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## Chicken Paprika and Tug of War: the Romantic “Dream Song 4” by John Berryman

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**I**N JOHN BERRYMAN’S “Dream Song 4” the speakers, Henry and Mr.

Bones, oppose one another within the preconscious of a man suppressing his primal sexual desire in a restaurant. As stated by Helen Vendler, these archetypes of American minstrelsy roughly depict the Freudian Superego and Id (Vendler). The scene is narrated from Henry’s perspective with interjections only by the consciousness of his opposite, “Mr. Bones.” What takes place is the internal dialogue of a man brimming with jealousy and sexual desire, inhibited only by the colloquial rationalization of his Superego — the ideal self — and the repercussions of springing at “her compact & delicious body” (Berryman l.1) in front of her spouse and four others. Seemingly absent from the Superego, Mr. Bones, is the punitive shaming of himself for salacious Id-borne thoughts. Vendler reconciles Berryman’s departure from Freud by suggesting the poet infused the Superego with a Christian “conscience.” I disagree with this interpretation applying to “Dream Song 4.” Mr. Bones displays no Christian virtue. Instead, he seemingly mocks Henry with the tone of someone annoyed by his partner’s perpetual caprices. Therefore, the Superego does not seem to significantly stray from his psychoanalytic origin as there is a motivation to humiliate Henry for his intemperance. What Berryman reveals in his wild reinterpretation of the love sonnet, as told from Henry’s point of view, is the Id’s irresistible romanticizing and the balancing force which keeps society in check. Both

are inherent in even the refined echelons of society, but remain hidden within the civilized self.

In the form of a love song, this poem traces the one-sided, half-delusional relationship of a single half of a man and a stranger sitting in a restaurant. The first stanza describes Henry's first encounter with his muse, the second is his profession of his love, and the final is a 'romantic' ode to her. However, the love song only takes up about half of every stanza. The second half serves as a rational counterargument to the Id, even when Mr. Bones is not present. In the first stanza, Henry recognizes that the husband and four other people are present. In the second, Mr. Bones, who reigned him in the first time, tells Henry to move on, and in the third, Henry realizes how divided he and his love truly are.

Although a composition of three sestet, the poem serves as a parody to the Italian sonnet in which the male speaker's erotic love is impeded. Clearly a woman in "Dream Song 4" is elevated, but Berryman makes no attempt to sublimate lust into anything proper or noble. He does the opposite by stripping away the veil which shrouds the conflict between the Id and Superego that the audience observes crudeness in a person's lustful cognition. What occurs in each stanza reflects the conflict-solution framework characteristic of the Petrarchan sonnet (Gregerson, 3:00-3:30). As aforementioned, Henry bemoans his sorry state or threatens brazen illegality and Mr. Bones crassly dismisses him. Berryman infuses the form with crude realism where a man wonders at a woman and her posterior.

In the first stanza, as Henry dines on his dessert, he spots his infatuation:

Filling her compact & delicious body  
with chicken páprika, 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 (Berryman 1-6)

The restaurant seems upscale — it serves chicken paprika, not pub fare — and, as such, we can imagine the man Henry and Mr. Bones inhabit is upper class and relatively respected. The Id interprets the sight of a woman eating dinner nearby as an act of breaking bread and establishing

a connection through a shared meal, despite the fact that his body sits at a separate table from her, her husband, and her four companions. Still, the speaker claims “she glanced at me / twice” (2-3). However absurd, he believes in some linkage with her, as indicated by the enjambment giving twice its own line — establishing the significance of her looks that cause him to faint “with interest” (4) — an exaggeration. Henry’s portraying this as a conversational statement and response expresses his assumption that they are on a dinner date. In keeping, he “hunger[s] back,” (4) responding with his own appetite for sustenance and *her*. He overreacts, and his dramatic interpretation of the moment reveals the constant caprices of the Id that would spring on the woman, had no one else been sitting with her. But why do other people prevent Henry from seeking what he desires? The Superego compels him to be concerned with lowering his social standing, the fact they would be witnesses, or most likely, in the Id’s animalistic logic, the reality that he is outnumbered and weak compared to them. Still, for a moment, he considers diving on top of a random woman in a chicken-paprika-serving restaurant.

However, this is only the physical and aggressive act Henry imagines. In the second stanza he adds the alternative course of action and the subsequent sadness of being unable to satiate himself:

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. (8-12)

His minstrel speech and references to himself in the third person suggest Henry’s desperation, passion, and primal emotion. He wants to display his romantic feelings for a stranger he has yet to speak to, fearless of any social repercussions. Despite his capriciousness, Henry inhabits half of the mind of the civilized man sitting in the restaurant. He is controlled entirely by this internal conflict raging on between the Id and Superego.

A pattern appears in the second stanza as Henry “advance[s] upon/ (despairing) [his] spumoni,” (10-12) continued from the first line when he “hunger[s] back” (4). The poet exhibits the Id’s erratic thoughts by leading the reader to make a false assumption about Henry’s

subsequent action. In hungering back, it seems as though he will also eat, like the stranger of his obsession eats her dinner, but instead he hungers for her in a discomfoting savagery. Then he “advance[s],” and, for a moment, it appears Henry is going to dive towards the woman. He controls himself, however, and sadly eats his gelato.

His foil, Mr. Bones, finally scolds Henry at the resolution of the second stanza — “is stuffed,/ de world, wif feeding girls” (11-12) or “the world is full of girls eating.” He explains to the Id there is no need to resort to such drastic measures for this woman eating chicken paprika, because there are plenty of other woman out there, eating dinner also. Bones’ role is to placate the overdramatic friend with whom he shares a body. Here it begins to be understandable why the unidentified diner has not utilized his Id’s absurdist form of courtship: the also-innate conscience mocks his irrational desires, so their body remains seated at his table.

In the third stanza, Henry ignores the Superego who tells him to move on, and remains fixated on the woman:

—Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes  
downcast . . . The slob beside her feasts . . . What wonders is  
she sitting on, over there? (13-15)

He lists her features, with “[b]lack hair, complexion Latin, jeweled eyes/downcast” (13-14). This is, of course, all very superficial. Nevertheless, he exhibits a vague or false sympathy rooted in lust, observed in the line break separating “downcast” (14) from the rest of the sentence, revealing he lingers upon her countenance. Henry then glances over to her husband who is apparently not paying his wife any attention — the attention he *knows* she deserves. It is arguable whether she really is sad or not on account of the unreliable narrator. This likely could be the interpretation of the Id searching for a reason to save the woman from her husband or be of value to her. He stares with utter jealousy as “the slob beside her feasts” (14). The space between “her” and “feasts” is loaded with envy as he racks his mind to describe the action of the husband that harkens back to the “hungering” of the first stanza (14). From Henry’s perspective, his antagonist gluttonously enjoys a feast in the literal sense but also in life. He has the wife Henry so desires.

He then returns to his infatuation with her physical appearance, asking “[w]hat wonders is she sitting on, over there?” (14-15). In

imagining what her buttocks may look like, he acknowledges the separation between himself and her, conveyed longingly through the comma. This sad punctuation most effectively impels the audience to sympathy, as they feel Henry's voice quaver upon his realization. Because feelings swirl about his mind without language, a choked-up silence is apt for expressing Henry's strongest desires. Thus, the pregnant pause invokes an emotion shared by Henry, the man, and their observers: a longing for something just out of reach.

Henry is pulled out of his fantasy in the line approaching the resolution, perhaps at the behest of his handler, Mr. Bones. The "restaurant buzzes" (16). He becomes increasingly aware of the reality of the situation — "[s]he might as well be on Mars" (16) and the man is in fact, incredibly alien to her. This idea furthers the comedic one-sidedness when coupled with the clarity of the woman eating without any awareness of the melodrama she has caused.

The separation feels like a breakup for Henry. He asks "[w]here did it all go wrong" (17)? Nothing, though, has transpired in the scene beyond dining and quite a bit of brooding. He has become utterly defeated by Mr. Bones and no longer ponders the woman. Instead, he looks inward and comes to the realization he is similar to that husband, or to his demonization of him. They are both "hungry," gluttonous individuals. He laments, "[t]here ought to be a law against Henry" (17), with a tone of self-loathing at his absurd thoughts. This suggests success on the part of Mr. Bones in effectively shaming Henry to the point of reason. Henry despises himself and proclaims there should be powers to control him; and this is where Mr. Bones factually interjects "there is" (18). Mr. Bones is the law for Henry. Bones has prevented him from giving in to his most drastic impulses. Mr. Bones is why every stanza ends with a dose of reason — their perpetual tug-of-war moderates the man they manipulate because, throughout this entire poem, there is a civilized man sitting quietly at an upscale restaurant. No one is aware of his internal conflicts because of his centering extremes, though, this duality is presumably shared amongst every other diner.

Berryman's accomplishment in this piece is an examination of the human psyche through a psychoanalytic lens. The internal dialogue between Henry and Mr. Bones depicts the preconscious conflict of the individual. Henry's existence as the speaker reveals his influence within

the individual's mind, though Henry's restraint shows he is equally matched by his counterpart. "Dream Song 4" reflects a very recognizable thought-process: first the initial impulse, followed by shaming and rationalization which slowly wins out. To give each mental-half thought reveals there is, in fact, a duality of cognition. Inspired by characters of racist minstrelsy, each half is primitive and innate but, together, they direct and moderate a civilized man (Vendler). Ostensibly, the piece expresses a sort of nihilism suggesting humans are manipulated by primal directives. Nevertheless, accompanying the animalism of the Id is an intrinsic, flippant voice of reason. In this sense, the poem maintains a humanistic assertion that rationality exists not only within external institutional controls but also within the individual. Society depends on the tug-of-war between the duality of man and the societal laws which govern him. It is the consequences of diving to the feet of the chicken-paprika diner that the Superego utilizes to moderate the Id, who may be restrained only by the knowledge that he is outnumbered by the dinner party. Still, Henry recognizes the rules governing marriage and understands pursuing someone else's wife will elicit a negative response. Therefore, no such event occurs, and everyone can enjoy their dinner peacefully.

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