

Helen Vendler: On "Dream Song 14"

. . . when the depressive side of bi-polar illness is ascendant in Berryman, Henry is represented as paralyzed by a pervasive apathy, an unwillingness to play even his own game. Here is the opening of Dream Song #14:

[lines 1-12]

Berryman's debt to the lyric tradition appears in Henry's appeal to Romantic gestures? 'The sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn.' On the other hand, in Henry's frame of mind the entire Western literary tradition, from Homer on, is of absolutely no use, and so itself becomes a lower-case cartoon in which Achilles' wrath is reduced to 'plights & gripes.' 'Literature bores me,' says Henry, seeing himself in his plights and gripes' as bad as [a lower-case] achilles.' The Dream Songs visibly adopt certain features of the long autobiographical poem as we find it in Don Juan, which originated, in our literature, the spectacle of an impulsive and greedy protagonist commented upon by a worldly authorial voice.

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