

YEARNING FOR DARKNESS IN HENRY'S FATE & OTHER POEMS

Ileana-Silvia CIORNEI
Lecturer Ph.D., University of Pitești

The term *confessional* was used by Philip Rosenthal reviewing the poetry collection *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell in 1959 where he identified two major aesthetic currents of American poetry after the war. One was Confessional poetry represented by Lowell, Plath, Roethke, Berryman and Sexton and the other the Projectivist movement. Confessionalism is a poetic mode inspired by Freudian interpretations of the self “reinforced by echoes of gloomy puritan views of man” (Mihailă, 1995, 28). In a cultural and psychological crisis, the poet exposes the intricate relation between self and the world, searching to cure his vulnerability and neurosis. *77 Dream Songs* (and its sequel *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*) centers on a character named Henry who bears a striking resemblance to Berryman, a fictional version of himself. These poems establish Henry as an alienated, self-loathing, and self-conscious character. In 197, John Haffenden published *Henry's Fate & Other Poems*, a selection of *Dream Songs* that Berryman wrote after *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* but did not publish. Puzzling and funny, wandering between allusion and frankness, the volume expresses once again his fears, feelings and obsession of death which finally helped him leap into darkness from *Washington Avenue Bridge* in Minneapolis.

Keywords: Confessional poetry, emotion, experience, self, death

The most well-known achievements of Berryman were *77 Dream Songs* in 1964 and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1968 which brought him fame, recognition and several awards. In spite of his chaotic lifestyle of alcohol and drugs, adultery and divorce, madness and hospitalization, he was an erudite and a brilliant teacher, author of poems, essays and prose works who wanted to be remembered as a man who worked hard.

Henry's Fate is a volume which gathered poems written by Berryman from 1967 and 1972 with the last one written within forty hours of his death; it includes only a part of his uncollected and unpublished work. Most poems of *Henry's Fate* were written when Berryman was working on *Love & Fame and Delusions* and were somehow put aside by the author, presumably due to “length, subject or even incongruence to the basic themes and structures” of his two first volumes and to the fact that in 1967 he had nearly completed his *His Toy His Dream His Rest* (Haffenden, John, Introduction, *Henry's Fate*, 1977: xi). Accordingly, in 1964, Berryman said in an interview in The Minneapolis Tribune that “if a further volume of Songs were to be published, it might be called Addenda”. The reason is that “the two volumes of *Dream Songs* have taken Berryman's character Henry as far as he will go” and if there is a third volume, the reader should fit the poems in among the published ones. The volume *Henry's Fate* includes a group of poems written in Europe in 1967 which he had no occasion to print and some others written occasionally in the following two years. During that period, Berryman was working on the novel *Recovery*, on life of Shakespeare but in 1971 he was already a sick and tired man due to alcoholism and unrelenting study and work; this could explain why his new venture of Songs made no further progress.

Confessionalism is a poetic mode inspired by Freudian interpretations of the self “reinforced by echoes of gloomy puritan views of man” (Mihailă, 1995, 28). In a cultural and psychological crisis, the poet exposes the intricate relation between self and the world,

searching to cure his vulnerability and neurosis. The term confessional was used by Philip Rosenthal reviewing the poetry collection entitled *Life Studies* written by Robert Lowell in 1959 where he identified two major aesthetic currents of American poetry after the war. One was Confessional poetry represented by Lowell, Plath, Roethke, Berryman and Sexton and the other the Projectivist movement.

Christopher Beach argues that “the so-called ‘confessional’ movement represented an important change in the way the American poetic mainstream approached the writing of poetry” (2003: 154). Furthermore, he states that “the poems were presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were very emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure” (2003: 155). The main figures of the confessional movement are Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman, among others; their works focus on issues such as traumas, divorce, infidelity, childhood neglect and mental disorders such as alcoholism and depression.

Rosenthal states that Confessionalism removes the mask poets used to disguise themselves with (1991:110). “Confessional poetry condenses all the fears, traumas, states, and experiences of writers, reflecting the reality of a time in an intimate and straightforward approach that shapes poetry and influences poets up to this day”. (Torres, Alejandro, 2018:6)

Alongside other poets of his generation such as Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Berryman was identified with “Confessionalism” – and, although he rejected the label, 77 *Dream Songs* (and its sequel *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*) along with the poems in *Henry’s Fate* are autobiographical and center on a character named Henry, seen as a fictional version of Berryman. All poems have an imaginary central character called Henry, a white American in early middle age who has suffered irreversible losses and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend who in pseudo-black dialect, occasionally addresses Henry as “Mr. Bones.”

These poems establish Henry as an alienated, self-loathing, and self-conscious character. Whether he identified with him or not, Berryman created in Henry, with his laments and sensitive acute observations, one of the most memorable characters in 20th Century literature and, established a unique poetic voice.

Berryman is a lyric poet, which means that his poems express intense personal emotion, and which records not only the depths of his own degradation but also love and ecstasy. When asked to define the most important elements of poetry, John Berryman replied, “Imagination, love, intellect—and pain. Yes, you’ve got to know pain.” (<https://www.newyorker.com › Books › John Berryman>)

Similar to the first volumes, in *Henry’s Fate*, Henry is in a state of perpetual transformation expressed with self-deprecating irony. “When the characterization of Henry is successful, we are given a picture of a comic poet-hero, taking upon himself our suffering, and bodying it forth in song...” (Arpin, Gary, 1078:62) in order to perform his self-expression.

Now he travels in Europe:

*Legman assman bustman, abominable Henry
wandered thro’ France and Italy agog*

with Venice his favourite :

*Canal smell. City that lies on the sea like a cork
of stone and gold, manifold throng your ghosts
of murdered and delight
in Greece:*

*Henry, staggering, elderly, black, nearly fell off the Acropolis
it is so damned old high.*

studies art history and literature :

*Shall willing Henry study art history
or Number or write letters or test the text
of the Merry Wives tonight?*

drinks:

*leaving Henry solo, honey
to that terrible booze bruising his future, dear,
solo, with accurate money
&a brain, a brain, that should have left him clear
years ago, honey, off this stuff he drinks,*

takes drugs:

*Haldol & Serax, phenobarbital,
Vivactil by day; by deep night Tuinal
&and Thorazine,
kept Henry going, like a natural man.*

visits his former wife:

*Deep she sank into Henry's mind, such years ago.
Now with her children & her lawyer husband O
she is visited by Henry.*

reads Shakespeare:

*I'm reading the Q of Much Ado for its own sakes
I find I made notes to keep,*

remembers his women:

*Sinewy Henry let his ladies hang
down from his arms, in arabesques, whilst he
sought formulas for them,*

gives candies to his daughters:

*His wife was out on errands. He sighed and scratcht.
The little girls were fiddling with the telephone.
They wanted candy, the which he gave them.*

meditates about New Year:

*He shopped until he bled, all the way downtown.
He constructing lists of his surviving friends
and of the others the ends,*

talks about money:

*Glistening Henry freed himself from money
by making enough. Not much, enough.*

dreams about his daughter's future:

*Daddy parked at the curb,
will watch his baby, muttering in Latin,
scrambling up the steps of Smith or Vassar saying
I want a Yale man with a yacht
after my degrees,*

prays:

Great flaming God, bend to my troubles, dear

remembers past loves and loss

*Immeasurably sad, O long ago
she ceased her being with mine, mine like a fuse
sputtering toward a common doom.*

Puzzling and funny, wandering between allusion and frankness, the volume also approaches some of the themes that continue to trouble Henry in later Dream songs like his relationships with women and his obsession with death and suicide. Many poems suggest weariness and despair, mental states always associated with grief, life troubles, old age and inevitable breakdowns, in Berryman's case both nervous and marital; moreover, alcoholism and a medical condition called nervous exhaustion, ruined his health:

*Codger Henry, desperately tired,
nevertheless got fed up with his state
which alas only he could fix.*

Berryman witnessed many ups and downs but still says so beautifully :

*So and so tired I cannot cast a shadow.
It's Bellevue and the Tombs if I'm found out.
How have I come so far?
Exploited Henry passed his avatar.*

In certain poems Henry uses the first persona :

*Who coined despair? I hope you never hear,
my lovely dear, of any such goddamned thing.*

With bitter irony the poet passes to Eros as the only thing which can oppose despair :
*Who made you up? That was a thin disguise:
The soul shows through. You are my honey dear.
Come, come live with me.*

In spite of the funny side of his poetry, Berryman can be easily seen as a poet of mourning. The *Songs* focus around, as Berryman said, at “an irreversible loss”. The primary loss is Henry’s father, who like Berryman’s biological father, John Allyn Smith, committed suicide when Henry was a child. On the other hand, grief, in *The Dream Songs*, is more general. There is the grief of losing contemporary poets (“*I’m cross with god who has wrecked this generation*”). There is the bewildering childlike fear of watching the older generation go (“*The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who’s there?*”). (Leith, Sam, <http://uk.trem.media › books › 2014 › oct › 24 › happ.>):

*So here failed Henry sits, counting his losses,
not wholly in despair and growing hungry.*

And there is a sense of an irreparable “departure” that afflicts not just Henry but all of us, the tragic side of human condition, which stands as a permanent undercurrent in all *Dream Songs*. Loss creates depression and Henry experiences is fully:

*With arms outflung the clock announced: Ten-twenty.
Dozen of demons sprang & preyed on Henry.
All on a heavy morning.
The baby was ill, the sky was dark, the I
was Id, somebody put the sky on, like a lid,*

The poem bearing the title *Henry’s Fate* expresses in private but open intensity his self-conscious feelings and starts with the lines :

*All projects failed, in the August afternoon
he lay & cursed himself & cursed his lot.*

Henry is incessantly preoccupied with death. Death as an image and a leitmotif often appears as a general concept, sometimes associated with Henry’s death:

*Death all endeth, Henry to Sybil saith.
Sybil regurgitates, no word from her.
Ah, no word from her.
Flashing existence seems from her to incur
a bitter silence, vomit, assent to his death
Black as it must occur.*

Also, death allusions and images often accompany his hero:

*Gulls chains voices bells: honey we're home.
I don't care if they cremate Henry or not,
December: the noblest. After the pains & glories of the Fall
dead winter: snow car-high, snow shoulder-high,
snow cinema-high:/hope shoulder-high for death:*

Death wish and suicidal allusions are common to Henry; apparently, Berryman never recovered from the childhood shock of his father's suicide and prone to emotional instability, often alludes to it.

*Her mother runs
at the shout, but then there is a shot.*

The poem *A Nerve is Pinched* refers to the state of Henry who is “damaged” & also “crushed” and alludes to Massada, the place in the Judean desert where all survivors killed themselves as an alternative to slavery. Just like Life, Death is a permanent and perpetual choice for Henry:

*The subject? Henry house & his troubles, yes
with his wife & mother & baby, yes
we're now at the end, enough*

*Henry's destiny? he fought it tooth & rime
country to country, hanging on. When he's had enough
he'll mount into the dark*

However, since Henry goes far beyond the experiences of an individual, we cannot limit our reading of Henry as John Berryman. Such a reading is correct, but can be considered rather

incomplete, and likely to result in narrowing Henry's complex function as a literary character.” “Distancing the character of Henry from the poet John Berryman allows for a wider range of interpretive possibilities. If we read Henry as a mere filter for the poet's thoughts and desires, or a vehicle for his so-called “confessions,” then we are likely to overlook a great deal of the metapoetic commentary revealed through Henry's struggle to express himself”. (Pollifrone, Max: 14).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arpin, Gary, *The Poetry of John Berryman*, Port Washington, Kennikat Press, 1978
Beach, Christopher, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2003
Berryman, John, *Henry's Fate and Other Poems*, Introduction by John Haffenden, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977

Caleshu, Anthony, *Dramatizing the Dreadful: Affective Postures in The Dream Songs. After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman*, Ed. Phillip Coleman and Philip McGowan. *DQR Studies in Literature* 38, 101-120, 2007

Mihăilă, Rodica, *Turning the Wheel*, Editura Universității București, 1995

Pollifrone Max, *Babbling, Braining, and Brooding Mr. Bones: An Exploration of the Metapoetic in 77 Dream Songs*, Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository, <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca>

Rosenthal, M. L., *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews*, Persea Books, New York, 1991

Torres, Alejandro, *Poetics of Depression: Mental Illness and Suicide in Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton's Poetry*. Dissertation Paper, Treball de Fi de Grau, Universitat de Barcelona, 2018

WEBOGRAPHY

<http://diposit.ub.edu> › *Otal, Alejandro TFG.pdf.pdf*

<http://uk.trem.media> › *books* › 2014 › oct › 24 › *happ.*

<https://www.theatlantic.com> › *archive* › 2015/03 › *the-...*

<https://www.newyorker.com> › *Books* › *John Berryman*