

Berryman's Last Work

In 1973, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux published the manuscript of a novel that one of its prized authors had left unfinished at his death. John Berryman had been working on *Recovery*, the working title of the manuscript, in the year before he leaped from a bridge over the Mississippi River in January 1972. The story of an alcoholic who has entered treatment at Northeastern Hospital in an unnamed city, the manuscript was no more than an early draft, and Berryman seems to have finished about two-thirds of it when he died. The central figure of the 224-page fragment is Alan Severance, a microbiologist and specialist in immunology, but *Recovery* is in fact highly autobiographical, and any reader familiar with Berryman's life will quickly see how thin the disguise is. Berryman entered St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis in May 1970 and was there for about six weeks. Relapsing, he returned to the hospital for another six-week stay in October. It was in June of the following year that he started to work on the novel, one of many projects that he conceived during the final year of his life. Like Berryman, Severance has been institutionalized three times for alcoholism, and one element of his recovery is to make a list for his counselor of the delinquencies he has committed. Berryman did not have to invent (for the novel) the disclosure, which if anything is an abbreviated version of the report he prepared for himself during one of his hospitalizations—"twenty-three years of alcoholic chaos, lost wives, public disgrace, a night in jail and a lost job, injuries and hospitalizations, a blacked-out call to a girl student threatening to kill her, involuntary defecation in a public building, DT's once, convulsions, once, etc. . . ." According to John Haffenden's biography, that "night in jail" would refer to the evening he was arrested during his brief stay at the University of Iowa in 1955. He quarreled with his landlord after an evening of drinking and got himself

arrested. Berryman was a well-established poet even by that early date, and the incident drew the attention of the press and cost him his job at the university.

Berryman describes in detail in *Recovery* the methods of in-patient rehabilitation, and a similar program can be found in the journals of John Cheever, who regained sobriety at a facility in New York at about the same time Berryman was drying out in Minneapolis. (Cheever's biographer, Blake Bailey, describes the experience in some detail.) Severance, like other recovering alcoholics, attends encounter groups that follow the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program, where people discuss the troubles, pains, and experiences that provoke guilt and remorse. These disclosures often elicit the sympathy and support of others in the group, though they also set the stage for "confrontations," when members of the group press for missing details from a story and try to strip away the "delusions" alcoholics have exploited to justify their drinking. Some of these exchanges are rough. One counselor listens to a patient explain his drinking and roundly declares, "You're a drunken lying half-assed *bum!*" Severance listens to evening lectures on the dangers and causes of alcoholism; the speakers are physicians, clergymen, and social workers, some of whom have themselves struggled with alcohol. A few of the patients have private sessions with psychiatrists. Severance and others on Ward W wander the halls at odd hours of the night, meet in one another's rooms, gather in a lounge to talk and share snack food. The goal? To drive out what Berryman calls the "witch messages" that have haunted the patients for years or decades, those voices that tell them they're failures, incapable of finding purpose or achieving goals. The hope is to break down the walls of shame and remorse that immure them. In "animal, vegetable, mineral," patients tell one another what sort of element—a carrot, say, or a kitten, or limestone—the other person strikes them as seeming. (Only Berryman, one imagines, would have called another patient "an immobilized badger.")

“Eye-stare” is another technique of this therapy, in which patients engage the gaze of another and hold it for a prolonged moment, an awkward experience that may nevertheless establish important bonds between people. The overall purpose? To learn about themselves and acquire meaningful experiences that constructively rearrange the furniture of their minds. They are less alone and better equipped to recover a sense of their worth.

Confession is part of the program, and confession of course is an element of penance, a sacrament of the Church. Step four of the AA program requires members to make “a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves,” and step five enjoins them to “admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.” In a religious context, penance and confession are means of achieving grace. They have a different role in therapy. In self-disclosure we share a part of our lives with another person and try to unify ourselves by bringing into the open secrets that we have kept to ourselves. Cover-ups drain a person of his strength, while sharing private experience can strip the shaming secret of its power and open the door to renewal. When it is openly disclosed, the power of shame is deflated, at least a bit, and by sharing private material in a “safe environment,” people can draw on a collective source of strength. Others become a part of one’s life, which of course is not free of risk, because the response to shared private material is not always benevolent or free of injury. During his stay at the hospital, Severance presents a burning disclosure, though I think few readers today would find it as shocking as earlier generations did. Certainly it is all but impossible for Severance to bring himself to share the material. Inappropriate and paralyzing sexual images danced before his closed eyes in their dozens, or hundreds of thousands.

Vulvas, hands on him, mouths, hot breasts, spread bottoms, their clenched feet and scissoring, in cemeteries, parks, cars, sand dunes, darkness and daylight, floors, beds,

beds. Heaving, breathing, gropings back, once without even knowing who it was.

Friends' wives, virgins. Unspeakable. And the myriad unacted.

On this occasion, at least, the penitent is disappointed: The confession does not bring about the warm understanding he had hoped for, and Severance retreats within himself, alienated and offended—for the moment. The procedure does not always produce the effects one wants, but the point is to take risks, to try, to dare. If the participants were guaranteed a favorable reaction, the experience would be stripped of its power. “You’ve got to take risks,” declares one of the counselors during a group session. “You can’t stay where you are; if you do, you’ll drink.”

What was Berryman/Severance’s “delusion?” Part of the answer comes from his mistaken conception of what was necessary to write poetry. There are antecedents for this fantasy that go back to the surrealists and *écriture automatique*, to Coleridge and Rimbaud, and even to the Greeks, with their understanding of Apollo and Dionysius. Berryman believed—erroneously, as he later conceded—that alcohol freed up faculties essential for composition:

Severance was a conscientious man. He had really thought, off and on for nearly twenty years, that it was his duty to drink, namely to sacrifice himself. He saw the products [i.e., poems] as worth it. Maybe they were—if there had been any connexion.

But Severance contemplates a range of other influences that have led him to drink. “Why *do* I drink?” he asks himself early in the novel. Defiance and grandiosity are among the reasons; he persuades himself that he “can handle” excessive drinking, even though the destructive effects trailed his life for over twenty years. There was the other delusion that “I need it,” that it was a necessary method for controlling the excitement of receiving a good book review or delivering a successful lecture. Or to dull the pain of loneliness and the impact of bad news. “I feel as if the scales were falling from my eyes,” Severance declares in a journal entry, weighing all his

grounds for drinking. “Surely these [explanations] can’t *all* be wrong,” he says to himself, as part of the effort to strip away his “delusions” and reach the truth.

For many of the participants, repeat offenders like Severance who have entered a rehab program for a second or third time, sobriety is an urgent matter, an issue of life and death. Rooms available for the program are limited. Others are waiting to claim them, and the hospital won’t hesitate to expel participants who are not making progress. This is not a casual rehab program for the moneyed class in a plush corner of Connecticut or Northern California; the stakes are high. Happily, notes that Berryman left for the novel, included by the publisher in the text, suggest that he planned for Severance to finish treatment and regain his sobriety—as Berryman did himself, though it wasn’t enough to prevent his suicide.

I would think this fragment of a novel would find appreciative readers. Certainly those who know Berryman’s life and poetry and hope to learn more of the background of both will value the material. Although the document is no more than a draft, there are passages of real power, faint echoes of a few of Berryman’s excellent short stories, including “The Imaginary Jew,” “Wash Far Away,” and “Thursdays Out.” Those pieces went through several drafts and were carefully edited. And for those who relish the autobiographical quality of all of the late poetry—*Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc*—this fragment illuminates a corner of Berryman’s life and work. People who have struggled with alcohol will find a picture of the forms of treatment that were considered effective forty years ago, and still are.

Copyright © 2017 by David Cohen