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*The Dream from Which No One Wakes:
Jarrell, Dreams, and War*

RANDALL JARRELL, perhaps the most skilled of American poets writing on the Second World War, closes his haunting prose poem, "1914," with the following summation on the nature of modern war: "It is the dream from which no one wakes." While itself a poem of only marginal significance in Jarrell's canon, this piece serves to bring to our attention a crucial, yet often overlooked, aspect of his work—his obsessive examination of the complex relationship between dreams and war. Of the forty-four war poems included in Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, nearly half, (nineteen) make at least a passing mention of dreams or dreaming.¹ Speakers in Jarrell poems often depict war as a dream or nightmare, mention dreams as a soldier's means of escape from war, or discuss their dreaming as part of some greater revelatory experience. While not a central thematic concern in every poem, the frequency of its mention suggests that the language of dreams is a significant, even necessary, part of discourse on war. The radical distortion of "normal" peacetime realities that accompanies the state of war—the social sanctioning of violence and killing, the increased probability of a sudden, gruesome death, the isolation from civilian life—seems, according to Jarrell, to require a language that accommodates the facts of such distortion, a language flexible enough to reflect an environment where up is down, "wrong" is "right," and where normal rules simply do not apply. The world of dreams, in its constructedness, in its disconnect with the "real world," offers these poems both a linguistic and theoretical frame through which to represent the grotesque reality of modern war.

It is not the case, however, that Jarrell's poems are simply dreamy, surrealistic representations of conflict: rarely do speakers in these poems indulge in direct

discussions of the content of their dreams. And it is to our advantage as readers that they do not. The extraordinarily dense subconscious iconography present in even the most banal dream can be interpreted in countless ways; one need only consider the body of both clinical and theoretical literature inspired by Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* to see the complex interpretive possibilities in dream-work.² What offers a somewhat more productive avenue for investigation, and by productive I mean more limited and digestible, is an examination of how Jarrell's speakers discuss or refer to dreams and dreaming in their poetic monologues. We can often learn far more about the significance of Jarrell's ideas on dreams by investigating what his speakers do with their dreams or how they use them as a rhetorical device rather than what those dreams literally "say" or symbolize.

One of the most pronounced "distortions" of reality that occurs during wartime is the dilution of language's power and meaning. When writers are faced with what Paul Fussell calls in *The Great War and Modern Memory* the "nasty" facts of war, their language often becomes imprecise, euphemistic, and ambiguous, effectively diffusing the emotional and sensory impact of the events it depicts.³ In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argues that in war and other times of political crisis, direct, forceful language becomes "transformed" and used in defense of the "indefensible."⁴ According to Orwell, political forces make use of the ambiguity and flexibility natural to language and metaphorical thought to further their political goals, making them more palatable to ordinary people through sterile terminology and euphemism. Michael Herr, noting in *Dispatches* the almost impenetrable system of military language that often dominated discourse on the American war in Viet Nam, calls this dilution of meaning "the jargon stream."⁵ For Herr, the language that surrounded discussions on Viet Nam was awash in euphemism and dissimulation: the term for killing and intimidating possible Viet Cong or North Vietnamese sympathizers became "armed propaganda," illegal, under-the-radar CIA and Special Forces campaigns were termed "black operations," (a favorite subject of Tom Clancy novels), violent interdiction of supplies and personnel along the Ho Chi Minh Trail—usually via air-strikes—became "frontier sealing."⁶

Many of Jarrell's lyrics illustrate a sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon. A number of his strongest poems, including "Eighth Air Force," "Losses," and the ever-anthologized "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" examine both the flexibility and fluidity of war language, as well as the moral, linguistic, and political consequences of that flexibility. Dreams are often a key tool in this project. In some poems, speakers discuss the experience of a dream as the catalyst for some kind of moral or meta-linguistic epiphany; because of having the dream, the speaker knows more than he did about war or language. In other, less direct poems, dreams serve as rhetorical devices—thematic or formal—that attempt to evoke a similar

revelation in the reader: by experiencing or hearing about the poem's dream, *we as readers* are forced to recognize the problems of the jargon stream.

Jarrell's "Losses," from his volume of the same name, is perhaps his most forthright examination of the relationship between war, language, and dreams. In this poem, we find Jarrell tracing the military's consistent deflection of "direct" linguistic signification when dealing with the inevitability of death in war. In Saussurian terms, the poem interrogates the constant change in the signifiers involved in the discourse of war, while highlighting the fact that there is little or no change in the actual, essential signifieds of that discourse. The result of this sliding system of signification is not only a deflection of meaning, but one of responsibility for the extinguishing of human life, both "friend" and "enemy." In this poem, the speaker, a member of a bomber crew, seeks to understand his own actions, but is mired in a language that actively resists a stable, reified labeling of events. This deflection is the central point of the text, informing even its title: "Losses" is a euphemistic military term denoting the amount of men and machinery destroyed in any given engagement. This pattern of deflection is perhaps most visible in the opening lines of the poem:

It was not dying: everybody died.
It was not dying: we had died before
In the routine crashes (ll.1-3)

The speaker first defines the experience of "loss" by describing what it is not, simply "dying." "Dying" is something that other people or things, such as "aunts [perhaps a pun on "ants"] or pets or foreigners" (l.10) do. The inability of Jarrell's speaker to find an adequate analogical referent here is interesting, highlighting the pre-military innocence—and distance from "real" conflict and suffering—of the pilots and trainees. He shows them fresh out of high school, where "nothing else had died / For us to figure we had died like" (ll.11-12). The simple, deadpan assertion that "it was not dying" creates an ironic tension in the line, in one sense literally distancing the innocent, fresh-from-high school recruits from death, but in another, indoctrinating them into the language of military authorities. The difference between the "military" and "civilian" taxonomies in this passage clues us to Jarrell's acute awareness of the manipulation of language by his superiors: i.e., whatever the pilots in training did in Arizona was "not dying" in the eyes of the military. They were "sacrifices," "casualties," "costs," nameless victims of the "routine crashes," and part of the "rates" of quantifiable casualties that go up, "all because of [them]" (ll.3-4).

As the poem progresses, we see a more devious manipulation of language at work, an intentional corruption of language in service of a political agenda. It is worth reprinting at length—note the terms that I italicize here:

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.) (ll.13-20)

Here, the “new” fliers, innocent children fresh out of high school and flight training, transform into “replacements,” the military term for troops replenishing the depleted ranks of a combat force. This transformation is instantaneous, spanning only five lines and one grammatical thought. No essential change in the nature of the crews has taken place here; the “new” pilots are merely renamed “operational” “replacements” making them ready to experience combat. The fact that, to the speaker, “it wasn’t different” (l.18) shows the transparency of this discourse; the speaker (and possibly every other soldier) knows that nothing *is* different, despite the terminology the military uses to describe it.

The terms used to describe the fliers’ deaths are also an extension of this awareness: “but if we died / It was not an *accident* but a *mistake*” (l.19). Again, the speaker notes the discrepancy in the terminology used to describe the same event, death. In war, deaths are not “accidents” as they are in training, but “mistakes,” events that happen because of a glitch or flaw in planning or execution. The American mythology that underlies such thinking, the idea that one can do anything if given the freedom, has lethal real-world implications here: if one “does the right thing” or “follows orders,” he gets to live. The “plan,” in this sense, of modern warfare is sound; those who follow it will survive. This logic is redolent both of Willy Loman’s tragic longing to be “free and clear” by being a good worker bee in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Thomas Sutpen’s grand dynastic designs for Yoknapatawpha county in Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!*⁷

While both of those characters suffer ignominious ends, neither man’s personal mythology is forced to face anything like the overwhelming chaos of twentieth-century war. Plans, however well-thought out, in the face of industrialized warfare and modern military bureaucracy often disintegrate: the 1942 Canadian raid on Dieppe, the American airborne operations on D-Day, and the complex Market Garden in Holland in 1944 are perfect examples. D-Day was, remarkably,

successful; Market Garden and Dieppe were disasters. Even those soldiers who “followed orders” and did not make “mistakes” at times get killed. This is a simple fact of war.

The culminating image in “Losses” is that of a cataclysmic dream, where the speaker is obliterated both literally and figuratively. The last stanza of the poem reads:

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?” (ll.28-32)

The dream, in terms of the rhetorical structure of the poem, is where the deflection of meaning central to the earlier parts of the poem ceases. Dying, when discussed as part of the speaker’s dream, is called *dying*, not becoming a “casualty” or a “loss” or anything else. The speaker has literally “died” and is dreaming that he is “dead.” The near-obsessive repetition of the verb “die,” both by the speaker and by the cities serves as an ontological hammer, its hard /d/ phoneme pronouncing itself with a thudding finality. The personification of the cities reinforces this idea, providing a human voice for the purposely anonymous victims of war, i.e., those killed by the falling bombs. The cities’ questions to the flier, “Why are you dying?” and “Why did I die?” seem to serve a double function here, both to indict the speaker for his violent actions and to criticize him for his complicity in a system of signification that makes such atrocity possible. This meditation is an act of conscious self-examination that is oddly missing throughout the entire poem. For all the speaker’s awareness of the ambiguity and instability of military language, he never bothers to wonder *why* he has done all that he has done, undergone as many supposed “transformations” as he has. The cities’ response to the speaker’s silence is “We are satisfied, if you are.” This implies that the speaker has or had the power to object, or to accept the reasoning behind his actions. By extension, we can also reason that this question and its assignment of responsibility to the speaker serves as an indictment of a language that occludes “death” and “dying” from an actor’s consciousness. Even while noticing the shifting terms at work in military discourse, the speaker still acts, still “burned the cities [he] learned about in school.” Unfortunately, this epiphany comes too late to do him or the cities any good; he has “died,” taking with him numerous innocents caught in the machinery and language of war. The dream, in its directness and lack of artifice, serves as a momentary antidote to the jargon stream, illuminating and summarizing the crucial problem of the poem, the speaker’s inability to rationalize morally what he has done or to find an adequate language for it.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Jarrell's writing is its understanding of complex moral problems such as these, particularly regarding the perilous choices faced by the individual soldier. While acknowledging the tragedy of modern war for all involved, Jarrell's poems, unlike the Great War writing of Sassoon and Owen, often actively resist representing the soldier as war's ultimate victim, a meaningless cog in the vastness of modern warfare. These poems often suggest a more complicated moral picture; blame for the atrocity of modern war falls not only on political and military leaders—those who exploit the jargon stream—but also on the soldiers that pull the trigger, those who know and understand the moral consequences of their actions, yet choose to act nonetheless. While "Losses" attempts to illuminate some of the basic linguistic problems of military discourse (along with their corollary, implied moral issues), another of Jarrell's most well-known poems, "Eighth Air Force," addresses these problems by attempting to construct a moral lexicon applicable to war. This focus on morality is especially relevant given the subject matter of the poem: the American Eighth Air Force was responsible for much of the strategic bombing against Axis targets in the European theatre of operations, including the infamous incendiary attack on Dresden in 1945, an attack in which thousands of civilians were killed. The primary concern of the poem, as one might expect, is the speaker's attempt to find an acceptable means of discussing the moral status of the bomber crews of the Eighth Air Force. Does the bombing of innocent civilians, even during wartime, the poem asks, constitute an act of "murder?" Is a soldier who participates in the bombing of civilians morally equivalent to a common criminal? In attempting to resolve this conundrum, the speaker focuses obsessively on the clash between the placidity of the fliers' environment and the moral realities in which they live. The question that opens the poem frames the speaker's attempt to reconcile this contradiction:

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 Paradiso!*—shall I say that man
Is not as men have said: a wolf to man? (ll.1-5)

The speaker has some trouble reconciling the disparate images in this passage; his use of the conditional notes this. *If* all of these pleasant images: a puppy drinking, a can of flowers, a man whistling while shaving, are present, how can one label these people, and the sergeant in particular, as predators, as "wolves" to men? This statement, of course, has larger implications. One can read the speaker's use of "man" here as simply referential: "shall I say *that* man" (the sergeant shaving) is a predatory, evil creature? A crucial question, no doubt, but one limited in its usefulness. Reading the use of man

as attributive (representative of an attribute of an entire genus or group), however, offers a larger interpretation, implicating the entire race in predatory acts—"shall I say that man / Is not as men have said, a wolf to man?" This linguistic and moral double reading prefaces the rest of the poem: should one call these particular men predators? All men? Or should one say nothing at all? The act of articulation fails in the context of this conflicting data: "murderers" or "wolves" do not demonstrate the basic humanity that such images imply.

Even while capitulating to the term, the speaker's use of "murderers" lacks a certain depth:

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!* (ll.4-8)

The emphasis on "murderers" (the italics are Jarrell's) calls attention to the term as merely a term; the speaker is clearly aware of the complex implications of calling these men "murderers," particularly in light of the activities he observes here. The soldier counting missions is perhaps the most acute representation of this problem. How can a "murderer," a criminal, have real, genuine, fears about his own mortality, as this man surely does? He recites the resonant syllables "One, one, one" as a mantra, a protective charm, as if it were a prayer for undeserved salvation. The answer to the moral question then, for the speaker, is linguistically vague and unhelpful; he merely must accept the disparate images as "how it is." The men are at once innocent and murderers, because "this is how it's done" (l.10) in war.

In the penultimate stanza, seemingly accepting this paralyzing contradiction, the speaker carefully avoids labeling the men outwardly at all; instead, he refers to them far more vaguely, as simply "these." This abstraction, however, has its antecedent in the previous stanza, with the exclamation of "O *murderers.*" Thus, the use of "these" refers literally not to "these men" but to "these murderers." The repetition of "these" in this stanza is interesting, at once making and withholding moral judgment:

... 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— (ll.13-16)

In using "these" the speaker portrays the "murderers" as innocents, playing "like puppies with their puppy," continuing the problematic duality that has plagued

the first part of the poem. The second clause of the above passage complicates this further, identifying the speaker as an actor similar to the “murderers.” He, however, seems distanced from the label that he puts, however tenuously, onto the others—he is “a man.” The second use of “these” in reference to the fliers has as its antecedent “man.” With such slippery, easily confusing language, the speaker acknowledges the complex moral position of the fliers, simultaneously innocent and guilty, “men” and “murderers.” In light of the ambiguous relationship that he defines for the fliers, the speaker, the purveyor (however flawed and guilty himself) of morality, decides to “content the people as I can / and give up these to them: Behold the man!” (ll.14-15). With this passage the speaker “gives up” his responsibility for judgment, he giving up “these,” either men or murderers, to the abstract “people” (the American public, the community), forcing the world at large to “behold the [M]an” in all his human complexity. But the surrender in this passage goes a bit deeper: if one reads “these” as referring to the words that he speaks subsequently (“Behold the man!”), the speaker’s proclamation becomes an unwilling one. He reluctantly “gives up” his words—and the authority for moral judgment—as an act of appeasement to those outside the experience of war. In this sense, “Behold the man” becomes almost an empty slogan, a packaged restatement of an irresolvable problem.

In contrast to “Losses,” in which the content of the dream-vision was very clear, the dream reference that concludes “Eighth Air Force” is abstract and vague. Using a complex allusion to the dream of Pontius Pilate’s wife just prior to the crucifixion of Christ (Matthew 27:19), Jarrell’s speaker obliquely refers to having “suffered, in a dream, because of him / many things” (ll.16-17). Despite its lack of specificity, the dream serves a similar rhetorical function to that in “Losses”: to signal the presence of the speaker’s intuitive, subconscious sense of moral clarity, a sense that penetrates the ambiguous “jargon stream” of war. In this allusion, the speaker takes on the position of perhaps the most tragically doomed judge in history, Pontius Pilate (and, more specifically, of Pilate’s wife, who “suffers” in a dream because of Christ). As a Pilate-figure, the speaker feels compelled by those outside of the experience to “judge” the fliers, to attempt to articulate a truth about their moral status; they are either “murderers” or simply “men.” But this simple opposition fails to describe the bomber crews accurately: they are, in the speaker’s mind, both, and he does not have a language that is capable of reflecting that truth. The fliers are at once Barabbas the criminal and Christ the sacrifice, and the speaker is helpless to release them.

The fact that the speaker’s “suffering” as Pilate has its apex in a dream is especially significant. In this poem, the rational process of language and “labeling” results in failure: it comes to an unacceptable binary, shown in the vacillation between unacceptable terms (“murderer” and “man”) that dominates the first stanzas of the poem. The dream, the means through which the speaker recognizes the tragic

inadequacy of the system we use to discuss the morality of war, is *non-rational* and intuitive, an emotional rather than intellectual experience. As a revelatory experience, the dream is ambiguous, unstable, and troubling, mimicking in a sense the moral chaos that defines the state of war.

Acknowledging the inadequacy of one's linguistic options, however, does not free him from them. Despite the "suffering" the speaker has experienced "in a dream," the speaker is still limited in what he can say by the labels—the simple "murderer-man" binary—that the language provides him. Either choice in this binary, "murderer" or "man," forces the speaker to "lie" to some extent, to willingly state something that is literally untrue. He states in the final stanza:

... for this last saviour, man,
I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying? (ll.17-18)

In this statement, we can see that the suffering the speaker experiences is not only due to the actual ambiguity in the signifying system he chooses to employ, but in his willing violation of his own integrity. For the complicated, Christ-like fliers, he "lies," violating both the conventions of the linguistic system and of morality if he does not label the fliers "murderers." Of course, the speaker then complicates the entire process by asking, "But what is lying?" In doing this, he calls into question his own ability to use that system effectively, even on an epistemological level; he cannot even tell what is a violation of "truth" in the system of signification.

Thus, we are left at the end of the poem much in the same place as we began it, in a condition of agnosticism. The difference here, however, is that the speaker has chosen this condition of ignorance as a means of escaping the contradictions of his own language. The last two lines of the poem are incredibly ambiguous; we do not know whether their intent is ironic or not:

Men wash their hands in blood, as best they can;
I find no fault in this just man. (ll.19-20)

This passage, as Richard Fein has noted, is a continuation of the Pilate allusion from the first part of the stanza.⁸ Here, the speaker seeks, as Pilate did, to "wash" his hands of the responsibility for judging—or perhaps even talking about—the fliers. But this act of "cleansing" hands in blood, while an attempt to absolve himself of his actions, is ultimately a further act of pollution. Pilate's symbolic "hand-washing" did not relieve him of responsibility for executing Christ on behalf of the bloodthirsty Pharisees; it was a capitulation, a choice to surrender to the mob. The speaker's final statement seems a similar choice. Faced with endless tautology, he *chooses* the more preferable moral option, finding "no fault in this just man." The

moment of clarity that the dream's "suffering" provides" thus recedes back into the linguistic and moral instability that defines the state of war.

In Jarrell's most famous poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," dreams are not only a thematic concern, but a formal one as well. With its five surreal lines that depict the entire life-cycle of a nameless soldier, the work is itself dreamlike; one can hardly tell the "real" from the dream here:

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.

The radical compression of narrative and dense symbolism in these lines evokes the profound distortion of "normal" reality that accompanies the "State" of war; up is down, birth is death, heaven is hell. Part of Jarrell's intent, no doubt, is for the reader to equate the "reality" of warfare with a dreamlike state: falling from his "mother's sleep," the gunner wakes into his own violent death from "black flak and the nightmare fighters," his entire life (as many critics have noted) an abortion to be washed away with a steam hose.

In "Losses" and "Eighth Air Force," Jarrell discussed the experience of being lost in the "jargon stream" of war; his speakers in both poems were victims, in a sense, of the indeterminacy of the language of warfare. In "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," however, the focus is not on the slippery definitions of a few key terms, but on the daunting density of symbolic language itself. To even begin to make sense of the poem, a reader must negotiate a number of "loaded" and highly complex metaphorical domains, each with its own vast network of associated meanings. In the first lines of the poem, for example, one must contend with the ideas of "motherhood," of "sleep," of "the State," and of "animals." Paired with the literal knowledge a reader might bring to his or her reading, such as the shape of a B-24 bomber and a ball-turret gunner's position in it (inverted, as a fetus), the metaphors only become more complicated. Because each of the domains that Jarrell chooses to deploy here has its own vast network of connotations and associated meanings, the poem is almost endlessly interpretable—it can be about what political states do to people in war, what war "reduces" humans to (to animals, to mere effluvium), how institutions (parenthood and the "State") fail to protect people from war, or about countless other aspects of the experience of war. Any successful poem forces readers to engage with multiple interpretive possibilities and multiple meanings; nowhere is this more true than here.

But we must also remember that this poem is not simply a dreamy rendering of the violence of war: the poem is, in the final analysis, one of protest. It protests the failure of parents to protect, it protests the “State’s” treatment of the soldier, and it protests the fact that young men were often “washed out” of their lives with a hose, reduced to nothing. Casting aside for the moment the complex “just war” ideology that qualifies the anti-war sentiment in “Losses” and “Eighth Air Force,” this poem sees nothing noble or morally complicated in the death of its speaker. The gunner dies for nothing, less than a footnote in the gruesome history of combat.

The use of dreams in this poem is perhaps the most complex in Jarrell’s canon. The poem seeks, through a thematic and structural appropriation of dream-language, to emulate the experience of being caught in the swirling realities (and un-realities) of war. The poem’s narrative structure—or at least the first four lines—is dreamlike in itself, featuring a radical compression of time and space, highly abstract symbols and characterization, and ambiguous phrasing. Pinning a stable meaning on these lines is purposefully difficult; Jarrell wants us to experience the dream-like jargon stream of living in wartime, distorting language and meaning nearly (just nearly) to the point of its own disintegration.

As a parallel to this rather straightforward formalization of the jargon stream, however, Jarrell positions a vocabulary of dreams and dreaming that evolves as the poem progresses, eventually stripping itself of all ambiguity and “play,” all remnants of the fluid, deadly puzzling language of war. The speaker’s life, which is, as Hobbes put it, extremely “nasty, brutish, and short,”⁹ is dominated by several prominent images of sleep and dreaming: the speaker falls from his “mother’s sleep” into the “State”; he is “loosed” from the Earth’s “dream of life” when in the ball turret, and he wakes, tragically, to “black flak and the nightmare fighters.” The progression of ideas here is unmistakable, moving from unconscious, passive “sleep” into a “dream” of life, and then into “black flak and the nightmare fighters.” The gunner’s experience in the ball turret is *outside* the “dream of life” on the earth below, outside the fantasy and phantasm of peacetime existence. War expels him from such a peaceful, soothing dream, and wakes him to the “nightmare” of combat. The contrast between “dream” and “nightmare” is significant here: whereas “dream” has a number of meanings: aspiration, fantasy, vision, unconscious thoughts while asleep, “nightmare” has fewer; all the definitions in the Second Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary suggested “horrible vision” or “worst possible scenario.” The speaker’s dream-like existence, whirl in the complex symbolism of the first four lines, nonetheless becomes more and more narrowly defined as the poem moves toward its conclusion, its vocabulary constrained by its own horror.

As the “dream-world” of the poem ends, so does the poem, its language denuded of any essence of ambiguity. The image is stark and visceral, as the gunner, reduced to mere blood and guts, laments that “when [he] died they washed [him] out of

the turret with a hose.” Evoking the opposite of the fluid, dreamlike mood of the previous four lines (spanning the gunner’s entire life), the language is as concrete and literal as it can be, relaying without emotion or confusion the very real consequences of modern war. The jargon stream here ceases to flow and distort and diffuse the ugliness of combat. As the culminating, tragic image in the poem, the gunner’s grisly death is something we cannot ignore, nor can it be softened by rhetorical flourishes or military terminology.

Through immersing its reader in a cataract of dreamlike language—and violently ripping him out of it—“The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” at once enacts and exposes the dangerous fluidity of wartime discourse. But the dream also serves as a rhetorical device, working on the reader: we experience the gunner talking about his dream, the horrible nightmare that was his life, and must, if the poem is to be successful, respond emotionally or intellectually to the moral and political challenge it poses. Whereas in “Losses” and “Eighth Air Force,” the speaker uses a dream as part of his own revelatory process concerning war (or his attempt at some form of revelation), in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” the revelation must be the reader’s. What cannot happen in the mind of the gunner—it is too late, he has died—can happen in us. Through his “dream” of war, we come to understand the meaning of his life, and presumably his death. The dream here thus serves as a rhetorical contrast to the jargon stream, a means of both replicating and protesting the experience of war.

Jarrell positions dream language as a thematic and formal counterweight to the overwhelming ambiguity that frames discourse on war, a device that triggers a disruption—or simply a recognition—of the real implications of the jargon stream. This relationship in many ways seems counter-intuitive. According to conventional post-Freudian logic, dreams are the absolute *essence* of ambiguity, a highly intuitive, purely symbolic language enacted by the subconscious. Lacking a standard grammar or calculus of signification, their “meaning” is entirely subjective, residing totally within the individual who experiences them. That Jarrell’s speakers interpret their dreams as “enlightening” in some way seems to suggest that a meaningful negotiation of the language of war—via interpretive schemas that are not mired in the tautology and ambiguity of jargon and Heller-esque logic—is at least partially dependent on processes that are just as *intuitive* and *subjective* as the dream process. Imaginative and mobile, dream-logic’s freedom from the “real-world” political and moral obligations of consciousness makes an evacuation of the intention behind war-language possible; in the dream-world of these poems, language can exist in its most neutral state, freed from military or political influence. The dream, as the representation of an interior, subjective language largely disconnected from conscious intention, cannot be turned into an agent of the State’s will.

This celebration of the power of dreams *within poems* suggests an implicit connection between the experiences of dreaming and of reading a poem: both are highly symbolic, textual, and fundamentally intuitive and imaginative activities (as opposed to purely “rational” ones, like creating a system of sterile, flattening jargon), demanding of those who experience them (when aesthetically successful) a significant personal and emotional investiture. The experience of dreaming in these poems provides Jarrell’s speakers with epiphany; his poems intend to do the same for the reader. We are supposed to share the speaker’s recognition of his own moral precariousness, of the limits of language to represent crisis, and of the hellish futility of death (and life) in wartime. Shocking, crude, beautiful, and at their core iconoclastic, these poems mean to display the language of war for what it is: a moral, epistemological, and physical deathtrap. The ability of Jarrell’s work to highlight the ambiguity of war’s language as well as a possible way to confront it seems more important than ever now, as we as a world again confront the jargon stream of the new millennium: “Weapons of Mass Destruction,” “terrorism,” “Homeland Security,” “precision guided munitions,” “Massive Ordinance Aerial Burst,” “liberation,” “collateral damage.” In the face of this deluge of doublespeak and euphemism, we must, Jarrell tells us, remain vigilant, tirelessly interrogating the terms in which we discuss our most destructive institution.

Notes

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2. Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: HarperCollins, 1972.
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