

Berryman Revisited: A Response

My essay on alcohol and poetry was written seventeen years ago at a time when almost no one spoke publicly about the topic. That is no longer the case, of course, but it is worth remembering that it once was lest we forget that a gathering of essays such as we have here is in itself an achievement to be valued. Not only that, but these essays illustrate how far we've come. The discussion has marvelous complexity now, and each of these papers has something new to teach us.

I will come back to what seems to me new and valuable in a moment, but let me begin my response by marking the few places where I have reservations about my colleagues' remarks.

To begin with, we have a perplexing problem in this business of honesty and delusion. Addressing my 1975 essay on Berryman, George Wedge speaks of a "prejudice against the possibility that an active alcoholic can write truthfully" (233). I'm not sure that formulation catches the full flavor of my remarks; I think Berryman was witheringly truthful much of the time. But I certainly do claim that he is often divided against himself, and that we often hear the voice of active alcoholism, a voice that willingly sacrifices the truth for other ends.

Wedge's claim, in any event, is not just that we find truth telling in *The Dream Songs* but that Berryman, the writer, was in control of his art as he wrote those poems. "John, distancing himself behind the mask of Henry, knows what he is looking at," Wedge tells us. "My view," he says, "[is] that the poet remains in control—even when drunk" (239, 240).

Against this view let us pose the unsettling description of “delusions” that Roger Forseth found in one of Berryman’s manuscripts: “Alcoholism . . .,” Berryman wrote, “produces inevitably what are known as ‘sincere delusions.’ A sincere delusion is a lie . . . which the liar does not know to be a lie” (249).

The puzzle, of course, is to figure out how we know when we are telling the truth and when we are sincerely deluded. How do we know when we are in control and when we are out of control? These questions smack of old philosophy-class conundrums such as, How do we know if we are awake or asleep and dreaming?

I don’t know how to solve such problems. Suffice it to say, first, that I think Wedge is right to find more truth telling in *The Dream Songs* than I allowed for in my old essay; but, second, that I dissent from the idea that “the poet remains in control—even when drunk.” The stories I have heard recovering alcoholics tell of their drinking days belie that conceit.

All of which brings me to a second topic. Having addressed the “prejudice against the possibility that an active alcoholic can write truthfully,” Wedge “shudder[s] at the cost of this prejudice in whole canons of much loved and highly honored authors” (233), mentioning London, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Carver, Cheever, and so on.

I must admit that the canon so listed is one I am glad to see revalued. One’s attitude here hinges, I suppose, on what one takes to be the uses of literature. Why do we read these books in the first place? Again, the question is not one we can settle quickly, but at some level, in discussing these writers, we are moving toward our answers. For myself, I look to literature for enchantment, beauty, and wisdom, but also for solace and hope. Those works matter to me which have given me courage for living, which have helped me bear suffering and the knowledge of death. In those terms a writer such as John Cheever, while I have admired and learned from his craft, does not appear in the canon inscribed on my heart. In contrast to Wedge, I shudder to think of a culture that would canonize these voices without marking where they fail us.

All this said, let me turn to what I find fruitful in these essays. In addition to his remarks about “delusions,” I like very much Roger Forseth’s formulation that *Recovery* is “a work about the education of the feelings” (248), and I am grateful to George Wedge for his

news about the "grave Sienese face," a line that has puzzled me for decades.

More, both of these essays seem to me to offer a looser and therefore better way to speak of intoxication and literature than the one represented in my old essay.

I share George Wedge's reservations about working from "the AA model." Perhaps because alcoholism is a deadly disease, and perhaps because for recovering alcoholics there is no "in-between" (you're either drinking or you're not), the AA model tends to be categorical. Both of these essays open up possible in-between's and therefore make the discussion less programmatic, less moralizing. In particular, both essays urge us to seek in the struggles of the active alcoholic—half deluded as they may be—seeds and signs of potential recovery. With their wider middle ground, their readings of Berryman are more generous than my own, and I welcome that.¹

In closing, though, let me place the categorical tone of my old essay in its history. It is useful to remember how far we have come with this topic, how much has changed in the years since Berryman's suicide. Is there anyone now who does not know about Twelve Step groups? We know so much about them, in fact, that one longs for a thirteenth step whose text might begin, "Having awakened a sense of irony as a result of this program . . ."

Seriously, though, in the late 1960s, when I was a student of John Berryman's, there was virtually nothing "in the air" about alcoholism and sobriety. At the college where I now teach, all incoming freshmen receive a lecture on alcoholism; in five years at the University of Minnesota in the 1960s I never once heard the topic discussed. Berryman used to teach while drunk, but no one ever spoke about this remarkable fact within earshot of his students. The whole place was like one of those alcoholic families where no one is allowed to talk about the old man's problem. Part of the categorical tone of my essay drives from this air of denial; I was speaking against a large silence, and felt I had to speak emphatically.

For a second point about the tone of that essay, let me back off and offer a remark that James Baldwin makes in his memoir about his father, in "Notes of a Native Son." In that essay, Baldwin's father, with whom he had fought bitterly, has recently died. For a moment at the father's funeral the son finds himself released from his bitterness

and anger; he sees the old man with fresh eyes, and, I think, forgives him. "It was better not to judge the man who had gone down under an impossible burden," Baldwin writes. "It was better to remember: *Thou knowest this man's fall; but thou knowest not his wrassling.*"

I say all this because another part of the tone of my 1975 essay is anger. It is the anger of the young who want much from their elders and are necessarily betrayed. It is the anger of anyone who has been close to an active alcoholic and gotten hurt. It is anger toward an intellectual community that seemed unable to respond to the wounded one in its midst.

Both the silence and the anger feel like history to me now. It is fitting from this distance in time that greater generosity and nuance should mark our readings of Berryman's work. And, for those of us who knew him, acceptance is in order. Looking back on John Berryman these many years after his death, let us say, as Baldwin says, *Thou knowest this man's fall; but thou knowest not his wrassling.*

NOTES

1. I did not have a chance to read Alan Altimont's essay before the conference at which the essays in this volume were presented, but I have read it since. As with Wedge and Forseth, Altimont seems to me to offer a valuable widening of how we might read the links between Berryman and alcoholism. My one reservation has to do with making alcoholism "subsidiary" to the psychological (259). What Altimont sees as an opposition between our approaches I take to be more a matter of point of departure. Berryman surely had "fear of intimacy with a woman" (260) and he surely had alcoholism; to say both is to complicate our reading, as it should be complicated, rather than narrow it as I once did and as Altimont does when he cleaves too fully to the psychological.