

Jeffrey Alan Triggs: On "Dream Song 14"

This is a subtly organized poem, whose theme is well realized in its language. The incessant "ands," the persistent refusal of the syntax to come to rest, the literate colloquial tone all contribute to the poem's feeling of restless dissatisfaction. Berryman satirizes in particular middle class ecstasy over the common functioning of nature ("the sky flashes, the great sea yearns"), which borders on pathetic fallacy ("we ourselves flash and yearn"). The speaker who does not respond to all this flashing and yearning must alienate himself from the mainstream of society, represented by his mother, and conclude that he has "no inner resources." But even the Baudelairean stance of the alienated or adversary poet is boring, as are the artificial paradises of "tranquil hills" and "gin." The speaker himself is a wraith, an empty gesture, the "wag" of a vanished dog. All that is left standing is the elegant structure of the unrhymed stanza Berryman so often uses with its alternating long and short lines in the pattern: A, A, B, A, A, B. Composing his poem with three such stanzas, Berryman aims at the local intensity of a sonnet within a sequence. (Indeed, reviving the idea of the poetic sequence as opposed to the isolated well-made lyrics of the new critics is one of Berryman's real contributions to contemporary American poetry.)

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