

Helen Vendler: On "Dream Song 5"

The most original poems among The Dream Songs invent, with enormous buoyancy, the Henry-dialect, of which more needs to be said. This is not therapy-language as such; rather it is a cartoonish poetic equivalent of the aggression and regression permitted in the analyst's office. It includes baby-talk, childish spite-talk, black talk, Indian talk, Scottish talk, lower-class talk, drunk-talk, archaism and anachronism, megalomaniacal self-aggrandizing images, hysteria and hallucination, spell-casting, superstition, paranoid suspiciousness, slang, and primitive syntactic structures of all sorts?sentence-fragments, incorrect grammar, babble, and so on. Many of these are present in the famous Dream Song # 5: . . .

Haffenden glosses the last image as deriving from Cervantes' 'Colloquy of the Dogs,' in which the witch Camacha of Montilla was able 'to cause the living or the dead to appear in a mirror or upon the fingernail of a newborn child.' The image is made more plausible when we know that in an unpublished poem of the fifties, Berryman writes of himself as 'a sort of Don Quixote trickt out as Lucifer.' Still, the role the unglossed fingernail-image plays in the poem is a surreal one, as though even the newborn John Smith proleptically bore on his own body the picture of his dead father, which as John Berryman (he punned on 'bury-man ') he continued to exhibit.

The elegant three-part comic strip of Dream Song #5? locating Henry first in the bar, then in the plane, and lastly in the hospital?gives the sort of emotional access to Berryman's extreme mood-swings that the gloomy psychiatric diagnoses quoted in Haffenden's biography cannot adequately convey: 'Cyclothymic personality . . . Habitual excessive drinking'; 'After admission he became severely grossly tremulous, insomniac, experiencing some frightening dreams, and was obviously on the verge of delerium tremens.' These late medical diagnoses merely record, in psychiatric terms, the disorienting experiences which formed the given of Berryman's adult life, and out of which he made, so vividly, the Dream Songs.

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