

John Berryman on "The Dream Songs"

INTERVIEWER: In *The Dream Songs* there is a passage about assistant professors becoming associate professors by working on your poems. How do you feel about being cannon fodder for aspiring young critics and graduate students?

As for the graduate students, some of the work they do is damned interesting. A woman somewhere in the South did an eighty-page thesis investigating the three little epigraphs to the 77 *Dream Songs* and their bearing on the first three books of the poem. I must say that her study was exhaustive?very little left to be found out on that subject! But it's good, careful work. I take a pleased interest in these things, though there is ineptness and naiveté, and they get all kinds of things wrong and impute to me amazing motives. Another woman thought I was influenced by Hebrew elegiac meter. Now, my Hebrew is primitive, and I don't even know what Hebrew elegiac meter is?and, moreover, neither does she. It's a harmless industry. It gets people degrees. I don't feel against it and I don't feel for it. I sympathize with the students.

The professional critics, those who know what the literary, historical, philosophical, and theological score is, have not really gone to work yet, and may not do so for a long time yet. I did have a letter once from a guy who said: "Dear Mr. Berryman, Frankly I hope to be promoted from assistant professor to associate professor by writing a book about you. Are you willing to join me in this unworthy endeavor?" So I joined him. I answered all his questions. I practically flew out to pour out his drinks while he typed.

INTERVIEWER: I would like to change the subject now and talk about your work. Let's start with *The Dream Songs*. As you know, there is some controversy over the structure of the work? why it was first published in two volumes, why it consists of seven sections of varying lengths, and so on. What structural notion did you have in mind in writing it?

[...] I think the model in *The Dream Songs* was the other greatest American poem?"I am very ambitious?"*Song of Myself* "?a very long poem, about sixty pages. It also has a hero, a personality, himself. Henry is accused of being me and I am accused of being Henry and I deny it and nobody believes me. Various other things entered into it, but that is where I started.

The narrative such as it is developed as I went along, partly out of my gropings into and around Henry and his environment and associates, partly out of my readings in theology and that sort of thing, taking place during thirteen years?awful long time?and third, out of certain partly preconceived and partly developing as I went along, sometimes rigid and sometimes plastic, structural notions. That is why the work is divided into seven books, each book of which is rather well unified, as a matter of fact. Finally, I left the poem open to the circumstances of my personal life. [...]

The poem does not go as far as "*Song of Myself*." What I mean by that is this: Whitman denies that "*Song of Myself*" is a long poem. He has a passage saying that he had long thought that there was no such thing as a long poem and that when he read Poe he found that Poe summed up the problem for him. But here it is, sixty pages. What's the notion? He doesn't regard it as a literary work at all, in my opinion?he doesn't quite say so. It proposes a

new religion? it is what is called in Old Testament criticism a wisdom work, a work on the meaning of life and how to conduct it. Now, I don't go that far? The Dream Songs is a literary composition, it's a long poem? but I buy a little of it. I think Whitman is right with regard to "Song of Myself." I'm prepared to submit to his opinion. He was crazy, and I don't contradict madmen. When William Blake says something, I say thank you, even though he has uttered the most hopeless fallacy that you can imagine. I'm willing to be their loving audience. I'm just hoping to hear something marvelous from time to time, marvelous and true. Of course The Dream Songs does not propose a new system; that is not the point. In that way it is unlike "Song of Myself." It remains a literary work.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you go from here?

[...] I have a tiny little secret hope that, after a decent period of silence and prose, I will find myself in some almost impossible life situation and will respond to this with outcries of rage, rage and love, such as the world has never heard before. Like Yeats's great outburst at the end of his life. This comes out of a feeling that endowment is a very small part of achievement. I would rate it about fifteen or twenty percent, Then you have historical luck, personal luck, health, things like that, then you have hard work, sweat. And you have ambition. The incredible difference between the achievement of A and the achievement of B is that B wanted it, so he made all kinds of sacrifices. A could have had it, but he didn't give a damn.[...]

But what I was going on to say is that I do strongly feel that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal. Certain great artists can make out without it, Titian and others, but mostly you need ordeal. My idea is this: the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing. And I think that what happens in my poetic work in the future will probably largely depend not on my sitting calmly on my ass as I think, "Hmm, hmm, a long poem again? Hmm," but on being knocked in the face, and thrown flat, and given cancer, and all kinds of other things short of senile dementia. At that point, I'm out, but short of that, I don't know. I hope to be nearly crucified,

INTERVIEWER: You're not knocking on wood.

I'm scared, but I'm willing. I'm sure this is a preposterous attitude, but I'm not ashamed of it.

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