

Lea Baechler: On "Dream Song 384"

In 384, composed in the late sixties a few years before Berryman's suicide, the poet's inability to comprehend John Allyn [his father]'s action and forgive it translates into an anger so violent that it results in an imagined assault on the father's corpse. Open to rather intensive Freudian interpretation, the poem is stripped of all the hopeful figurations of light and usual funerary offerings ? "The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done." The poet announces, "I stand above my father's grave with rage," revealing that he has made this imagined "awful pilgrimage" more than once "to one / who cannot visit me, who tore this page / out." ? The last line articulates a desire to destroy the starting point, that is, both the father himself and the fact of his suicide. As progenitor, the father is thus Berryman's "start"; the father's suicide is the "start" of the poet's lifelong misery and the beginning of his residence in "the country of the dead" (Song #279). The irony in that desire to fell too late "the start" that is, the corpse of the father who has lived, begat, and willfully ended his life ? compounds the rage and impotently the poet experiences in response to what is irreversible.

From Lea Baechler, "Berryman, Roethke and the Elegy" in Jay Parini, Ed. *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia U P, 1993), 620-621. Copyright 1993 by Columbia University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

John Berryman [2]

Author:

Lea Baechler [3]

Poem:

Dream Song 384 [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/lea-baechler-dream-song-384>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

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

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/lea-baechler>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/dream-song-384>