

ALCOHOL

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POETRY:

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by LEWIS HYDE

In looking at the relationship between alcohol and poetry I am working out of two of my own experiences. For two years I was a counselor with alcoholics in the detoxification ward of a city hospital. I am also a writer and, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, I knew John Berryman (briefly, not intimately).

Berryman was alcoholic. It is my belief that his disease is evident in his work, particularly in *The Dream Songs*. His last poems and *Recovery*, his unfinished novel, show that by the time of his suicide in January of 1972 he himself was confronting his illness and had already begun to explore its relationship to the poetry. What I want to do here is to continue that work. I want to try to illuminate what the forces are between poetry and alcohol so we can see them and talk about them.

Alcohol has always played a role in American letters. Those of our writers who have tangled with it include Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Malcolm Lowry, Hart Crane, Jack London and Eugene O'Neill, to name a few. Four of the six Americans who have won the Nobel Prize for literature were alcoholic. About half of our alcoholic writers eventually killed themselves.

This essay begins with a short description of alcoholism and then a longer sketch of the ways in which it is entangled in our culture and spiritual life, the two areas where it bears most heavily on poetry. In the second part of the essay I will turn to Berryman and take a close look at *The Dream Songs*.

I

Most of what we know about alcoholism comes from alcoholics themselves, specifically from Alcoholics Anonymous. It is their experience that an alcoholic is someone who cannot control his drinking once he has started. He cannot pick up just one drink (“one is too many, a thousand’s not enough,” is the saying). Another way of putting this is to say *if you are alcoholic, you cannot stop drinking on will power*. In this it is like other diseases of the body. It may be hard to believe—and harder for the active alcoholic!—but I have seen enough strong-willed alcoholics to know that good intentions and will power are as useful for recovering from this disease as they are for curing diabetes.

Because of this it seems clear that alcoholism has a biological component. It is common to call this an ‘allergy,’ that is: alcoholics’ bodies react differently to alcohol. Some people may be born with this ‘allergy’ (it seems to run in families), others may develop it through heavy drinking. Once present in a person, it hooks into his social, mental and spiritual life, and it is in these areas that most alcoholics first get hurt. Most have trouble in their family life or with their jobs or end up doing things they don’t want to, long before alcohol destroys their bodies.

Alcoholism cannot be cured. Once a person becomes alcoholic, he can never again drink in safety. However, there is a way to arrest the disease, and that is the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA is the ‘medicine’ and it works. Of those who join a group, get a sponsor, and become active, more than half never drink again and all enjoy some improvement. Those alcoholics who don’t manage to find sobriety end up in jail or in mental institutions or dead from cirrhosis, brain damage, suicide or something else related to alcohol.

It is commonly believed that AA is a religious group, but it is more correctly described as a spiritual program. It has no creed. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. It does have a series of “12 steps to recovery” and these include the concept of a “higher power.” The first three steps read:

We admitted that we’re powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

They say you can get sober on the First Step alone, but certainly not with the ease of those who find their way to the others. The move from the First to the Second

step is a problem for many, but logically it shouldn't be, for every active alcoholic already has a higher power at work in his life: the booze.

In AA it is common to refer to alcoholism as a threefold disease: it is physical, mental, and spiritual. This holistic description was first put together in this country in the 1930s and it led immediately to the first recovered alcoholics and the founding of AA. A key insight—that the disease includes the spirit—came indirectly from Carl Jung. The story is interesting and helps me begin to show how alcoholism is tied up with creative life.

Many alcoholics try psychotherapy of one sort or another to deal with their problems. It notoriously fails. They say that alcoholism is “the siren of the psychiatrists.” In 1931 an American alcoholic sought out Jung for treatment. Whatever analytic progress they made did not affect his drinking and Jung told him that his only hope was to become the subject of a spiritual experience, a true conversion.

It was Jung's belief, as he explained in a letter 30 years later, that the “craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness . . . (for) the union with God.” He included the line from the 42nd Psalm: “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.” And he concluded his letter: “You see, ‘alcohol’ in Latin is *spiritus*, and one uses the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*.”*

What is a ‘spirit’ in this broad sense? There are several things to say. First, a spirit is something larger than the self, and second, it has the power to change you. It alters your Gestalt, your whole mode of perception and action. Both alcohol and the Holy Ghost can do this. But a spirit does more than give you new eyes: it is the mover. This is the sense of spiritual power when St. Paul says “I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” A good spirit does not just change you, it is an agent of growth.

Spiritual thirst is the thirst of the self to feel that it is a part of something larger and, in its positive aspect, it is the thirst to grow, to ripen. The self delights in that as a fish delights in water. Cut off from it, it seeks again. This is a simple and basic human thirst, comparable to the body's need for salt. It is subtle and cannot be extinguished. Once woken, it is very powerful. An animal who has found salt in the forest will return time and again to the spot. It is the same with a taste of spiritual powers.

The disease of alcoholism includes what they call a “mental obsession” with alcohol and a “physical compulsion” for it. Once we have understood this matter of spiritual thirst, we see that this is like saying that the moon has a “compulsion” to orbit the earth, or a whale has an “obsession” with the ocean.

* All my sources are listed at the end of the essay.

Man is compelled to move with powers greater than himself. The compelling forces may be mysterious, but they are not a problem. The problem is why a person would get hooked up with alcohol—which is a power greater than the ego, but not a benevolent one. I do not know why, though by the end of this essay I will make a few guesses.

All the psychotropic drugs—alcohol, the amphetamines, LSD, mescaline and so forth—could be called spirits in the sense I am using. But I would prefer to call them spirit-helpers, first because they are material spirits and seem to be limited to that level, and second because it now seems clear that they are not actually agents of maturation. They do have power: they can show the novice in a crude way the possibility of a different life. I call it crude because it is big-footed and able to bust through the novice's walls. I say 'show' because a spirit-helper does not give you the new life, it merely points.

The amphetamines, for example, can show you that it is possible for huge amounts of energy to flow through the body and leave you in a state of almost hopeless attentiveness. However, this is not you. It affects you, but you do not own it. Properly used, such a spirit-helper makes a demand: Find the path that leads to the place where you can have this experience without the help. Often the path is long and the things the spirit-helper shows you do not actually become yours for 5 to 10 years. The risk, especially in this civilization and without a guide, is that you will get weary, forgo the 5-year walk, and stay with the material spirit. And when you stay with the material spirit you stay at its level, you do not grow. This is why we speak of their effect as 'getting stoned' or 'intoxicated,' rather than 'inspiration.' 'Inspiration' refers to air spirits such as those which come through meditation, or the Holy Ghost, or the power that rises above a group of people. Air spirits are less crude and they abide. They have power over matter.

Few of these spirits are good or evil of themselves. Their value varies by their use. Alcohol has many uses and all of them change depending on a person's drinking patterns. It is a relaxant and social spirit; it has always been used as a ceremonial spirit; it is a medicinal, a sedative hypnotic and an anaesthetic.

It is also, along with others of the material spirits, a possessing drug: it is addictive. (Withdrawal from alcohol addiction is worse than that from heroin.) As a spirit possesses a person he more and more becomes the spirit itself. In the phrase of AA's First Step—"powerless over alcohol"—is implied the idea that the alcoholic is no longer running his life, the alcohol is. Booze has become his only experience and it makes all of his decisions for him.

If he senses this at all it is a numbed recognition that he himself is being wiped out. After several years an alcoholic commonly begins to have apocalyptic fears. He stops going out of the house because he is afraid that buildings will fall on him. He won't drive across a bridge because he fears the car will suddenly leap off of it.

This is the self realizing it is being forced out, but so blind with the booze that it can't see the true cause, it can only project its death onto everything in the outer world.

I am saying that as a person becomes alcoholic he turns more and more into the drug and its demands. He is like a fossil leaf that mimics the living but is really stone. For him the drug is no longer a spirit in the sense I have used, or if it is, it's a death spirit, pulling him down into itself. He has an ever-increasing problem knowing what 'he' is doing and what the booze is doing. His self-trust collapses. He doesn't even know if his feelings are his own. This state does not require physical addiction. Long after his last drink, the symptoms of the alcoholic's physical addiction linger and recur—sometimes for years—a phenomenon known as the 'dry-drunk.' The drinker becomes alcohol in a human skin, a parasite dressed up in the body of its host.

These issues—spiritual powers, possession, growth, inspiration—clearly have to do with the life of a creative person. But there is a further thing to say about alcohol that connects it even more closely with poetry. Alcohol is described medically as a sedative hypnotic or an anaesthetic. It progressively relaxes and numbs the different centers of sensation, coordination and control, starting with faculties such as judgment and physical grace and progressing (as with other anaesthetics such as ether) down through the voluntary nervous system.

'Anaesthetic' does not just mean a thing that reduces sensation. The word means 'without-aesthetic,' that is, without the ability to sense *creatively*. The aesthetic power, which every human has, is the power which forms meaningful configurations out of all we sense and feel. More than that, it makes configurations which are themselves lively and creative, things which, like art, begin to exist separately from their creator and give meaning and energy back to all of us. If this power were not free and active a human being would die, just as he would die if he lost the power to digest his food.

An anaesthetic is a poet-killer. It is true that some poets have found alcohol a spirit-helper; for some it has broken up static and useless interpretations of the world and allowed them to "see through" and move again. Theodore Roethke appears to be an example. But this doesn't happen for alcoholics. An alcoholic cannot control his drinking and cannot selectively anaesthetize. A poet who has become wholly possessed by alcohol is no longer a poet, for these powers are mutually exclusive. The opposition of these forces is a hidden war in our civilization. On one level it is a social war, for ours is a civilization enamoured of drugs which deaden the poetry-creature. But for many the fight is personal, it has already entered their bodies and become a corporeal war between the powers of creation and the spirit of alcohol.

To conclude the first part of this essay I want to show some of the ways in

which alcohol is involved in our culture and civilization. To look at it from this level I want to turn to some ideas developed by Ivan Illich in his new book about health care, *Medical Nemesis*.

One of Illich's main points is that pain asks a question. Discomfort makes an urgent demand on us to find its cause and resolution. He distinguishes between suffering and feeling pain. The latter is passive but it leads to suffering, which is the active process, the art, of moving from dis-ease to ease. It turns out that the idea of a 'pain-killer' is a modern one. This phrase appeared in this country only a century ago. In the Middle Ages it was the belief of doctors that if you killed the pain you killed the patient. To the ancients, pain was only one sign of disharmony. It was nice if it went away during the healing process, but this did not mean that the patient was whole. The idea is that if you get rid of pain before you have answered its questions, you get rid of the self along with it. Wholeness comes only when you have passed *through* pain.

Illich's thesis is that "health care and my ability to remain responsible for my behavior in suffering correlate." Relief of this ability, through the use of drugs to separate pain from the performance of suffering, is a cornerstone of which Illich calls "medical technocracy." He writes:

Pain had formerly given rise to a cultural program whereby individuals could deal with reality, precisely in those situations in which reality was experienced as inimical to the unfolding of their lives. Pain is now being turned into a political issue which gives rise to a snowballing demand on the part of anaesthesia consumers for artificially induced insensibility, unawareness, and even unconsciousness.

A culture in the sense being used here is, by nature, a healing system. Illich speaks of "the health-granting wholeness of culture," and of "medicinal cultures." The native American tribes are a good example: they called their whole system of knowledge and teaching 'the medicine,' not just the things that the shaman might do in an emergency. As a member of the tribe it was your privilege to walk daily inside of the healing air.

A culture faces and interprets pain, deviance and death. It endows them with meaning; it illuminates how they are a part of the whole and thereby makes them tolerable. We do not become trapped in them because the culture continually leads out of pain and death and back into life. Medical civilization reacts in the opposite way: it tries to attack, remove and kill these things. With this the citizen becomes separated from his own healing and interpretive powers, and he and the culture begin to pull apart and wither, like plants pulled from the soil until both become dust.

The widespread use of alcohol and other central nervous system anaesthetics is directly linked to a decline in culture. The wider their use, the harder it becomes to preserve, renew and invigorate the wisdom that a culture should hold. This then doubles back and escalates. Alcoholism spreads when a culture is dying, just

as rickets appears when there is no Vitamin D. It is a sign that the culture has lost its health-granting cohesion.

The native American tribes would again be an example. Here were cultures rich in spiritual life and healing power. The Indian, cut off from the sources of his own spiritual strength by the European tribes and unwilling to adopt the gods of his oppressors, was left with an empty spiritual space, and too often the spirit of alcohol moved in to fill it. The Europeans were all too happy at this and often shipped the liquor into the dying Indian villages.

Nobody knows what causes alcoholism. It is one of those things, like a war, whose etiology is so complex that attempts to describe it do not yet help us heal. One of the insights of AA was to quit wondering why a person drinks and just work with the situation at hand. In doing this they figured out how to keep an alcoholic sober after he has stopped drinking. Two chapters in the AA "Big Book" describe how the program works. They list typical situations in which alcoholics who have found sobriety begin to drink again. By looking at these, we can do a sort of backwards etiology of the disease. Here are three examples:

"Resentment is the 'number one' offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. . . ."

The alcoholic is "driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity. . . ."

"The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot."

In summary, AA has found that the following may lead a sober alcoholic back to drinking: resentment, self-centeredness, managing, trying to do everything yourself, and keeping secret the things that hurt you. There are two categories in this list. An alcoholic will drink again (1) if he sets himself up as self-sufficient and (2) if he gets stuck in the mechanisms that defend this autonomy. *Individualism and its defences support the disease of alcoholism*. Just one more example: in this civilization we take personal credit for change and accomplishment. But it is AA's experience that if an alcoholic begins to feel personally responsible for his sobriety, or if he tries to take control of the group, or if he breaks his anonymity, he will probably drink.

Getting sober goes against the grain of our civilization. This grain consists of money and technology. For more than a century these have been our dominant models for security and liveliness. I want to show quickly how these models feed 'individualism' and its false sense of human and higher powers. To begin with we have misperceived the nature of machines. First, we have assumed that they run by themselves, that they can be isolated and self-sustaining. Second, we have thought they were our slaves. But it has turned out that the model of life that includes slavery diminishes humans, regardless of whether those slaves are people or machines. And finally, we have forgotten that mechanical power is only one form

of power. It is authentic and important, but limited. In the last 50 years it has become so inflated as to impoverish other forms of power. (These points can also be made about money—we have assumed that money could be left alone to ‘work’ for us and out of this assumption it has become an autonomous and inflated power.)

But neither money nor machines can create. They shuttle tokens of energy, but they do not transform. A civilization based on them puts people out of touch with their creative powers. There is very little a poet can learn from them. Poems are gifts. The poet works them, but they are not his, either in their source or in their destination. The differences between mechanical and monetary power and creative power are not of themselves a problem, but when the former become inflated and dominant, as they have in this century, they are lethal to poetry.

Hart Crane is an example. He was a poet born into a typically mercantile American family. His father invented the life saver and built up the family candy business. Between the time he left home and the time he killed himself, Crane made endless flesh trips back and forth between his creative energies and his father’s designs. There was one horrible hot summer when he ended up in Washington D.C. trying to sell the family sweets. You cannot be a poet without some connection to others—to your group or family or class or nation . . .—but all that was offered to Crane was this thing that kills poets. It is not an exaggeration to say that these forces divided him from his own life energies and contributed to his alcoholism and his death.

The link between alcoholism and technical civilization—and the reasons they are both antithetical to poetry—is their shared misunderstandings about power and powerlessness. It is a misunderstanding which rises out of the inflation of mechanical power and results in the impoverishment of personal power, the isolation of creative energy, the blindness to high powers, the limitation of desire to material objects and a perversion of the will.

In a technological civilization one is deprived of authentic expressions of creative energy because contact with the outer world does not lead to real change (transformation). When this happens it becomes impossible to make judgments on the limits and nature of your personal power. You become stupefied, unable to perceive either higher powers or your own. You have a vague longing to feel creative energy, but no wisdom to guide you. Such a person is a sitting duck for alcoholism.

The disease begins and ends with an empty willfulness. The alcoholic fighting his disease has no authentic contact because nothing changes. The revelation that the alcoholic is powerless over his drinking was one of the founding insights of AA. And the admission of this powerlessness is the First Step in arresting the disease. The paradox is that the admission of powerlessness does not lead to slavery or obliteration, but the opposite. It leads to revaluation of personal power which is human, bounded and authentic.

II

Here is a curious quote from Saul Bellow's introduction to John Berryman's unfinished novel, *Recovery*. It refers to the time when Berryman began *The Dream Songs*:

John had waited a long time for this poet's happiness. He had suffered agonies of delay. Now came the poems. They were killing him. . . . Inspiration contained a death threat. He would, as he wrote the things he had waited and prayed for, fall apart. Drink was a stabilizer. It somewhat reduced the fatal intensity.

What does this mean, "Inspiration contained a death threat"? Bellow is hot on the trail of a half-truth. When one is inspired, filled with the breath of some other power, many things die. The conscious ego dies, or at least falls back, when the inspiring powers speak. But is this a *threat*? Certainly it is a risk, like any change, but religions and artists have long held that this inspiration is joyful and enlivening, not threatening.

There seem to be two kinds of death: the 'greatful death' that opens outward with release and joy, and the bitter or stone death that tightens down on the self. An alcoholic death is of the second kind. The self collapses; it does not rise. Bellow is right, there was a relationship between this poet's drinking and his inspiration, but he has the structure of it wrong. For an alcoholic, imbibing itself is fatal to inspiration. The poems weren't killing Berryman. Drink was not the "stabilizer" that "reduced the fatal intensity." Alcohol was itself the "death threat."

It is my thesis here that this war, between alcohol and Berryman's creative powers, is at the root of the *Dream Songs*. I will show how their mood, tone, structure, style and content can be explicated in terms of alcoholism. Further, that Berryman himself (at the time he wrote the poems) was blind to this. His tactics, aesthetics and epistemology, were all wrong and by the end of the book booze had almost wholly taken over. He lost the war. The bulk of the *Dream Songs* were written by the spirit of alcohol, not John Berryman.

Before I unfold a particular example I want to say a few words related to the tone of the *Dream Songs*. As I outlined above, in the course of getting sober an alcoholic must deal daily with his own anger, self-pity, willfulness and so on. If he doesn't face these, the booze will latch onto them and keep him drinking. As the "Big Book" says, they "may be the dubious luxury of normal men, but for alcoholics these things are poison."

Self-pity is one of the dominant tones in the *Dream Songs*. To understand it we must first look at pity. William Blake wrote that "Pity divides the soul." Apparently a part of the soul goes out to a person we pity. A corollary to this is that one cannot grow or change and feel pity at the same time, for growth comes when the soul is whole and in motion. This is old wisdom, common in ancient tales. For example in Apuleius' story "Amor and Psyche" (lately revived by Erich

Neumann) Psyche, when she has to journey into the underworld, is warned by a tower that pity is not lawful down there. "As thou crossest the sluggish river, a dead man that is floating on the surface will pray thee, raising his rotting hands, to take him into the boat. But be thou not moved with pity for him, for it is not lawful." Another example: among the Zuni Indians, a gravedigger is supposed to be immune to pity, for if he pities the newly dead he will be vulnerable to their cries and they will carry him off.

In pity, when a part of the self goes out to the sufferer, the self is not free to move until the sufferer has been relieved of his hurt. So there are two situations in which pity is dangerous. One is that in which the self is in need of all its faculties to survive, as in Psyche's passage through the underworld. The other is the case in which the sufferer cannot be made whole again, as with the truly dead. It seems that death-energy is so strong that if a person identifies with the dying he will be hopelessly sucked in.

This is why Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead." When Jesus himself took pity on Mary and her tears over Lazarus, his own soul was torn. (St. John says that he "groaned in the spirit.") The interesting thing is that he could not raise the dead in this condition. Before he could act, he had to first address the Father in order to regain his wholeness. You cannot raise the dead if you have pity on them. It is only done with love and love's wholeness. Pity is directed to the past and present, love is directed toward the future. So Nietzsche says "All great love is above pity: for it wants to create what is loved!" It wants the future and pity is a stony place in the present.

Self-pity has the same structure, only it works entirely inside a person; he needs no outer object. His own soul is divided, to use Blake's image, and self-pity is the mechanism through which the division and its stasis are enforced and solidified. The self casts off its hurt part, sets it up as an object, and broods over it. Resentments work the same way and to a similar end, the maintenance of the status quo. In alcoholism they call it 'the poor-me's' and its metaphysics is "Poor me, poor me, pour me a drink."

In the end, all the dividing emotions—self-pity, pride, resentments, and so on—become servants of the disease of alcoholism. Like political palliatives, they siphon off healing energy and allow the sickening agent to stay in power. Their tone and mood are part of the voice of booze.

Let us look at a poem, one of the early, solid Dream Songs. When Robert Lowell reviewed the first book of Songs back in 1964 he chose to print Song 29 in full as "one of the best and most unified." It reads:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
 só heavy, if he had a hundred years
 & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
 Henry could not make good.
 Starts again always in Henry's ears
 the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

And there is another thing he has in mind
 like a grave Sienese face a thousand years
 would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of. Ghastly,
 with open eyes, he attends, blind.
 All the bells say: too late, This is not for tears;
 thinking.

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
 end anyone and hacks her body up
 and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
 He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
 Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
 Nobody is ever missing.

Though not apparent at first, this poem is deeply connected to alcohol. The last stanza describes what is known as a 'blackout,' a phenomenon of heavy drinking in which the drinker goes through periods of un-remembered activity. In a blackout one is not *passed* out; he goes to parties, drives home, has conversations and so forth, but afterwards he has no memory of what he has done. The next day he may meet someone on the street who thanks him for the loan and returns money, or he may find himself in an airport and call home only to discover he has inexplicably taken a plane halfway across the continent. Berryman gives an example in the novel. The main character is a teacher (so close to Berryman that we needn't maintain the fiction) who reports "my chairman told me one day I had telephoned a girl student at midnight threatening to kill her—no recollection, blacked out." This incident may be the actual basis of the last stanza here. (The misogyny of the Dream Songs would take another essay to unravel. Suffice it to say here that sexual anger and alcoholism are connected through similar misconceptions of human power. As it has been men who "get into power," men have traditionally outnumbered women alcoholics. This will change to the degree that women mistake feminism for a route to centralized power.)

This poem has one other personal allusion in it. When he was a 12-year-old boy, Berryman's father killed himself. (It is implied in the novel that his father may also have been alcoholic.) His suicide is the subject of several of the Dream Songs, especially numbers 76 and 384. In fact it lurks throughout the book. William Meredith reports that Berryman once said of the Dream Songs that "the first 384 are about the death of his father . . . and number 385 is about the illegitimate pregnancy of his daughter." This remark is as much truth as wit. I have no doubt Berryman believed it, certainly when he wrote the Songs and perhaps even when he was writing the novel. Though it is intentionally vague in this poem, if you had asked him what the "thing" was that sat down on Henry's heart, he would have said his father's suicide.

Let us return to Song 29. I take this poem to be about anxiety and I should say a few words about this to make it clear why it is not just the mood of the poem, but

the subject. Anxiety differs from fear in that it has no object. This means there is no *action* which will resolve the feeling. The sufferer who does not realize this will search his world for problems to attend in hopes of relieving his anxiety, only to find that nothing will fill its empty stomach. For example, anxiety is a major symptom of withdrawal from alcohol addition, in which case it has a cause—the sudden absence of the addicting drug—but still no object. There is still nothing to do to resolve the feeling. If the alcoholic in withdrawal begins to drink again, his anxiety may be relieved but not resolved; it is merely postponed with an anaesthetic glow.

Anxiety is a symptom not just of withdrawal, but of active alcoholism and it even plagues sober alcoholics long after their last drink. The mood in this poem is typical of alcoholic anxiety; it is intense, mysterious and desperate. This is not grief and this is not suffering. It is important to make this clear because both Berryman and his critics have seen the mood here as grief or suffering. But both of these differ from anxiety in that they are active and directed toward an end. The grief we feel when someone dies moves toward its own boundary. The mourning song usually lasts three days and its biological point, as it were, is that it leads out of itself. Grief that lasts much longer than a year does so because it has been blocked in some way. It is then pathologic, just as a blockage in the blood system is pathologic. In fairy tales the person who weeps and cannot stop finally turns into a snake, for unabated grief is not human.

Suffering, like grief, is an activity, a labor, and it ends. There are healthy ways to suffer—that is, ways which move with grace from pain to ease. This is not what happens either in the Dream Songs or in this poem.

Now let us look more closely at the content of Song 29. It is one of the strongest of the Dream Songs precisely because its vagueness is true to anxiety. Throughout the Songs the character Henry is bothered and doesn't know why. The cause of his pain is always abstract, "a thing" here; elsewhere "a departure" (1),† "something black somewhere" (92), and so on. Typically an anxious person does not realize this lack of content but projects his mood onto the outer world. Everyone else knows something is being projected because the proportions are all off, as when a dying man begins to worry about his cat. A strength of this poem is that Berryman does not unload his mood directly. However, behind the vagueness there are ghosts.

The first stanza I sense as a description of the recurrent and inescapable memory of his father's suicide. The anxiety is projected backwards. The second stanza has as its main image the "grave Sienese face." The reference is obscure to me but I associate it with art, religion and death ("grave"). It carries Berryman's sense of the future. His hope is that spiritual life and poetry will be the path out of his misery, but he fears he won't make it. (That this was in fact the form of his activity can be shown from other poems. In both Songs 73 and 99, for example, he

† Parenthetical numbers refer to the numbered Dream Songs.

approaches temples but is unable to make any contact. Song 66 has spiritual wisdom as its background but at the end, "Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad" and is reproached as he is by the Sienese face here.) The middle stanza of Song 29 is future directed and hopeless. It has in it a premonition, certainly the fear, of his own suicide.

Therefore the structure of the poem is the structure of his anxiety: it is felt as inescapable, it is projected backwards (onto the father's suicide) and forwards (onto his own), and he senses himself, in the blackout stanza, as an alienated field of violence between these two deaths.

We can now return to self-pity which I judge to be the final tone of this song and of the book as a whole. The Dream Songs do not move to a resolution. Berryman told Richard Kostelanetz in 1969: "Henry is so troubled and bothered by his many problems that he never actually comes up with solutions, and from that point of view the poem is a failure." The core mood in the poems is anxiety and dread, and when they leave that they do not rise out of it but slide sideways into intellectualizing, pride, boredom, talk, obfuscation, self-pity and resentment. This happens so often that these are the dominant tones of the Dream Songs. Here are a few examples of resentment and self-pity:

God's Henry's enemy. (13)
 Life, friends, is boring. (14)
 Henry hates the world.
 What the world to Henry
 did will not bear thought.
 Feeling no pain,
 Henry stabbed his arm and wrote a letter
 explaining how bad it had been
 in this world. (74)

All this is being scrutinized in the critical literature about Berryman under the fancy handle of "the epistemology of loss." But it's really just an alcoholic poet on his pity-pot. Not having decided if he wants to get well he is reinforcing his disease with a moan. The poems articulate the moods and methods of the alcoholic ego. But as the "Big Book" says, "when harboring such feelings we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the Spirit. The insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again. And with us, to drink is to die." This means that when approached by an alcoholic with a magnificent problem, all years a-drip with complication and sorrow, one's response has to be "Yes, but do you want to get sober?" To become involved in the pain before the disease has been arrested is to help the man or woman stay sick.

Berryman's father killed himself more than forty years before these poems were written. It is a hard judgment, but inescapable, that the use of the father's death here and elsewhere in the Dream Songs amounts to self-pity. Certainly there is

grief and anger, but in the end the memory of that death is used as a device in a holding action of the alcoholic ego. I think Berryman himself saw this before he died. I presume he is referring to the two books of *Dream Songs* (1964 and 1968) when he writes in the novel of his "self-pity, rage, resentments—a load so great I've spent two well-known volumes on it."

When making judgments like these the question arises whether or not Berryman was trapped. If he couldn't resolve his pain for reasons beyond his control, then his expressions of it are not self-pity. This is important because this was Berryman's sense of himself. He identified with the trapped and oppressed: Anne Frank, Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Job, Jeremiah in the *Lamentations* and so on. Can an alcoholic be classified in this group? In one sense yes, he is trapped: once the booze has possessed him it also baffles his healing powers, so that demanding he simply quit drinking is a bit like asking a catatonic to snap out of it.

And yet people get sober. AA guarantees a day of sobriety to any who follow their suggestions. So once the alcoholic, like the early Christian, has heard the Word, he is no longer trapped; it comes down to whether or not he wants sobriety. And then the real war begins. It is when the active alcoholic is presented with the option of sobering up that he starts to defend his right to drink, to deny he is having any trouble with alcohol, to attack AA and to hoard his resentments and pain.

In the end Berryman's tone leads me to judge he was not trapped. The blues don't have that tone. They are not songs of self-pity. Leadbelly or Billie Holiday have more resonance than the *Dream Songs* precisely because they were not divided against themselves by their oppressor (as an alcoholic is) and because the enemy is identified (not vague as in Berryman) and the self is in motion. Likewise the strength of Anne Frank is that her diary is direct, not whiny. Berryman was lost and in pain, but not trapped.

and something can (has) been said for sobriety
but very little. (57)

Why drink so, two days running?
two months, O seasons, years, two decades running?
I answer (smiles) my questions on the cuff:
Man, I been thirsty. (96)

This voice is to alcohol what the Uncle Tom is to the racist.

I want to turn now to the structural innovations, the emotional plot, of the *Dream Songs*. As a person becomes alcoholic he becomes divided inside and typically turns into a con-man. The booze-hustler in him will command all of the self's true virtues to maintain its hold. He has a double voice then: sincerity with a motive. Berryman's device of having his central figure, Henry, be a white man in black face is an accurate imitation of this. Henry has become a con-man and can't figure out why. His mood is accurate to alcoholism: he is anxious, guilt-ridden, secretly proud, baffled and driven. "Huffy Henry hid the day/unappeasable Henry sulked" (1).

As Berryman wrote, Henry has "suffered an irreversible loss." He knows somewhere that he is not responsible for it and yet he can't escape it either. His sidekick in the poems, a black man who calls him Mr. Bones, is exactly like the alcoholic spouse who keeps saying "You're suffering, you must be guilty." They conspire in keeping each other unhappy.

When Berryman says that the book is a "failure" in terms of finding a solution to Henry's problems, it seems clear that he would have preferred to work with Henry, to exorcise him or at least objectify him and his loss. But this is a disease and not susceptible to such powers. "Will power is nothing. Morals is nothing. Lord, this is illness," he wrote in the novel. That is, when confronted by the will and the ego, alcohol always wins. James Dickey noticed that when a Dream Song gets off the ground, Berryman gets it there "through sheer will and guts." Some of the poems do work this way, through will power, like Song 29. But they are oddly empty, like screams.

The will is a power and a necessary one, but by itself it is neither creative nor healing. But it is Berryman's tool, and this is why I said earlier that he loses his fight with alcohol because his tactics and epistemology are all wrong. Of course it did not help him that these misunderstandings about power and willfulness are everywhere imitated in our civilization.

The original design of the Dream Songs has a resonant tension that is lost as the spirit of alcohol (Henry) takes over. This begins in Book III. Berryman's inspiration in Book IV was to kill Henry off. The poems are written from the grave. My guess is that he hoped to cleanse him through a night journey. It fails. Henry leaves the grave in Song 91 and it is the resurrection of a material spirit: the media invoke Henry to rise; he does and immediately calls for a double rum. The last stanza I judge to be Berryman's horror at this, caught in the gut assumption that if the spirit of alcohol won't die, he'll have to:

A fortnight later, sense a single man
upon the trampled scene at 2 a.m.
insomnia-plagued, with a shovel
digging like mad. Lazarus with a plan
to get his own back, a plan, a stratagem
no newsman will unravel.

Berryman always insisted that Henry was "an imaginary character, not the poet, not me." Everyone has disregarded this as a poet's whim, for the two are so clearly connected. When Berryman goes to Ireland, Henry goes; when Berryman is visited by the BBC, Henry is visited, and so forth. So we have said that Henry is only a thin disguise for Berryman. But the opposite is more accurate: during those years, Henry came out of the book and possessed his creator. Berryman was reduced to a shadow. He hardly appears in Book VII at all. Its flatness and silly pride are nothing but booze talking. Nowhere can you find the passion, insight,

erudition and music that mark Berryman's earlier poetry. "He went to pieces./ The pieces sat up & wrote" (331).

As a final part of this look at the Dream Songs I want to say a few words about their style. The innovations are fairly well represented by the last stanza of Song 29. They are mostly syntactical oddities: mixed tenses ("never did Henry . . . hacks") and reordered phrases ("he reckons, in the dawn, them up"). It is a deliberately broken speech which is striking when it fills with music and alternates with direct statement. Songs 29 and 1 are both good examples. The voice is reminiscent of and drawn from several sources: black blues and dialect, baby talk, drunk talk, and the broken syntax of extreme anxiety.

Why was Berryman drawn to these sources? The connections are in power relationships. In a power structure, dialect is the verbal equivalent of the slave's shuffle. It is an assertion of self in an otherwise oppressive situation. It says: "I'll speak your language, but on my own terms." Baby talk works the same way. It is the speech equivalent of the child's pout. Both are signs that there is a distance between real personal power and desired personal power. And yet neither of them is a true confrontation of that distance. They reveal that the imbalance has been neither accepted *nor* rejected, for such would lead to direct speech. When the child pouts he doesn't want his parents to leave. When the slave shuffles he has been baffled into the myth that he has no internal power and his only hope is to cajole a piece of the action out of the master. The cloying voice depends on the audience it hates. It is divided, identifying with a power not its own and hoping to control that power through verbal finesse. This is the style of the con-man.

In a case of real and inescapable oppression, stylized speech might be an assertion of self. But this would be short term; when it becomes a way of life, it is something different. In these poems, written by a grown white male, the voice is a whine. When the child whines he doesn't want the grown-ups to go away and when Berryman writes like this he doesn't want to give up the booze.

The question arises: who is the mean parent/slave driver? At times Berryman thought it must be God himself. He commonly equated Henry with Job, announcing that "God's Henry's enemy" (13). But this won't wash. As before, the tone is the tip-off. Job is neither cynical nor ironic. What successfully imitates anxiety in Song 29 deflates into weary irony as it is spread over 385 songs. Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. This is why it is so tiresome. People who have found a route to power based on their misery—who don't want to give it up though it would free them—they become ironic. This sustained complaint is the tone of active alcoholism.

The stylistic innovations in the Dream Songs are epistemologically wrong—an alcoholic is not a slave—and this is why they are so unsatisfying. The style obscures and mystifies, it does not reveal. Berryman himself knew there was a growing distance between his style and his self. The question is honesty. The more

developed the style became, the more he was conning himself, reinforcing the walls of his cage. So in *Recovery* when he tries to write out some self-criticism he reads it over and comments to himself: "No style: good." This is a remarkable sentence for a poet to write.

His last poems, written at the same time as the novel, move away from the old style. They were written in a drying-out place where Berryman had gone for help. Judging from the novel, many of his old ploys were falling away as he attended to his disease and, more importantly, as he attended to other people and received their attention. Through other people he began to feel a "personal sense of God's love," which he had not had since his father's suicide. The poems from this period still have syntactic twists, now more like an old nerve tic, but on the whole they are direct and clear, descriptive and loving:

Jack went it was, on Friday, against the word
of the staff & our word . . . violent relief
when Sunday night he & his son, absurd
in ties & jackets, for a visit brief
looked back in, looking good.

I have shown that the Dream Songs can be explicated in terms of the disease of alcoholism. We can hear the booze talking. Its moods are anxiety, guilt and fear. Its tone is a moan that doesn't revolve. Its themes are unjust pain, resentment, self-pity, pride and a desperate desire to run the world. It has the con-man's style and the con-game's plot. It depends for its survival on an arrogance of will, ascendant and dissociated from the whole. These poems are not a contribution to culture. They are artifacts of a dying civilization, like one of those loaves of bread turned to lava at Pompeii.

The way out of self-pity and its related moods is to attend to something other than the self. This can be either the inner or the outer world, either dreams and visions which do not come from the self, or other people and nature. The point is that the self begins to heal automatically when it attends to the non-self. Pablo Neruda is a good example of a poet who did this. He had great trust of the interior world and turned to it automatically when he was otherwise isolated. And when I asked him once what made the melancholy of his early work disappear, he spoke immediately of politics. The Spanish Civil War made him change. "That was my great experience," he said. "It was a defeat but I never considered life a defeat after that. I had faith in human things and in human people."

Berryman found neither of these things. I think his trust was broken early in both the inner and the outer worlds and he was never able to regain it despite his desire. He had no politics except patriotism and nostalgia. He refused to read at the first anti-war readings in Minneapolis. He wrote the only monarchist poem (Song 105) to come out of the sixties. And there is no spiritual energy or dream-consciousness at all in the Dream Songs.

This leads us to the question of how Berryman was handled by the rest of us. We did not handle him well. Few of his critics faced the death in these poems. Most were snowed, as he was himself, by Berryman's style and brains, as if they thought rhetoric, intellectualizing and references to famous friends were what poetry is all about. At the end Berryman began to see that his fame was built on his sickness. The character in his novel "really thought, off and on for twenty years, that it was his duty to drink, namely to sacrifice himself. He saw the products as worth it." Berryman felt that "the delusion that . . . my art depended on my drinking . . . could not be attacked directly. Too far down."

This is not true. He could have attacked it. But it would not have been easy. He would have had to leave behind a lot of his own work. He would have had to leave his friends who had helped him live off his pain for twenty years. And the civilization itself, which supported all of that, weighs a great deal. *Life* magazine unerringly made the connection between our civilization and disease and went straight to Berryman as their example of the poet from the sixties. They called the piece "Whiskey and Ink, Whiskey and Ink," and there are the typical photographs of the poet with the wind in his beard and a glass in his hand. Berryman bought into the whole thing. Like Hemingway, they got him to play the fool and the salesman the last ten years of his life.

I am not saying that the critics could have cured Berryman of his disease. But we could have provided a less sickening atmosphere. In the future it would be nice if it were a little harder for the poet to come to town drunk and have everyone think that it's great fun. You can't control an alcoholic's drinking any more than he can, but the fewer parasites he has to support the better. No one knows why some alcoholics get sober and others don't. They say in AA that it takes a desire to stop drinking and, after that, the grace of God. Here are Berryman's words on this, with which I will close.

Is escape . . . too difficult? Evidently, for (1) the walls are strong and I am weak, and (2) *I love my walls* . . . yet some *have escaped*. . . . With an effort we lift our gaze from the walls upward and ask God to take the walls away. We look back down and they have disappeared. . . . We turn back upward at once with love to the Person who has made us so happy, and desire to serve Him. Our state of mind is that of a bridegroom, that of a bride. We are married, who have been so lonely heretofore.

Sources

I

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II

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