

Alan Ross (British)

(1922-2001)

Radar (1954)

Distance is swept by the smooth
Rotations of power, whose staring
Feelers multiply our eyes for us,
Mark objects' range and bearing.

Linked to them, guns rehearse
Calculated obedience; echoes of light
Trigger the shadowing needle, determine
The flaring arrest of night.

Control is remote: feelings, like hands,
Gloved by space. Responsibility is shared, too:
And destroying the enemy by radar,
We cannot see what we do.

ANALYSIS

The setting is probably a battleship. The revolving radar antennae with their "smooth / Rotations of power" pick up "echoes of light" and transmit them to the aiming apparatus of the big guns. The "shadowing needle" responds to the signals, and there is a "flaring arrest of night" as the shells explode.

Twelve lines compress the dilemma of modern life: how machines, both scientific and political, have increased our power at the cost of depersonalizing our relationships. Though the "feelers" of the radar antennae increase the range of our perception, they "glove" our "feelings." Though they "multiply our eyes for us," they paradoxically blind us too, for "We cannot see what we do." Human suffering cannot be measured statistically: it must be seen to be evaluated. Concomitantly, the sharing of responsibility in a bureaucratic state or a naval command means, in effect, the destruction of responsibility, since no one is personally responsible. To share responsibility is to shift it. Thus, through our scientific invention and industrial organization, we have acquired power and efficiency, but they make us less personal, less human.

We are out of touch.

It is the business of the poet to keep abreast of modern life, to keep us informed of the significance of new developments, to evaluate them in their human rather than in their merely scientific significance. Alan Ross is doing that. The radar is the depersonalizing extension of our human perception. The poet is the personalizing extension. He is the "feeler," the emotional radar that we need and must heed if we are not to destroy ourselves as well as the enemy. The poet keeps us personal.

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with James M. Reid