

Joe Student

English 30-1

Mr. Alan Friesen

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“This Ringing Hum, This Ringing Hum”:

Structure Informing Content in Turner’s “Phantom Noise”

Brian Turner's poem "Phantom Noise" is, at first glance, chaotic: there are words out of place, ideas that don't initially make sense, and lines that start and end without an immediately understandable sense of order. However, despite this initial impression, it is clear upon closer examination that the poem is not as meaningless as it first appears. Indeed, the poem was very specifically constructed in an attempt to evoke the chaos and turmoil of combat.

Why do we know that this poem is about combat? The poem is filled with military language: we have a "bullet-borne language ringing" (2) and we hear "this wing-beat / of rotors and tanks" (5-6) as well as "this muzzle-flash singing" (16), among other military images. When we pick out these specific words and phrases from the general confusion of the poem, we can see that *something* is happening that is related to the military or to combat. We may not initially understand what is happening, but those specific words indicate a starting point for our interpretation.

Once we have a general sense that we're looking at a poem about combat, we can start to identify its structural features so as to understand the poem's meaning. A major structural feature within this poem is the deliberate repetition of the sounds within the words "ringing", "humming" (7), "missing" (12), and "singing" (16). Said out loud, we can

hear the onomatopoeic hum: the words make our mouths hum and the sound resonates throughout our skulls. This is very reminiscent of media portrayals of explosions of artillery and heavy gun fire. In Saving Private Ryan, for example, the character played by Tom Hanks goes partially deaf—hearing the ringing of a "phantom noise", as it were—as a result of a heavy weapons strike near him. Spielberg interlaced a high-pitched noise into the soundtrack to emulate the character's deafness. It is this sound that is evoked in these words within Turner's poem.

Why does it matter that this onomatopoeic sound is present within this poem? Since we know that this poem is about combat, we can use that knowledge to identify other stylistic features that are present, such as this sense of humming, this ringing in the speaker's ears. Put together, these two features give us a stronger sense of what is happening within the context of the poem: the speaker is in combat, noting various features of combat that he sees around him, and does so while his ears are ringing from the sounds of conflict.

But what is the conflict? What does the conflict within the poem look like? The poem's chaotic structure hinders any easy interpretation of the poem. One such structural feature is the confusion caused by the seemingly-haphazard enjambment that is present on almost every line. Consider, for example, the first three lines in the poem: "There is this ringing hum this / bullet-borne language ringing / shell-fall and static" (1-3). In the first line, we have the complete thought "There is this ringing hum", followed by the word "this". The second line is "bullet-borne language ringing". It's clear from the context of these two lines that the "this" at the end of the first line is connected to the "bullet-borne language" of the second, but what about the verb "ringing"? Is the full thought "this bullet-borne

language ringing", is it "this bullet-borne language", or is it "this bullet-borne language ringing shell-fall and static", putting these two clauses together? All three interpretations are possible; the enjambment in these three lines defy easy interpretation.

Regardless of which is correct, these first three lines show the confusion present within the poem: the poem is not neatly divided into tidy phrases as we would expect from, for instance, a Shakespearean sonnet. So, then, what's actually happening in this poem? There's no discernible chronological order here; it's not as if we have a Marine running from tank to tank as he withstands multiple artillery barrages (as we might expect from a straightforward poem about combat). Instead, what we have are separate and distinct images: a ringing hum; the chatter of gunfire accompanying falling artillery shells; radios receiving static; helicopters flying above while broken bodies lay in destroyed steel tanks; a reference to the Ancient Near East empires of Babylon and Sumer, perhaps indicating that the setting is in the Middle East; a reference to dead children with missing limbs; ringing eardrums; references to useless brake pads and muzzle flashes; the lovely and macabre metaphor of bullets threading into muscle and bone; and finally, the repetition of "this ringing hum" as the poem closes with the word "ringing." This confused barrage of images does not allow an easy explanation of what is happening. Rather, the chaotic structure of the poem mirrors the poem's chaotic setting.

To understand Turner's "Phantom Noise", it is important to recognise that the structural features within the poem are not accidental, but inform the poem's meaning. Without the identification of the purposeful repetition of the gerund verbs "ringing", "humming", "missing", and "singing", and then the identification that the enjambment within the poem purposefully causes confusion, the poem would simply read as a

mishmash of violent images. Perhaps this was Turner's intention all along: the creation of a poem that accurately reflects the chaos of war in its very structure.