

Thomas Travisano: On "Dream Song 29"

. . . This Song is clearly centered on a terrible loss, but whose loss? And what has been lost? And where and when, and how, and why?

[quotes ll. 1-6]

Here is a truly displaced elegy. Loss appears not as a deprivation but as an arrival in the form of an oppressive psychic visitation: "There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart." In the first sestet, neither the nature of the thing that "sat down . . . on Henry's heart" nor the time of its encroachment is spelled out. "The little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime" that "Starts again always in Henry's ears" suggest that these are possible memory triggers, recalling in some way the cause of the oppression that "sat down, once . . . on Henry's heart," but how can "an odour" start in "Henry's ears"? And why, exactly, should Henry have to "make good"? One colloquial meaning of "make good" is to "succeed," a demand parents are wont to place on their children; another connotation is to "make good" on a debt or to make up for an omission or transgression. The poem may be an elegy for childhood losses. But here, unlike Jarrell's "Ball Turret Gunner," a child's consciousness is suggested not through the direct evocation of a child's experiences (a womb, birth, "my mother's sleep"), so much as through the preservation or stylized recreation of childlike forms of speech ("in all them time," "so heavy," "could not make good"). These childish or childlike forms of speech convey Henry's feeling of his own incomplete maturity, the struggles caused by the fact that a part of himself remains locked in childishness, emotionally uncompleted.

The Dream Songs emerged out of a period of intensive dream analysis for Berryman. And the poem's sudden shifts and surprising juxtapositions reflect his extensive exploration of and immersion in unconscious experience:

[quotes ll. 7-12]

Henry feels the reproach of that grave Sienese face, no doubt a Madonna, and the language evokes other religious and ceremonial elements (such as "the bells") that here float in an unsettling sea of indeterminacy that may be drifting toward nondisclosure. Yet is there any reason for reproach? Has any crime been committed? Most important, if this is an elegy, whose death is being mourned?

[quotes ll. 13-18]

This monody is peculiar in part because the reader discovers that there has been no death, certainly no murder, since "Nobody is ever missing." Despite feelings of grief and guilt, particularly over a urge to commit violence to women, reenacting, in effect, Edgar Allan Poe's "Black Cat," there seems to be no deceased object nor any specific action to which Henry can

attach his disconcerting feelings of guilt and grief. Yet the feelings of guilt and grief remain, and they assume a character of unusual intensity and duration: "so heavy" and so lasting that "weeping, sleepless, in all them time / Henry could not make good."

Much later, in "Dream Song 327," Berryman concludes that "Freud was some wrong about dreams, or almost all," in part because he saw dreams not as "a transcript / of childhood & the day before," which is how Henry, apparently, sees them, but as "a panorama / of the whole mental life." But Berryman also objected to Freud, that "Grand Jewish ruler, custodian of the past / our paedagogue to whip us into truth" because "you wholly failed to take into account youth." It was in Berryman's youth that the violent death of his father and his own abrupt transformation from the Floridian Catholic John Smith to the Manhattan unbeliever John McAlpin Berryman occurred, in the context of abuses whose pervasive reality Freud's system chose not to acknowledge.

Berryman had reason to fear his mother, both as a possessive and judgmental presence in his life and as his father's possible murderer. Moreover, his father was definitely, if ambiguously, "missing." In "Dream Song 29," he dramatizes the problem of radically displaced emotion that "too much exceeds its cause" or that remains free-floating, unattached to any assignable cause. Perhaps this is because, despite deep self-analysis and even self-punishment, the real cause of Berryman's blocked emotion is too painful to name and thus has been most savagely repressed. And in his quest for self-knowledge and maturity, Berryman would conclude of Freud that "I tell you, Sir, you have enlightened but / you have misled us" (DS 327). Berryman exploits the postmodern elegy to explore the lost world of repressed emotion, that elusive yet strangely imperial kingdom whose hegemony is chiefly felt, and in *The Dream Songs* expressed, through the language of symptoms. And for insight into this world, Berryman felt sure, Freud's work provides only a partial key.

from *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by University of Virginia.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

John Berryman [2]

Author:

Thomas Travisano [3]

Poem:

Dream Song 29 [4]

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/thomas-travisano-dream-song-29>

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