

Merton Lee: On "Front"

With its ambiguous title, Randall Jarrell's "A Front" seems to play the coy modernist game of encouraging misreadings and interpretive errors. Though this is a poem of witness, there is no particular person who witnesses. Instead, the narrator is some impossible persona who nonetheless is the only point of entry for the reader's own subjectivity. Thus, we can't be sure exactly what we're seeing in the poem, despite the specificity of the things described.

The poem reads as a kind of mystery with a cumulative logic. The first line "Fog over the base: the beams ranging" evokes an obscured home and the unfocus of blindness. The second line enforces the idea of home. Then, from this far perspective, line three closes in on the personal: "The crews cold in fur?" Jarrell's association of "fur" with his pilots is surreal; and though in elliptical poems like "A Front", the presence of one strange image doesn't necessarily stand out, here "fur" does convey a sense of both uncanniness and the surreal surpassing of reality. "Fur's" echo in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" with its womb imagery to me carries an aura of the sexual, which is very faint and somewhat perverse. "Fur" implies the tactile but also the animal which can be variously innocent or helpless. And in the poem's general contrast of scope from wide angle to close up, the line feels almost intimate. So, the full line, "The crews cold in fur, the bombers banging?", moves to the human, to touch, and to the hard contact of like bodies.

But this eroticism can only be hinted at; so immediately we shift again to the fog-shrouded exterior and half-obscured images of an alienated machinery. These images, "lost trucks down the levels of ice" (4), "tires and turrets" abstracted from their machines (7), an isolated wail (8), achieve a high loneliness, so that although the paraphrasable content might be hard to frame, the emotional content definitely builds up from these images.

Ultimately, the humanized perspective barely touched in line three comes back in the poem, when the explicitly human "voice" returns in line thirteen. Here the voice "keeps on calling" ? implicating some other in loneliness with its plea. The last lines' desperation comes as the dénouement to a whole poem's isolation casting it as futile and ominous. The effectiveness of this lightly-touched moment of humanity is made possible by the impossible narrator's slightly increased proximity to this one subjectivity.

However, the overall obliqueness of this poem is matter-of-factly clarified in Jarrell's short explanatory note that explains the title. Read with the note, the poem's ambiguity is grounded in a concrete narrative so that what would otherwise read as almost surreally opaque pure image decodes to some correlative element of the story. Which is to say, the note effectively guides us into an airtight "correct" reading of the poem.

Jarrell's *Complete Poems* does not feature his note for "A Front," which begs the question of what use the note is. The note and the poem are separate texts, written in different voices and accessible only by the visual acrobatics of swinging from the top of the page to the bottom and back again. This very motion implies that the real effect of the note is not to condense one text into another, but the fact of the intertext. Alternatively, the relation between the poem and note can be conceptualized by the phallic metaphor. Is the penis merely a nozzle for

urine, or does it play some more dignified role in insemination? According to Slavoj Žižek we arrive at the more dignified phallus only by choosing the mistaken 'vulgar empiricist' concept of the penis as piss-tube. Then, the phallus's other role can enter on the higher plane of speculative meaning, based on the noncoincidence of the phallus with itself. In other words, if we ascribe to the penis the role of insemination on the elementary level of empiricism, then a baby is something that is pissed out by men and menstruated out by women.

So read with the note, 'A Front' boils down to this gap in identity: the insight that the tautological relationship really is empty, which paradoxically imbues the poem with a meaning apart from the merely denotative. So, to reconsider the homoeroticism of the 'bombers banging,' isn't this image's power the eroticization of the minimal difference?

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