FORM AND DISCONTENT:
THE PROSODY OF THE DREAM SONGS

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When *The Dream Songs* was published in 1969, Elizabeth Bishop greeted it with a “Thank-You Note”, published in the *Harvard Advocate*.¹ It is a slight and occasional piece, playfully punning on “berries” and Berryman’s name, but it nonetheless affords an entry into his work. In the first couplet – “Mr Berryman’s songs and sonnets seem to say: / ‘Gather ye berries harsh and crude while yet ye may’ ” – there are at least three allusions to works by poets from the English tradition. The first line recalls Donne’s *Songs and Sonets*, while the second conflates Herrick (“Gather ye rosebuds, while ye may”) and Milton (“I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude” from “Lycidas”). After these textual allusions to English poetry, the second half of Bishop’s poem moves on to a specifically American experience that is non-literary and of the senses, evoking the astringent taste of the chokecherry. If nothing else, this suggests that what Bishop calls the “thick-bunched” fruit of *The Dream Songs* is something of an acquired taste. Certainly, it presents an enduring puzzle: while *The Dream Songs* is the most elaborate and sustained exercise of his particular poetic methods, and arguably constitutes his greatest achievement, Berryman’s Dream Song structure does not seem to have entered fully into the corpus of late twentieth-century poetry as an exemplary form.

“After thirty Falls” the degree to which Berryman’s poetry is being eroded by subsequent history seems remarkable. Where once he was an inevitable and insistent voice, he risks nowadays being consigned

to the status of a madman in our attic. It may be that the present
generation of readers is left uncomfortable and embarrassed by the
subject matter of many of the Songs. Sexual adventuring is now likely
to be regarded as predation; alcoholism and depression are conditions
to be treated and cured, and are not intrinsically interesting in
themselves; social faux-pas are not to be repeated; and grief is to be
kept within the bounds of decorum. Attitudes, which in their time
seemed daringly individual and innovative, are now regarded as
questionable and reprehensible.

It is not unusual for a poet’s reputation to dip after his death. The
details of Philip Larkin’s biography as they emerged had a notorious
effect on his posthumous reputation, because these details were
socially rebarbative to many of his readers. Indulgence of the poète
maudit, confessional and uncomfortable, appears to have been
replaced by an understandable preference that poets nowadays be
genial, adept at working a wine-and-cheese reception, and able to
exude affability on the book launch and poetry reading circuit that is
the cockpit of contemporary reputations. In Berryman’s case the
awkward aspects of the life are deeply embedded in the Dream Songs
themselves, and it may be simply that nowadays there is less of a
readership for poems based on a difficult and damaged life. The silent
criticism of the poems is, in part, a stricture on the behavior. The
prominence of Berryman’s own persona and experience has been an
issue from the outset, right from his disingenuous remarks about the
distancing of Henry. The distinction Berryman asserted between
Henry and himself has not ever been taken at face value. His use of
the stratagem is no more than a reminder of the distance to be
understood between the poetic first-person and the author: *The Dream
Songs* was, after all, written by a poet whose career was coincident
with the heyday of New Criticism and its insistence on the exclusion
of the poet as subject.

*The Dream Songs* is characterized by Helen Vendler as a sequence
of “Freudian cartoons”: with its repetitions and anecdotes in
freewheeling, free-associating language, the poem mirrors the regular
therapeutic interviews of psychoanalytic sessions.2 The Freudian
reference is also a reminder of the complexity of the personality that is
depicted through the different speakers and voices characterizing the

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