“ONE GRAND EXCEPTION”:

THE DREAM SONGS AS THEODICY?

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“But how should a man be just with God?” (Job 9:2)

Christopher Ricks, in a 1970 review of contemporary American poetry, argues that The Dream Songs might be read as a theodicy:

Like all good elegies (Lycidas as well as In Memoriam), the Dream Songs [sic] can’t but be a theodicy. Berryman’s poem, for all its fractures and fractiousness, is as intensely a theodicy – “a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil” – as In Memoriam; as intensely, and as equivocally. “God loves his creatures when he treats them so?”

This comment has been noted by a number of critics without any comprehensive investigation of its problematic nature. Ricks claims The Dream Songs to be an “equivocal” theodicy, and bolsters it here

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1 Christopher Ricks, “Recent American Poetry”, Massachusetts Review, XI/2 (Spring 1970), 336. Ricks’ assertion is, of course, also provocative with respect to Tennyson’s In Memoriam. Though an investigation of that poem as “theodicy” is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that it culminates in a positive declaration of God’s “one law … To which the whole creation moves”, a resolution that is missing from The Dream Songs.

with the standard dictionary definition, “a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil”. Yet if that is its meaning, the term itself seems ultimately to demand an annihilation of equivocality in favor of a revelation of divine order, a replacement of equivocation with vindication. A recognition of the difficulties surrounding the concept of “theodicy” must underpin any assessment of Ricks’ provocative application of the term to Berryman’s long poem.

The word “theodicy” is a product of the theological problem of evil, an issue that has been painstakingly explored by countless religious scholars and one that stretches back into the heart of scripture. The prophet Habbakuk laments, “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the Wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?”.3 A suffering Job asks, “Is it good unto thee that thou shouldst despite the work of thine hands, and shine upon the counsel of the wicked?”.4 Human rationality struggles to accommodate the coexistence of manifest worldly injustice and a moral framework of justice administered by an omnipotent and loving God. The specific term “theodicy” appeared in the eighteenth century to describe the structured philosophical response to this problem, and was coined by G.W.F. Leibniz in his 1710 volume Theodicée, written in reaction to the skeptical arguments of his contemporary Pierre Bayle. The word stems from the Greek theos, “God”, and dike, “justice”: a theodicy, then, according to its etymological components, is the conjunction or reconciliation of God and right – the revelation, that is, of an intact divine moral order behind and within morally corrupted quotidian reality. Leibniz’s attitude is marked by a fundamental urge towards resolution: “Concerning the origin of evil in its relation to God, I offer a vindication of his perfections that shall extol not less his holiness, his justice and his goodness than his greatness, his power and his independence.”5

The positivity of Leibniz’s work was famously attacked by Voltaire, who felt tragedies such as the 1755 Lisbon earthquake hopelessly undermined the notion that we are living in the best of all

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3 Habbakuk 1:13.
4 Job 10:3.