirited citizen, wandering timidly but obliviously among the monoliths of a deadlier age, will they never let you alone? To us, as we look skyward to

the bombers, this urban Frost, the frequenter of zoos, calls *Culture and morals and Nature still have truth, seek shelter there*; and this is true; but we forget it beside the cultured, moral, and natural corpse. . . . At Maidanek the mice had holes, but a million and a half people had none. (Jarrell, *Kipling* 128)

Moore's "private spirit" blinds her to the complex fusions of the universal warfare state, in which victory continues to maintain bombers overhead. Under Jarrell's baselisk stare, nature, partner to culture and morals, remains pure only to those who limit their intercourse with animal ferocity to the zoo.

Unlike Owen, Jarrell faced a war in which censorship could not wholly conceal the impact of bombing and tank campaigns on non-military targets. The blind, averted gaze of noncombatants of WWI, which had so outraged Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, was for many painfully and/or knowingly sighted and re-directed in WWII. Besides the journals for which Jarrell wrote like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, he had reading access to various official materials. To Lowell he writes in August 1945: "You should see a diagram of the latest type incendiary (it's literally impossible to put *it* out) they use, on the Japanese cities. What a nightmare! [. . .] I wrote this about two weeks ago, before the atom bomb and the peace. You can guess how I feel about both—especially about Nagasaki, which was bombed simply to test out the second type of bomb" (*Letters* 129)

Jarrell's reaction to Moore's "In Distrust of Merits" only heightens the spectacle of his unqualified admiration for Elizabeth Bishop. In writing "Roosters," Bishop evinced an anti-militarism like Jarrell's; yet her poem acknowledges more extensively than Jarrell's war poetry ever did, the social injury that a pure worship of heroic masculinity engenders. A ripe decade into their acquaintance, Randall Jarrell wrote to Elizabeth Bishop warmly but deferentially merging both his own and her poetic enterprise. He said:

I like your poetry better than anybody's since the Frost-Stevens-Eliot-Moore generation, so I looked with awed wonder at some phrases feeling to me a little like some of my phrases, in your poems; I felt

as if, so to speak, some of my wash-cloths were part of a Modigliani collage, or as if my cat had got into a Vuillard. (*Letters* 420)

There's no indication that Bishop reciprocated these feelings. In 1948 she remarked to Carley Dawson: "Jarrell at his best has a remarkable dark, creepy Grimm-Wagnerian quality" (*One Art* 173). In the same letter, she notes that his interest in the French poet Tristan Corbière brings out "more and more of his rather maudlin, morbid streak." To Robert Lowell and others she is often picky and grudging about Jarrell's poems, in the early years especially offering the rapid fire of disapproval with which one sibling might spray another too close to treading on his feet. On May 5th, 1959, she writes to Lowell: "Have you ever read Capt. Slocum's books? They are wonderful— but please don't breathe a word to Randall because I'm sure he'd like them, too, and immediately write a poem about Slocum, and I really think I'd like to try one myself—" (Bishop to Lowell correspondence, Vassar Library)

The same uneasy, joky competitiveness governed her estimate of Jarrell's war poetry, with which in 1956 she saw herself in unfortunate collision for the Pulitzer Prize, which she went on to win. In June she wrote to Lowell again, saying "I honestly feel from the bottom of my heart that it should have gone to Randall, for some of his war poems, and I don't know why it didn't" (*One Art* 319). The "honest" note, with its self-conscious protest creeps in to Jarrell himself on October 7th of the same year. Again lamenting the disposition of the Pulitzer she says, "I really cannot for the life of me understand why they didn't give it to you." She adds: "Some of the war poems are surely the best ever written on the subject, honestly— and as far as our wars go, the only ones. But re-reading them I began to think that perhaps that's just why; that's why they settled on someone innocuous like me. The war is out of style now and they want to forget it?" (*One Art* 324). Bishop attempts to be soothing here— "surely" she never considered her own poetry "innocuous"— and to patch over, at least with Jarrell personally, the ongoing discomfort of valuing highly his praise of her work— from the very first always given generously— which rubbed continually against her private judgment of his poems.

Other reservations might stem from her settled dislike of his representation of women and from her own suspicion of anything resembling a public rhetoric, or a capitulation to conventional sentimentality about war, a subject inviting from so many the “maudlin” and the “morbid.” It is worth noting that in her consolatory message to Jarrell, she merely notes that war is now unfashionable, refusing to sort out the complexity of what exactly his poems in their singularity did do with war.

Bishop ranked her own responses to war with Virginia Woolf’s antiwar themes in *Three Guineas*. With Woolf, Bishop shares what she characterizes as a distaste for war’s “terrible *generalizing* of every emotion” (*One Art* 113). For Bishop, one of war’s corruptions is the rhetorical reduction and oversimplification of experience, and an appropriate resistance to war seems to extend to even allowing it house room in the life of the imagination—so susceptible is art to its deformations.

Unlike many European, Latino, Asian, and African women, but very like most North Americans, Elizabeth Bishop’s direct experience of war was marginal. When she found herself in the middle of insurrection in Brazil in 1956, and then again more sharply in 1964, Robert Lowell first worried about her safety, and then in letters couldn’t resist egging her on to write the war that clearly his mouth was watering to follow:

I am still reeling as I try to imagine the stir of the
last few days and surely the last weeks or months.

Indeed, his mind already leaps ahead to possess her conflict:

As I flew home, there was a clear sky across the Atlantic when we reached it, and I pictured the same moon, thousands of miles south, shining on the same ocean, everything strangely nearer because the sandy shore led like a road to you, and in the mind one might walk it, and be lost as I then thought in conflicting knots of thin helmeted soldiers. (Lowell to Bishop correspondence, Vassar Library)

Bishop’s amused response deliberately undercuts these dreamings and imaginings in cool and domestic detail; “thin helmeted

soldiers” are replaced by an incongruously childlike image of Brazilian marines in military regalia:

Another division of marines held the sort of park where Goulart’s “palace” is, protecting him— but there are also big apartment houses in it where several of our friends live. They couldn’t go out at all for a couple of days. There’s a small playground in the middle, and at 2 AM the friend looked out and saw marines (they’re the ones that wear the pretty uniforms and Scotch bonnets with streamers) swinging in the swings, “pumping away,” he said to swing as high as possible. (Bishop to Lowell correspondence, Houghton Library, Harvard University)

She sidelines combat, and derides a show of “pretty uniforms.”

Similarly, her vision of “thin helmeted soldiers” in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” ends not with the men in creaking armor, but with those “maddening” women in tormenting retreat before them. Her reworking of Civil War extracts, “From Trollope’s Journal,” again dismisses imperial glory, focusing on a shabby Washington, “The White House in a sad, unhealthy spot,” and poxy cattle for the Army quartered deep in mud. She ends with a croaking surgeon, himself diseased:

“Sir, I do declare
everyone’s sick! The soldiers poison the air.
(*CP* 132)

Infection and disease, domestic realities for massed armies, and which up until the moment of penicillin accounted for as many or more deaths and casualties as direct battlefield hits (*Cowdrey* 3), come to the forefront in Bishop’s poem. But the final line suggests the contagion of militarism itself.

But “Roosters” provided the most open feminism of Elizabeth Bishop’s career. Although she swept away Marianne Moore and Moore’s mother’s improving suggestions with as much dispatch as an affectionate and genuine respect for these ladies would allow, she sounds quite firm about the slant of her poem. With unusual defensiveness she writes to Moore: “I

cherish my 'water-closet' and the other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism" (*One Art* 96). Much later, when she speaks to George Starbuck in 1977 about the poem's tendency towards "feminist tract"—a tendency that "history" has shown her—she intuitively distrusts such abstractions. Admirable or not, poem centering on war stir her ambivalence.

Tardily, in a letter to Moore she acknowledges receipt of a copy of "In Distrust of Merits," saying that it

overawed me into another two months' silence. Oh Marianne, all my congratulations. It seems to me so intricately impressive, with a kind of grinding caterpillar tread that is almost too upsetting. (*One Art* 113)

This intricate impressiveness indeed weighed heavily. The caterpillar tread of Moore's tank-like poem shadows her reality only in metaphor, as Bishop refuses to give an inch to any open acknowledgment of martial necessity. Her reaction is full of self-conflict. Bishop's pre-publication letter in January 1945 to her editor, Ferris Greenslet, taken up with other last minute details about her first book of poems, says anxiously: "The fact that none of these poems deal directly with the war, at a time when so much war poetry is being published, will, I am afraid, leave me open to reproach" (*One Art* 125).

In 1945, not to write about war appeared unpatriotic or worse, obtuse; yet for any woman not in nurse's or war-worker's shoes, and not being bombed or interned or on the run as a refugee in the dominant narrative of the time, the literary options are dubious: from a woman sensitive to her position *hors de combat* a wary response was requisite. An American woman could play a latter-day Jessie Pope, and cheer on the soldier laddies aggressively from her sheltered corner, cry for an absent lover, or employed, single and unencumbered, bank the swollen checks drawn from a booming war economy. In any case, as war spread more and more deeply into a working and thinking life, it could have brought Bishop a deeply unstabilizing sense of her own irrelevance at the site of others' pain, grief, and confusion. But while the proliferating war struck her as the responsibility of

masculine others, female anger and frustration at being unable to change the river in its bed and send it elsewhere brought her to stinging protest of the whole gendered system.

In "Roosters," written in 1940 in response to Axis bombing, war is inextinguishably the territory of the male; and in this poem, war for Bishop becomes the always compromised subject of the heroic, in which strutting cocks

brace their cruel feet and glare

with stupid eyes while from their beaks there rise
the uncontrolled, traditional cries. (*CP* 35)

In "Roosters," whose "sordidities" were so stoutly defended by Bishop, tradition, roused in "the gun-metal dark," becomes a fouled (certainly fowled) presence rising from "the water-closet door, / from the dropping-plastered henhouse floor," and the allegorized male ego thrusts "Deep from protruding chests / in green-gold medals dressed, / planned to command and terrorize the rest." Each "Very combative" rooster is "an active / displacement in perspective;" one rooster flies "with raging heroism defying / even the sensation of dying." Yet another rooster "lies in dung / with his dead wives." In this poem, war is a fundamentally dirty enterprise, and the hero takes the women dumb enough to constitute a compliant harem along with him. "Virile presence" is comic grotesque, and any civilians submissive to its appeal go down in terror and ignominy with it. Significantly, for feminists claiming a special female inoculation from the vice of war, when men can be brutal, women can be weakly complicit.

By concentrating on civilians, Bishop shares a subject with both early and late Jarrell. But while she grapples allegorically with the gender economy that produces rooster fighters and hen supporters, with both suffering, her poems do not attempt the comprehensive scope with which Jarrell is both so partially and strikingly successful. Jarrell's war poems gather breadth of reference from his removed status as a noncombatant, in weaker poems translating into the wooden heaven of authorial omniscience. Both Bishop and Jarrell sit out the war in American safety. But dressed in soldier's khaki, Jarrell finally brought himself to critique the Old Boy's ideology of adventure, while

Bishop, unable to change the deeper dress of gender, perfected her single strike against the drape of masculinity itself.

From Jarrell's first to almost his last book, his opinions about war and society nonetheless match Bishop's anti-militarist assessments in many particulars. Even in the war poems most addicted to the grandiose or Bishop's dreaded "*generalizing—*", Jarrell's work takes surprising turns. The greatest temptation, to surrender to the blind patriotism that inflates friend and degrades enemy, that moves to flat binarism and cartoon or posterboard motivation, never compromised his choices. By the time that the Phony War of 1939-40 was over, Jarrell had found his stride, and the chameleon sensitivity— however incomplete— with which he slipped inside the skin of refugee children, the wife of a dead pilot, the mother of a returning airman, and other assorted wartime identities of all genders, ages and geographic stages of wartime posting— had begun.

That Randall Jarrell, as man and soldier, had a soldier's ticket of admission as an authentic war witness, did not prevent various critics from dismissing his war poetry on the grounds of either sentimentality or bad style. While poets and critics like R.W. Flint and Karl Shapiro were strong in their praises, others like James Dickey and Donald Hall, were doubting or hostile. Even friendly testimony like William Pritchard's notes (120) that there are war poems in which "Each teeters on the edge of the lugubrious [. . .] poems which in their reiterated insistence never let up, but purchase their intensity at the cost, perhaps, of wearing out the reader—for all the vividness of individual passages."

R.W. Flint, a veteran himself, generously rejects expectations for a more familiar kind of war poetry; Jarrell's virtue

was obscured from some of us who had been closer to the action and wore a veteran's foolish pride not quite lightly enough, forgetting that the civilian Whitman and Melville had been the Civil War poets, resisting a repetition of the mud-soaked griefs of Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg in WWI, looking perhaps for [. . .] something abrupt and hard-bitten, steeped in romantic disillusion and military slang; brief, sweeping, dismissive ironies, like

the crushing out of a last cigarette before take-off.
(Lowell, Taylor, Warren 79)

Ultimately, Flint looks at Jarrell's work as an advance in the subject matter and thinking of war lyric. In his useful writing on these poems, Flint considers what Jarrell did to enlarge both subject and point of view in war writing:

He moves beyond the avuncular-idyllic manner of Whitman's *Drum Taps*, beyond the lovable Kipling fantasy of marching, campfires, and taverns, beyond even the comradeship of Owen, to a place that mixes pity and philosophy, exact knowledge of war and sympathy for its victims, on a grand scale; a fresh visionary tension. (83)

Randall Jarrell grasped the implications of late twentieth-century industrial war-making, but in the best of his work he also tucked his conclusions inside a language as homey and direct as a pump handle. *The Complete Poems* constructs an encircling map of twentieth-century consciousness: in wildly ambitious categories, its Table of Contents swings from "The Graves in the Forest" to "Bombers" to "Carriers" to "Prisoners" to "Camps and Fields" and to "Children and Civilians," and so on. In perhaps the least persuasive, many of the poems, especially the mid-war poems like "A Pilot from the Carrier," try to fly. In the manner of the traditional elegiac and transformational heroic, they want to soar, leaving material death behind or beyond in some ether of the poet's coruscating and embalming language.

But poems like "Losses" and "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," acknowledging a truth about the youth and expendability of airmen and soldiers by a ruthless state, also link his pilots and gunners to the postwar existence of the "aging machine part," Jarrell's name for the anonymous speaker of "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." The aureate diction of some of his poems creates a dignity for wartime sacrifice in keen opposition to what Bishop evaluates as war's impact, a dignity suspiciously close to what Jarrell condemned in Marianne Moore's poem. Jarrell's poems encompass *lager* and prison camp, and the whole horrifying, global reach of burning city, fortified desert,

and mined atoll; one man, he couldn't load up all that pain and terror onto his poetry, and manage unwavering insight and investment in reality, too. Is it that lyric particulars must break under epic necessity, or is it the larger need to acknowledge that even the ambition to represent war's range is to give play to suffering that should stay unspeakable and unaffirmable in depletion? At the least, the reverse side of Jarrell's coin provides a tough and bitter antidote to Moore's parochialism: the evil that created WWII recurs in the fret of postwar life.

No judgment of Jarrell's war poetry is complete that does not account for his difficult mix of irony and elegy, or of the magnitude of his vision, one having the further intelligence to settle war itself within the disquieting borders of the modern peace. When Jarrell scolds Moore he says: "she should have distrusted the peace of which our war is only the extrapolation. It is the peace of which we were guilty" (Jarrell, *Kipling* 129) War/peace, remembrance/forgetting, and most potently, innocence/guilt—these are only some of the binaries which Jarrell's brilliance exploded in a war poetry not quite like any other. ☞

Notes

1. All page number citations for Jarrell's poems follow the numbering of Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1969.
2. Susan M. Hartmann gives this information: "During World War II 25 percent of military personnel never left the United States and only about one in eight actually saw combat. In World War II only 34.1 percent of army personnel was engaged in purely military occupations. Thus, the increasingly 'civilian' nature of many military duties, more than 10 percent of which were administrative and clerical, made possible the employment of women in the defense establishment" (34).
3. Jarrell was no doubt acutely aware of the high risk life that WWII pilots led. John Keegan gives these numbers in *Fields of Battle*: "The Army Air Forces lost 52,173 aircrew in combat in the Second World War, four-fifths of them in Europe and the majority of these from the Eighth Air Force bomber crews who flew from Britain. [. . .] There was roughly, an even chance of surviving the course; put the other way about, there was an even chance of not" (331).

4. Jarrell notes at the Pfeiffer College reading that the aria is drawn from Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Vasco da Gama*, celebrating the vision of the New World. That the denizens of the New World paradise were returning to bomb the Old World seems an irony Jarrell is plucking at us to notice.

5. Hastings, Wright, and Glueck comment that combat fatigue for airmen was strictly correlated with numbers of missions flown, not to any previous record of emotional distress. In the European Theater of Operations, 25 missions were at first standard, which was upped to 30, with the worst tension occurring in anticipation of the final mission. Their restricted report, *Psychiatric Experiences of the Eighth Air Force*, had been issued to Air Force flight surgeons in August, 1944. Other reports possibly familiar to Jarrell include a piece by Brendan Gill, interviewing a pilot, in *The New Yorker* for August 12, 1944. Hallock, the pilot, is quoted saying: "It was getting close to the end and my luck was bound to be running out faster and faster. [. . .] The twenty-ninth mission was to Thionville, in France, and all I thought about on that run was 'One more, one more, one more.'"

6. James Dickey's work in mid-career and earlier provides an interesting comparison with Jarrell's treatment of boyhood. Dickey, who claimed to have flown one hundred combat missions in the Pacific, feels the urgency of dealing with war guilt in "The Firebombing" (69). This poem, written in the free verse forms of the 1960's but dealing with WWII, points towards the anguish of guilt expressed in Vietnam War veteran poetry. Other Dickey poems like "The Sheepchild," and "Cherrylog Road," in which the speaker adolescent is "wild to be wreckage forever," also deal with an untamed sexuality and exultant adolescent destructiveness that is never part of Jarrell's take on boy pilots.

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