

Dreams, Machines, and the State- The War Poetry of Randall Jarrell

Robert KUNTZ

Randall Jarrell was never just a "war poet." Had the Second World War never occurred, Jarrell's talent and immense body of work would still have made him a major American poet. Yet, it is within the dimensions of World War II that Jarrell and his poems are often remembered. This is somewhat ironic because it is seldom the act of war itself that Jarrell writes about. His war poems are really about the machinery of the State, the lunacy of machines and government and what they do to men.

Jarrell never opposed World War II on the moral principle of opposing all wars. He was never a violent protester like Daniel Berrigan or a conscientious objector like William Stafford. Rather, he was an active participant. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1942 as a combat pilot. But, because of his age, 28, he was "washed out" and became a celestial navigator and aviation instructor instead. This position of instructor gave Jarrell the unique viewpoint of a participant/observer. He could remain far from the battlefields, but he could, at the same time, observe the machinery of war all around him. In one of his poems, "Losses," he describes this feeling of detachment:

It was not dying: everybody died.
It was not dying: we had died before
In the routine crashes—and our fields
Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,
And the rates rose, all because of us.
We died on the wrong page of the almanac,
Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;
Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,
We blazed up on the lines we never saw.

We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.
(When we left high school nothing else had died
For us to figure we had died like.)
In our new planes, with our new crews, we bombed
The ranges by the desert or the shore,
Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores-
And turned into replacements and woke up
One morning, over England, operational.
It wasn't different: but if we died
It was not an accident but a mistake
(But an easy one for anyone to make).
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?"

In this poem the lines "Our bodies lay among/The people we had killed and never seen." is especially interesting. Jarrell is giving us an exact characterization of the remoteness he feels about the war. He says that no one cared about dying because they had all died long ago in the psychological machinery the State had created for war. They had died (mentally) in the long, needless lines, in the training camps, in "the routine crashes." The people of this poem, the airmen, have been killed not by the war, but by the war mentality. Jarrell says: "It was not dying: everybody died." But their deaths are not the deaths of loved ones: "We died like aunts or pets or foreigners." Not loved ones, but forgotten men, a part of the machinery to be replaced because it has broken; "And (we) turned into replacements and woke up/One morning over England, operational." It is this inhuman mechanization, this use of men as "replacements," interchangeable parts of a greater body, that concerns Jarrell.

His feeling of detachment is something all soldiers in war must feel. It involves being a part of something which is undefineable. It is an absurd, violent situation which the soldier has no control over. Consider this statement about Randall Jarrell's poetry by another American poet, James Dickey:

The poems give you a feel of a time, our time, as no other poetry of our century does, or could, even. They put on your face, nearer than any of your own looks, more irrevocably than your skin, the uncomprehending stare of the individual, caught in the State's machinery: in an impersonal, invisible, man-made, and uncontrollable Force.¹⁾

But even before the outbreak of World War II Jarrell's poetry was concerned with the same themes. In his first book of poetry, *Blood for a Stranger*, 1942, he gives us a poem which I would like to quote in full for those unfamiliar with Jarrell's work. The poem is titled "The Automation:":

In the emplacements of the wood,
By the pierced aqueduct, I lay and wept.
I heard the wind run through the drums
Or, held in the marsh the oil made, moan.

Since I was what was left, I spoke;
Since I was what I was, I signed;
Next day I tore the treaties up.
That night I saw the dead men walk

With baskets through the yellow wood.
Night's will grew keener, and a cry
Or dying whisper wakened me;
Along the wires, as I crept by,

The faint wind whispered fitfully.
Someone laughed, and something shone;
Discolored by the gibbous moon,
A troop of corpses huddled there,

1) Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren, ed., *Randall Jarrell 1914-1965* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 47.

A corpse held upright by the wire
Seemed meditating some command,
His helmeted head held so low it brushed
The pierced mask strapped against his breast.

In their midst a great shape rose,
The slave and remnant of the slain,
Its senseless limbs awaiting
The word the dead men puff to say-

Unconquered, inexhaustible,
The genius of a world's desire,
And cast at that world's judgment
Into the world-consuming fire-

Unquestioning and pitiless
Among the ruined and strengthless dead,
It lifts above the bloody field
Its powerful and lifeless head.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an automaton as: "Something which has the power of spontaneous motion or self-movement; a piece of mechanism having its motive power so concealed that it appears to move spontaneously; a living being whose actions are purely involuntary or mechanical." (Volume 1. p. 575) And, in this poem, Jarrell implies all three meanings. The "great shape" rising from the midst of past wars, in particular World War I, is the automatic device Jarrell fears most, the war without end. It is the mechanized war that has means ("spontaneous motion or self-movement"), but no end.

But, of course, Jarrell also helps define the other meaning of an automaton. The soldier in this poem is the generalized soldier, he represents all soldiers. He is never an individual, but always a part of a larger mechanism. His actions are like those of "a corpse held upright by the wire," in short, a puppet. He is a robot who speaks, signs treaties, and tears them up.

And, just as in the poem "Losses," the soldiers in this poem are also the victims of war. They suffer equally with the cities and people they kill. The dead men walking through the wood and the "troop of corpses" huddling together, the people killed by the bombers and the men who fly the bombers, are all fighting against the same thing, the State. This fact

gives credence to the point that the soldiers actions are “purely involuntary.” The soldiers would not voluntarily suffer and die. But the State provides the impetus, the motion needed to make these men kill each other. This motion, whether in the form of “the war to end all wars,” domino theories, or simple patriotism, is an expedient way of achieving the State’s desires.

In a brilliant essay which carefully dissects the generation of such poets as Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Ciardi, Delmore Schwartz, and Richard Wilbur, Karl Shapiro notes that “Jarrell suffered deeply through the Stalinist-Franco-Mussolini-Hitler years, hoping against hope for a betterment in the human condition.” “...the themes of war and Fascism—war as Fascism—were always in his mind.”²⁾ In another poem from *Blood for a Stranger*, “A Poem for Someone Killed in Spain,” this feeling of compassion emerges

Though oars are breaking the breathless gaze
Of the summer’s river, the head in the reeds
Has its own success; but time is brimming
From the locks in blood, and the finished heart

Gasps, “I am breaking with joy—” and joy
Suffuses with its blood the difficult fields
Where the dogs are baying. “I am not angry,”
Thinks the fox. Nor is death. And the leaves

Of the light summer are too new to joy
To think that their friend is dying, and their whispers
Are not patient but breathless, are passionate
With the songs of the world where no one dies.

This poem is a simple eulogy in twelve lines. It shows the deep suffering Jarrell felt for the victims of Fascism and war. In this poem, Jarrell explores a popular theme, the relationship between man and nature. But this poem does not concern an environmental problem. Rather, man and nature are in harmony because they are grieving together. The dead man and nature are both filled with sorrow because of what they see around them. The leaves of summer are young and light and, most

2) Ibid. p. 220

of all, free. Seeing their friend killed, the leaves whisper breathlessly on the trees. The whispers become a passionate wind blowing across the landscape and singing of a world where men and leaves are free from war.

One can easily envision this poem as being about a young man, probably a member of the forces of the Republic, who was killed by Franco's Army. One can also sense how hard Jarrell tried to capture this man's triumph over Fascism and death. The dying heart gasping "I am breaking with joy—" With joy! not with fear or a sense of defeat. Or, the success, the individual success, of the head in the reeds. The signs of death are everywhere: "the breathless gaze," "time brimming/ From the locks in blood," "the finished heart." But this man has overcome the State. And the trees, the leaves, all of nature, soak up his blood and carry his life forward.

Undoubtedly, Jarrell's most famous war poem, a poem that Karl Shapiro calls "the most famous and best war poem of anyone in the twentieth century, in five lines," is "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner:"

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.

It is Jarrell's intimate association with the machines of war, the guns, bombers, ball turrets, etc. that allows him to write a poem of such compact intensity. His description of what happens when men and machines collide is "Helleristic" in scope. (cf. Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961.) There's always one catch that says men die, but the war machine goes on. Men are merely washed out and replaced.

This poem begins with the gunner's fall from innocence, from his mother's sleep into "the State." It is a fall which is, at once, quick and total. But, because war by its very nature is undemocratic, the gunner does not become a part of the State, he simply falls into it. The Fascist

nature of war prevents him from becoming anything more than an element of the war. But, though an element, a useful replacement to be used by the State, he is still essentially a foreign element. Hunching in the belly of the State's machine, six miles from earth physically and light years away spiritually, the gunner suddenly awakes from his own dream of life to the nightmare of war. But, it is too late. Finally, he is washed out of the State by another machine, a steam hose, whose powerful spray eliminates all evidence of his existence.

The dream of this poem is a common theme of Randall Jarrell's poetry. But the dreams in his poems are sometimes nightmares. And, more often, it is impossible to distinguish the sleeping, dreaming hours from the hours of wakefulness:

When I woke up I think I thought that I was dreaming—
I was so little then that I thought dreams
Are in the room with you, like the cinema.
That's why you don't dream when it's still light—
They pull the shades down when it is, so you can sleep.
I thought that then, but that's not right.
Really it's in your head.

“The Truth”

He whispers, “dreaming”; and he thinks to wake.
The old mistake.

“A Field Hospital”

And the man awakes, and sees around his life
The night that is never silent, broken with the sighs
And patient breathing of the dark companions
With whom he labors, sleeps, and dies.

“Absent with Official Leave”

It is the dream from which no one wakes.

“1914”

These are but a few of the poetic references to dreaming, sleeping, and waking in Jarrell's poetry. Jarrell seems to have understood the similarities between wars and dreams. He knew that we live and experience both, but when they're over we're never quite sure what (or if they) really happened. He senses that the absurdities of a man's life in war

are like those of a dream. And, like a dream, war is something we have no control over. We fall into the State much as we fall asleep. We can only hope that the dream isn't a nightmare and that the war isn't endless.

Daniël Berrigan—Radical War Poet

Hubert R. PELLMAN

Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest noted for radical opposition to American participation in the Vietnam War, has produced noteworthy poetry of social protest and personal faith. His poetry is radical in the original meaning of going to the root of things; it touches reality in a powerful manner. It is chiefly religious, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ being central to his thought. These beliefs give human personality supreme worth and motivate social concern. His aim is reconciliation of persons with each other. His style is appropriately tense, concentrated, witty, paradoxical, and ironical.

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Randall Jarrell is often thought of as a war poet. But his war poems are never just about war itself. He is concerned with the role of the State both in and out of war. His early poems are concerned with many of the same themes as we find in his war poems. This essay concerns the development of three of these themes—dreams, machines, and the State.