

Helen Vendler: On "Dream Song 384"

The aesthetic problem Berryman sets himself when he decides to write actions and discourse for his unmanageable Id has been solved here, as elsewhere, by relying on broad cartoon-like strokes. The Id is represented in several ways: by incoherence of affect ("O ho alas alas / When will indifference come"); by childish regression of action and words ("I'd like to scrabble till I got right down / away down")? by interspersed melodramatic nonsense-syllables of revenge ("open ha to see," "grave clothes he & then"); and by a temporary abandon (between the sixteenth and seventeenth line) of end-punctuation of any sort. The final tableau ? as Henry in self-pluralizing wish ("we") takes an ax to his father?s casket, rips the decayed wrappings of the corpse, and then drives the ax into his father?s body ? resembles in its components an episode out of Poe, but it forgoes Poe?s ghastly ceremoniousness of action and diction: this is why the Dream Songs deserve the name of "cartoon." The reductiveness and garishness and violence we associate with cartoons ? and do not normally associate with our "sensitive" therapeutically-presented selves ? are Berryman?s startling comic means toward representation of his irrepressible Id. Cartoon-strokes enable him to render his life-donnée in literary terms, at the considerable cost of an occluded and alienated authorial self, concealed behind its puppets.

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