

Joel Conarroe: On "Dream Song 1"

The stanzas are self-contained, but the rhythms are more complex, and the norm on which the variations are played is the four- rather than five- stress line. The sound pattern is also more subtle, the strong regular rhymes (day-away, thought-ought, etc.) partly obscuring the less obtrusive slant rhymes (sulked-talked, long-sang, glad-bed).

With its alliterative opening phrase followed by a caesura the first line resembles Anglo-Saxon verse. except that the half line following the pause fails to repeat the pattern of the first half. It is clear that the repetition of the "h" sound is meant to underscore the implications of "huffy." The pause, however, where one would logically expect a preposition, such as "throughout," thus making a conventional five-stress line, lets the reader know immediately that he must collaborate actively, must suspend his expectations and learn to hear Henry's music. After the comically alliterative expression of persecution ("the thought that they thought"), Henry describes himself (the "I" and "his" being the same person) as "wicked & away." This odd phrase, totally unexpected, is quintessential Berryman, the sort of thing that accounts, at least in part, for the charm of Henry's lengthy lamentation.

The transition between the first stanza and the second is implicit rather than obvious: we immediately discover why Henry is in such a rotten mood. The world was once on his side, like a woolen lover, which suggests someone wrapped in a warm blanket, sharing Henry's side of the bed (and the empty bed emerges explicitly at the song's end). Following the departure, and the ensuing disappointment, Henry introduces the image of being "pried open." There are several possible interpretations for this phrase. It suggests, for one thing, an oyster, pried open for its pearl?and "all the world" was Henry's oyster once. (In number 25 he is referred to as "valved.") It also suggests the scene of number 91 in which, like Lazarus, Henry is dug up from a grave. And "pried open" implies, in addition, an operation, a reading that takes on added resonance when we come to number 67, in which Henry conducts operations of great delicacy on his own body. (In number 8, another hospital poem, "they lifted off / his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled.") The word "pry" also hints at secrets, knowledge of intimate details, and as a poet Henry has been, and still is, on display, his "pride" in his "long wonder" subject to the world's scrutiny. The world, however, no longer a single lover, is now a manipulative, impersonal "they."

While in stanza two Henry does not understand how he survived, he introduces in the final stanza an elegiac lament for past happiness?the memory of what has been and never more will be?when he sang like a bird in a tree. This image, which derives from references in the *Sonnets to the sycamore* outside Lise's house (and which may also allude to Zacchaeus in a tree, watching Christ pass), is picked up in the final song in the first book: "The glories of the world struck me, made me aria, once," and later, in number 352, "He sang on like a harmful bird," as well as elsewhere. The concluding lines have considerable power. In the course of the songs we come to associate the sea both with Berryman's mother (and birth) and with his father (and death). In this case the "empty bed," following the sexual pun in "hard on," looks back specifically to the departed woolen lover as well as generally to attrition (the sea wearing down the land) and to loss through death. Moreover, the movement from the singing bird to the empty bed is related to the image in number 68 of Pinetop and Charlie (Bird) Parker

playing the "Empty Bed" blues.

This song, putting forth images of a man sulking alone (like Achilles when his bedmate has been taken from him), of a woolen lover, of a prying open, a sycamore, and finally of the sea and an empty bed, introduces its symbols with the associational logic of a dream. It is helpful when reading the songs to remember that dreams (including nightmares), on which so many of them are modelled, are mysterious, that they tend to lack coherent transitions, and that their symbols are often grotesquely distorted. To explain away particularly difficult passages, however, by saying that dreams are, after all, inscrutable, would be to give up our critical and imaginative prerogatives too easily. Dreams (and songs, and poets) can be analyzed, if not always definitively, then at least suggestively. Moreover, there are a great many songs (the one describing Pound at Eliot's funeral, for example) that have nothing to do with dreams. A few, some quite wonderful (101, 317), are apparently transcriptions of dreams, but these are out-numbered by those in which dreamwork, if involved at all, comprises only one facet of the song.

The caesura in line one, the ampersand in line five ("wicked & away"), the complex interlacing of rhymes, the repeated word ("Henry" is named five times in eleven lines), and the images picked up in other songs are all strategies that Berryman employs throughout the book.

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