

Paul Breslin: On "Dream Song 4"

With Berryman, the adoption of "Henry" as a persona mitigates the bluntness of self-disclosure. So does his self-deprecatory wit. Lowell and Plath are seldom funny, and even when they are, theirs is a muted, saturnine humor. Already by the fourth Dream Song, Berryman has struck a comic note never sounded in their poetry:

and only the fact of her husband & four other people kept me from springing on her
or falling at her little feet and crying 'You are the hottest one for years of night
Henry's dazed eyes have enjoyed, Brilliance.' I advanced upon (despairing) my
spumoni.

Much as I like Berryman at his best, I have omitted detailed discussion of his work, because he seems less "confessional," in the sense defined by Rosenthal and Alvarez, than Lowell and Plath. Although Berryman occasionally claimed representative implications for his private suffering (as in the Massachusetts Review interview quoted earlier), the poems seldom draw the sorts of parallels between personal and social history that one finds in those of Lowell and Plath, who, between them, define a polarity within the confessional mode.

from *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Copyright © 1987 by the U of Chicago P.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism ^[1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

John Berryman ^[2]

Author:

Paul Breslin ^[3]

Poem:

Dream Song 4 ^[4]

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/paul-breslin-dream-song-4>

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