

Helen Vendler: On "Dream Song 4"

Dream Song #4, a farcical sketch of Henry in a restaurant lusting after someone else's young wife: this is Berryman's picture of the Id at work, checked in its lust by Conscience. It is a poem unthinkable in American poetry before the postwar Freudian era: . . .

It is Berryman's gaiety of writing, his joyous blasphemy of traditional love-poetry, that wins us in this Song. The parodic aspects are several: the planctus takes place in a restaurant; the lady is reduced to her body engaged in the inglorious act of eating; she is guarded not only by her husband but by a comic superfluity of 'four other people'; the Petrarchan lover's cry of adoration is debased to 'You are the hottest one . . . / Henry's dazed eyes /have enjoyed'; the lover continues to eat, and does not omit to notice that it is spumoni that he is, even if despairingly, eating; the lover's jealousy makes him cartoon the husband as 'The slob beside her'; the lover's admiration of the lady's beauty suddenly descends to a crude interest in her buttocks ('What wonders is / she sitting on, over there?'); and the conventional eloignement of the lady takes on tones of science fiction: 'She might as well be on Mars.' The lover's comment is of the fist-to-brow soap-opera kind?'Where did it all go wrong?'

The growling, resentful, truculent, unmanageable Henry is an enviable comic creation, and his repertoire of semiotic reference, old and new, is lovably various in both serious and parodic ways. We become marginally convinced, by such a poem, that the troubadours were Henrys too, and that Berryman is merely uncovering the unsalubrious, but oddly solacing, layer of psychic squalor beneath high artistic convention. And yet, at the same time, we see the negative of this truth: that even the lustful and coarse-minded Henry wants to call his 'feeding girl' by a name like 'Brilliance,' to see her eyes as 'jewelled' and her company as a 'feast.' These are all metaphors straight out of the love-tradition, and what is exhilarating in Berryman as a writer is the balance between the parodic and the ecstatic that he keeps alive, as he reveals both the body's abject yearning for idealization, and the mind's conspiratorial desire for buttocks.

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