

The Freudian Lyric
John Berryman's Dream Songs

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Discussion

The most inclusive rubric that can be proposed for the lyric poetry written in America immediately after World War II is 'Freudian lyric' as many of the poets of postwar America found in the therapeutic hour (and its textual support in Freud's writings) not only themes for their poetry, but also new formal procedures shaping it. The choice is made here of Berryman's *Dream songs* because he is notably original in his Freudian inventions, and because his *Dream Songs* is a sequence drawing on the successivity of therapeutic interviews with their small anecdotal narratives.⁽¹⁾ Berryman had a good deal of experience with breakdowns and psychotherapeutic interventions. He was also an intellectual who had read widely in Freud and broke an early 'intellectual' verse style to invent a far more colloquial and quotidian sort of poetry influenced, maybe, by the primal sort of conversation that takes place in therapy. Another factor behind choosing Berryman is that he encountered a metaphysical void in leaving behind formal religion and found the Freudian master-narrative, with its emphasis on the inner life, a congenial replacement. He saw in the material of American daily life processed in the therapeutic hour a subject matter relatively untouched by literary

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The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

conventions and he followed the Muse of free association as a path to the Muse of lyric.⁽²⁾

Berryman seemed fated to intense suffering and self-preoccupation. His father, a banker, shot himself outside his son's window when the boy was twelve. The suicide haunted Berryman to the end of his own life, which also came by suicide. John Berryman was born John Smith in MacAlester, Oklahoma, in 1914. He took his new name from his stepfather, John McAlpine Berryman, also a banker. He received an undergraduate degree from Columbia College in 1936 and attended Cambridge University on a fellowship. He taught at Wayne State University in Detroit and went on to occupy posts at Harvard and Princeton.

His early work was published in a volume entitled *Five Young American Poets* in 1940. It reflects the influences of the Irish and British poets W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the Americans Hart Crane and Ezra Pound. Tremendously erudite and a brilliant teacher, Berryman in his early work *Poems* (1942) and *The Dispossessed* (1948) displayed great technical control in poems that remained firmly rooted in the conventions of the time.

It was not until the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956, when he was already in his forties, that he won widespread recognition and was acclaimed as a boldly original and innovative poet. Nevertheless, no one was prepared for the innovation that would follow, a collection that would seal Berryman's reputation as an essential American original: *77 Dream Songs*, which was published in 1964 and

awarded a Pulitzer Prize, unveiled the unforgettable and irrepressible alter egos "Henry" and "Mr. Bones" in a sequence of sonnet-like poems whose wrenched syntax, scrambled diction, extraordinary leaps of language and tone, and wild mixture of high lyricism and low comedy plumbed the extreme reaches of a human soul and psyche. In the succeeding years Berryman added to the sequence, until there were nearly four hundred collected as *The Dream Songs*.⁽³⁾

But the psyche that had been plumbed could not bear the strain; Berryman, who never recovered from the childhood shock of his father's suicide, was prone to emotional instability and heavy drinking throughout his life. Tragically, in 1972, he died by throwing himself off a bridge in Minneapolis. Though Berryman never got over the loss of his father, he eventually found a paternal source within his books.

Although Berryman absorbed Freud's ideas from his own reading and more generally from the culture of the time, it was through the poet's manic-depressive illness that he felt most acutely the influence of Freud, and that influence was more one of method or process than of theory. Meredith Skura makes the same distinction in *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*:

My emphasis on process draws attention to psychoanalysis as a method rather than as a body of knowledge, as a way of interpreting rather than as a specific product or interpretation. I am interested in psychoanalysis not so much for what it reveals about human nature, or even about the particular human being presently on the couch, but for the way in which it reveals anything at all. A sensitivity to the delicate changes in consciousness taking place moment by moment in the actual process of an analytic hour can

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

lead to a renewed awareness of the possibilities of language and narrative- an awareness that will increase our range of discriminations rather than reduce them to a fixed pattern, as the theory tends to do. The dynamic movement of the process brings us closer to what goes on in literature than the theory, with its rigid hypostatizations, can ever come.⁽⁴⁾

In suggesting that we may learn something about how literature works by looking at how psychoanalysis works, Skura, an American critic and psychoanalyst, is directing her remarks to people who read stories and poems, yet the same reasoning applies to those who write the stories and poems as well.

Psychoanalysis, or self-examination of any sort, implies a splitting of the self into that part which is to examine and that part which is to be examined; in this way the ego is split into an observing and an experiencing part so that the former can judge the irrational character of the latter. The experiencing part, in an analysis, is irrational because it has been set free from the control of the rational and allowed, or indeed, encouraged, to roam freely. Skura describes the process as one in which "One part of the mind is freely associating," while the other part, the "Observer" often "draws on the resources of logic and secondary process thinking discarded by free association, but its role is not to provide authoritative interpretation... instead, it provides new perspectives, finds new relationships, reorganizes figure and ground, and changes emphasis."⁽⁵⁾ She associates this characteristic of the psychoanalytic process with literature: the "Resemblance between psychoanalysis and literature lies in

their dynamic interaction: the interaction between the free-ranging play of the mind and the organizing response to it, and the continuing play which they contradict or confirm."⁽⁶⁾

The question which poses itself here is that: Does this split in the ego of the poet, as we encounter it in Berryman's poetry, serve an aesthetic or a more personal purpose? Or does it shape and form raw material into art by providing the poet with a huge amount of information about his inner life which is still waiting to be discovered. The answer to these questions seems possible by realizing the impossibility of separating the strands of self-examination from the strands of art in Berryman's poetry, and, indeed, their interdependence fortified both his life and his writing. The splitting of the ego into two parts, then, has itself a dual function: it permits the rational 'observing ego' to observe the experiencing self, and to shape the materials of the experience into art. Each function enters into and affects the other.

The Freudian lyric is a personal, egocentric poem which aims at analyzing the repressions of adulthood and trying to inch backward from the conflicts of the present to the childhood experiences to which they are related. This kind of lyric, then, tries to undo the repressions and thereby to restore to consciousness the full conflict as it had probably been conscious, if only for a fleeting moment, and as it would be conscious had the individual not been unwilling or unable to face up to it, and not tried to escape from it by repression. And although, Freudian poetry is sometimes called 'confessional poetry', one can see in the instance of Berryman's Dream Songs that it is "often precisely not confessional poetry as

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

there is no sin to confess, no way to make amends, and no one to be absolved. The therapeutic hour is concerned less with confession than with an analysis"⁽⁷⁾). What the Freudian poem does, therefore, is to analyze states of mind, and without analysis there is no poem. Of course, the means of analysis available to lyric are not in all respects the same as those available to the analyst; but the aim of the Freudian lyric is primarily analytic, not confessional. In lyric, the analytic movement is often, as it is in the *Dream Songs*, a structural one. In Freudian terms, Henry's 'free-floating guilt' would be seen as the sign of something repressed, not consciously available. "The structure of the poem, which locates the 'grave conscience face' between the two stanzas of Henry's guilt, suggests that what he has repressed is behaviour consonant with that austere profile, the sort of behaviour he still believes in, if in an unconscious way"⁽⁸⁾. The repression of chastity, the repression of asceticism, the repression of spiritual gravity, are odd things to mention in a Freudian context. But for Berryman, the adult's repression of his youthful religious superego is as great a cause of guilt as would be, in classic Freudian terms, the repression of libido.⁽⁹⁾

Berryman's *Dream Songs* are an account of a character, Henry, who speaks of himself in the first, second and third person and some times encounters a nameless friend who gives him usually ineffectual and often humorous advice. Although Berryman maintained that Henry was not himself but a white, middle-aged American man, sometimes appearing in a black face, who had suffered a tremendous loss, the poem is clearly a reflection of Berryman's own thoughts, obsessions,

pain and often darkly comic understanding of life. In these songs there are two main voices: Henry, the main protagonist, and his anonymous friend whom he sometimes addresses as 'Mr. Bones'. These two protagonists are characterized by Helen Vendler as the Id for Henry and the Superego for his friend. They are, in other words, the experiencing and observing parts of Berryman. The former, as symbolized by Henry, represents the unconscious, egocentric part which comprises the unorganized part of the personality structure that contains the basic drives. Henry, therefore, is the dark, inaccessible part of Berryman's personality which finds an outlet only in dreams. The latter, as symbolized by the nameless friend, represents the social conventions which prevent Henry from acting freely in the actual world. These two parts of Berryman's split under-selves talk to each other across a void, never able to find common ground and hence create a chaotic atmosphere which distorts the ego completely. In the first Dream Song, for example, one can see how Freudian concepts play out in the theatre of Henry's mind:

**Huffy Henry hid the day,
Unappeasable Henry Sulked,
I see his point,- a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
They could do it made Henry wicked and away.
But he should have come out and talked.
All the world like a woolen lover
Once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
Open for all the world to see, survived.
What he has now to say is along
Wonder the world can bear& be.**

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

**Once in Sycamore I was glad
All at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
And empty grows every bed.⁽¹⁰⁾**

The first two lines of the above Dream Song introduce Henry, the protagonist of The Dream Songs, and describe him from the outside ('huffy' being descriptive of behaviour) and from the inside ('unappeasable'). Reasonably, Henry is undergoing a kind of conflict between the internal and external worlds of being. This conflict is referred to in the first line when Henry retreats from the outside world "Hid the day" and moves to the internal world of the self. This conflict is based, according to Freud's theories, on the pleasure principle in which the individual struggles to achieve self-satisfaction. This concept unveils itself in Henry's mind as he thinks, "All the world like a woolen lover/Once did seem on Henry's side/ Then came a departure." Freud would most likely assert that such a departure, or mutual dispute, is the result of the splitting off of fantasy which occurs early in childhood. Therefore, The 'unappeasable Henry', who, conscious of the fantasy split, is discontented to the point where he removes himself from society, or as he puts it 'hid the day'. Instead, Henry retreats into his own mind to seek those sources of pleasure he received before the split. In the second stanza he reveals this point clearly and we discover why Henry is in such a rotten mood. The world was once on his side like a 'woolen lover', which suggests someone wrapped in a warm blanket, sharing Henry's side of the bed (and the empty bed emerges explicitly as the songs end). Following the departure, and the ensuing disappointment, Henry introduces the image of 'pried open'. In

this image, Henry suggests that "All the world" is like an oyster, pried open for its pearl. In this way, Henry is digging up his internal world seeking for the pearl which he lost in the external one. The word "Pry" also hints at secrets, knowledge of intimate details, and as a poet Henry has been, and still is, on display, his 'pride' in his 'long wonder' subject to the world's scrutiny. The world, however, no longer a single lover, is now a manipulative, impersonal 'they'.

The splitting of the self into an Id and ego becomes clearer in Dream Song 4 in which the ego expresses its sexual desire in a more direct way:

**Filling her compact & delicious body,
With chicken paprika, she glanced at me twice.
Fainting with interest, I hungered back,
And only the fact of her husband & four other people,
Kept me from springing on her.**

The first stanza of this poem declares that the ego is at work and Henry is expressing unconsciously his sexual desire towards a married woman while she is engaged in the inglorious act of eating. And the fact that she glanced at him makes him 'faint' with desire and 'hunger back' to make an intimate relationship with her. However, he is hindered back by realizing the presence of 'her husband & four other people'. In the second stanza Henry goes on expressing his desire towards her, but with a colloquial and informal manner:

**Or falling at her little feet and crying,
'you are the hottest one for years of night,
Henry's dazed eyes,
Have enjoyed, Brilliance.' I advanced upon,
(despairing) my spumoni.- Sir Bones: is stuffed,
De world, wif feeding girls.***

* these words and many others in *The dream Songs* are written in a black or negro-dialect, said, may be, by a black boy.

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

Henry's cry of love in this stanza is not a Petrarchan lover's cry of adoration nor a courtly love one, but it is a cry of desire which minimizes

the lady to her 'hottest' body. Another voice, yet, appeared in this stanza and that is of the Id stating consciously Henry's progressing despairingly in eating his Italian ice cream. The statement of the Id, however, is meant to associate two different, though interrelated, processes in Henry's inner and outer worlds: the first one is Henry's burning desire towards the lady and her hot body which is associated with the second process of eating the cold ice cream in a desperate manner. This association is meant to show how the ego is suppressed by the external reality of the presence of the husband who is ridiculed into 'the slob beside her':

**- Black hair, complexion Latin, jeweled eyes
Downcast... The slob beside her feasts... What
wonders is
She sitting on, over there?
The Restaurant buzzes. She might as well be on
Mars.
Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be
law against Henry.
- Mr. Bones: there is.**

The lover's admiration of the lady's beauty suddenly descends to a crude interest in her buttocks ('What wonders is/ She sitting on, over there?'); and the conventional beauty of the lady takes on tones of science fiction: 'She might as well be on Mars.'

It is interesting how Berryman invokes the image of ingestion throughout this poem to approach Henry's sexually

repressed desire. Henry describes the woman as a compact and delicious person, as if she were something he could potentially eat. She appears to be consuming chicken paprika and the 'slob beside her' is also feasting, while Henry is left only to 'hunger back.' Henry's question, 'Where did it all go wrong?' marks a kind of desperate nostalgia for a lost animal past in which sexuality is imagined as restrained.

This dream song points strongly to all the divisions and interactions of the psychic faculties. In this situation, Henry's thoughts reveal the conflict between the Id and the ego, as well as the role of the external world (the husband, the four other people, and the unnamed friend) which galvanizes Henry's superego. Furthermore, one can consider what Freud calls the "primordial conflict"⁽¹¹⁾ if one dichotomized the song by transposing both the positive and negative parts of the pleasure principle on Henry's inclination to 'spring on her' and fulfill his appetite for sexual pleasure, but shortly thereafter he opts to avoid any displeasure that may come about through the husband and four others. Ultimately, Henry's situation results in the renunciation of sexual pleasure which produces the twofold resentment directed at both society and Henry himself. Henry, resentful of these aim-inhibiting social conventions, asks 'Where did it all go wrong?' And, resentful of his own intentions, comments that there 'should be a law against me'. So what is Henry left with? According to Freud, Henry must depend on deflection, surrogate satisfactions, and intoxication to attain pleasure. Throughout *The Dream Songs* Henry mostly depends on intoxication for pleasure because, as indicated in the first dream song, he can not be appeased by artificial

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

sources of pleasure. As a result, Henry has bouts of anxiety, depression, euphoria, and is essentially neurotic.

Helen Vendler states that there is "A third ingredient of desire in *The Dream Songs* besides those of body and mind, sexuality and idealization, and that is the desire of the conscience."⁽¹²⁾ The conscience clearly wants something better for Henry; but it appears in *The Dream Songs* as an alienated voice, speaking from the other end of the minstrel stage from Henry. The fundamental staging of *The Dream Songs* as a comic interlude in black face with the rebellious Henry on the left and the taciturn and wise 'straight man' on the right has roots going back, of course, to the good and bad angels on the medieval stage competing for the soul of man. Nonetheless, for all its debt to medieval drama, Berryman's staging of *The Dream Songs* ultimately mirrors, as it seems, the classic analytic encounter. Within the analyst's office, the client is free to recount his most shameful wishes or dreams, to become his own Id; and the therapist serves in part, as Henry's unnamed friend does, as a blank wall on which to project behaviour. And, like Berryman's nameless end man, the therapist is also a reminder of the reality principle. By going back to Dream Song 4, one can see that there are two interventions of the end man: the first intervention remarks on the delusion of mentally idealizing one particular love-object: '- Sir Bones: is stuffed,/ De world, wif feeding girls.' This remark has absolutely no effect on Henry, who goes on ingesting, along with his spumoni, the sight of his unattainable lady. The second intervention checks Henry's melodramatic cry, 'where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law

against Henry,' by the succinct echo '- Mr. Bones: there is.' The 'straight man' duly has invoked the religious law, specifically the commandment forbidding the coveting of another's wife. This remark silences Henry temporarily, because it has literally taken the words out of his mouth; this suggests that the other end man is the conscience.

Successive sessions of psychiatric therapy may be seen as another form of the "sessions of ... silent thought."⁽¹³⁾ The identical length of each therapeutic session, over time, perhaps helps to generate the strict eighteen-line form of *The Dream Songs*. Any change in the social order and psychological surrounding of any poet is capable of creating a new form of art. And the Freudian poem is perhaps an inescapable evolutionary form once Berryman began a sedulous examination of the inner life and family romance.

Therefore, Henry is so much a part of Berryman that the poet could scarcely imagine himself as a personality without the responses Henry embodied. Yet the end-man conscience represented something equally genuine to Berryman the man, and to Berryman the watchful artist, as well. The unnamed friend reminds Henry of what Henry, behind his body thoughts, already knows; and the friend is unfailingly courteous and kind, even in his mockery. *The Dream Songs*, one must always recall, are written not by Henry, not by the courteous end-man conscience, but by Berryman the writer, not the incompetent historical Berryman, but by the poet who never lost his respect for accuracy of language, and who eventually found a miraculous comic balance. And how clear-minded the poet is, savaging each of Henry's pretensions even

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

as he watches Henry engage in them. Unlike the analyst-conscience, Henry's nameless friend, is "ruthlessly pictorial and relentlessly analytic" and he is the ever "fastidious and aloof artificer making something ludicrous and touching out of the dreadful given of life, his wretched illnesses and their humiliating manifestations in behaviour."⁽¹⁴⁾

Henry, as the perpetual rebel against the law of the father, is shown to be dogged by a perpetual and unidentifiable free-floating anxiety and sense of homicidal guilt. Or, when the depressive side of bipolar illness is ascendant in Berryman, Henry is presented as paralyzed by a pervasive apathy, an unwillingness to play even his own game. Here is the opening lines of Dream Song 14:

**Life, friends is boring. We must not say so.
After all the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
We ourselves flash and yearn,
And moreover my mother told me as a boy,
(repeatingly) 'ever to confess you're bored.
Means you have no,
Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
Inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
Literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes,
As bad as Achilles.**

Berryman's debt to the lyric tradition appears in Henry's appeal to Romantic gestures, 'the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,/ we ourselves flash and yearn.' On the other hand, in Henry's frame of mind the entire Western literary tradition is of absolutely no use, and so itself becomes a lower-case in which Achilles' wrath is reduced to 'plights & gripes.'

'literature bores me,' says Henry, seeing himself as bad as Achilles. *The Dream Songs* visibly adopt certain features of the long autobiographical poems originated in American literature in which the poet talks about himself and takes the main incidents to be the motifs of their writing. This is also true in Berryman's poems in which the suicide of his father forms the pivotal axis to Henry's loss and confusion throughout *The Dream Songs*.

The Freudian lyric supports the wounded soul, and does not accuse it; it lays bare the mechanism behind the guilt, and does not accept it as necessarily founded on fact. At most, it traces guilt or madness to its origin in family history, or its origin in a pathological scrupulosity, or to a repression of one side of the self; it then finds aesthetic means to enact its analysis, and can go no further. It contemplates the unleashed primitive emotions and language of the Id without concealment, as we can see in Dream Song 384, Henry's fantasy of killing his already-dead father. In this dream song, Henry goes to his banker-father's grave in Florida, and lets his rage, hoarded from childhood, have its lyric say:

**The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done,
I stand above my father's grave with rage,
Often, often before,
I've made this awful pilgrimage to one,
Who cannot visit me, who tore his page,
Out: I come back for more,**

**I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave,
Who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn,
O ho alas alas,
When will indifference come, I moan & rave,
I'd like to scabble till I got right down,
Away down under the grass.**

And ax the casket open ha to see,
Just how he's taking it, which he sought so hard,
We'll tear apart,
The mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry,
Will heft the ax once more, his final card,
And fell it on the start.

The suicide of Berryman's father forms the common element of the self-splitting which is the major technique used in *The Dream songs*. And the aesthetic problem Berryman sets himself when he decides to write actions and discourse for his unmanageable Id has been solved in this poem, as elsewhere, by relying on broad strokes. The Id is represented in several ways: by incoherence of effect ('O ho alas alas/ When will indifference come'); by childish regression of action and words ('I'd like to scabble till I got right down/ away down'); and by interspersed melodramatic nonsense syllables of revenge ('open ha to see,' grave clothes ha & then'). The final scene, as Henry in self-pluralizing wish ('we') takes an ax to his father's casket, rips the decayed wrappings of the corpse, and then drives the ax into his father's body, resembles an unconscious dream of Berryman taking revenge upon his father because of his suicide and leaving him alone in this cruel world. It is this desire to express himself, or to imagine himself doing things he could not or would not think of doing them, which motivates Berryman to write *The Dream Songs*. One might think that without the madness that sent him into therapy, Berryman might not have found Henry; and without the analyses conducted in therapy, he might not have found the literary artifice with which to represent Henry.

To conclude one can see that *The Dream Songs* came into being after Berryman turns inward for self-scrutiny. It was when he began to hear his own seductively sulky and comic inner voice, and to hear it in a dialogue with a black-dialect conscience that he began, with objectivity, to write the antiphonal music of *The Dream Songs*. In a notebook dated '18 Nov. 1957' he wrote of 'my long literary and practical acquaintance with analysis,' adding that:

In self-analysis one has to face alone what is difficult enough for the ordinary analysand who has to support him in his agonies of self-discovery, the forbearance ('love') & experience & skill (timing) of his analyst; perhaps I should not have been able to do it if I had not had, rather earlier, the experience off & on for some years of what is called supportive therapy by a first-class analyst and then the furnace of some months of group analysis.⁽¹⁵⁾

Psychoanalysis and Freud's theories play an important part not only in Berryman's life but also in shaping his poetic achievement by giving him a form to write. From another perspective, Berryman's interest in psychoanalysis reflects his willingness to escape despair, replace it, or even wish to be another person. In other words, Berryman did not want to be the person he found himself to be, which fell far short of his perfectionist compulsions. His constant temptations to suicide, recorded in many notebooks long before the act, show him unwilling to be a self at all. Willing to be another than himself, John Berryman willed to be Henry. Berryman invents Henry, the demoniac man, and gives him a confidence in his black-face conscience. And even allows his intense analysis of

The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

despair to turn into the menacing little anecdote of *The Dream Songs*. The rapidity, colour, distortion, comedy, exaggeration, and brazenness of the despairs of his divided self allow us, in the end, to see better the real man behind this drama and to realize his agonies and the main motives behind writing, in Freudian manner, such innovative lyrics.

Notes

1. Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (USA: Library of Congress, 1995),p.31.
2. Helen Vendler, p.31.
3. Nina Baym, Wayne Franklin, Ronald Gottesman, David Kalstone, Norton Anthology of American Literature (4th ed.) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), p.2486.
4. Meredith A. Skura, *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p.67.
5. Meredith A. Skura, p.69.
6. Ibid, p.69.
7. Helen Vendler, p.36.
8. Ibid, p.37.
9. Ibid, p.37.
10. John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p.4.
11. Matt Stoltz, *Dream Songs and Freud*. URL: <http://www.angelfire.com/dreamsongs/freud.html>. p.2
12. Helen Vendler, p.37.
13. Matt Stoltz, p.5.
14. Helen Vendler, 39.
15. Avila Middlebrook, *Notebook: Berryman Papers* (USA: The University of Minnesota, 1957), p.45.

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القصيدة الفرويدية جون بيريمان أغاني الأحلام

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تعريف القصيدة الفرويدية والبحث عن الدوافع الكامنة وراء ظهور هذا النوع من الشعر كما يهدف أيضاً إلى تحليل العناصر الرئيسية ومميزات هذا النوع بالإشارة إلى ديوان الشاعر جون بيريمان (أغاني الأحلام). إنَّ القصيدة الفرويدية، كما هو واضح من اسمها، مشتقة من نظريات عالم النفس المعروف سيجموند فرويد عن الأحلام والتحليل النفسي. حيث تقسم النفس البشرية، طبقاً لنظريات فرويد، إلى ثلاثة أقسام: الأنا والهو والأنا الأعلى. حيث يمثل الأنا حالة الوعي عند الإنسان، ويمثل الهو اللاوعي، في حين يمثل الأنا الأعلى الضمير. وقد زود هذا التقسيم للنفس البشرية وكذلك نظريات فرويد عن الأحلام بيريمان بكمية من الموضوعات وطريقة لكتابتها شعراً. ويظهر هذا البحث كيف استخدم بيريمان في قصائده تفاصيل حياته الشخصية وانتحار والده المبكر والذي نتج عنه معاناة الشاعر من مرض الكآبة الحادة وكيف استخدم نظريات فرويد كأسلوب وطريقة لكتابة ديوانه (أغاني الأحلام). وعليه، فإنَّ هنري، الشخصية الرئيسية في (أغاني الأحلام)، يمثل حالة الوعي عند الشاعر، ويمثل السيد بونز، الشخصية الرئيسية الثانية، حالة اللاوعي، في حين يمثل الصوت الثالث الذي يظهر بين الفينة و الفينة ضمير الشاعر. ولا تمثل هذه الشخصيات سوى شكل القصيدة الفرويدية التي استخدمها الشاعر بيريمان في عملية التحليل النفسي الذاتي.

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The Freudian Lyric John Berryman's Dream Songs

Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman
