

John Haffenden: On "Dream Song 55"

In a filmed interview for BBC television in 1967, Berryman described the Song as being like the graveyard scene in *Ulysses*, where, prompted by the words 'I am the resurrection and the light', Bloom utters his thoughts about an afterlife. He is averse to the notion of resurrection since the thought of physical corruption strikes him as too conclusive. So, for different reasons, it is conclusive for Henry. Song 288 (ll. 7-8) alludes again to *Ulysses*. Although Henry opposes the dogma of Christ's Resurrection, he is yet wary of what he calls 'a coda of blaming' (194: 12). He feels immersed in an existentialist dilemma (347:7-10).

For Kierkegaard, whom Berryman studied, not just to live, but to be a Christian, is to suffer. He makes it clear that, for him in serving an Absolute absolutely, suffering is unavoidable in this world which is a conditioned world. Kierkegaard explains the paradox: 'Suffering depends on the fact that God and man are qualitatively different, and that the clash of time and eternity in time is bound to cause suffering.' (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Last Years: Journals 1853-1855*, ed. and trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Fontana Library, 1968), p. 255). He also isolates the paradox by which, for the Christian, grace is known negatively?since it brings suffering. 'Christianity', he explains, 'is sheer grace, and suffering for a few years in this life is infinite, infinite grace' (ibid., p. 279). Henry verges towards the same belief in Songs 113 (ll. 1-3) and 194 (ll. 1-3) but his nuance is invariably ironic, for he severely questions the same paradox elsewhere, as in Song 256 (ll. 16-17) or in 266 (l. 10).

Similarly, when Henry speaks of death?and consequent nothingness?he often does so in terms of a refuge from the horrors of Hell (239:14-16).

In general, the balance of Henry's thoughts on the matter is weighted in favour of death being literally a dead end, or at least a condition in which one simply dreams the past forever (123:11) (Cf. 140:14, 146:6, and 195:17-18).

One of the main reasons why Henry desires obsessively to know about the afterlife is because of guilt, his fear of punishment. He asserts almost desperately that he will not believe in Hell, and sues above all for a continuance of this life, as in Song 266 (ll. 11-18).

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