

Helen Vendler on: "The Dream Songs"

Though it is tempting to characterize the two protagonists of *The Dream Songs*—the 'imaginary character' Henry and his nameless 'friend'—by the words of faculty psychology—'intellect' for the friend, and 'will' for the irrepressible Henry, a much better fit comes if we speak loosely of the two protagonists of *The Dream Songs* as Superego and Id. Yet, though the second of these two names fits the anarchic protagonist Henry reasonably well, the unnamed Friend, representing both common sense and conscience, does not exhibit the irrationality and sadism of the Freudian Superego, though he utters the reproaches proper to it. He could more properly, perhaps, be called Conscience, like something out of a medieval Christian allegory. In fact, it is the very crossing of the Christian model of the Friend with the Freudian model generating Henry that makes *The Dream Songs* an original book; two great schemes of Western thought, the religious and the psychoanalytic, contend for Berryman's soul in a hybrid psychomachia.

The fiction of the *Dream Songs* (first published as *77 Dream Songs* in 1964) is that its two protagonists are 'end men' in an American minstrel show. This common form of vaudeville (seen in my childhood) presented, while the curtain was lowered between vaudeville acts, banter between two 'end men,' one standing at stage left, one at stage right, in front of the closed curtain. The end men were white actors in exaggerated blackface, who told jokes in exaggerated Negro dialect, one acting as the taciturn 'straight man' to the buffoonery of the other. They addressed each other by nicknames such as 'Tambo' or 'Mr Bones' (the latter a name referring to dice). The unnamed Friend in *The Dream Songs*, acting as straight man and speaking to Henry in Negro dialect, addresses Henry as 'Mr Bones' or variants thereof. Henry, the voluble, infantile, and plaintive chief speaker, is the lyric 'I' of the songs; he never addresses his 'straight man' by name. Henry's own colloquial idiolect (sometimes represented in third-person free indirect discourse or second-person self-reproach) is not exclusively framed in any one dialect, but rather exhibits many dialectical influences, from slang to archaism to baby-talk.

One can see that there is no integrated Ego in *The Dream Songs*: there is only Conscience at one end of the stage and the Id at the other, talking to each other across a void, never able to find common ground. In the early *Dream Songs*, the fastidious John Berryman writing the poem never enters the verse, and never interacts with either of his split under-selves. As he wrote about his Henry, 'Who Henry was, or is, has proved undiscoverable by the social scientists. It is . . . certain that he claimed to be a minstrel.' Each *Dream Song* is (with very few exceptions) eighteen lines long, and is divided into three six-line irregularly rhyming stanzas—an isometric form one might associate, looking backward, with Berryman's debt to the meditative Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet sequences or, looking forward to the therapeutic fifty minutes, with the, inflexible and anecdotal psychiatric hour. Theoretically, anything can be said within this arbitrary limit, but one has to stop when one's time (one's rhyme) is up. Henry, the Id, has a great deal to say: he is petulant, complaining, greedy, lustful, and polymorphously perverse; he is also capable of childlike joy and disintegrative rage. Henry's life has been blasted, as he tells us, by the suicide of his father when he was a boy; he is driven by a random avidity, often sexual, which he indulges shamelessly until the unnamed Conscience reproaches him.

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Criticism Target:

John Berryman [2]

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dream [5]

psychology [6]

Superego [7]

Id [8]

Freudian [9]

Vaudeville [10]

Conscience [11]

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[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/john-berryman>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/helen-vendler>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/dream-songs>

[5] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/dream>

[6] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/psychology>

[7] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/superego>

[8] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/id>

[9] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/freudian>

[10] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/vaudeville>

[11] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/conscience>