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*A Study of John Berryman's Poetic
Devices and Handling of Voice*

by

Maria do Carmo de Vasconcelos

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
English in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

September 15, 1995 Herbert Lebowitz
Date Chair of Examining Committee

Sept. 15, 1995 Joyl Wood
Date Executive Officer

Elizabeth Tenenbaum
Michael Tenenbaum

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

*A Study of John Berryman's Poetic
Devices and Handling of Voice*

by

Maria do Carmo de Vasconcelos

Advisor: Professor Herbert Leibowitz

This is a study of "John Berryman's Poetic Devices and Handling of Voice," which originated in opposition to the misleading label "confessional" for all of Berryman's poetry. My work presents a close reading of some poems in the volumes *Poems*, *The Dispossessed*, *Sonnets to Chris* and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. In my conclusion, I have given a brief analysis of the way *The Dream Songs* fit into the pattern of Berryman's work.

According to my study, the designation "confessional" for Berryman's work is incorrect since it does not reflect the poet's different modes of presentation. The objective, self-detached, literary mode is already found in the

work of his teens and even beyond the reach of his conscious memory.

Although spiritual, family, social and intellectual situations in Berryman's childhood and young manhood seem to inform his outlook and his poetics, these experiences are presented with impersonality. Berryman's poetry is the sum of complex, contestatory views. Their meaning is always plural, equivocal. Their impreciseness is caused by the waywardness and the unfamiliar private references in the poems.

In my reading of the poems, I concentrate on the way Berryman's poetic devices and his handling of voices conceal and reveal the personal.

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There are voices, voices
I love great men I love. Nobody's great.
I must remember that. ("Dream Song 230")

Am I a bad man? Am I a good man?
-Hard to say, Brother Bones. Maybe you both,
like most of we. ("Dream Song 239")

'I don't try to reconcile anything' said the poet
at eighty,

'This is a damned strange world.'
("Eleven Addresses to the Lord 2")

Rationale of the Dissertation

After reading John Berryman's poetry and the literary criticism covering his work, I came to the conclusion that I couldn't accept the general view of many authors who only considered Berryman a confessional poet. Yes, Berryman is a confessional poet, and he is not. The content of his poetry, the similarities between the poet's life, the life of "Henry"--the hero of *The Dream Songs*--and the "I" which, especially at the end of Berryman's career, expresses many details of the poet's actual existence, can justify some critics' designation of Berryman as a confessional poet. To reach this conclusion, the critic would be using mimetic criticism.

There is, however, another way to approach Berryman's work. Berryman refused the "confessional poet" epithet, and continued to reject it throughout the period of his career in which he produced *The Dream Songs*. If this refusal is seen as paramount to an understanding of

the work, readers must stress the fundamental assumption that Berryman's poetry, like every human activity, is "constructed" and does not argue for meaning as an expression of the author or a reflection of "reality." The reader's views are dominated by formalist, structuralist, or post-structuralist views. Consequently, the decision of whether or not to classify Berryman as a confessional poet depends on the school of criticism the reader adopts in his readings and the elements in the work to which the reader gives precedence. Yet the question of the accuracy of that designation still needs to be clarified.

Even when Berryman embraced the personal for his poetry, he did not neutralize the impersonal. This is reflected in the modes of presentation in his major works: *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*. This impersonality was a result of years of attempts to emulate the abstraction and high style of Auden, or build a "system" similar to Yeats's with his masks and phases of the moon.

Moreover, probably because of this training

and his innate method of seeing the world, Berryman always presents in his work the polarities of intellectual and emotional perceptions. Because of these double views on life, the reader is best served by paying special attention to the modes of presentation.

When I read in *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* that Berryman's verse "is complex, dramatic, and personal, often mirroring the anguish of a trivial age" (84) without any allusion to confessional poetry, I felt I was heading into a possible reading.

Yet, in contrast to that quotation from the *C.C. Encyclopedia*, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* seems to synthesize those contrasting views by defining confessional poetry as "an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals personal problems with unusual frankness." Berryman is referred to as confessional because *The Dream Songs* deal with alcoholism and insanity (43). It is obvious to me that, if these definitions are acceptable for Berryman and *The Dream Songs*, they must also extend to the poet's

other volumes of poetry such as *Love and Fame* and *Delusions, etc.* because they share a similar content.

What disturbed me most in my critical readings was the fact that no author who called Berryman a confessional poet seemed to consider his constant statements protesting that categorization. Of course I know that between the intentions, ideals or desires of an author and what happens in his/her work, falls the shadow of readers' interpretations that are beyond the poet's control; those aspects of the work become part of the public domain. Still, Berryman's vehement negation should at least be a guide to reading his poetry. Most of the writing on Berryman's poetry, however, fails to approach the work with Berryman's standpoint in mind.

Charles Molesworth in *The Fierce Embrace* writes:

In a sense, [Sexton] was ... the most 'confessional' of the four poets [Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and

W.D. Snodgrass] discussed here, if by that word we mean a commitment to recording as directly as possible the shape of a private pain and an intimate sickness, without regard to artifice or aesthetic transcendence.... Berryman and Sexton were often occupied with denying the direct, autobiographical basis of their poetry. But the recourse they had to theories of "personae" and the inescapability of artistic fabrication grew less sheltering as their careers progressed. (73)

Even if I agree with the last section of this quotation, I cannot share Molesworth's views that there was no "artifice" when the poet was expressing his emotions or his views. In referring to "shape," he is explicitly pointing to outline, surface, configuration, form or relations, which are artifices: crafty devices that cannot be dissociated from meaning and might create aesthetic effects. The assumed "I" often reveals itself as a construct and part of a game, more so if the reader

thinks of recurrent changing of the subjective "I" into other pronouns, which create different voices or the illusion of voices in Berryman's poetry.

Voice is the metaphorical term for the distinctive features of written material in terms of spoken utterance. Voice denotes the characteristics exhibited by the speaker, narrator, or any author evaluated in terms of tone or presence. To insist on defining the poet's verse as confessional is to emphasize the content of the poetry and stress a unity of author and lyrical or narrative voice. Moreover, it is to read the text as univocal; it originates from a singular source: the author. This is not my way of reading Berryman's poetry. I paraphrase, but I lay emphasis on themes and voices because they are two important poetic artifices which contribute to style; they inform the reader's perception of the universe of the poems, the world, and Berryman's artistic development.

The voices, or the illusion of voices, created by the constant changes of personal pronouns in Berryman's poems are dramatic devices. In his

early career (1940-1948), when he writes narrative, objective, generic, and apocalyptic voices supersede the personal voice, creating an intellectual context, a philosophical tone that destroys the illusion of reading the "I" voice as Berryman the poet or Berryman the emotional human being.

These voices also point to Berryman's difficulty in finding his own idiom throughout his long development. According to the critics, Berryman had found his voice by his middle career (1948-1968). However, he defined "Henry" by saying the character was his concepts, making it clear that he had held onto some of the habits of his early mind.

It is important to recognize that, despite Berryman's artistic growth, until the end of his life he never completely abandoned the objective and the generic voice, the one Denis Donoghue called "Mankind's voice" (Thomas 154).

These verse lines illustrate this point:

The terrible trains crawl seaward thro'
the South,

Where TV teams quiz small-town citizens:
'Waal ... if the Army says it's safe,
it's okay with me.
Ah've got a boy in Veetnam.'

All this mad stuff has been there fifteen
years!
leaking its coffins. Had the Chinese
come
down in Korea, who knows? them or now
knows?
Nobody knows anything

but somewhere up in the murky
constellation
of Government & the scientists & the
military
responsible to no-one someone knows
that he too doesn't know anything

and can't say what would then have
happened or will 'now' happen

on the Atlantic bottom in the long dark
of decades of ecology to come
while the 20th century flies insanely on.

("Have a Genuine American
Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks
(14,500 six-ton concrete-&-
steel vaults of nerve-gas
rockets, lethal)" *Love &
Fame*)

Despite the dramatic qualities of this poem,
and the humor of the first stanza, the first verse
line establishes an objective mode, and the three
last lines of the last stanza echo the generic and
apocalyptic voice.

By examining voices and other devices in
Berryman's poetry, the critic can better analyze
the poet's evolving modes of presentation and
determine which epithet--confessional/not
confessional--better defines his poetic
achievement.

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*INTRODUCTION**BERRYMAN'S CRITICS**AND**A GUIDE TO READING THE POETRY*

John Berryman (1914-1972) is one of the foremost members of what is now called "The Middle Generation" of twentieth century American poets. To this generation belong Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarell, Theodore Roethke and Robert Lowell, all of whom became characters, literary allusions or the subject of eulogies in Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (90, 149-158, 187).

For this volume of poetry, Berryman received the Pulitzer Prize in 1964. This Prize celebrated Berryman's long devotion to poetry; however, only in 1969 was he honored as a professor, scholar and poet with the title "Regent's Professor of Humanities" at the University of Minnesota, where he was employed from 1955 to his death in 1972. These two distinctions were a public reward given

to the poet who, despite the turmoil and suffering in his private life, made both poetry and scholarship the highest priorities in his life. Poetry was a supreme craft; and, to fulfill his need to write it, he would sacrifice rest, sleep, social and family life.

This craft was an expression of culture, and culture was the result of "intelligence, discipline, and dedication."¹ Berryman praised these qualities in his mentor, Mark Van Doren, and tried to emulate them. "It was the force of this man's example, Berryman always insisted, that first made him seriously think about becoming a poet himself" (Mariani 33).

Berryman muses bitterly in "Dream Song 181--The Translator--II" on America as a failed Utopia:

Because I am not able to forget,
Henry is dreaming of society,
one where the gifted & hard-working
young poet is cherished, kissed as a king
to come, a prized comer. Ah but see

¹ John Berryman refers in these terms to Mark Van Doren while attending Van Doren's Composition course at Columbia College (1932). See Paul L. Mariani. *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* p. 33.

them baleful ignorant

justicer & witnesses, corrupt by purity,
lacking all sense of others, lacking
sense,

but liars too, pal.

I snuff the proper vomit of a State
where every tree is adjudged equal tall,
in faith without debate.

I beg to place in evidence, vicious
mother:

That in the west of my land tower Douglas
firs,

taller than others.

If then a judge grides to one of them

'You are sick,

lazy: Siberia!' what gross metaphors
shall we invent for this judge?

(The sentence: forced labor for five years in a
'distant locality.')

Does the allusion to the oppressive, communist

life in the Soviet Union parallel, ironically, the oppressive community in the USA that, despite its ignorance, was to accept Berryman's poetry, to make him famous by giving him prizes (Harriet Monroe Poetry, 1957, Bollingen, 1969 and several others), interviewing him and putting his image on the cover of *Life*?

These public honors seem to acknowledge Berryman's importance, and a wide interest in his work is demonstrated by commentary from parts of the world as diverse as the Far East and Scandinavia.² However, considering the impact of Berryman's work, one would expect him to have inspired a larger body of criticism. There has been extensive commentary; but, if one compares it to commentary, for example, on Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, the criticism of Berryman falls short.

Berryman's influence on contemporary poets and critics such as Michael Hofmann and Lawrence Joseph is recognized by the consensus of scholarship, which also holds the view that it was Berryman,

² See Bibliography, pp. 251 and 259.

despite his "anxiety-of-influence,"³ who challenged Eliot's authoritative theory of impersonality in writing. The range of Berryman's influence is such that it demands a comprehensive study.

Systematic critical commentary on Berryman's poetry began in the '70s. In late 1970 Gary Arpin wrote extensively on Berryman's poetry. To some degree, he takes a comprehensive approach. This type of broad, inclusive study is done not only by Arpin, but also by Joel Conarroe. The latter deals with themes, form, prosody and other elements in the work. It is, in this sense, a good introduction to the poems, but the information in it is so extensive for such a small book that one's overall feeling is that a more precise focus on the poet's work was needed. Two large memoirs by Eileen Simpson, Berryman's first wife, and by E.M. Hallyday, his good friend from Columbia days, and a

³ The title of Harold Bloom's seminal book, in which he presents a theory of poetry based on Freud's Model: stressing the Oedipus Complex. Bloom perceives in the relationship between the "strong" precursor and the "belated" poet, that the latter is forced to make use of various strategies in order to establish his or her own space as an imaginative being.

very short memoir by Saul Bellow (which appeared as the preface to Berryman's incomplete novel *Recovery*) are both biographical and critical. In addition, two large-scale biographies by John Haffenden (1987) and Paul Mariani (1990) seem to cover every detail of Berryman's life. Their works illuminate the life of the man and the life of the poet.

In April, 1990, Berryman's disciple, Michael Hofmann, wrote an article "Single combat" in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, in which, for the first time in recent years, Berryman's poetry is chronologically presented and re-evaluated. Briefly, his main contentions are that "*Sonnets* show what Berryman can do with a plot and a setting...." In contrast, he shares with Louis Martz⁴ the view that "*The Dream Songs* lack plot, either traditional or associative." I disagree with both critics on this point. Berryman affirmed

⁴ See Paul L. Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*, p. 448. Berryman "on September twenty-second 1969, ... wrote to a bibliographer of his work to say he would help her in any way he could. 'Various people are writing various books and papers on me,' he explained, and a 'very bad' first booklet on him by William Martz was due out any moment."

that there is a plot in *The Dream Songs*: "Its plot is the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world" (Thomas 7).⁵ I also perceive a plot in *The Dream Songs* built on the repeated, associative themes⁶ presented by the different voices. Hofmann believes, as I do, that "*Homage* is mature Berryman...." But to refer to maturity in *Homage* is to correlate it with the treatment of voices and plot. This same mature development applies to *The Dream Songs*.

This volume of poetry has, up to now, been approached from different perspectives. Previous commentary has covered a few matters in that work: the self, consciousness, "Henry," plot and prosody. *The Dream Songs* is Berryman's only work to have generated such extensive commentary. This fact notwithstanding, the issues of joy, comedy, the place of *The Dream Songs* in the genre of

⁵ John Berryman. "An Interview with John Berryman." Interview. With John Plotz. *Harvard Advocate* Spring 1969: 4-9. Rpt. in Thomas. *Berryman's Understanding*, (1988).

⁶ Association in the sense of themes (ideas) which are linked in the mind with the same object of contemplation or situation of meditation (suicide), and recalled in connection with them.

traditional or personal epic, as well as the triangular relationship between Henry/Berryman and Berryman's father have been ignored or treated perfunctorily.⁷

Commentary on *The Dream Songs* is well represented in the selection of interviews, memoirs, essays, and reviews edited by Harry Thomas (1988) and Harold Bloom (1989). The catalogue of articles in these collections helps one to become acquainted with the range of approaches to Berryman, the man and the poet, and to his poetry. Almost all of the articles are, however, insistently psychological. Just to mention a few, Arpin, Harold Beaver, Paul Kameen, and Lillian Feder deal with madness. Feder, in *Madness in Literature*, points out: "Madness in the poetry of John Berryman and Sylvia Plath is a series of partial suicides, 'fantasies' and memories of attempts at self-destruction that enact the persona's most intense experiences of being and creating. Guilt, madness, death and suicide are recurring motifs of Berryman's *Dream Songs*" (272).

⁷ See Conarroe, *passim*.

David K. Weiser in "Berryman's *Sonnets*: In and Out of the Tradition" explains the sonnets "as the representation of an underlying conflict between inner principles and outer norms...." Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich in "Berryman Saved from Drowning" interprets *Homage* as Berryman's "great crisis poem, commemorating a poetic crisis," which she judges him "to have surmounted." Ernest C. Stefanik in "A Cursing Glory: John Berryman's *Love & Fame*" defends that book "as a pilgrimage from despair to Christian acceptance." Diane Ackerman in "Near the Top a Bad Turn Dared" praises Berryman for "[t]he courage to face ontological precipices...." With Edward Mendelson in "John Berryman: The Question of Imperial Sway," the focus shifts to the nature of literature itself. He holds that *The Dream Songs* "remain the most courageous and interesting poetic experiment of their decade...."

I have kept for last a comparative study by James D. Bloom, *The Stock of Available Reality* (1984). Bloom writes that R.P. Blackmur and Berryman show "obsessive and consummate

literariness" (9) and "[t]hey embody consequently the burden-of-the-past and 'anxiety-of-influence' questions that pervade current literary discourse" (10). Bloom is pointing to the difficulty associated with the quality of Berryman's poetry, and at the same time to modern, high modernist and postmodernist modes in the work.⁸

Bloom, just by distinguishing "literariness" in Berryman's poetry, offers avenues to understanding this poetry. There are others, including Philip Toynbee, Hayden Carruth, Martin Dodsworth and Peter Dale, whose discordant voices raise the cry to close those avenues. Dale says that, despite his acrobatic style, "Berryman's work is very ordinary, very simple-minded work" (Arpin

⁸ Despite its fuzzy origins, modernism is usually defined as the artistic and literary movement between 1880 and 1945, with its most productive and innovative period being the 1920s and 1930s. Literary historians associate high modernism with 1922, the year that James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* were published. Modernism's preeminent position as an artistic and literary term is connected to the change in thinking which came about as a consequence of the first World War. In recent years, there has been discussion as to whether modernism has been superseded by a more fragmented, but more "playful" aesthetic -- postmodernism. Some critics say that the nuclear age and the Holocaust with their horrors gave rise to a new way of conceiving the world.

52). Dodsworth, in *The Survival of Poetry*, holds that Berryman's major work is an "attack on literature, that it is modernist literature in the symbolist tradition, a literature divorced from life" (119). Dodsworth's contention is quite strange because commentators always point to plenty of life in the poetry of Berryman.

Following the New Critical doctrine, Berryman himself observed:

When a writer has given us satisfactory work--*King Lear*, say, or *Moll Flanders* or "Ode on a Grecian Urn"--we need nothing, properly, outside the work, and interest in circumstances or in the author as individual becomes recognizably what it in fact always is, vulgar and unwarranted curiosity. (Mariani 54)

He insisted that the work of art was a self-sufficient world with its own vitality. The allusions to *King Lear* and *Moll Flanders* are instructive. Their worlds do not depend either on the mind and personality of the writer as individual, or on historical, political and social

implications, but on the perception of the autonomy of the work. As Mariani puts it: "[R.P.] Blackmur and *The New Criticism* had done its work on him" (54). Moreover, T.S. Eliot's views are pervasive although, progressively, Berryman challenges them. In contrast, Berryman later stated:

The Dream Songs seek to 'expose' the poet's most remote level of consciousness, to present the reader with the kind of experience Berryman believes and feels to be behind the superficialities of life, but which we are ordinarily content to ignore. (119)

These views clearly express Berryman's poetics and characterize his entire poetic achievement; however, the first contention better serves to illuminate the phase of his first publications (1940-1948), whereas the second better describes his major work (1947-1972).

Could it be that critics who reject the notion of "literariness" in Berryman's poetry are unable to perceive the kind of valuable life to which Berryman is referring? In Dale's view, Berryman's

poetry is "ordinary," certainly also "vulgar," to use the poet's term for popular curiosity. Yet the "vulgar" language of certain poems stresses the importance of experience, which Berryman incorporated into other poems besides *The Dream Songs*: *The Nervous Songs* (1942), *Sonnets* (1947), *Love & Fame* (1971).

A sampling of verse lines from these three works proves how deeply Berryman professed this creed:

Ai, they all pass in front of me those
girls!

Blazing and lazy colours. The swaying sun
Brushes the brown tips of them stiffy
softly

And whispers me: Never take only one

As the yellow men the white the
foreigners do. -

No, no, I dance them all.

("The Song of the Young
Hawaiian," *The Nervous Songs*)

Keep your eyes open when you kiss: do:

when

You kiss. All silly time else, close

them to;

Unsleeping, I implore you (dear) pursue

In darkness me, as I do you again

Instantly we part.. Only me both then

And when your fingers fall, let there be

two

Only, 'in that dream-kingdom': I would

have you

Me alone recognize your citizen.

Before who wanted eyes, making love, so?

I do now. However we are driven and

hide,

What state we keep all other states

condemn,

We see ourselves, we watch the solemn

glow

Of empty courts we kiss in.. Open wide!

You do, you do, and I look into them.

("Sonnet 36")

I fell in love with a girl.

O and a gash.

I'll bet she now has seven lousy
children.

(I've three myself, one being off the
record.)

I wish she'd read my book & write to me
from O wherever ah how far she is.

After all, I get letters from anybody.

From hers, I'd tear to the 'phone.

It's not now near at all the end of
winter.

I have to fly off East to sing a poem.

Admirers, some, will surge up afterward,

I'll keep an eye out for her.

My tough Songs well in Tokyo & Paris
fall under scrutiny. My publishers

very friendly in New York & London
forward me elephant cheques.

Time magazine yesterday slavered Saul's
ass,
they pecked at mine last year. We're
going strong!
Photographs all over!
She muttered something in my ear I've
forgotten as we danced.

(*"Her & It," Love & Fame*)

The language of these poems conveys certain types of humor, subtle, erotic fantasy, as well as the desire for survival and security. In his early work, Berryman hadn't developed a personal idiom. Although the "I" in *The Nervous Songs* is clearly not Berryman, the language represents a breakthrough for the poet, an important step toward the development of that idiom which continues through the *Sonnets* and is fully-realized in *Love & Fame*. The details of daily life and dreams distance the language in *The Nervous Songs* from the solemnity and abstraction of the earlier poems.

Arpin notes that Dodsworth is correct when he points out that "*The Dream Songs* is intimately connected with life" (6). This will be one of the central contentions of my study. I share with Arpin the belief that to live is to recognize the absurdity and pain of life; but if one acknowledges the absurdity and pain of life, one should be able to acknowledge its humor and joy. Berryman is a master of humor and irony, despite his difficulty in dealing with the strong polarities of pain and joy, death and life in association with the threat of madness. Arpin sees those difficulties as "these things" that Berryman dealt with in *Homage* and in *The Dream Songs*, and they "are what make Berryman's poetry memorable" (10).

Taken as a whole, these studies seem to have left a few stones unturned. There is a gap in the critical commentary on Berryman's poetry which it is the purpose of this study to close. I will focus on voices and themes in his work. In examining these and other poetic devices, I shall illustrate Berryman's poetic development, which can be associated with his private life and with his

acting on the academic, professional, social and political stage. In so doing, I am following Berryman's views that the major work of his middle years more distinctly conveys his deep awareness of his own existence and environment. He transformed the impersonality--steady, objective and generic voices⁹--that marked the beginning of his career into personal voices that revealed in a new-found idiom that permitted him to clown, comment, brood, or sing; this reflects the change from his hermetic vision of art (New Criticism) to an orphic view (Phenomenology).

This stylistic shift raises again the question of how to categorize Berryman: is he confessional or not confessional? Up to and including the time he wrote *The Dream Songs*, Berryman often addressed this point, as if it nagged at him. But clues offered by his comments and by his poetry often seem contradictory.

Besides the extensive use of voices in his

⁹ Denis Donoghue in "Berryman's Long Dream" (Thomas 153) refers to the three voices of the first Dream Song. The first voice is objective, the second is Henry's voice, the third is generic, representative and apocalyptic.

poems, Berryman builds drama by manipulating personae, diction, syntax and altering verb tenses. These devices would seem to point to a "non-confessional" classification. On the other hand, the obvious similarities between the life of "Henry" and the life of the poet could steer readers toward a "confessional" classification.

"Listening" to the poet doesn't make the answer any clearer. Berryman was adamant about his belief in the value of dramatic imagination and craft. These elements stress mediation, not direct revelation of the poet's personal problems. Furthermore, Berryman's frequent remarks that readers needing nothing outside the work, coupled with his insistence that he and "Henry" were not one and the same, would suggest that his poetry should not be viewed as confessional. At the same time, however, he was slowly bringing the personal into his poetry and stated that, with *The Dream Songs* he hoped to lay bare "the poet's most remote level of consciousness...." If this is Berryman's method, it seems clear that his work should be seen as confessional.

Berryman's clues lead in opposite directions, one set seeming to invalidate the other. The conclusion could be drawn, however, that Berryman is pushing the reader to choose one way or the other--confessional/not confessional--or to weigh both possibilities equally, thus negating both. This last option brings us full circle because for Berryman this designation never existed. Nevertheless--because it became part of literary history--it is fruitful to try to understand its nature and value.

Even if it is possible to argue that certain of Berryman's poems are confessional, I cannot accept the generalization that all of Berryman's poetry is confessional. Voices, memory and imagination mediate between reality and irreality or presence and absence. Alluding to imagination in *The Dream Songs*, Berryman says: "imagination as sweet milk" ("32"). This pleasurable source of life has limitations. There are realities which demand more than imagination. It cannot be the only sustenance in moments of extreme despondency.

Berryman saw it well:

He died in December. He must descend
Somewhere, vague and cold, the spirit and
 seal,
The gift descend, and all that insight
 fail
Somewhere. Imagination one's one friend
Cannot see there. Both of us at the end.
Nouns, verbs do not exist for what I
 feel.

(“Epilogue”)

If imagination can only take one so far, the same is true for language and the craft of the poet. In this context, the nature of confessional poetry is related to the mastery of language, which would be able to convey life's implacable suffering. But imagination, as it is sung in this short poem on the death of Robert Bhaun Campbell, cannot always help the human being and the poet.

Despite the importance Berryman places on imagination, none of his critics has addressed this topic. The only critical work dealing with imagination that focuses, even briefly, on *The*

Dream Songs is Kathe Davis' *Conrad Aiken: A Priest of Consciousness* in the section "Ushant in John Berryman's *Dream Songs: Consciousness as Metafiction*." Davis' commentary is brief but explicit. It is an intelligent and fine comparative study of Aiken's *Ushant* and Berryman's *The Dream Songs*.

My study diverges, however, from Davis' because I will not apply a psychoanalytical approach to the reading of Berryman's *Dream Songs*; nevertheless, I share with Davis her reading of *Dream Songs* as a "long poetic sequence"¹⁰ (285), and not a collection of individual poems. Davis already perceived technical innovation in *Homage*. She quotes Aiken in a 1953 letter to Berryman. "*Homage* seems to me one of the finest poems ever written by an American, right on the door step" (286). Aiken was referring to the effects created

¹⁰ M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, in *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (1983), devote a chapter to the confessional mode: Robert Lowell and others. One of the other poets is John Berryman. "Virtually all these poets have written sequences often as the culminating efforts of their career. The sequence has been their great vehicle for discovering the full possibilities of dynamic interplay among poems and fragments conceived under the same ultimate psychological pressure of creative impulse (vii).

by Berryman's manipulation of voices, pronouns and tenses. Yet when Davis later refers to *The Dream Songs*, she places more emphasis on the poems as content: on the substance of Berryman's own life, and not on the formal features of the poems. She points out that *The Dream Songs* is "a work that would have as its subject [the poet], the substance of his own life, viewed in the light of his dream-based knowledge."¹¹ She adds: "It is his life story ... a traumatized life" (287), and she also maintains that the self is fragmented yet functioning "consciousness of consciousness" (287). One can say the self is transformed into metafiction.

This metafiction of the self is inseparable from that created by the High Modernist mode of the poems. Davis alludes to the metafiction of the self as "a brilliant display of intelligent craft" (287). The devices of this craft are: voices, pronouns, characters, and plot, which are important in *Homage* and *The Dream Songs*. The voices call

¹¹ Kathe Davis informs the reader that "Berryman was deep in Freud, Adler, Pfister, Ferenczi and Rank" (286).

attention to other voices, characters and themes. Because of Berryman's ideas and technical innovation, the reader has to play his game when reading his work, and adjust to the changing rules of the game because if, for example, in one line "Henry" is happy, in the next he is miserable. God is at times good, at other times, He is awful:

Henry sats in the plane & was gay.

("Dream Song 5")

I'm scared a lonely. ("40")

I dare interpret: Adonai of rescue.

("Unknowable? perhaps not
altogether," *Delusions, Etc*)

God's Henry's enemy.... ("Dream Song 13")

... God is a slob,
playful, vast, rough-hewn ("238")

Dinch me, dark God, having smoked me out.

("266")

This is a motivating intellectual game for the writer and reader and demands their attention. Berryman's jittery style, though it springs from the poetry of Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, still projects an ambiguity and indeterminacy: what, we wonder, is the possible meaning of Berryman's poetry? As a whole, his poetry is the sum of complex, contestatory views. Their meaning is always plural, equivocal. Their impreciseness is caused by the waywardness and the unfamiliar private references in his poetry; meaning often remains unclear. The indistinct references of the pronouns "I," "we," "they" and alternating voices prevent a coherent, unifying pattern in the majority of his poems. If this demands work on the reader's part, it also empowers him/her to control the textual meaning.

The very first song of *The Dream Songs* exemplifies those views:

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 &
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 a long
wonder the world can bear & be.

Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.

Hard on the land wears the strong sea

and empty grows every bed.

(“Dream Song 1”)

Who are “they”? What thought is expressed about a possible action: “they could do it.” Berryman is right: “These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand./They are only meant to terrify & comfort.” (“Dream Song 366”)

It is more informative to grasp the poetic devices with which Berryman builds *The Dream Songs* than to adopt a mimetic approach. By composing voices as artifices Berryman boasts that he “contain[s] multitudes”;¹² but as counterpoint to these personal or objective voices, we overhear the sound of the generic voice, intellectual and moral, concerned about what is good and evil. It silences the other voices with its obvious wisdom:

The old men wept when the Old Man in blue
 Bulked in the doorway of the Train, Time
 spun
 And in that instant’s revolution Time
 (Who cannot love old men) ...

¹² See Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. One of Berryman’s literary influences is Whitman. Berryman recreates that meaning by mentioning, “Unite my various soul” (“Eleven Addresses to the Lord 3”).

("Ancestor")

... The time is coming near
 When none shall have books or music, none
 his dear,
 And only a fool will speak aloud his
 mind.

History is approaching a speechless end,
 As Henry Adams said. Adams was right.

("The Moon and the Night and
 the Men")

Yet, even when Berryman employs this voice, as if he were lecturing on the Great Books, he creates "multitudes": through changes in the personal pronouns and choices of the verb and verb tenses. "The Disciple," in which the "Ventriloquist's" art is praised, highlights this game. This change of "we" into "I" and later into "He," associated with the rapidity of changes in verb tenses--"we came," "I was amazed," "He made someone sit," "he would astonish us," "he spoke"--introduces a telling mode that transforms into a showing one. However, this shift is an illusion, because these changes are

also associated with the fluidity of themes
expressing concepts of time:

Summoned from offices and homes, we came.
By candle-light we heard him sing;
We saw him with a delicate length of
 string
Hide coins and bring a paper through a
 flame;
I was amazed by what that man could do.
And later on, in broad daylight,
He made someone sit suddenly upright
Who had lain long dead and whose face was
 blue.

Ventriloquist and strolling mage, from
 us,
Respectable citizens, he took
The hearts and swashed them in and upland
 brook,

 ("The Disciple")

Distinct modes of presentation in Berryman's
work correspond with the narrator's "Various soul,"

and with "The Imaginary Jew" in *The Freedom of the Poet*. In this essay, Berryman reflects on a past event. The protagonist remembers a public humiliation which led to a deep awareness of both himself and the world. The incident takes place in New York City during the "Second Summer of the European War." Having come to New York from an area of the South without Jews, the narrator makes known his "simplicity of blindness" regarding Jewishness.

One night, when coming home, he finds himself in the middle of a crowd in Union Square, listening to an argument concerning whether or not the United States should enter the war. Upon entering the debate, he is reproved by one of the contenders as being a Jew. The narrator becomes confused and vehemently denies what seemed a terrible accusation. The poet recalls that it was by "asking careful questions" of his fellow students that he had come to acknowledge the existence of anti-semitism at his school. This discovery was the beginning of Berryman's initiation into

political life.

As Ernest J. Smith¹³ puts it: "Berryman's protagonist loses not only his own naïvete, but more significantly, becomes aware of a much larger arena of loss" (313). This incident reinforced in his life not only the uncertainty, but also the richness of his multiple selves and identities. This awareness was already present in him when he was twelve years old, after his father killed himself. This tragedy, which brought changes in locale, in home, in school, in religious affiliation, and in name, created the diversified fabric of his consciousness and the imaginary landscape which made him receptive to the lesson learned in the incident of prejudice.

In *The Freedom of the Poet*, Berryman touches upon the related concepts of sympathy and empathy.

I was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted
down, on other nights and days, as a real
Jew. Every murderer strikes the mirror,
the lash of the torturer falls on the

¹³ Ernest J. Smith. "John Berryman's Short Fiction: Elegy and Enlightenment." *Studies in Short-Fiction*. 30.3 (1993): 309-16.

mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow down together. (366)

This approach to reality, imagination, sympathy and identification with the other is at times actualized by the game of multiple impersonations.

Part of Berryman's artistic achievement derives from his dramatic imagination: it creates the voices in poetry. Furthermore, it is responsible for the separation of the characters in the poems from the poet. Berryman himself wrote in a note to *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*:

The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named 'Henry' ... [who] talks about himself sometimes in the second [person]; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as 'Mr. Bones' and variants thereof. (Linebarger 16)

Berryman's hint should have furnished critics with a compass to the tricks of his dramatic imagination. Simply by considering the importance

of the protean styles in *Homage* and in *The Dream Songs*, we can discern Berryman's dramatic intentions and emotional high jinks. His poems may flaunt a self pitying, or ironical and satirical tone. Take irony. Once, in an interview, Berryman said that, among other things, a long poem demands "the construction of a world rather than the reliance upon one already existent." When asked if the world of *The Dream Songs* differed from the existent world, Berryman replied, "It's a hard question to answer." Instead of a direct explanation, he offered an analogy about the relationship between "Henry" and himself:

"'Henry' both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points. He only does what I made him do. He performs all kinds of other actions besides those named in the poem, but the reader has to make them up. That's the world." (Thomas 31)

If Berryman wishes us to spotlight the production of meaning in the text and the author, he also forces us to reconsider the function of the

reader. These ideas still carry signs of his flirtations with New Criticism, that movement in American literary criticism from the 1920s to the 1950s which concentrated on the verbal complexities and ambiguities of poems, considering individual works as self-sufficient objects, disregarding their origins or effects. Berryman challenged T. S. Eliot's views of poetry's autotelic status, but shared New Criticism's enticing concept of focusing on the intrinsic qualities of a work rather than on biographical source-study or historical context.

Berryman's thoughts, consequently, point to the hermetic tradition of the nature of language¹⁴ (the idea of a literary work with words taking primary value as realities), and at the same time, to fiction as a world. Berryman alluded to reading as the imaginary quality of literature; he honored the imaginative power of both writer and reader.

¹⁴ Gerald Bruns in *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* presents a fine study of poetic and literary language according to the Kantian model (hermetic) and to the Heideggerian model (Orphic). The Kantian model deals with language as "pure expressiveness," able to displace or arrest the function of signification. In contrast, the Heideggerian model sees poetic speech as the ground of all signification (1-5).

Literature prescribes imaginings;¹⁵ probably this is one of its fundamental, attractive functions. Yet Berryman's views are provisional. Sometimes the hermetic tradition prevails over the orphic, the ideal that dreams unify the world and being: creation of the world. At other times, the orphic prevails. Often, both are alternately played out in his works, with consequent changes of points of view; nonetheless, the Orphic model was to be accentuated once Berryman accepted the fact that he had to bring personality and the personal to his poetics, thus challenging the authoritarian views of New Criticism and Eliot's influential impersonal theory of poetry. However, for Berryman, "personal" did not mean complete or direct exposure of his private life.

Berryman, more than once, with "rage and contempt" declared he did not know what "confessional" in poetry meant¹⁶ and insisted he

¹⁵ Kendal Walton in *Mimesis* points to the equivalence of Mimesis with Representational Forms of art and with Fictions. In his terminology, literature prescribes imaginings.

¹⁶ John Berryman. "The Art of Poetry." Interview. With Peter Stitt. *Paris Review* (1972):177-207. Rpt. in Thomas. *Berryman's Understanding*, (1988).

was not "Henry" of *The Dream Songs*;¹⁷ yet the note at the front of the *Sonnets* does not warn us, as the notes prefacing both volumes of *The Dream Songs* do, that the characters and events are imaginary. Moreover, if Berryman first insisted on separating "Henry" from him as a person and a poet, later, in the interview with Plotz, he added, "Henry both is and not me, obviously.... But I am an actual human being; he is but a series of conceptions--my conceptions." However, "Henry" is defined as a real personality: "Free, black and forty-one" (Plotz 7), and in "Dream Song 13," he is a "human American man."

This consistent, ambiguous fine line between what might be real or unreal reflects Berryman's approaches to life and to his poetics. He keeps blurring the divisions. His aim is to protect himself from readers and critics who would continue to stress in their views of his work traditional, mimetic autobiography over fictional work. "I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends,"

¹⁷ John Berryman. "An Interview with John Berryman." Interview. With John Plotz. *Harvard Advocate* (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Thomas. *Berryman's Understanding*, (1988).

wrote Berryman in "Message."

He was calling the attention of readers and critics to his *artful* poems. As a consequence of his craftsmanship, that writing seems, against his desires, biographical. By calling the reader's attention to his technical virtuosity, Berryman is placing himself as author into his work. In assuming authorship, he is fictionalizing life and poetry.

Both poetry and life, according to Berryman, are very difficult and uncertain processes. Incarnating them in poems required changing pronouns and verb tenses, and juggling voices. These and other devices speak for his notion of poetry as craft. They reveal certain painful aspects of the poet's life that he cannot openly address: the deep sadness brought on by the death of his father, his constant struggle with the erosion of his idealized love for his mother, his mother's demands and eventual dependency on him. His sorrow and pain fueled his compulsive womanizing, suicidal rages and the desire to be king of the poetry hill. They will show Berryman's

poetic growth throughout his career.

Still, sticking the label "confessional" on all of Berryman's poetry is unwise. It neglects his different modes of presentation. My study originates in my opposition to this misleading category. My method is to take a general approach to the work and then move to a specific examination of representative poems. In the initial phase, I introduce poems, stanzas or verse-lines, but I do not fully analyze them. My aim is to point to the structural organization of the volumes of poetry, and to particular qualities that mark the stages of Berryman's poetic development.

Chapter I

Berryman's Formative Years:

Poems

John Berryman, as William Meredith saw him, is "one of the most learned, intellectual and lonely"¹ of modern poets. These attributes surface in his poetry in allusions to religious, philosophical systems, to poetics, to foreign languages and cultures. These are signalled by calling a name, evoking a situation, or embodying obsessive themes. Also to be heard are reverberations of many poets' works. His observations of life's synapses are attentive and subtle. The intricacy of his poetry is difficult.

Berryman thinks dialectically; in his poetics and poetry, he discloses the contradictions, but he avoids resolution. However, when "Humankind's" voice speaks, it imposes an unequivocal wisdom, an attempt at neutralizing those contradictions. If that wide, representative understanding leads the

¹ William Meredith. "In Loving Memory." *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*. (1988):87.

reader to perceive it as the mind of the poet as a man "speaking to other men," impersonality quickly negates this possibility. "What has been taken away will not return" ("Fare Well"). This verse line is too generic to be felt as personal.

Because Berryman detected and made use of impersonality in his apprentice work, and because it persisted throughout his career, I believe that it originated somewhere beyond the reach of his conscious memory. Surely, the abrupt, unbearable pain of losing his father and the feelings of guilt that followed that loss partly determined that impersonality. Another factor was his conforming to his mother's wishes, a pattern which was made clear while Berryman was a student at South Kent School. At school he was also made aware of his own difference from other boys.

In his early career (1940-1948), the impersonal voice parallels historical catastrophes (World War) and personal errors (infidelity). Moral, political and social perceptions became the fabric of those poems. Spiritual, family, social

and intellectual situations in Berryman's childhood and young manhood informed his outlook and poetics. I shall point to these influences and connect them with impersonality in his poetry so as to give a basis for better understanding it.

Besides defining Berryman as a poet, Meredith also acknowledged an important affinity between himself and Berryman: "a yearning for decorum, even for old-fashioned manners. [He was] not speaking about [their] social behavior, which [was] dubious in both cases, but about a social ideal."² This social ideal evolved with the beginning of Berryman's religious awakening at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Anadarko, Oklahoma. There, on May 6, 1923, he had his first communion, in 1924 he served as an altar boy for Father Boniface Beri, and, on March 29th, was confirmed.

He dearly loved Father Beri; his kind benevolent image--associated with the ritual of mass, the faith, doctrine and the hierarchical system of the Roman Catholic Church--was to be imprinted into Berryman's life even if he "would

² Ibid. 83.

later remember with a mixture of pride and disbelief that he and that boy had ever been the same person" (Mariani 8). Yet, till the end of his life, he would remember "with fondness 'the squat ... good, stern, friendly Belgian priest ... who ... became a second father to him" (Mariani 7). This warm memory of Father Beri may have facilitated Berryman's return in 1970 to the faith of his childhood.

Berryman's early interest in and attention to the Church's hierarchy and display of riches was to be continued after the death of his father (1926) during the difficult, spartan, elitist years at South Kent (1928-32), a small Episcopal boarding school in Connecticut. Despite his monastic existence, his life there was connected to that of the rich.

From the beginning he was given a taste of the caste system imposed by the sons of the affluent on those beneath them. Most of the boys' parents were like Berryman's parents, only more so. The fathers bought and sold stocks and bonds,

ran banks, belonged to country clubs in privileged enclaves like Old Saybrook and Darien. The boys were expected to dress appropriately for classes, which meant knickers, tie, and jacket. As young Christian gentlemen, they were also expected to attend daily prayer, to ask politely for the potatoes at lunch and dinner rather than simply grabbing for the bowl, and, as their fathers had before them, to subdue their competitors on the muddy playing fields and iron-hard ice rinks. There was a strict hierarchy, beginning with the 'Brats' of the lowly second form and rising through the imperial sixth. (16)

Even if he hated this school, the headmaster--the old man, Sam Bartlett--the prefects and the boys, certain external signs of social status were attractive to him. When families visited, he had a chance to study their manners, social graces, and aesthetic preferences. These became ingrained in him, affecting his dress code, manners, and ideals.

In 1930, when The Depression was already being felt but had still bypassed his family, his mother bought him his first tuxedo, which he wore at two New Year's parties.

That sense of social decorum and idealized existence was to be heightened in Cambridge (1936-1937). Some social snobbery was reflected in his exaggerated British accent, his mannerisms and clothing. All these affectations, however, didn't obscure the benefits of being in a stimulating intellectual environment. On the eighth of October, immediately after his arrival on October first, he wrote Mark Van Doren, "Perfection is perfection and its given name is Cambridge" (Mariani 60).

This easy celebration shows a lack of wide experience of places and people. Clearly, Cambridge embodied Berryman's ideal. However, as with many judgments made hastily in youth, this perception of Cambridge was to prove an illusion. By November of 1936, Berryman did not attend lectures anymore, and he complained, "What was the point of being [there] if all one did was 'follow

American graduate school grind-teeth curricula?'"

(65) His feelings about the English had also changed. He wrote E. Milton Halliday describing English women as "horrible, dull ... and graceless" (66). Nevertheless, in Cambridge he continued to exercise his intellect. He worked with his tutor, George Rylands (a Shakespearean scholar and the author of *Words and Poetry*), and became the second American to win the Oldham Shakespeare Prize. He met E. M. W. Tillyard, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and William Butler Yeats and attended lectures by T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and Stephen Spender.

His feelings for Cambridge were like those felt for an idealized love-at-first-sight. As a word, "Cambridge" summoned up passion, enthusiasm for intellectual life, spiritual tastes and traditions.

Beliefs and ideals are showcased in Berryman's poetic achievement. In his early work, for example in the poem "Statue," his vocabulary--"tolerant," "charming," "fountains," "pride," "aristocracy," "pity," "statesman," "traveller," "illustrious"--

sets up a parallel between the past and present. The result is the certainty that history's ugly, destructive power is marauding again--"Coriolanus and Rome burning," "Disfigurement is general"--but the speaker's language echoes his nostalgia for a courtly way of life:

Where I sit, near the entrance to the
Park,

The charming dangerous entrance to their
need,

Dozens, a hundred men have lain till
morning

.....

Disfigurement is general. Nevertheless
Winters have not been able to alter its
pride,

If that expression is a pride remaining,
Coriolanus and Rome burning
An aristocracy that moves no more.

.....

The statesman or the traveller?
Who first died or who edited his works,

The lonely brother bound to remain longer
 By a quarter-century than the first born
 Of that illustrious and lost family?

.....

The acute social and moral sensitivity that the poem exhibits developed early in Berryman's life. If his father's suicide forced him to place a protective barrier between himself and his suffering, creating an impersonal voice, it oriented him toward introspection. His experiences--lifelong suffering and intellectual influences--slowly allowed him to move from impersonality to an idiom more passionate and humane. This holds true even if impersonality resurfaced throughout his career (*Sonnets, Homage, or The Dream Songs*).

In an interview near the end of his life, Berryman articulated his credo: "The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business" (Thomas 44)³.

³ John Berryman. "The Art of Poetry." Interview. With Peter Stitt. *Paris Review* (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Thomas. *Berryman's Understanding*, (1988).

In the introduction to *We Dream of Honor: John Berryman's Letters to His Mother*, Richard Kelly refers to this ordeal: "It is one of his strengths that, in poem after poem, he was, in fact, able to transform his suffering into art and to universalize it in a way that touches the reader as well" (5).

This suffering was of a double nature. First, the father's suicide, when Berryman was entering adolescence, imposed on him anguished feelings of guilt from which he suffered throughout his life. Second, the mother's expectations of him as a surrogate husband created an unbearable oedipal tension between the two of them. As Kelly notes:

A persistent thread throughout his letters is a desire to please Mrs. Berryman with his accomplishments. It is as if love manifested itself in achievement and, despite what she says, he cannot be truly loved for what he is, only for what he does... Throughout his life, even when relations between them were cool, he hastened to let her know of

his achievements and honors, seeking her satisfaction and approval. (6)

This pattern is established early. On May 26, 1929--from South Kent School--Berryman writes his mother:

Two or three guys beat me on the Latin test again. Father [Jasper] Kemmis wrote it on the board, then left, and half the class cheated (Dawbarn, Forster & myself weren't among them). The Second Form is darned rotten in that respect--all but a few cheat. I wish the whole Council would watch us during final exams, but if I said a word, every boy who cheats would be down on me. I am working hard for the final exams ... I study all the time.
(23)

Even if Berryman was not the best at Latin, this testimony shows his desire to please his mother with his effort and commitment to his studies and the integrity of his behavior. It separates him, however, from the other students. "The older I get and the more I know about people,

the less I like them. Boys are a cruel, selfish, dishonorable bunch, most of them[,]” he wrote in his diary (Haffenden 46).

With the exclusion of his Columbia days (1932-1936), Berryman always felt alone: he couldn't connect with those around him, and no one seemed able to relate to him. This feeling was a constant in his academic and social life, despite all of his friendships and the respect of his peers. Because of his intelligence, achievements, and his lack of athletic prowess, the beginning of his life at South Kent was characterized by isolation.

Another letter to his mother demands extensive presentation. It was written April 13, 1932 and expresses his scholastic interests and successes, humor, literary abilities, perceptions and worries.

This letter will be principally about English. I have other work to do, as always--poor boy, so overworked!--but I consider this more important.... I consider English the only subject I'm taking this year that is really of vital importance.... Yesterday, we read

Riders to the Sea by John Synge, and wrote a short paper on it.... [Albion] Patterson read mine and Ward's in class, mine first. I noticed that while Ward's was not as polished as mine (only relatively--mine can be vastly improved and polished, of course) it was more interesting reading because it was more personal and intimate. I have thought several times that my themes were rather cold and calculating; of course, we are writing about impersonal subjects, but still I wondered if I were on the road to becoming an intellect like Francis Bacon. Naturally, I didn't compare myself with him, but he was probably cold and impersonal, if less intellectual, in his youth. So this morning I took a theme that I had re-written, embodying several of Mr. Patterson's suggestions, in to him and we talked for something over an hour. I spoke to him about the detached (I don't know whether I could be detached if

I wanted to, but it resembles that) quality of my work of late and asked him about it.... I asked him what kind of writing [I should do now], and he said that it would be better if I didn't receive any suggestions--just write about whatever I want and not to write for criticism or marks merely what I feel and think.... In that way he thinks I can develop my own style and get away from this impersonality.... I am interested mainly in English, but I don't see how I could be an author, because I know absolutely nothing about human nature. I might learn about that in Psychology or by experience, though ... I have a sound and excellent knowledge of English (for my age, and it will develop), an interest in words and a fairly lucid mind--all inherited from you.... (28-29)

This extraordinary document by a young man of seventeen displays a writer who is already aware of

his literary shortcomings, but who is knowledgeable, humorous, ambitious--and an admirer of his mother. This letter is a piece of criticism that points to literary traits that seem partially endemic to Berryman's personality: "a cold and calculating" mode of writing, and "impersonal" distancing. Moreover, his remarks about the ingredients needed to become an author are extremely perceptive and intelligent: without experience--whatever its sources, no one can write.

It is knowledge and that "impersonality" to which he referred in his letter that the speaker of his poems transmits. This voice, however, intellectualizes even empirical experience and distances itself from it. These elements shaped Berryman's first volumes of poetry. Maturity came with time as well as poetic development, but also with deep personal suffering: losses--his father John Allyn and Delmore Schwartz, his beloved friend; separation--from Beryl Eeman, his English fiancée, from Eileen Patricia Mulligan, his first wife, from Ann Elizabeth Levine, his second wife, and from so many other people who were dear to him;

illness--in 1939, he suffered a "petit mal," which is considered a form of epilepsy (later, his wife Eileen showed that this was a misdiagnosis); steady depressive states; alcoholism--starting in 1947, the year of his first infidelity; exhaustion, breakdowns and constant intoxication (1966-1972).

All this turmoil was aggravated by the instability of temporary teaching appointments: a year as instructor at Wayne State University, Instructor of English for four months at Harvard University, three weeks' teaching at the Iona School in New Rochelle (1943), Instructor in English for one year at Princeton. This pattern went on and on: Briarcliff College, University of Washington, University of Vermont, University of Cincinnati, University of Iowa. At last in 1955, Berryman started teaching in Humanities at The University of Minnesota, where he stayed until his death.

Up to 1965, when he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Dream Songs* and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Berryman lived in poverty, always mismanaging any money he could make. These awards

happily soothed his serious insecurity about himself and his own work.

From the inception of his career, Berryman's insecurity had to do with his private life, and the models he wanted to emulate: Yeats and Auden. Their names evoked fame and mastery. The young Dylan Thomas, as young as Berryman and already famous, exhibited bountiful talent. He produced poems without any demanding efforts. In the face of such competition, Berryman's personal and poetic sense of insecurity worsened.

His father's suicide and his mother's suffocating desire for him to excel unnerved the boy of twelve. What could be much worse than losing his father? This event became the curse of his existence: the dominant theme of *The Dream Songs* (1964-1968). "And this unhappy man, who spent his life lamenting the suicide that left him fatherless at age twelve jumped to his own death in 1972, leaving behind a young wife and two daughters, aged eight and one" (Conarroe 2).

Still, either because sometimes one is not totally aware of one's suffering at a young age, or

because of protective survival tactics, Berryman was able to keep an emotional distance from his father's suicide. However, he painfully felt Bhain Campbell's death, and in his "Epilogue" (*Poems* 1942), he described that grief as if it was one he had never before experienced. This loss was not explicitly conveyed, however. His emotions metamorphosed into meditative lines. Nor was his pain openly revealed in the poems of 1940 published in *Five Young American Poets* (brought out by New Directions).

Another pressure that caused Berryman to wrap himself in impersonality was his mother's nagging requirements. They began at South Kent:

[I]t [was] ironic that his mother, ambitious for his success, urged him to excel not only in his studies but equally in sports. Since even she played her tune in time with the school, Berryman had no alternative but to dance. She unknowingly exacerbated his sense of self-conflict by pushing him to work up an interest in field sports for her sake

as much as for the school's, and by heightening the degree to which he grew at variance with any true standard for his real disposition. By so doing, she helped to forge a divide between his genuine and his professed feelings, and indeed between herself and him--since he had in effect to lie even to her. The insincerity of his career at school disturbed the kilter of his moral and emotional development. (Haffenden 37-38)

It is instructive to read Berryman's outburst of sincerity and criticism of his schoolmates' lack of integrity, and then to realize that he had to lie in order to cope with his mother's demands.

These harmful events set off a conflict between sincere feelings and pretended ones. The poems of 1940 to 1948, the product of subliminal agonies and happy moments, incorporated images and ideas mixed with material absorbed from readings. Indistinctly allusive, they indicate the themes that would preoccupy Berryman throughout his

career: the dangers and terrors of reality and history, the relationship between the public world and his own psyche--haunted by memories, death, love, and fear.

Those early poems (1940) were written in his twenties.

The speaker, typically, is seated in a room at dusk, alone in thought, brooding about the dangerous reality beyond his walls, all the while making disturbing connections between this public world ... and his own private world...." (Conarroe 25)

The speaker "broods" upon the sinister reality, paralleling it with his threatening, fearful inner reality. The impersonal, detached manner of presentation separates the speaker who "sees" from the human being who suffers and the reader who has suffered.

The occasion of these poems is "the eye of the mind [as it] travels among its past,/seeing an anxious now" ("Meditation"); with its Platonic "vision," and recurrent vocabulary--"see," "stare,"

"night," "ironic," "death," "sentry," "asylum," "sanctuary"--Berryman conjures, in a romantic manner, subjective moods, manipulating public or private symbols. Alongside this symbolist mode marches his modernist manner, its features drawn according to imagist principles: direct, economical presentation of the object and the creation of an image--vision.

These lines illuminate these points:

An evening faultless interval when
 Blood ran crescendo in the brain
 And time lay as a poem clear
 Falls from me now; a friend is gone
 Who taught my anger
 Is all but lost in time; few things
 remain.

The insolent look a woman gave
 Casually from a door one day
 Leaves me not, on the other hand;
 Strange stigmata to our grave,
 Indiscriminate as the wind,
 We carry, with our bones they will decay.

The sky and sea are one in the night,
No eye can make distinction where
Eye is contained, eye subject is
To eyelid, even the pawn of light:
But panthers explain parenthesis
Until they prey and state all hunger
there.

Certainty shall not touch my tongue.
And yet I hold, I have in mind
That this our love will stay for us:
Instructed by the years belong
Obdurate and anonymous
A sanctuary eye among the blind.

("Sanctuary")

All forms are entangled, giving some impression,
generating images and connecting outerworld and
innerworld. "The sky and sea are one in the
night," is a romantic line, "An evening faultless
interval," is a symbolist one, and "Blood ran
crescendo in the brain," is a modern concoction.
The voice, however, remains impersonal.

"Song from 'Cleopatra'," "The Apparition," "Meditation," "Sanctuary," and "Ceremony and Vision" are representative of Berryman's early poetry. These short narratives are presented from the point-of-view of a third person speaker. Despite the presence of the "I," the reader in detecting the lyrical "I" expects it to be the conventional agent of direct expression of feelings and thoughts; however, that role is not totally assumed. The "I" "sees" and thinks; its observations are grounded in experience of nature -- "The cloud before the sun when the sun rose" ("Meditation")--imagination--"From Pharos I have seen her white/Standing with Pompey" ("Song from 'Cleopatra'"), or memory--"Next remains to the mind, of all those loud/Merciless laughing boys..." ("Meditation"). No matter the situation, the self-detached voice never changes.

The "I" assumes a cold posture and the short narrative in "Song from 'Cleopatra'" mixes brief description--"I have seen her white," "she but young"--with generalized, intellectual and philosophical conclusions--"Ambition died into

delight," "Resentment got continual strife":

From Pharos I have seen her white
Standing with Pompey while the moon
Twice turned and made a silver noon
Upon the Alexandrian night.
When air was olive, she but young,
Ambition died into delight.

A bird there was that died and then
Struck from its ashes into life.
Resentment got continual strife
And blood upon the marsh and fen.
Limp in the antique arms of one
She learnt her hatred for all men.

That Queen insulted Cicero,
Lucan and Horace threw a gibe,
But Anthony and all his tribe
Cut out the hearts that called her so.
Wandering upon her terrace
They go and ask not where they go.

What symbol of degraded death
 Will now sustain what she has been?
 Not a Tanagra figurine
 From out the tumult and the wrath
 Perhaps the sensual eye, the pride
 That spent itself before her breath.

(“Song from ‘Cleopatra’”)

This same pattern is exhibited in “The
 Apparition” in phrases and verse lines such as:
 “In one indiscriminate place,” “A familiar chair,”
 “the slight/Smile of a fresco god your face/Which
 from the advancing eye/Withdraws miles in an
 instant.”

Frequently when the night
 Binds Austria and England in
 One indiscriminate place,
 Staring I see between
 A familiar chair and the slight
 Smile of a fresco god your face

Which from the advancing eye
 Withdraws, miles in an instant,
 Is quite gone, and the god

Resumes his banishment
To curtain mathematics: dry
And bitter the brain is in my head.

Could I suspend sight where
It met you, could I command
Instinct be still, blood still,
I fancy you might stand
And your eyes, even your hair
Stay to reward that skill.

Tonight I will do: patience
Rule my long love and guide
The wild nerves when they start.
But something will have died
From me if I look once
There and restrain my heart.

("The Apparition")

The speaker is rarely described; at times he is defined by what he says, the matter he is dealing with and the relationship with it. The speaker's voice is abstract, as if the voice of any human being, and the context of the poem is vague,

trafficking in general terms: creation/destruction,
life/death.

"The Trial" justifies those perceptions:

The oxen gone, the house is fallen where
Our sons stood, and the wine is quiet and
skew

Among the broken walls the servants are

Except who comes across the scorching
field

Historian. But where the wind is from
That struck the mansion, great storms
having failed,

No man can say. What wilderness remains?
Prosperous generations, scythe in hand,
Mapped the continents, murdered, built
latrines.

Intellectual sores raven among
The faithful organs, corrupting from
within;
To scrape them but the fastidious tongue.

Perforce we sit among the ashes, not
 By will. We have no friends who come to
 pray,
 Cannot discover what disaster brought:

Ignorant who commanded grass to burn
 Like Spanish altars, we can scarcely say
 Let the day perish wherein we were born.

The context is not clear even if the verse lines "Like Spanish altars, we can scarcely say/Let the day perish wherein we were born," can allude to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). It is a bad, anguished time. That anguish, says Conarroe, because it "is not grounded in any specific reality, the reader, while willing perhaps to accept its validity for the writer or speaker, is finally unable to participate in its feeling" (26).

I disagree with Conarroe on this point. Berryman calls up ruin, loss and pain, universal emotions. Therefore, who cannot agree with: "Perforce we sit among the ashes, not/By will"? Who among us hasn't experienced an instant of

despair in which we have in some way wished: "Let the day perish wherein we were born"? Nevertheless, the voice remains aloof even when the objective narration assumes the intimacy introduced by the pronoun "we." Nothing changes; it is still narrative, just slightly more descriptive: "house is fallen," "broken walls," "fastidious tongue."

Emotions of sorrow, however, draw on the reader's complicity. For example, if one grew up in a farm community and reads, "The oxen gone, the house fallen," these images resonate for him/her. We feel not just for the speaker, as Conarroe remarks (26), but for ourselves because of what we love, need and lose. Despite this understanding, these elements remain too general and indeterminate; but because of this vagueness, the reader can easily project into the poems that which has moved him/her.

In the poem "Song from 'Cleopatra'," some literal meaning about that great romantic heroine is given; but, what are the other layers of meaning? The historical, mythological and literary

allusions--"Cleopatra," "Pharos," "Pompey,"
 "Alexandria," "Anthony," "Cicero," "Lucan,"
 "Horace," "Tanagra"--reverberate with the power of
 these vanished figures.

Furthermore, beyond the standard meanings
 conjured up by such words as "moon," "bird,"
 "ambition," "resentment" ("Song from 'Cleopatra'"),
 or "patience," "love," "heart" and "died" ("The
 Apparition"), or "bones" and "decay" ("Sanctuary"),
 are "private definitions" that grow out of a
 person's emotional and intellectual landscape.
 Despite their special usages, however, they are
 directly linked to lived reality. The bond between
 speaker and audience about their common human lot
 is strong:

Even if they are not very well identified,
 those symbols from history do not create any
 communication problem between the speaker and the
 readers. The trouble resides in the indeterminacy
 of common words or thoughts; some are impossible to
 decode. Like impersonality, they obscure meaning.
 These lines explain this point:

That constant sensibility which by night

Exerts content upon my head, my brain

.....

Hers is the obscure laurel, the steady
love

Which will not qualify before the grave,
Hers integral and passionate delight.

("Meditation")

Which is that "constant sensibility," to whom is
"hers" referring? It is not clear.

These early poems baffle because they are not
easily accessible; Berryman omits precise
descriptions of external reality, of the speaker's
opinions, even straightforward statements about his
inner world. Yet the reader infers sense from the
overtones of special words or images.

In this light, let us analyze the voices and
themes in "Song from 'Cleopatra'," "The
Apparition," and "Meditation," works published in
Five Young American Poets. I will give a close
reading of each poem, after which I will introduce
information from Berryman's life which some readers
connect to the poems and, therefore, interpret as
evidence of the confessional nature of Berryman's

poetry.

"Song from 'Cleopatra'" describes the Egyptian Queen's heroic traits. We can use Plato's and Aristotle's views on narrative to begin our examination of the imagined voices. Plato and Aristotle outlined three basic kinds of narrator: the speaker, poet or any writer who uses his own voice; one who assumes the voice of another person or persons, and the one who uses a mixture of his own voice and that of others. The narrator is defined in terms of his or her degree of participation in the story. The voice, however, stresses the way in which it addresses the reader. To better understand the notion of voice, I shall also ground my analysis in T. S. Eliot's definition of the three voices of poetry.

In emphasizing the tentative nature of his enquiry, Eliot said: "Its validity is uncertain, and the value of which, even if true, may be questionable" (5). *The Three Voices of Poetry*, however, became part of the critical canon and proved to be a good analytical tool. For Eliot, "the first voice is the voice of the poet talking

to himself or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character" (6-7). As a conclusion, Eliot decries the existence of the first voice, except in Epilogues.

In "Song from 'Cleopatra'," the reader listens to Eliot's "second" and "third" voices; but because of the "I" pronoun in the first line, he also thinks of Plato's first person narrator because he is imaginatively witnessing the events of the story. Since this "I" sees from afar (time and space) and stands outside the events, he is a third person narrator, like an omniscient author who has access to the character's unspoken thoughts--"She learnt her hatred for all men." This narrator also has knowledge of events happening in different places--"That Queen insulted Cicero/Lucan and

Horace threw a gibe"; these events happened after he had seen her "From Pharos ... white.../Upon the Alexandrian night."

This voice coincides with the assumed "I," which, because of his lack of emotions and the majestic setting he observes, as well as his allusions to the important historical figures, gives both the voice and the poem a dramatic torque.

The "I," because of the setting and the enacted romantic, historic drama, is a voice addressing an audience as well as an "I" who, because of his presence in the scene, is also a "dramatic character." The complexity of an "I" who is a first-person narrator who changes to third-person and a second/third voice, anticipates the explicit impersonations of *Nervous Songs*, *Sonnets to Chris* and *The Dream Songs*.

The pronoun "I" appears only once, and this isolated instance highlights its usage. The title, however, calls our attention to the heroine and the poem names her "Queen." These points, added to the fact that the pronouns "her" and "she" appear seven

times, move the focus from the "I" who sees to the "she" who acts. Contemplation and action are the two attributes that Berryman praised in a human being.

In defining "her," the third voice narrative introduces transience, alluding to youth and death. Ruled by love and with her beauty and vigor, the demands of the state are superseded by private delights: "... she but young,/Ambition died into delight." Love and death are associated with the conventional symbol of the phoenix; there is always freedom, death and renewal: "A bird there was that died and then/Struck from its ashes into life." With life come "Resentment," "hatred," "wrath," "pleasure," and "pride."

These motifs are integral to Berryman's entire poetry. The use of a third voice narrative to present these elements creates drama, the antithesis of confessional verse. The poem is about "Cleopatra" and her environment; this information, with the reader's perceptions, constitute the poem's meaning.

Wishing to go beyond the literal meaning, some

readers may be interested in understanding why Berryman undertook the writing of a "Song from 'Cleopatra'," how the different themes were developed. Certainly, then, they could be helped by having access to Berryman's biography.

In February of 1937, while in Cambridge, "Berryman had noticed a beautiful young woman playing--ironically--the role of the mother in *The Revenger's Tragedy*" (Mariani 76). Before he left for London on holiday, Berryman attended "a party thrown by Andrews Wanning, a sociable good-looking fellow-American who was up at Magdalene...." There he met "Beatrice."⁴ He rushed to tell Katharine Fraser⁵, "'I've met the most beautiful, stunning and brilliant girl'" (Haffenden 92). Beryl Eeman was an actress, and because they shared the same passion for the theatre, he wrote a dramatic poem--a version of *Cleopatra* (a one-act play) for Eeman. "'Shakespeare,'" he asserted, "'was magnificent

⁴ "Beatrice" is the name given to Beryl Eeman by Berryman and by John Haffenden, Berryman's first biographer.

⁵ Katharine Fraser and Gordon Fraser owned a bookshop in Portugal Place where Berryman used to browse. "To Berryman the Frasers seemed in brief, 'Young, pleasant and remarkably interesting, he brilliant as the devil but rather insane and she a dark Beatrice Lillie, oddly charming'" (Mariani 78).

(and wrong), I hope to be interesting as well as right'" (92).

He thought Eeman's posture and beauty the perfect medium for his art:

She ought really to be nude; but Proctors being proctors, the alternative is such a gown as Cleopatra wore at The Council in Tarsus: a robe of transparent gauze fastened beneath the breasts. Fetching, eh? And *might* help the box office, for Beatrice is superbly made. (93)

Berryman is obviously proud and intoxicated with "Beatrice," but he did not mind exposing her for the sake of his art. Berryman and Eeman fell in love; she became his first fiancée.

Intimacy, passion, happiness, energy, motivation ... all together were a new experience in Berryman's daily life. The couple met every day. Berryman wrote letters to his mother, Van Doren and Halliday praising this love of his life. He was "'deeply & joyously in love with the most remarkable girl'" (Mariani 78). Meanwhile he wrote poems including "Meditation in Rain," studied the

Shakespeare folios, read *Henry VI*, *Richard III* and the first four comedies in this order: "(*Errors*, *Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen*, *Love's Labour Lost*,') *Hamlet* & *Lear*, *Measure for Measure* and the romances" (80). The list goes on and on.

On the morning of his twenty-third birthday, Berryman awoke,

obsessed with thought of Hamlet and his own death.... That fall ... he spent hour after hour listening to classical music, especially the Brandenburg Fifth, until he could follow its major themes. He also learned that the harness, for which he'd say in May, would not be awarded [that] time around.... When he read Auden's *Paid on Both Sides* and *The Orators*, he had concede[d] that Auden was 'the best British poet alive,' even if he did too much psychologizing. [He] even began reevaluating Beryl. He'd seen her at least once every day since the beginning of term, and after a month of

that decided it might be better to see her less often. (82)

Berryman was accepting his isolation and changing moods, and feeling melancholy because he was not known as a poet. He was gradually becoming aware that for him to choose life was to betray art.

Against this background, it is possible, then, to perceive in the "Cleopatra" of "Song from 'Cleopatra'" the actress, the lover and the mother. Berryman admires and celebrates her presence, complexion ("white"), posture ("standing"), and youth ("the sensual eye"), as well as her "pride." "Cleopatra," "Beatrice" and "Jill"⁶ become one. Eeman, the actress on the stage, can lurk behind the dramatic arras of the poem. And if Eeman becomes "Cleopatra," by extension, Berryman is the condemned Marc Anthony. In choosing this conventional romantic, tragic material, is not Berryman, by analogy, suspecting that his encounter with Eeman is doomed?

In their first months of romance, Berryman,

⁶ Martha ("Peggy") Shaver [Little] Smith changes her name to "Jill Angel" after her marriage -- September 8, 1926 in New York -- to John Angus McAlpin Berryman.

inspired by his fresh love, worked diligently and produced poems systematically. While preparing himself for the "short," "stylized" *Cleopatra*, he read "the authorities": "the Roman historians." This is certainly the reason allusions are made in the poem to the greatest Roman orator and philosopher, to the poet and the one of the greatest lyric poets: "Cicero," "Lucan," and "Horace" respectively.

Berryman's gradual awareness of the difficulties of balancing the exigencies of poetry with the pleasures of love and intimacy forced him into the position of having to make a choice. During the summer of 1937 he wrote his mother, saying that Beryl had become his "one chance for a full and rich and permanent (if, necessarily, desperately partial) human happiness" (80). Despite his feelings for Beryl, however, he chose to bend in the direction of work and poetry. His mother, in her letters, was always manipulating him to view himself as a great poet with a name for posterity. Knowing these things, the reader can then share his growing worry: "Ambition [should

not die] into delight."

Yet the "delight" was over. Later, in 1942, Berryman broke the engagement to Eeman. It is both ironic and sad that, close to the end of his life, it was not the love of his third wife (Kathleen Donahue--"Kate"), that he immortalized, but his longing for the love of "Beatrice." For him, for almost thirty years, her love was like the "Pharos" off "Alexandria."

If, however, "Cleopatra" was written explicitly for "Beatrice," certain words--"youth," "pride," "sensual eye," "white," "resentment," "continual strife"--can be seen as part of the internalized feminine model, his mother, from which all others were cast. Berryman always felt the beauty, coquettishness, and attraction of his mother and perceived the love betrayed between his father and mother. His father's affair with the "Cuban woman" (1926) and his mother's marriage less than three months after his father's death were the memories which created "the continual strife and the resentment."

Moreover, the verse line, "She learnt her

hatred for all men" was so much an element of the plot of the family stories of Berryman's childhood that it must have been ingrained in his psyche. When his mother would tell him about the shaky union between her mother and father--Martha May Shaver and Alvin B. Little--and her father's desertion when she was only five, it was a tale of dread. She only saw her father through the unforgiving hatred of her mother. For her mother, all men were the same: enemies.

Naturally, the mother passed her rancor on to her daughter. Her father's abandonment as well as her husband's justified her feelings of "resentment." And John Allyn's suicide was indeed "[a] degraded death," damaging the persona Berryman's mother had created for herself: the dignified and cultured woman who was in control. That death helped to foster Berryman's lifelong threatening fears and contradictions.

All of these perceptions were part of Berryman's mental landscape. If "resentment" was part of his parents' vocabulary, dominating their stories and memories, his own world was already

filled with resentment and guilt toward his father and mother. When "Beatrice" entered this complex web of destructive emotions, his love for her doubled his sense of guilt toward himself as a poet, and as a lover to his American girlfriend--Jean Bennett--who, because of his love for "Beatrice," he would have "to abandon" as well. (He had previously been jilted by Jane Atherton, his old flame.) The circle seemed sadly completed. Such chaos ran parallel to his poetic quest.

Whether or not "Cleopatra" gains symbolical layers of meaning if the reader possesses knowledge about Berryman's life, the major interest of the poem remains the speaker's manipulation of a romantic, mythological, tragic content in a detached, cool style. "Like Yeats he would write plays, dramatic things, he explained to Van Doren as a 'mask for my life, a discipline, a stylized order'" (62).

Yeats was one of the passions of Berryman's life. His presence is felt in "The Apparition." Yet in a close reading of the poem, one is left with the difficulty of the undigested ideas, "Is

quite gone, and the god/Resumes his banishment/To
curtain mathematics: dry" and indeterminate
references. Whose "face" is that one?
Nonetheless, the reader becomes aware of the poem's
focus: the cherished "face" that has the power to
overcome distances, "Which from the advancing
eye/Withdraws miles in an instant," and storm the
truth of the heart. The speaker dwells on longing
and love, but the tone reflect thinking and the
occasion for the vision.

The pattern of "Song from 'Cleopatra'"
continues: a relationship is established between
speaker and nature: "Frequently when the
night/Binds Austria and England in/One
indiscriminate place." Already the speaker imposes
distance, "staring I see ... your face." This
attentive looking is the pretext for a private,
intellectual digression replete with a religious
allusion and conclusion that that face belongs to
someone with "skill." There is no spontaneity or
emotion. Even if the "I" pronoun is repeated six
times, it creates no intimacy; the unfolding of the

meditation is cerebral. It is a complex pattern: the "I" that is "staring" is also the narrator of a story that does not unfold. Because the "I" lacks any kind of identity and emotional strength, despite the disarray of the senses in a future encounter, the "I" remains impersonal, any voice. In this sense, the "I" is not only a second but also a third voice: the speaker, the narrator and one character in his own show. The other, "the face," embodies love and emulation.

Isolation, resentment, longing, and love are the subjects of the poem. As part of Berryman's thematic inventory, they are connected to his stay in Cambridge. His love for Yeats was tested when "Andrew Chiappe asked him to speak about W.B. Yeats to The Dilettante Society, the Clare College Literary Society, on 11 February [1937]" (Haffenden 85). Berryman concentrated on the study of lyric poetry and on Yeats's symbolism. He began to stress the importance of Yeats's life to his work, to think that biographical elements were fundamental for him as a critic. "'Many of the symbols in [Yeats's] poems,'" he wrote, "'are

personal symbols, to be understood in terms of his history, and only when understood can they be appraised'" (86).

While preparing for the conference, he became possessed by Yeats:

Exhausted from over work ... he experienced an hallucination. 'Wednesday evening while I was reading here [10 February], suddenly my attention wandered, as if forcibly; I shut my eyes and an image rose before them, not clear but strong: I saw that it was the figure of Yeats, white-haired and tall, struggling laboriously to lift something dark ... I saw that it was a great piece of coal, irregular black. He raised it high above his head, hair flying and, with a set expression, brilliant eyes, and dashed it to the ground at his feet, a polished ground that might have been a floor: the pieces rolled away silver.' The symbolic vision of a Yeats purging Ireland, striking silver out of coal, was

the product of heroic identification.

(86)

The reader might now recognize that the "face," "the dry/And bitter the brain," in the poem reflects the anguish of struggling to live up to poetry and fame's high demands or cope with the "encounter" that stirs love and admiration. The poem becomes the best testimony of that imaginary encounter. Berryman did not construct a poetic system like Blake's or Yeats's, which one can absorb in order to understand his private allusions. His poem exhibits a cerebral, synecdochic celebration of one person and his/her talent.

In the poem, the gender of the person who shows the "face" remains indeterminate, and the words "your eyes, even your hair" associated with the unveiling of possible emotions in their encounter, hint (by choice--craft or poetic inexperience) that the face could be a feminine symbol. But even if it refers to a man, the continuing game of impersonation is interesting, and, in this case, brings about equivocal readings.

Difficulty is one of the characteristics of
Berryman's poems. "Meditation" is no exception:

I

The clouds before the sun when the sun
 rose
Perform their thoughtless promise, summer
 rain
Filling the morning falls about the
 house.
River's resentment to its natural gain
Is reconciled; communications close

To the town, muffled, and the sentinel
 strain
Of solitude is taken by the ground
Together with half of light and all of
 sound:
Asylum thus for memory and praise.

II

Uncircumscribed in an August prison
The eye of the mind travels among its
 past,

Seeing an anxious now; this without plan
 But perfect apprehension. Being chaste
 It finds simple and strange mostly the
 moon
 Directing loss, generation into waste
 Four hundred miles hence and the fluent
 blood
 That never knew an evil from a good.
 Or heard among the springing corn the
 sun.

III

Elegy that way. The intelligent eye
 Is tourist here and passes on, pausing
 Now with delight upon the symmetry
 And energetic poise of a grey wing
 In Channel flight against a heavy sky,
 Bearing like feathers the weight and end
 of Spring
 To scattered home, indicating but this:
 The texture of grey flight, analysis
 Left dazzled on the shore hungry and dry.

IV

Next remains to the mind, of all those

loud

Merciless laughing boys but one who knows

Too the continual drive of craft. The

crowd

In classroom and on field, time cannot

choose

But give a humorous aspect; we allowed

Last night however in our distant news

No compromise, five years and sea apart.

I thought upon, with sickness at my

heart,

The many foundered and a few the proud.

V

And now the eye breaks out to open light

Beyond cloud, where the source it can

maintain:

That constant sensibility which by night

Exerts content upon my head, my brain

Invests with careful patience and my
sight
By day teaches a singular discipline.
Hers is the obscure laurel, the steady
love
Which will not qualify before the grave,
Hers integral and passionate delight.

VI

The uncontrollable eye spins in the year,
A curious harvest brings. Pieces of
bread
At twilight on a Dublin quay, and fear;
The clenched lip, a wrinkle on the
forehead
Of hanging Christ; the eye sees
everywhere
Indestructible evidence of dread,
In apples as in smiles, horrible both.
But generosity upon her mouth
Levels all torment in an actual tear.

VII

Million kaleidoscope: gesture of hand
Whose white invisible hairs are dangerous
Men, whose wrist intends frontier assault
and
Rapture; the rain silent beyond the
house;
The kernel being stripped of its tough
rind
Bitters in air; deserted walls focus
One afternoon a lovely shelter, soft
Grass where a floor had been, and when
she laughed
The sound could make a shelter for the
mind.

VIII

Items to make a history. Most I stare
Upon the sign of our precaution, now
Symbol of some defeat. For a career
Before it began ends; and she, although
She wanted nothing, wants in the young
air

New breath for heritage we have let go.
 Her secret loss assures that he is dead
 Who could not know his dark restricted
 bed

And what horizons have been tested there.

The initial verse-lines follow the same course as "Song from 'Cleopatra'" and "The Apparition." The speaker establishes a natural setting, but in this poem, because the poet personifies nature, symbolically the speaker's inner world is immediately unveiled. The opening lines reveal feelings and actions: "thoughtless promise," "river's resentment is reconciled." It is summer, but the speaker makes use either of "the intelligent eye" or "the mind" to indicate signs of past times. Memories are disclosed in "an anxious now."

It is an elegiac time. Gloomy omens are everywhere: "communications close/To the town, muffled, and the sentinel strain/Of solitude." They point to the certainty of "generation into waste." In this public, hopeless arena, there are, however, signs of hope--in nature and in the

artist. There is the "River's" reconciliation and the youth's "continual drive of craft." This mission asks from the aspiring poet to go and look for assurance and to pay homage to the great living poet. The representative of the magic craft is in "Dublin." Allowing the mind to travel, the speaker moves to "Dublin," close to the protected, personal sanctuary of love and its secrets: betrayals and losses. The speaker finally explains: "Her secret loss assures that he is dead/Who could not know his dark restricted bed/And what horizons have been tested there." These lines remain vague and obscure. Yet, more extensively than the two poems I have already discussed, "Meditation" deals heavily with platonic, recurrent symbols and views: the long journey from darkness into light--"And now the eye breaks out to open light". More elaborated themes with more poetic illustrations bring together life journey and artistic quest. This is the new gain of this poem. But the self-detached voice persists. It is, coincidentally, a first and a third-person narrative: "The uncontrollable

eye spins in the year/A curious harvest brings." With the unclear insinuations to "That constant sensibility," "discipline," and "Hers is the obscure laurel," the voice continues to be impersonal and opaque. Through "The eye of the mind," the speaker goes on, connecting outer/inner reality and past/present times. There is an instant in which the impersonal voice coincides with the "I," but instead of "showing" his feelings, he states them, and his conclusion is a poor moralizing, gothic tale: "I thought upon, with sickness at my heart,/The many foundered and a few the proud." This is related to a precise setting --youth and school--but it suggests life in general.

Those lines and the conclusion of the poem justify Conarroe's remark that the poem "is stiff, important, full of high sentence" (25). Yet its vocabulary--mixing public and private realities -- and visual images evoke awe and approaching disaster. These painful, fearful times dredged up from consciousness require protection. Subsequently, the speaker needs self-detachment and

memory's transfiguration of those events to smooth the ravages, "New breath for heritage we have let go." Yet the specter of death hovers over the poem.

Because it is a recurrent theme in Berryman's poetry, that loss exposes his difficulty in dealing with it and his need to keep the speaker from telling about it. Suffering and pain are too close to the poet to allow his speaker to identify them clearly. Art, subsequently, can reveal life, not only in the garb of the poem with its layers of meaning, but in the speaker's (and poet's) strategies of distancing himself from his own material.

The speaker is impersonal; the allusions are mostly private and obscure. They show that Berryman consciously or unconsciously protecting himself. His style can be a result of subconscious guidance, choice of artistic process, or both.

Poetry that is opaque because of private allusions leaves itself open to biographical readings. Berryman wrote this poem on August 13, 1937 in Cambridge. His stay in England had become

very disquieting, not only for personal reasons, but for historical ones as well: over the winter of 1936, Germany, Italy and Russia were involved in Spain's Civil War.⁷ He was afraid that the new year would bring the news of a general war all over Europe. With this gloomy thought, he realized that both he and his brother would probably have to join the army and fight. To add to his worries, he was suffering again from his nerves: "[He] characterized his condition as a form of manic depression: 'mental instability, fits of terrific gloom and loneliness and artistic despair alternating with irresponsible exultation'" (Mariani 65).

This information sheds new light on certain aspects of "Meditation." Such lines as

⁷ In 1923, in Spain, a military dictatorship was established under Primo de Rivera. King Alfonso XIII was deposed (1931) and the second republic started. However, opposition from both the left and the right, as well as from Catalan separatists, eventually shattered the republic. The election of a leftist coalition in 1936 led to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Under Francisco Franco, the rebellions adhered to conservative groups: monarchists, the army, the church, and the fascists. After an extremely blood-thirsty conflict, the pro-republican forces (Loyalists) were defeated and a dictatorship under Franco was imposed.

"communications close/To the town, muffled, and the sentinel strain/Of solitude" refer to Berryman's extreme loneliness. The external signs of a world at war found echo in Berryman's private fights. He was feeling extremely sick, probably one of the reasons he was attracted to the "Asylum," mentioned in the ninth line of the first section. The speaker of the poem and Berryman are, in that instance, one. The psychosomatic marks: "At twilight on a Dublin quay, and fear;/The clenched lip, a wrinkle on the forehead/Of hanging Christ" turn the speaker into the suffering victim. Distress brings to consciousness the harsh memories of South Kent School. The poet's intellectual abilities and lack of talent for sports excluded him from the group. He was the scapegoat for those "Merciless boys." However, time dilutes anger and pain. The speaker expresses caring, smiling thoughts for the torturers. Sincerity is surfacing, a result of the passing years and maturity. In his isolation, the speaker, the Christ figure, symbolically shows himself superior to the others. He can have pity for those "who

founded." Human failure is just one more tragic sign of the times.

The speaker's journey goes on. The "mind's eye" takes him to Ireland. This quest is "the need to write one solid, genuine poem" (72), and to pay homage to the seventy-one-year old Yeats, while there was still time.

Berryman felt he couldn't write, but even "when the crisis passed, [and] he started again, writing, revising, reshaping his poems" (73), he wrote to Halliday he was going "'mad' in Cambridge experiencing constant bouts of hysteria between intense periods of work" (73). After eight days in London, "he took the train to Liverpool and spent 'a most uncomfortable and entirely sleepless night' on the night boat, arriving in Dublin in a dark pain at six in the morning" (73).

But:

the Master was in London preparing one of his plays for the stage. Berryman went in the Cuala Press, where he spoke with Yeats's sister. He decided to wait for Yeats to return.

He found a cheap bed-and-breakfast
 ... and over the next few days browsed in
 the shops along Nassau Street and visited
 the lunatic asylum at Grange Gorman....
 (74)

The introduction of the word "asylum" into the poem attests to his certainty that this was "a sight he was sure he would not forget" (74).

He also attended the Peacock, an experimental Theater, and hoped to meet Yeats's eighteen-year-old daughter, Anne, about whom he fantasized because of Yeats's poem "Prayer for My Daughter." At the end of the play, when he spoke with her, reality destroyed illusion; she was just an ordinary human being.

Uncertain about the date of Yeats's arrival, Berryman decided to return to London. The sojourn in "Dublin" appear in section VI of the poem. Yet the unidentified historical and personal occurrences, the opaqueness of thoughts and the indeterminacy of the pronouns "her," "she," and "hers" limit the biographical reading. In

referring to "her," is the speaker dealing with the mother, or Mary Magdalene, or both? In section V, "Hers" and "she" ambiguously refer either to a beloved one or to the mother.

Is "her" only the mother or also the idealized "hostess" in Ireland? Certainty of meaning is not more a feature of this poem than it is of the previous ones. Because of the introduction of "loss" and death, "She"/"Her" in section VIII could be the mother. In this light, the mother and the father have haunted the speaker's life. The specter of the father is alive in the poem.

However, these conclusions are not allowed by the indeterminacy of the poem. With biographical data, a clearer reading is possible, but a reading that attempts to clarify and identify the vague words and thoughts works against the marked impersonality of Berryman's poetic device.

Let's take the word "Asylum." It conjures up a strong cluster of images and emotions: fear, illness, madness, need, lack of control, poverty, protection, refuge, safety. If the poet wanted us to share a precise emotion, he could have chosen

the appropriate word. Moreover, if he wanted to inform us about the location or his aim in going there, he could have mentioned "the lunatic asylum at Grange Gorman" (74) in Dublin. He could have identified his own perceptions. Certainly the powerful feelings aroused by this visit did not permit him to be in intimate, conscious touch with them.

Indeterminacy creates difficulty in Berryman's poems by limiting the focus of thoughts and emotions; by eliminating the explicit personal references, it universalizes experience.

Indeterminacy and self-detachment become pointers to that very mode as the only way available to the speaker (poet and man) to deal with his past and present. True, the poems do not tell the full tale; "sound" and "fury" are silenced by intellectual labyrinths and impersonality. The confessional mode was not Berryman's project; it was not yet compatible with his talent.

Chapter II

Berryman's Formative Years:

The Dispossessed

In 1938 *The Southern Review* printed "Meditation" and other first poems. In 1940, Berryman's first collection, "Twenty Poems," was published in *Five Young American Poets*; in 1942, his first individual collection, *Poems*, appeared on the market. Eight years later, ten of the twenty poems published in *The New Directions* were reprinted in *The Dispossessed*. This same group had also been included in *Poems*. They became a permanent component of the Berryman canon.

New Directions, in its "Poet of the Month" series, published two thousand copies of *Poems*. These eleven lyrics were written between 1938 and 1940; most had already appeared in periodicals. Heavily influenced by Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Auden, they are connected to the political realities of 1939. The only work chosen from the

earlier published poems was "The Statue."

The old arrangement of an intellectual landscape with political references defines the work. The volume is dedicated to Berryman's good friend, Bhain Campbell, who died of cancer at the age of 29. The "Epilogue" for Campbell puts an end to the pamphlet. The major poem in the volume is "A Point of Age," a one-hundred-nine-line sequence about turning twenty-five. The poem does not use a personal voice dealing with life and artistic quest, but a generic voice brooding on society's afflictions that mirrors the speaker's. This pattern is to be continued in *The Dispossessed*. Despite the book's shortcomings, Conarroe praises the opening poem of the collection, "Winter Landscape," for containing "several powerful stanzas" (31). He does not point to them. He disparages the poem's lack of feeling: "For all his references to heartbreak, fear, sorrow, and hate the poems' speaker appears to be far more aware of civic woe than his own...." (31). In contrast, Randall Jarrell praised the "impersonal" and the "nostalgic" in the poem as a moving away

from "slavishly Yeatsish grandiloquence" ("Verse Chronicle" 152). Impersonality and evocation of feelings are compatible. This poem became the best known of the compositions in *Poems*.

"Winter Landscape" establishes the theme of an oppressed, weary and frozen world. Its "three men .../In brown ..." are connected to the "three men in brown" in Brueghel's painting "Hunters in the Snow" and to Hitler's brownshirts. This image introduces the themes of time and transience and loss in contrast to freedom and joy (symbolized by the world of the children and by a bird that still flies).

The unfolding of multifarious facets of that "wintry" theme reflects the mood of the speaker's inner world. Loss and permanence are the thematic coherence of the entire volume. The speakers dissect all possible, minute varieties of all events that relate to the themes, as "Henry" was to explain: "I am obliged to perform in complete darkness/operations of great delicacy/on myself" ("Dream Song 67") That tells more about his examination of his life than any traditional

narrative poetry or fiction which present "character in action."

The next five poems in *The Dispossessed* use the same method to present their variations on this theme. In "The Statue" we see an immobilized world, with an ominous "statue" symbolizing alienation from time. (This image echoes the old English poem "Ruin," which appears in "Dream Song 45.") There is a connection between time, cycles and spiritual struggle. Love coincides with the principle of life itself. The "lovers ... trust their spring; they have not seen the statue." In "A Point of Age," this conjunction is illustrated by the description of childhood emotions--joy which at times becomes emptiness:

The desolate childhood smokes on the dead
hill

In storm and gloom, before it is too late
I make my testament

Yet "it is time to start," so "[w]e must travel in the direction of our fear" ("A Point of Age"). In "The Traveller," the speaker learns again of isolation as well as estrangement. "That man will

never become as we are, try as he can." The reader sees the road of travelling and the uncertainty of destination. In contrast with this doubt, in "The Ball Poem," "In a world of possessions," the "little boy" learns a lesson of certainty: "The epistemology of loss." This obsessive lesson, restated in "Fare Well"--"What has been taken away will not return"--is the occasion for the tragic, empty effort of Sisyphus which pervades *The Dream Songs*: the travail of "not being able to forget." The speaker in "Fare Well" concludes with assurance: "I am not alone." This poem, which concludes the opening section of *The Dispossessed*, returns to the "Winter Landscape": "I slip into a snow bed with no hurt." And hope reveals itself again in the image of "the phoenix." The speaker's intensity sadly increases: "As I sink, I weep."

The poems in Parts II, III, and IV continue with some variations the thematic pattern of Part I: "Upon a primitive theme high variations/Like Soaring Beethoven's" ("Boston Common"). Time, death, memory, violence, guilt, lust, love

fidelity, pain, madness and drinking are the fabric of these sections. The concluding words of "The Possessed," "Weep, you are not a child," and of "The Spinning Heart," "Nothing can be known," voice what diminished moral force is left to deal with the predicament of modern man: a world that he can no longer understand. A day's bizarre, grotesque news includes the cold image of a boy "small, frightened, in a Sea Scout uniform," watching as his father is crushed by a ten-ton truck. And the "mother saw her child/crushed with his father...." Tragedy modulates into the sensationalism of tabloid headlines: "Man with a tail heads eastward for the fair./Can open a pack of cigarettes with it ... and brought/From Ceylon in the interests of science," "An Indian girl in Lima, not yet six,/Has been delivered by Caesarian./A boy."

Political, financial games take place: "Berlin and Rome are having difficulty/With a new military pact. Some think/Russia is not too friendly towards London. The British note is called inadequate ... the King approaching Quebec. Cotton down." From profit to fashion,

advertisement, and movie making, the catalogue goes on. Life is condensed as if the only life is those public images. The speaker concludes:

If it were possible to take these things
Quite seriously, I believe they might
Curry disorder in the strongest brain
Immobilize the most resilient will.

This fixity of will in contrast to images which roll at high speed is the image that reappears in "The Possessed": "... the world is blind/... It is growing cold." In Part III these forebodings continue: "History is approaching a speechless end," yet in Part IV, the opening poem, "Canto Amor," lessens the heaviness of those themes. It shows a speaker at a point of change, despite the difficulties of "the flowing ceremony of trouble and light" in his private world and in the visible world; he hopes that his marriage will endure in an uncertain world. In the following poems some lines contradict the recurrent fear in all of Berryman's poetry. In "Young Woman's Song," when she asks, "Where am I going?" her answer is that she is "not afraid." Yet other lines acquire a prophetic tone:

"Rarely a child sings now." They cough and say,
 "'We are a dying race'" ("The song of the Young
 Hawaiian"). This theme is reinforced in Part V,
 which contains all of the themes and begins with:

'Cold cold cold of a special night'
 Summer and winter sings under the beast

 Alas Our foreign officers are gay

 Waiting for the beginning of the end

("Rock-Study with Wanderer")

These poems in *The Dispossessed* show a
 similar pattern in their mode of writing.
 Generally, they are told by a reporting and
 narrative voice as in "Winter Landscape" ("The
 three men coming down the winter hill"). At times,
 though, that voice changes to a more personal voice
 as in "The Statue":

The statue...
 Looks only cynical, across them all
 To the delightful Avenue and its lights.
 Where I sit near the entrance to the
 Park,

The charming dangerous entrance to their
 need ...

In some poems the voices become more personal such
 as in "A Point of Age":

At twenty-five a man is on his way.
 The desolate childhood smokes on the dead
 hill,
 My adolescent brothels are shut down
 In the city of the stranger I discovered
 Strike and corruption ...
 In storm and gloom, before it is too late
 I make my testament. I bequeath my hear
 To the disillusioned few who have wished
 me well;
 My vision I leave to one who has the will
 To master it, and the consuming art;
 What else, the sorrow, the disease, the
 hate
 I scatter; and I am prepared to start.

Furthermore, in "The Ball Poem," "Fare Well,"
 and "Letter to His Brother" the reporting voice
 moves to the personal "I" that creates a dialogue
 with the pronouns "you" and "he." Sometimes in

poems such as "The Animal Trainer (I) and (II)," the opening lines are not in a reporting but in a very personal voice: "I told him. The time has come, I must be gone." Or as in *The Nervous Songs* the "I" is diversified into more personal voices, but then the voices belong to different impersonators: "Young Woman's Song," "The Song of the Demented Priest," "The Song of the Young Hawaiian," "A Professor's Song," and the like. In "Conversation" the journalistic voice says: "Whether the moorings are invisible," then switches to first voice plural: "we said we could not tell." This pattern is also followed in "Travelling South." These constant variations in *The Dispossessed* dot Berryman's entire literary output. In *The Dispossessed* all those variations are exhibited; they happen when they happen, but a skeleton can be found: the "I" often voices the themes of the poems. Take "A Point of Age": "In the city of the stranger I discovered./Strike and corruption .../And hallow the citizen deaf, half-dead.

In "At Chinese Checkers" double private and public views are offered:

I spat a piece of tooth out--this was

love

Or the innocence of love, long past its

time

Virgin with trust, which time makes

nothing of.

The wing is loud. I wonder, will it

grow,

That trust, again? Can it again be

strong?

What rehabilitations can the heart know.

Physical and mental pain, death, fear, love, innocence, and the transience of life, as revealed in the motto "seize the day," are what frees the singular voice in Berryman's poetry. This game of voices asks from the reader "auditory imagination," visual imagination, attention, awareness of how voices shift in register, and the skill to grasp the poem's pattern of feeling, sense and sound. Probably these voices' changes owe something to the influence of Edmund Waller's "violations of the

reader's expectations," and to Tristan Corbière's style of unexpected contrasts¹. Berryman praised these poets highly.

The poems in *The Dispossessed* (1948) sound as if they are spoken by a third person. Haffenden sees the "disinterested air" in statements Berryman wrote in 1944 as a sign that Berryman was becoming accustomed to self-pity and "fatalism" as a result of the ordeals he had been undergoing (152):

For three years already--at Harvard University from 1940 until 1943--he had suffered a more oppressive and bitching intellectual climate, from much of which (unlike his colleague Delmore Schwartz) he had shielded himself--only to indulge in increasingly morbid and paralyzing habits of self-appraisal. Subsequently, at Princeton [1943-1946], long hours of isolated study drew him more into patterns of brooding. His tolerance for setbacks both personal and professional became lower than ever before. But the

¹ See Thornbury xviii.

time he returned to teaching in 1946, he had assumed something of a second nature, a guise in which to outface what he felt to be frightful demands of his work and society. (148)

Lacking self-confidence, Berryman needed reassurance that his work mattered. With insecurity came heavy drinking. Yet when he began teaching at Princeton, in November 1943, he felt a renewed sense of well-being and direction. He wrote, "'To be content with little; rich & various in mind & in work done. To be free'" (149). Yet, even if he thought of Princeton as stimulating, his sense of his own limitations did not alter.

At the end of February 1944, his teaching appointment ended. Financial instability along with a sense of his unworthy behavior as a poet and human being brought Berryman to despair: he endured insomnia, nightmares, and fell into bouts of self-pity.

Europe's gradual destruction and capitulation to the power of Hitler and the speaker's malaise are explored in "Winter Landscape." It is

impossible to perceive the poem as a "commentary on Pieter Brueghel's "Hunters in the Snow," as Conarroe informs us (26). He explains:

It is tightly organized into five-line stanzas, all in regular iambic pentameter, with two seemingly random rhymes. It is actually in blank verse, with stanza breaks serving to reinforce the impression of parts making up a whole, appropriate in a poem modelled on a painting. (27)

These concluding remarks cannot stand up against a close scrutiny. Mariani throws a different light onto the poem. He explains that Berryman and Halliday

had been rummaging through the Marlboro bookstore, looking for bargains, and had come on a remaindered book on the work of Pieter Brueghel the Elder with an introduction by Aldous Huxley. The reproductions were of poor quality, but the book cost only forty-nine cents and Berryman bought one. It was Brueghel's

"Winter" that caught his imagination, though the poem, he would later insist--correctly--was not about the painting at all but about himself and a world in danger of being crucified by the terror gathering then in Europe. (98)

Yet, if the reader does not have access to any of this information, he might not grasp that the poem is covertly about the poet.

The three men coming down the winter
hill

In brown, with tall poles and a pack of
hounds

At heel, through the arrangement of the
trees,

Past the five figures at the burning
straw,

Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach,
The blue light, men with ladders, by the

church

The sledge and shadow in the twilit
street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the
brow

Of that same hill: when all their company
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene
and say

By their configuration with the trees,
The small bridge, the red houses and the
fire,

What place, what time, what morning
occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds
At heel and the tall poles on their
shoulders,

Thence to return as now we see them and
 Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill
 Descend, while three birds watch and the
 fourth flies.

(“Winter Landscape”)

The poem, Mariani writes, marks “the beginning of a distinctive syntax,” (98) if not a new voice. He does not explain what he means. The syntax *is* different; it hews closely to direct story-telling. The verse lines follow simple sentence-structure: subjects, predicates and complements. The absence of inversions and repetitious figures of speech makes the poem accessible, if not transparent. Unexpected visions recall the imagist² principle of the direct treatment of the object: “The blue light, men with ladders, by the church/The sledge and shadow in the twilit street.” The reader’s attention can easily focus on images and on the story.

² Imagism is the doctrine and poetic practice of a small but very influential group of American and British poets, who called themselves “Imagists” and “Imagistes,” between 1912 and 1917. Led at first by Ezra Pound, the group aimed at a new clarity and exactness in poems.

"Winter Landscape" functions as a traditional omniscient narrative. The narrator speaks in an authoritative, apocalyptic voice like the Old Testament God. The future of man is anticipated in the wintry bareness of nature as well as the hunters' destruction. The face of history is brutal. These men will remember what was there once, even if now covered with snow: "the trees," "The small bridge," "the red houses and the fire," and they would question who "Sent them into the wood." Time, distance and the men's memories will reassess what seemed almost mechanical, fatalistic behavior.

The speaker and the birds witness the scene. The first-person narrator stands outside the events, but inhabits the scene as well. "The three birds [that] watch" become a symbol of the mute captivity that results from the "evil waste of history." They parallel "The three men," while the "fourth bird," probably the witness (the speaker) gifted with clairvoyance, flies.

If the poem "is flawed by a ponderous, sententious tone" (Conarroe 27), it is a work that

elicits beautiful images and emotions of space and time. Even if the allusions are indeterminate, the contrasts of life/loss, youth/old age, man/nature, and present/future speak powerfully of the human plight. Memory becomes a subtle pedagogical instrument. It highlights fears, errors in perception, blindness and vision. With limited vision, tragedy begins.

Yet, if symbolically the "fourth" bird can be the speaker, he never sings out in his own voice. The objective tone is created by minimal description: Berryman avoids explanations about what motivates prompt "cold" and "silent" men. The neutral line, "The long companions they can never reach," neutral, denotative meanings acquire frightening associations. The objective voice rises into the prophetic, into an atmosphere of foreboding, "[The three men] [a]re not aware that in the sandy time/To come, the evil waste of history." The apocalypse waits; the poem cannot bother with personal voice.

The chromatics--brown and white--are valuable contributions to painting the environment; they

also act as subtle, political pointers to the savagery Hitler unleashed in Europe. The hunt is allegorical, a comment on destructive human power. Any glimpses of wisdom will come with time, if people learn from history. But "Winter Landscape" is bare of personal revelation.

For young poets it is a struggle to find a voice. Berryman often resorts to intellectual brooding, the method of "World's Fair":

The crowd moves forward on the midway,
back

And forward, men and women from every
State

Insisting on their motion like a clock

I stand by the roller-coaster, and wait

An hour I have waited, fireworks on the
lake

Tell me it's late, and yet it is not that
Which rattles at the bottom of my mind

Slight, like a faint sound sleepy on the
wind

To the traveller when he has lost his

track.

Suddenly in torn images I trace
The inexhaustible ability of a man
Loved once, long lost, still to prevent
 my peace,
Still to suggest my dreams and starve
 horizon
Childhood speaks to me in an austere
 face.

The Chast Mayd only to the thriving Swan

Looks back and back with lecherous
 intent,
Being the one nail known, an excrement
Middleton's grave in a forgotten place.

That recognition fades now, and I stand
Exhausted, angry, beside the wooden rail
Where tireless couples mount still, hand
 in hand
for the complex drug of catapult and fall
To blot out the life they cannot

understand
And never will forgive. The wind is
stale,
The crowd thins, and my friend has not
yet come.
It is long past midnight, time to track
for home
And my work and the instructor down my
mind.

In three nine-line stanzas, the eponymous narrator watches the motions of "the crowd" at the fair; he is only slightly involved in the events: "An hour I have waited, fireworks on the lake." Yet he knows more than the "tireless couples ... [who] cannot understand" life. Though the objective voice becomes the "I," he does not precisely inform the reader what "fair," country, and "state" he is talking about.

This solitary voice allows his mind to drift, to muse on the "lost ... track" of "the traveller" and the child's loss of love, which poisons the adult's well-being.

The contrast between that festive, lively setting and the suffering in childhood increases the speaker's pain. He remains possessed by the memory of a man, who although long lost, disturbs his peace. With a difficult, opaque allusion, he moves to the sphere of art. Memory and imagination oblige him to feel those marks of that first experience of loss, yet they enable him to elude suffering by exiling himself to the literary world. His childhood difficulties are reenacted in a different situation, in "Chast Mayd." These words associated with "swan" conjure up images of Yeats' "Leda," and "Thomas Middleton's play *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*" (Conarroe 39), reinforcing the twinned idea of pleasure and destruction.

"World's Fair" could be the fantasy world, like James Joyce's "Araby,"³ planted in the boy's imagination, that threshold between the dream world and reality. Daily life--"And my work and the instructor down my mind"--interferes, subjugating pain and pleasure. But the erotic vision of the "Mayd," who "Looks back and back with lecherous intent," and "childhood ... in an austere face,"

³ See Bibliography: James Joyce's "Araby" in *Dubliners*.

persist. Anything discarded before one has dealt with it will reappear (in Berryman's case, the suicide of his father). This is the lesson in each haunted poem.

Joyce's lesson in his moralizing epiphany⁴ had not yet touched Berryman: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (35). The American "insignificant dreamer" is too self-absorbed in quest of fame, lost in the milling crowd. If the dreamer's emotions are complex, frankness has not yet found channels of direct expression. John Allyn is to reappear again and again before Berryman gains wisdom and humility.

The father is the obsessional presence in Berryman's poetry. According to Mariani, he "saw" him in the "World's Fair" in Flushing Meadows, New

⁴ "Epiphany" is the term in Christian theology for a manifestation of god's presence in the world. Joyce made use of it to denote secular revelation in daily life, in an early version of his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), later published as *Stephen Hero* (1944). Joyce defined an epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation" in which the "whatness" of a common object or gesture appears illuminated to the observer.

York (1939). He had gone with his friend, Halliday, several times:

to see the international exhibits and enjoy the rides. One evening they split up, each forgetting where they were to rejoin. While he waited by the roller coaster for Halliday, Berryman became aware once more of his father and thought he saw him, the man "loved once, long lost" now "in torn images," whose fate could still rob him of peace. (103)

Mariani sees in the poem Berryman's mother's betrayal of his father. It veils his anger at her (103); art, the sublimation for otherwise unacceptable impulses, may also be a haven for dangerous emotions. By retreating to the art world or immersing himself in hectic daily life, Berryman neutralizes the need to delve deeper into his introspections. The speaker erects a barrier between himself and his subject matter. This survival tactic became a poetic program for Berryman.

Berryman perfected his technique of self-

detachment and rationalization in "The Animal Trainer I," but he breaks his habit of first establishing the setting and then introducing the "I":

I told him. The time has come, I must be
gone.

It is time to leave the circus and circus
days,

The admissions, the menagerie, the drums,
Excitements of disappointment and praise.

In a suburb of the spirit I shall seize
The steady and exalted light of the sun,
And live there, out of the tension that
decays,

Until I become a man alone of noon.

Heart said: Can you do without your
animals?

The looking, licking, smelling animals?

The friendly fumbling beast? The
listening one?

That standing up and worst of animals?

What will become of you in the pure light
When all your enemies are gone, and gone
The inexhaustible prospect of the night?

--But the night is now the body of my
fear,

These animals are my distraction. Once
Let me escape the smells and cages here,
Once let me stand naked in the sun.
See these performances will be forgotten.

I shall concentrate in the sunlight
there.

Said the conservative Heart: Your animals
Are occupation, food for you, your love
And your immense responsibility.

They are the travellers by which you
live.

(Without you they will pace and pine, or
die)

--I reared them, tended them (I said) and
still

They plague me, they will not perform,
they run

Into forbidden corners, they fight, they
steal.

Better to live like an artist in the sun.

--You are an animal trainer, Heart
replied.

Without your animals leaping at your side

No sun will save you, nor this bloodless
pride.

--What must I do then? Must I stay and
work

With animals, and confront the night, in
the circus?

--You learn from animals. You learn in
the dark.

"The Animal Trainer I"

The narrative begins in a conversational tone.
(The second voice addresses an imaginary audience.)
The opening line is all affirmation, but the
indeterminate "him" lurks in the shadows. Is it

the owner, the manager or simply the "Heart"? The story begins in the middle of things. The speaker's decision seems already taken. A transient, he puts faith in the romantic, redemptive powers of nature: "I shall seize/The steady and exalted light of the sun,/And live there out of the tension that decays." His journey "South" will allow him to gain his full humanity; he will be self-reliant, "until I become a man alone of noon." The "him" is the personified "Heart" that seems to speak in the voice of existential wisdom: "Can you do without your animals?" Life must be lived among others, and one must accept his mortality. Yet the speaker recognizes that "the night" is his great "fear." Aspiring to frankness and wholeness ("once let me stand naked in the sun"), he wants to liberate himself from the repetitive, greyish tasks to "concentrate in the sunlight." The sun as source of wholeness and transparency symbolizes the ideal world. The speaker, "Heart," insists that no man can live alone, yet knows only one truth: the life of man and the life of the artist are incompatible,

"Better to live like an artist in the sun," he advises, then adds, "No sun will save you."

After the dialogue, the speaker vents his doubts and concern: "--What must I do then?" Probably he is becoming aware that the complications and annoyances of life and mortality nurture his art. One might construe his doubts as a victory of "Heart," but I don't think Berryman's poem is a simple dialogue between "Heart"/mind reminiscent of Yeats's dialogue of mind and body in "The Circus Animal's Desertion," and "Sailing to Byzantium." Berryman's answer is not found in Byzantium but probably in the heart. The problem is that "Heart" is personified, not identified. First, It speaks with the experience of the instinct and the senses: "The looking, licking, smelling animals?/The friendly fumbling beast? The listening one?" However, "Heart" moves to the beats of Berryman's old impersonal, philosophical voices. Like an oracle, "Heart" utters its knowledge and wisdom in a generic voice: "When all your enemies are gone, and gone/The inexhaustible prospect of the night," "They are the travellers by

which you live/(Without you they will pace and pine, or die.)" The poem ends with a generalized good judgment: "--You learn from animals. You learn in the dark." We are far from the confessional voice.

"Heart" tunes in life and mediates it. "Heart" has its story and biography. Berryman wrote "The Animal Trainer" in July 1939 while in Ann Arbor. In June, for the first time since his return to America, he was making money. He was working for *The Nation*; in the fall, he would begin teaching English Composition at Wayne State University. Yet he continued with his "fainting spells" (Mariani 106). These simple facts are enough for the reader to envision a better, calmer existence for the poet. "Beatrice," however, is absent, and "Heart" misses her.

In early July, Berryman wrote Beryl,
 explaining that he had at last diagnosed
 his fainting spells. They had been
 caused, he told her, by the strain of
 prolonged sexual abstinence. For the

sake of his health, then, he had decided to have an affair with a woman named Harriet, a close friend of the Campbells. Beryl was to understand that this was being done strictly for his physical well-being and that his heart was still hers. Actually "Harriet" was Florence Campbell's younger sister, Annette.... In mid July ... the relationship between Berryman and Annette had dissolved into a farce. (106)

This letter shows that, in his private life, Berryman sought justifications to act according to his desires. The protective tactics he practiced in his poetry could be borrowed for his seductions.

Still, this letter underlines how complicated and painful the separation from Beryl must have been. The reader understands the obsession with the truths of "Heart" in "The Animal Trainer." It is clear how his heart both complicated and conferred meaning on his life. This is the crux of Berryman's argument in "Heart." The rift between life and art, head and senses, is in a pellucid

style, but the poem gives no definite answer to the question of how urgently he wanted to solve this problem.

Berryman's appreciation of Mark Van Doren and affection for his mentor's family life show a faith in the principles of heart and mind. He was never, though, able to balance these elements of his personality. Van Doren had managed to "marry head and heart" (107); Berryman couldn't. (He dedicated "Heart" to his friend.)

These personal facts shed light on Berryman's wish to celebrate the heart; but in the poem he can't go beyond generalizing the qualities and needs of "Heart." No one in particular occupies the speaker's heart--except himself. The plural "animals" reduces romantic or sexual love to love in general. The gerunds "looking, licking, smelling," recalling sexual love, fade into "The friendly fumbling beast." No particular biographical experience comes out of the poem. Despite the speaker's breakthrough in granting space to the senses, dabbles in abstractions.

These poems show Berryman avoiding his own

feelings by projecting them onto others. Even these thoughts--a result of painful introspection--he abandons because of the obligations and alienations of daily life, as the conclusion of "World's Fair" proves. Mariani informs us that on New Year's Day, 1941, Berryman began another unsent letter to Beryl: "'For two weeks,' he wrote, 'I did nothing whatever except drink and wander from party to party--not for pleasure, I promise you, but desperately to avoid thought'" (131). His awareness of drinking as a way of avoiding thinking corresponds to the impersonality in his poems: to unclear references, and unresolved conflict.

In his city ramblings, Berryman observed that the center of amusement for the modern masses was the nightclubs filled with "their chorus dancing, master of ceremonies, female impersonators, and alcoholic maze." He pondered "how much modern sensibility resembled Hamlet's, with its tendency to freeze rather than take strong, decisive action" (132).

Based on his perceptions about modern man and urban crowds, he wrote in mid-January a poem "Night

Club: Boston." (He would change the title to "The Enemies of the Angels.") In early February, Van Doren wrote to congratulate him on the poem, but "warned him that the social satire of the poem was not all that subtle. Berryman might do well to learn to take the world a bit more as it was and try to sound less hysterical" (133). That night he got drunk at a local bar; when he was not intoxicated any more, he once more decided never to allow it to happen again. This pattern of lapse and reformation was to dominate in his entire life. To show his good intentions, he immediately began working on a poem he later titled "Boston Common." It was early March, and he received the visit of his new friend Eileen Mulligan, whom he had met at one of the New Year's parties (1941) in her brownstone in Greenwich Village.

A few days later Berryman and Delmore Schwartz walked out to the Mount Auburn Cemetery to pay homage at the grave of Henry James. Berryman's specters were there with him; he clearly understood that Mount Auburn "'was where even great writers ended'" (134). After this visit, he wrote "The

Ball Poem" about "the epistemology of loss":

What is the boy now who has lost his
ball,

What, what is he to do? I saw it go
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and
then

Merrily over--There is it in the water!
No use to say 'O there are other balls':
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring
down

All his young days into the harbour where
His ball went. I would not intrude on
him,

A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
He senses first responsibility
In a world of possessions. People will
take balls,

Balls will be lost always, little boy,

And no one buys a ball back. Money is
external.

He is learning, well behind his desperate
 eyes

The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
 Knowing what every man must one day know
 And must know many days, how to stand up
 And gradually light returns to the
 street,

A whistle blows, the ball is out of
 sight,

Soon part of me will explore the deep and
 dark

Floor of the harbour.. I am everywhere,
 I suffer and move, my mind and my heart
 move

With all that move me, under the water
 Or whistling, I am not a little boy.

It is the first time in Berryman's work that he attempted a double vision. He alternates the child's first perception of loss; "As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went," with the speaker's sudden comprehension--looking forward and backward at the same time--that life is the sum of

so many similar losses:

Soon part of me will explore the deep and
dark

Floor of the harbour.. I am everywhere,

I suffer and move, my mind and my heart
move

With all that move me, under the water

Or whistling, I am not a little boy.

Although that double vision was a poetic gain, Berryman has problems mastering the tone of voice. The poem is about childhood's loss; symbolically the lost ball stands for the loss of innocence. But Berryman is too close to his own painful experience. The speaker watching the boy is very sympathetic, worried about "What, what is he to do?" The images of the unfeeling, free ball "merrily bouncing" and "merrily over," set up the contrast with "An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy." Again a vivid, anxious intimate voice modulates into a philosophical, generic voice: "Now/he senses first responsibility/In a world of possessions."

First, the speaker and the child are united by the speaker's observations and sympathy; the speaker becomes the boy; knowledge separates them. When "the ball is out of sight," the tone changes to one of foreboding: "Soon part of [the speaker] will explore the deep and dark/Floor of the harbour." Even if he "suffer[s] and move[s]," he knows he is "not a little boy." The concluding lines conveyed by an "I" remain cerebral and self-detached. As the speaker rationalizes, he negates the possibility of being read as the boy of the poem. Certainly he does not want his private pain to be exposed as that of the "little boy."

The poem allows the speaker to reassess the split between inner and outer worlds, to expose and protect vulnerable feelings. The reader senses that the speaker shields himself with impersonality, ideal worlds--literary/artistic (the poems, the statue, literary illusions), personified dichotomies ("Heart"/Mind), and lastly, double vision. These poetic devices are fixtures that cannot be sundered from the thematic coherence of permanence and loss in *The Dispossessed*. "The

Animal Trainer I" and "The Ball Poem" represent, though, a breakthrough revealing the speaker's desire to explicitly bring the life of the senses to poetry.

Such openness wasn't developed into confessional poetry, but into a dramatic form that resulted from Berryman's study of Rainer Maria Rilke's⁵ (1875-1926) voices and his researching of new topics for his poetry. Modern sensibility, Berryman pointed out to Van Doren, was paralyzed and conformist.

Certainly his knowledge of female impersonators in the nightclubs contributed to his new compositions: *The Nervous Songs*. Berryman began work on these songs over the summer of 1942. He had been married to Eileen since October 24, 1942. Over the winter of 1943, under the influence of the separation of his mother from "Uncle Jack,"⁶ her being married again to "a business

⁵ See Mariani 149. Rilke (born in Prague) is considered the greatest lyric poet of modern Germany. Sensitive and introspective, he was influenced by his travels. He developed a rich poetic style with visual imagery and symbols. Rilke's own favorite verse, his *Duino (Duinese)*, *Elegies* (1923) are a celebration of human existence.

⁶ "Uncle Jack" was the way Berryman and his brother,

associate," and the separation of Delmore Schwartz from his wife, Gertrude--partly a consequence of Delmore's insecurity about the worth of his poetry--Berryman needed to believe that he and Eileen were as happy as before. With his need for roots, intimacy, and stability, added to the fact that "Uncle Jack" now "was completely out of the picture" and living in Reistertown,⁷

Berryman became more openly interested in his past and asked his mother to send him a list of his ancestors. He also asked to borrow the letters he'd written to her while he was in England, ostensibly to search them for poetic topics for a series of poems that he had begun the previous summer and that he had taken to calling his "Nervous Songs."

These poems were based in part on his reading of Rilke, a poet he believed could teach him something about grace and

Robert Jefferson ("Bob," later "Jeff"), used to address John Angus McAlpin, their stepfather.

⁷ See Mariani 149 for bibliographical information on this section of the work.

limpidity of phrase. For years he'd known he himself was a huddle of nerves, and in the section of Rilke's *Book of Pictures* called "Songs" he had found a form and a voice he could use to express his wired intensities. From Rilke's [Songs] ... with their deracinated and altered states of perception and sudden and unexpected shifts of voice, he moved to his own 'Song of the Bridegroom' and then to other Songs. These consisted of three 6-line stanzas, variations played on the iambic pentameter, partly rhymed and partly unrhymed, a form equivalent in timing and linguistic and emotional weight to the tradition Italian sonnet.

(149)

The nine "Songs" are soliloquies spoken by different kinds of men and women, confused, anguished and obsessed. All Berryman's speakers live in crisis. Some are mad, preoccupied with natural elements, especially fire and water.

Consider the first composition, "Young Woman's

Song":

The round and smooth, my body in my bath,
If someone else would like it too. --I

did,

I wanted T. to think 'How interesting'

Although I hate his voice and face, hate
both.

I hate this something like a bobby cork

Not going. I want something to hang to.--

A fierce wind roaring high up in the bare

Branches of trees,--I suppose it was lust

But it was holy and awful. All day I

thought

I am a bobbing cork, irresponsible child

Loose on the waters.--What have you done

at last?

A little work, a little vague chat.

I want that £3.10 hat terribly. --

What I am looking for (*I am*) may be

Happening in the gaps of what I know.

The full moon does go with you as you go.

Where am I going? I am not afraid..

Only I would be lifted lost in the flood. Erotic, sad and ambiguous, the speaker begins by celebrating her "round," "smooth" "body," but her blurry image: "I hate this something like a bobbing cork," alters the vision of the body. What is "this something"? Her own body which she has praised, desire, lust? It is clear, though, that she hates "his voice" and "face," though "he" is never identified. She wants "something to hang to.--" Desire is present, as the similarities between the force of the elements and her longing indicates: "A fierce wind roaring high up in the bare/Branches of trees...." The calmness, the intimacy of the setting--the bath with the wind outside--allow her memory to roam and she reevaluates her actions: "--I suppose it was lust/But it was holy and awful"; her daily "deeds" are "A little work, a little vague chat."

With the same tone she moves from "something to hang to" (a man, sexuality, penis) to her wanting "that £3.10 hat terribly.--" The need for

the hat is stronger than any emotion in the poem. The concluding lines bring back, though, the opaque meaning. First, she is "not afraid." That strikes a happy note like a sign of hope. This revelation is connected to lust and death, "full moon/Flood," in the concluding line. Her sexuality and life are not a chant, but the burden and dependence symbolized on having "to hang to."

It is easy to hear in this composition the echoes of a feminine version of Eliot's "Prufrock," and to see how her mind digresses not because of perfume, but because of the relaxed occasion of the bath. She goes over the details by which she judges her life. Unlike Prufrock, despite her insecurity, she acts: "If someone else would like it too.--I did,/I wanted T. to think 'How interesting.'"

This mixture of sexual desire and a death wish is dominant in "The Song of the Bridegroom":

A sort of anxiousness crystal in crystal
has..

Fragile and open like these pairs of

eyes.

All over all things move to stare at it.
One's single wish now: to be laid away
Felted in depths of caves, dark cupboards
that
No one would open for a long time. --

Do not approach me! If I am on show
Compassion waves you past, you hoverers,
Forms brutal, beating eyes upon my
window.

Because if I am desolate I have --
Have emanations, and it is not safe.
Rising and falling fire, ceremonial fire.

Not long.. not long but like a journey
home
Frightening after so distant years
And such despairs.. And then fatigue sets
in.

Lead me up blindly now where I began,
I will not wince away into my one.
I extend my hand and place it in the

womb.

This most difficult song of the group has not one optimistic thought. It is fueled by two wishes: "To be laid away," and "Do not approach me!" However, the concluding lines offer signs of hope: "I will not wince away into my one./I extend my hand and place it in the womb."

If the Bridegroom speaks in an objective manner--first and second narrative voices are cerebral ruminations--Berryman transforms his self-detached manner with its transparent, fragile images into a more personal meditation.

The old Platonic image of the mind's eye attests to the desperate journey: "Because if I am desolate I have ... emanations, and it is not safe./Rising and falling fire, ceremonial fire." But the speaker knows the cause of his malaise: "A sort of anxiousness crystal in crystal." The speaker can verbalize one cause of his wish, a pathway to control that justifies the end of the poem. Differently from "The Animal Trainer I," the existential quest cannot avoid "depths of caves" and "dark cupboards." Many years of desolation and

unavoidable violence of life, "Forms brutal, beating eyes upon my window," and closeness to death at last made him stronger. He is like a new born.

The song exhibits the speaker's old demons, but he controls them better. There is more energy and directness in his voice, a new approach to his inner world. If the "Woman" is more straightforward, the "Bridegroom" offers a new vision of himself and of his relation to the world. The poetic reward is a new freedom of expression. Although Berryman insists that the separation between himself and his speakers continues, he is ready to cross the threshold in *The Sonnets* to a new poetic style.

*Chapter III**Sonnets to Chris*

In December 1947, Berryman wrote three poems: "The Dispossessed," "Narcissus Moving," and "Fare Well." These poems were composed after the *Sonnets*, which unfold a passionate, stormy, illicit love affair that ended in November.¹

With those poems, Paul Mariani explains, the poet tried to put an end to a very difficult period he had just gone through. But, sadly and ironically, Berryman realized that, if he was honest with himself, a "difficult period" meant his entire existence since his father's suicide. "Fare Well" is the testimony of a speaker who would like to let the past go and begin again; the image of "the phoenix" condenses that wish:

O easy the phoenix in the tree of the
heart,

¹ See Mariani 186-200 for precise dates of the development of the affair.

Each in its time, his twigs and spices
fixes

To make a last nest and marvellously
relaxes, --

Out of the fire, weak peep!..

Father I fought for Mother, sleep where
you sleep!

I slip into a snowbed with no hurt

Where warm will warm be warm enough to
part

Us. As I sink, I weep.

The speaker offers a new frankness, and for the first time directly addresses the father about his own views of his mother's actions: "Father I fought for Mother, sleep where you sleep!" Even if the meaning of his line is unclear, the speaker seems to have wished that, during her widowhood, his mother would have honored more the memory of his father. The poem also reports a new stage in the speaker's life. He has found peace at last:

I slip into a snowbed with no hurt

Where warm will warm be warm enough to part

Us. As I sink, I weep.

yet he "weeps." What does he express with his tears? Is he showing relief, opening his heart? He no longer feels hurt, but the metaphorical warmth in a snowbed cannot alter his previous certainty: "What has been taken away will not return."

If Berryman's suffering and because of his father's undesired, abrupt departure found resolution in his heart after years of evasion, it is still a rationalization to accept the presence of the absent father to warm him in his loneliness. This shows that the position assumed in "The Bridegroom"--the intention of not remaining alone--did not materialize. He may have achieved a level of peace with his father but because he is dealing with the dead and not the living, he is still alone. He is, however, maturing to a new level of intimacy with his own feelings; yet despite the speaker's new awareness and openness, this poem and the two others remain impersonal, as do the poems in the entire collection except, as I have mentioned, for some speaker's thought in *The Nervous Songs*.

In "Fare Well," the speaker asserts: "No! I am not alone." This outburst embodies the poem's directness of expression. This is reminiscent of the voice in "Young Woman's Song." Yet the young woman's straight manner and the personal content of the poem do not prevent the opaqueness of some lines, especially the concluding one. It retained the difficulty of meaning characteristic of the poet's non-emotional manner.

And when a change occurred in the life of "The Bridegroom," revealed by the certainty that he "will" not isolate himself, he could not yet talk clearly about his personal, painful journey. However, by the gesture of placing his "hand in the womb," he symbolically acknowledges protection and love in human relationships, and not in idealized, worlds of heroes, heroines, quests, artifacts, philosophical, generic locutions, or imposed daily tasks.

The speaker of *Sonnets to Chris* in embracing love seems to further reaffirm the concluding lines of "The Bridegroom": the value of love after the

long journey. However, if the *Sonnets'* speaker sings with a fresh voice, the result of a new experience of love, he also cannot get rid of heavily indeterminate allusive thoughts, which temper/sober the joy of a new found ecstasy and vitality.

The philosophical concluding lines of the work:

... Presently the sun
 Yellowed the pines & my lady came not
 In blue jeans & a sweater. I sat down
 and wrote.

reveal the speaker's old escapism when facing painful feelings.

Berryman did not entirely hide the fact that the final four sonnets were added at a later date. Writing poetry is certainly nobler than drinking, and it may be a convincing artistic choice to transform the lover into a muse, but poems like these, mimetic of such a passionate affair with the speaker's dependency on the lady, could not simply end with the resolution of the conflict as a rational, artistic option: the cool gesture of

sitting down and writing.

One of the reasons, however, for the speaker to accept work--creativity--as a way to achieve closure to such a heated story is that it was a deception from the beginning, a tale involving other people:

For you am I collared to quit my dear
 My redhaired mild good and most beautiful
 Most helpless and devoted wife? I pull
 Crazy away from this; but too from her
 Resistlessly I draw off ...

("Sonnet 69")

Furthermore, during the period of the affair, the speaker was not able to work except for writing these poems. While separated from "Chris," Mariani notes,

[H]e turned with renewed intensity to the sonnets, ransacking older sonnet sequences for parallels to his own affair... With Chris and her family due back shortly,... [o]n July 3, he wrote six more sonnets.... 'For weeks, for months, my will has been at the service

of my passion and my imagination'"
(Mariani 198, 191)

And yet in comparing the finale of *Sonnets* with the conclusions of poems in *The Dispossessed*, writing and poetry (the sunny landscape or other ideal worlds) reappear as easy protections for the speaker; the only real life, then, betrays the daring gesture of "The Bridegroom." Faced with topics that were too personal, the speakers in *The Dispossessed* always changed subjects rather than delving into them. Self-distance had been a poetic method.

By contrast, in the *Sonnets*, there is a proximity between the speaker and his material; the harvest is frankness, the fresh language of a new, bountiful experience, the liberation of the senses. Yet the poet conscripts the sonnet form and its conventions to impose control on his biographical material; but Berryman has not swept out his old devices--philosophical/generic voices, personal and indeterminate references, and literary allusions. So the *Sonnets* are not a complete departure from the work of *The Dispossessed*.

While writing these poems and *Sonnets*--in 1947, the year of his first infidelity--Berryman began seeing Dr. James Shea, a psychiatrist in New York, to help him understand the reasons for his obsession with "Chris." Berryman admitted that

Up till then he'd been unwilling to examine his past, partly because all he would see when he looked there was some 'hopeless fool,' and partly because there were things he did not want to think about. (198)

Much later, in 1962, when the *Sonnets* were published--some twenty years after they were composed--Berryman added an introductory poem, as a kind of preface, in the dream song stanza²:

He made, a thousand years ago, a-many
songs
for an Excellent lady, wif whom he was in
wuv,
shall he now publish them?

² The songs are composed of three sections of six lines each. Often the words fell into iambs. Most of the songs begin with a pentameter line. Many of the lines which are not in pentameter are tetrameter or hexameter.

Has he the right, upon that old young man
to bare his nervous system
& display all the clouds again as they
were above?

As a friend of the Court I would say, Let
them die.

What does anything matter? Burn them up,
put them in a bank vault.

I thought of that and when I returned to
this country

I took them out again. The original
fault

will not be undone by fire.

The original fault was whether wickedness
was soluble in art. History says it is,
Jacques Maritain says it is,

barely. So free them to the winds that
play,

let boys & girls with these old songs
have holiday

if they feel like it.

These lines prove that Berryman had been doing a

lot of thinking. He explained that the object of the poems was to remain a secret, as was the reason the poems could now be printed for the first time. The songs were written "a thousand years ago," and, after indecisions and revisions, he had decided not to destroy them, but to

...free them to the winds that
 play,
 let boys & girls with these old songs
 have holiday
 if they feel like it.

This interesting song is a commentary on the book. It changes the intention of privacy explicitly showed in "Sonnet 87" and "Sonnet 47." The first begins:

Is it possible, poor kids, you must not
 come out?
 Care for you none but Chris, to whom you
 cry?
 Here in my small book must you dance,
 then die.

And the opening lines of the second are:

How far upon these songs with my strict

wrist

Hard to bear down, who knows? None is to
read

But you: so gently.. but then truth's to
need.

Their conclusion is about a truth that cannot be
spoken.

The speaker assumes for his beloved, who is
the only one to read the songs, the role of her
"utraquist³." Because their affair was illicit,
he needed to use one voice for the lover and
another for everyone else: to be true to her and
to himself, he had to lie to others. The poem
reinforces the secrecy of their story by referring
to other love stories in which privacy was
necessary: Lancelot's, Tristan's ("Sonnet 109")
and Aeneas' and Dido's ("Sonnet 55").

The decision to publish the *Sonnets* is,
however, the result of the answer "yes" (even if
only "barely") to the question of "whether
wickedness was soluble in art." It is then clear

³ "Utraquist" suggests communion in both kinds (1894).
Utraquists insisted that both clergy and laity could take
communion.

why no note at the front of *Sonnets* informs readers that its world is imaginary. There is no such need. When, twenty years after their composition, the poet brings the poems to light, he is describing them as historical, literary objects. These poems were always artifacts. William Meredith put it well: "All the time, these poems were poems."⁴

There is a dramatic plot, the result of a conflicting romantic involvement, but in selecting the material and choosing poetic devices, Berryman invented fictions which differ from the actual events. Among the artifices that transformed "wickedness" into art, the most important are the literary conventions of the Petrarchan Sonnet, and the experiments with colloquial language. These permit deviations from the conventional structures.

The sequence shows the uneven rhythm of that illicit love affair. The beauty of the "Lady," symbolized in the recurrent, vivid image of her gray-blue eyes, is an organizational device. Every action of the speaker is symbolically oriented and

⁴ William Meredith, "A Bright Surviving Actual Scene." See Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding*, (1988):100.

controlled by those eyes. They are powerful erotic elements: "Each morning her strange eyes, eyes that grey blue/Not blue.. for your incurable sins some salve" ("Sonnet 8"). These eyes soothe the pain of some transgressions, while causing new ones--many unbearable lies:

Listen, for poets are feigned to lie, and

I

For you a liar am a thousand times,

Scars of these months blazon like a

decree.

("Sonnet 43")

These eyes are a relief from the "mind's eye" in *The Dispossessed*. Yet the *Sonnets* begin and conclude in the old manner: with a reference to time and with a choice of literature over life. It is middle March⁵, before the relationship between the speaker and his "Lady" had been consummated. The final sonnet tolls the end of the affair that had reached its climax during the summer of 1946.

⁵ The reference "middle March" in the opening sonnet suggests George Eliot's novel, with its middle aged scholar and his young wife. But Berryman was only thirty-two and the "Lady" twenty-seven.

The poems record the speaker's passion, euphoria, despondency, and despair. It was a tale of conflict; the hero was not only racked by love:

...--I wonder what the point of
life is.

Do, down this night where I adore you,
Chris,

So I forsake the blest assistant shrine
Of deep-laid maps I made for summits,
swine--

Enchanted lover, loafing in the abyss?

("Sonnet 4")

but tortured by his lack of integrity:

sometimes the night echoes to prideless
wailing

Low as I hunch home late and fever-tired,
Near you not, nearing the sharer I
desired,

.....
Hopeless: Locked in, and humming, the
Captain's nailing

A false log to the lurching table. Lies

And passion sing in the cabin on the
 voyage home,

.....

Madness like the tackle of a crane

(outcries

Ascend) around to heave him from the foam

Irresponsible, since all the stars rain

blind.

("Sonnet 25")

These images drawn from navigation illustrate how dark the journeys back home were. They enact the speaker's pain caused by the separation from the lover and his failure to maintain his ideal of honest behavior. These were good and bad times indeed.

If in *The Dispossessed* the speaker's worst times were balanced with dreams of traveling to the sun, or of rescuing artifacts, in the *Sonnets*, like Icarus, the speaker's flight to the sun, to "the topaz woman" ("Sonnet 41"), who is also the text, is the inevitable, self-consuming attraction.

The speakers in *The Dispossessed* still had an ideal choice for enduring their world, but the

sunny "Lady" has burned the speaker's other choices. Life and art become the same.

This entangled world was controlled by a strict artifice: the sonnet form. Literature and life being snarled, they acquired the same intensity. Passion and ecstasy become literary renderings. If the sonnet served Petrarch, Wyatt and Shakespeare, Berryman would certainly adopt it as his own.

In this way, Berryman intellectualized his ardent love and turned it into an aesthetic object. By this method he distanced himself from his own feelings. But, at the same time, while composing his sonnets, he was rekindling similar emotions, diminishing or telescoping them, and reassessing them. In objectifying his subjectivity, he is looking at his experience from different angles. In evaluating experience and work, he adopts the attitude of the Renaissance poet who embodies thought, judgment, knowledge and wit. Berryman continued to experiment with language to express deeper feelings. In addition to becoming one of

the characteristics of his poetry, it rejuvenated the sonnet form.

The sonnets follow the Petrarchan or Italian model. Its characteristics are derived from the work of the major Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). A typical Berryman sonnet is divided into an octave rhyming "abbaabba" and a sestet normally rhyming "cdecde"; it avoids the final couplet found in the English or Shakespearean sonnet. The rhythm is iambic pentameter.

In all but a score or so there is a space between the octave and sestet, suggesting a major break. In most of these, moreover, the octave is end-stopped and the thought is complete. In a number of the poems there is no division between the parts, save that created by rhyme patterns, and in these, typically, there is no end stop following the eighth line. In three poems (14, 47, 54) both the octave and sestet are divided in half by blank space, thus creating four discrete parts. The pentameter is regular.

(Conarroe 57-58)

As a rule, the octave presents the theme or problem of the poem, raising an issue or asking a question, and the sestet resolves it. A great majority of the *Sonnets* begin with an affirmation which introduces the theme, yet in others (2, 3, 15, 32, 46, 47, 60, 69, 82, 87, 132, 92, 103) the opening lines pose a question.

"Sonnet 35" illustrates how Berryman deals with this convention, and the suffering lover:

Nothing there? nothing up the sky alive,
 Invisibly considering?.. I wonder.
 Sometimes I heard Him in traditional
 thunder;
 Sometimes in sweet rain, or in a great
 'plain, I've
 Concluded that I heard Him not. You
 thrive
 So, where I pine. See no *adjustment*
 blunder?
 Job was alone with Satan? Job? O under
 Hell-ladled morning, some of my hopes
 revive:

.. Less nakedly malign--loblolly--dull
Eyes on our end.. a table crumbles,
things
Jump and fuse, a fat voice calls down the
sky,
'Too excitable! too sensitive! thin-
skull,
I am for you: I shrive your wanderings:
stand closer, evil, till I pluck your
sigh.'

The speaker begins by posing a question that recalls the brooding of the early poems, yet these worries are presented in a more direct way; they are not general pronouncements about life and art. Instead, they deal with his faith in something or "nothing up the sky alive." His doubts have to do with his love pains. The first answers he considers are pantheistic. However, he abruptly negates his insights about a divine presence in his life because of so much suffering. The answer to his questions seems to be immediately given. However, the doubts continue. He magnifies his

hellish situation by alluding to Job's tribulations, transforming his affliction into a dignified impasse. He sees himself as Job, the "upright man" tested by Satan with the permission of God. After Job saw everything that had been destroyed, after he was physically afflicted, he was restored to happiness. By association or analogy, the speaker feels better. Possibility is again a source of life, "some of my hopes revive." Yet he remains his own destructive power.

The meaning of the sestet is not completely clear, but the last line brings a larger resolution to the existent problem: "'... stand closer, evil, till I pluck your sigh.'" In part, the difficulty in understanding the final six lines has to do with the punctuation--the use of so many colons--and also with the choice of the adjective "fat" to characterize the "voice" that remains indeterminate even if it comes "down the sky." Is this "fat voice" "Satan's" or his own; or symbolically both? Is it his own conscience? Is it the best part of some presence who has power to eliminate evil? The only certainty which is a conclusion to the problem

is, "evil has to be plucked."

That structure of conflict and resolution is just one among many Petrarchan conventions, recreated by Elizabethan sonneteers and adopted by Berryman. His sonnet sequence revolves around the conceit⁶ of the "Lady's" presence and of her eyes as the sun. And its plot is the events caused by love and passion, these described in terms of a striking oxymoron: pleasurable pains. In "Sonnet 63" his "heart smiled while [his] heart was sinking." "Sonnet 27" illustrates that companion and a contradictory love situation:

In a poem made by Cummings, long since,
his
Girl was the rain, but darling you are
sunlight

.....

... what you excite

you are, you are me: as light's parasite

.....

⁶ "Conceit" has come to denote an elaborate figurative device which often incorporates metaphor, simile, hyperbole or oxymoron, and which is intended to surprise and give pleasure by its ingenuity and wit.

I lie down flat! under your discipline

I die...

With this allusion to the poet Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) and his "Girl," the qualities of the speaker's "darling" are enhanced: she is the source of warmth, life and strong beauty. But if the lovers are one, the contradiction resides in her liveliness and his dying. Naturally, the sexual reference is underlined: "under [her] discipline."

"The blond good-nature[d]" "Lady" ("Sonnet 1") as the subject and object of the sequence needs to be described fully. In scattered poems, more qualities of the "Lady" are introduced, recreating the inventory of *blazon* conceit, a catalogue of a mistress' charms and perfections: "your breast like starch," "your teeth irregular and passionate" ("Sonnet 1"), "Your hair a cascade" ("Sonnet 3"), the "tongue like a mulled wine" ("Sonnet 4"), "eyes that grey blue" ("Sonnet 8"), "Profane, and elegant flower" ("Sonnet 9"), "Blonde, barefoot, beautiful" ("Sonnet 37"), "Your dulcet lust" ("Sonnet 38"), "topaz woman" ("Sonnet 41").

Beauty and love in "Sonnet 10" provoke the lover's jealousy, an emotion so intense that it extends beyond potential human rivals to nature:

You in your stone home where the sycamore
 More than I see you, sees you where
 luck's grass
 Smooths your bare feet more often, even
 your glass
 Touches your palm and tips to your lips
 to pour

This is Berryman's variation of a lover's wishes to be an ornament, an article of clothing or object of his mistress.

Moreover, with love and jealousy come the speaker's need to appeal to the "Lady" not to delay loving because time is a devourer:

Two centuries have here misabused our
 youth:
 (Your grey eyes pierce the miles to meet
 my eyes)
 The bicentennial of our affair with truth
 (In the Southern noon whom do you
 tyrannize?)

Not turned out Well: the cast girl sucks
her tooth.

(Secret, let us be true time crucifies.)

("Sonnet 20")

With this *carpe diem* conceit, in which the passing
of time points to the fading of beauty and life,
the poet's verses will be immortal:

You come blonde visiting through the
black air

Knocking on my hinged lawn-level window
And you will come for years above, below,
& through to interrupt my study where
I'm sweating it out like asterisks: so
there,--

You are the text ...

("Sonnet 114")

And the speaker knows he will sit down, and he will
continue writing.

Berryman's poetic achievement in the one
hundred fifteen sonnets is to enlarge the speaker's
repertoire; he does not mind presenting himself in
more conventional roles besides the wan and jealous

lover. He emerges as a slave to love, "without you I/Am not myself" ("Sonnet 94"), and "Slow now your subject loved you, I would hover/Between the slave and the rebel..." ("Sonnet 101"), only to become a kind of clown and a hypocritical lover:

Burnt cork, my leer, my Groucho crouch
and rush

No more my nature than Cyrano's: we
Are 'hindered characters' and mock the
time

("Sonnet 100")

However, in citing "Cyrano," he is showing that his apparent lack of virtues was the result of a noble heart.

This sense of self-esteem does not, however, stay with him throughout the sequence. Mostly, he diminishes himself in front of his mistress and expresses self-hatred: "I am this strange thing I despised; you are./To become ourselves we are these wayward things..." ("Sonnet 45"). This self-effacement explains how the beauty and strength of the "Lady" and his desire annihilated his customary controlling position: "Before who wanted eyes,

making love, so?/I do now..." ("Sonnet 36").
 Furthermore, these lines in the first section of
 the poem, when the romance is still well and alive
 (in "Sonnet 59" there is already agony), illustrate
 how the speaker was for the first time engaged in a
 new sexual discovery and enchantment:

None could decline, crookt, ghastly, from
 the sight
 Of elected love and love's delicious rite
 ("Sonnet 45")

...--what I love of you
Inter alia tingles like a whole good
 day,
 A hard wind, or a Strad's consummate
 pluck,
 Proficient, full and strong, shrewd as
 the blue
 Profound sky, pale as a winter sky you
 lay
 And with these breasts whiter than stars

gave suck.

("Sonnet 86")

The language of these lines is lively and frank. Comparing both the mistress and the speaker with natural elements is a neat variation of sonneteers' conventions. The poems are charged with the image of a wind-rain-storm recalling the atmospheric depictions in the early poems. "Thunder, rain, hurricane, storms and lightning-flash" evoke and enhance the speaker's inner world. The fury of the wind in "Young Woman's Song" intensified sexual desire as the "lightning-flash" in "Sonnet 91" announces betrayal: "Itself a lightning-flash ripping the 'dark/Backward' of you-before, you harrowed me."

Berryman's images originate in the traditional connection of love and fire. Heat-cold, flame, burning and blazing depict the object of love ("Chris") and the sexual urgency of both the speaker and his mistress. Symbolically, in "Sonnet 13," on their first day of separation, because of her vacation with her family--husband "David" and son "Peter"--the speaker while in a bar to "lift at

six o'clock [his glass]/As [she] plotted..., [he] blow[s] [his] short ash red." This gesture extends the erotic connotation in the poem.

Variations on fire and other natural elements pervade in the sequence, and, because of their conformity to the conventions of the sonnet, are much easier to grasp than the thoughts related to sexual desire/death/water (flood)/fire in *The Nervous Songs*. However, it is chronology that determines the emotions of the poems and not the demands of a literary form. The rhythm of the plot is marked by the speaker's internal changes: instants of happiness and comic self-ridicule are followed by sadness and despair. Because the consummation of their passion was determined by the availability of "Chris"--the speaker was always accessible--the feelings of ecstasy and well-being during "Chris's" absence turned into confusion, doubt and guilt. The experience of both extremes of sexual attraction re-orient the speaker toward brooding and introspection ("Sonnets 60, 65, 73" for example). Yet, at the end of the affair, "[he] is a savant of the problem on both sides," ("Sonnet

116") as once "Pindar⁷ sang both sides" ("Sonnet 92"). Berryman endows his speaker with poetic excellence and fame by paralleling him to the great Greek poet. This situation is different from that of the speakers in the early poems.

In "The Animal Trainer I," the speaker still thought that sun/art/loneliness/well-being could be all harmoniously combined by the will. But in the *Sonnets* beyond the speaker's control, sun has the face and body of a young, beautiful, intelligent woman with whom he "'Fell In Love'" ("Sonnet 73"). The art of love intensified eroticism and inspired the speaker's new graphic language.

This lyrical voice is in touch with his feelings: "I adore you, Chris" ("Sonnet 4"). This outburst is unfamiliar. It came by accident, made possible by Cupid's art and the speaker's development, which culminated in "The Song of the Bridegroom" and, after the completion of the *Sonnets*, in "Fare Well." Both compositions stress the speaker's openness to warm feelings. The

⁷ Pindar (518?-c. 438B.C.) is generally regarded as the greatest Greek lyric poet. He wrote choral lyrics and established a standard for the triumphal ode.

experience with "Chris," is, however, more intense than anything previously experienced; it annihilates memory ("Sonnet 41") and alters the hierarchy of his needs: "Crazy with need to fall on you..." ("Sonnet 7"). She is the prize of the courtly quest: "All I did wrong, all the Grand Guignol years,/tossed me here still able to touch you still..." ("Sonnet 74").

All began in "Sonnet 16":

Thrice, or I moved to sack, I saw you:

how

Without siege laid I can as simply tell

As whether below the dreams of Astrophel

Lurks the wild fact some scholars would

allow

And others will deny in ours! O now

The punishing girl met after Toynbee's

bell

Tolled for us all I see too bloody well

To say why then I cheapened a blind bow.

Paid at the shore eyes, ears, a shaking

hand,

A pull of blood; behind you coming back,
 Already holding, began to be borne away..
 Held, after Mozart, saw you bend and
 stand
 Beside my seat.. held. I recovered..
 Rack
 The consumer! I rushed out Stockton
 Street one day.

With a theatrical opening--"Thrice"--the speaker informs that he saw "her," the manoeuvres of Eros at work. Lines four and five suggest what lies behind the great literature of love: dreams, desire, imagination.

The allusion to "Astrophel," and, implicitly, to "Stella⁸," stresses the tradition of the sonneteers, literary models, and romance. It permits the speaker and "her" to be elevated to the realm of idealized love and posterity.

Because this poem, part of the sonnet sequence, alludes to love and the literature of exalted feelings, the reader can figure out that

⁸ *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) by Sir Philip Sidney -- or Sydney -- (1554-1586), is considered one of the greatest Sonnet sequences. Sidney, a diplomat and courtier at Queen Elizabeth I's court, was the model of Renaissance chivalry.

the poem is about the speaker's discovery of his muse. Yet the poem is reminiscent of the indeterminacy of early work. Who is "you"? Where did he see her? Seeing her is a pretext for a literary and romantic digression. Yet her vision gave him the inevitable certainty that their destinies had been brought together. This happened in a place with the music of "Mozart," and the shadowy presence of "Toynbee⁹." Having seen but never met this woman, he describes her as "the punishing girl." Indirectly her beauty is disclosed, evaluated, and, because of the allusions to "Mozart" and "Toynbee," intellectual interests surface.

Berryman transmits the speaker's emotions, yet the voice establishes a distance, until the instant she is close to him. The feelings then are strongly and implicitly introduced: "I recovered." The evening he observed "her" for the first time

⁹ Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975) was an English historian. He wrote *A Study of History* in which he saw the problems of history in terms of great cultural groups of civilization rather than of nationalities. His view is that the well-being of a civilization depends on its ability to respond adequately to challenges, human and environmental.

was on February 20, 1947, when he was attending a lecture at Princeton given by Arnold Toynbee. "He was haunted by Chris's beauty," writes Mariani (186).

"Sonnet 1" introduces "her," the object of desire who is to be the occasion of the sonnet sequence:

I wished, all the mild days of middle
 March
 This special year, your blond good-nature
 might
 (Lady) admit-kicking abruptly tight
 With will and affection down your breast
 like starch
 Me to your story, in Spring, and stretch,
 and arch.
 But who not flanks the wells of uncanny
 light.
 Sudden in bright sand towering? A bone
 sunned white.
 Considering travellers bypass these and
 parch.

This came to less yes than an ice cream cone
 Let stand.. though still my sense of it
 is brisk:

Blond silky cream, sweet cold aches: a
 door shut.

Errors of order! Luck lies with the
 bone.

Who rushed (and rests) to meet your small
 mouth, risk

Your teeth irregular and passionate.

A language of experience is incorporated into the poem, and yet it is a different one. The odd diction, indeterminacy of referents, and intellectual digressions after a simple introduction of the "Lady" count for the opaqueness of meaning.

The lyrical "I" in an open manner introduces the "Lady"--"blond good-nature," "breast like starch"--and makes clear his desire for a close relationship with her: "admit/Me to your story." This wish takes place in springtime. Yet in the middle of this spiritual/physical description, the "I" unexpectedly grows philosophical. The voice is

opaque:

But who not flanks the wells of uncanny
light.

Sudden in bright sand towering? A bone
sunned white.

Considering travellers bypass these and
parch.

The first chant is subsumed into a landscape whose center is "A bone." This deathmark entangles with love/life ("Spring"). This unexpected surrealistic arid imagery is, in turn, replaced by a sensuous, icon of daily life, "ice cream cone." The instant of death is compared to the quickness of eating ice cream, or its melting. The sententious tone of the death thoughts are lessened by the simple evocation of a popular, tasty experience: enjoying "an ice cream cone." It is the language of advertisement. By association, the "Lady" incorporates qualities of the ice cream: "Blond silky cream," but the speaker's mind generalizes his "sweet cold aches: a door shut." The conclusion is, "Errors of order! Luck lies with the bone." In ascertaining death, however, he

rushes to life: "to meet [her] small mouth.../[her] teeth irregular and passionate." This ending is charged with life, with sexual love.

The novelty of the sonnet lies in the sensual description of the "Lady," the imagery of daily life, symbolized in the iconic ice-cream, and a new enthusiasm in the speaker's desire. Yet this lyrical voice still loses its way in his private mazes, for which the reader has no key. Like his early poems, understanding is elusive.

However, the opaqueness of the first sonnet, is not the constant characteristic or final effect of many of the remaining sonnets. Indeterminate allusions, literary connotations, esoteric and archaic words, and even nonwords sprout like weeds in the poems, but they do not obstruct communication. In the first section of the sequence this is due to the simple frankness of the excited, revitalized voice of the speaker; and it remains true in the final section because of its meditative, clear mode.

At the beginning of the sonnet cycle, the more the speaker discloses the physical mysteries of the

"Lady" and his own feelings, the more transparent the excitement of their sexual attraction. In idolizing his sunny "girl," he re-energizes his own voice. It becomes freer and more daring. This is the new timbre of the old speaker. Fresh words and imagery, humor and irony, translate his new-found Eden. Yet this voice does not totally silence the previous intellectual speaker. "Sonnet 1" introduced (as already noted), open, erotic imagery--"breast like starch"--that by association bring into play other phallic elements: "sand towering," "a bone," and "ice cream." Conventional literary allusions and philosophical statements that accent the love theme promote mental and empirical digressions: "sweet cold ache," "a door shut," "Errors of order! Luck lies with the bone." These clusters of images do not permit us to read the poem merely as a love poem; the same holds true for all of the other sonnets. They telescope and control multiple associations larger than the microworld of a love affair. The patterns are set by the voice. They range from lyrical but

colloquial language that describes the "Lady's" attributes and the settings--"my wide room" ("Sonnet 2"), "stone home" ("Sonnet 10") to metaphors drawn from daily American icons--"ice cream" ("Sonnet 1"), "A juke-box" ("Sonnet 13"), "billiard ball" ("Sonnet 14")--thickly allusive lines--"my strength with desire, my cup with your tongue/no more Melpomene's, but Erato's fool?.." ("Sonnet 4"); and high serious language--"Well, but then my breast was empty, monk/Of Yeatsian order: yesterday (truth now)" ("Sonnet 5"). This grave quality alternates with the speaker's humorous self-deflations: "Grinning with passion, your astonished martyr" ("Sonnet 14").

Both the levity and verbal wit and the formality and high tone create the playful and tragic mood of the sequence. The speaker throws into disorder the old orders: "strengthless and smiling under a maenad rule" ("Sonnet 4"). The reason is the plucking of the Rose. Centuries of literature come together in the vision--"Who for those ages ever without some blood/Plumped for a rose and plucked it through its fence?" ("Sonnet

3"); mingling with the actual, prosaic ghosts--
 "florist, amator of cents... vending the thornless
 rose," "Rents paid" ("Sonnet 3").

Colloquial, poetic, philosophical and generic
 voices mingle in the *Sonnets*: (1-4, 20 and 65 to
 mention just a few). Some are more insistently
 descriptive (11, 17, 18). But one salient feature
 in these compositions is the constantly derivative
 associations from the love theme. It is as if the
 speaker decided to adopt stream of consciousness
 content and technique¹⁰ in his poetry. He is one
 character in his own plot of impressions and
 memory. He acknowledges he is an actor: "We/Are
 'hindered characters' and mock the time" ("Sonnet
 100"). But he is also the narrator:

Presidential flags! and the General is
 here,
 Slops have let out, two bands are raising
 hell

¹⁰ Stream of consciousness is the continuous flow of sense-
 perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories in the human
 mind. As a literary method, it is the representation of
 such a blending of mental processes in fictional characters,
 usually in fragmentary and disconnected form.

O hell is empty and Nassau Street is well

 (Your grey eyes pierce the miles to meet
 my eyes)

("Sonnet 20")

And the lyrical voice:

How shall I sing western & dry & thin,
 you who for celebration should cause flow
 The sensual fanfare of D'Annunzio...

("Sonnet 32")

In order to give a better sense of those
 voices and other poetic devices, let us examine
 "Sonnet 8":

College of cocktails, a few gentlemen,
 Of whippersnappers and certain serious
 boys.
 Who better discriminates than I your
 noise
 From the lemon song and black light
 assertion
 Of the academies of eternity?... Your fen--
 Yet it's your fen yields this perfume I
 poise

Full against Helen, and Isotta: toys
 To times, late action in this girl.
 Again
 As first when I sat down amongst your
 trees
 I respect you and am moved by you! Hér
 you
 Taught not, nor could, but comrades of
 hers you have,
 She sleeps; she rouses, near you, near
 she frees
 Each morning her strange eyes, eyes that
 grey blue
 Not blue.. for your incurable sins some
 salve.

A narrative voice, partly disguised by objectivity,
 introduces that academic setting, crowded with
 impudent youth and just a "few gentlemen" ("certain
 serious boys"). The objective voice is not
 impersonal as in the early poems, but a good-
 natured, humorous presence: "Of the academies of
 eternity?.." This voice shifts to the lyrical "I."
 In that men's fortress, "a few gentlemen" and

"certain serious boys" differentiate "her" because of her strong beauty.

Associations, stream of consciousness, impressionistic images and literary echoes (Eliot's "Prufrock"¹¹) bring digressions whose cause is the mistress' token: the "fen" with its "parfum." The speaker does not assume he is straying away from the initial information but just "poise[s]." The lyrical voice remains ironical, theatrical, and the name "Isotta" enhances the light mood; however, reverberations of tragedy are felt with the invocation of "Helen" and Isolde,¹² but they are sabotaged by the calling of attention to the word "girl." This high/low use of language, its shuttling between Latin and the vernacular, is the "utraquist." It also the tragi-comic entanglement

¹¹ T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published in 1917. It expresses the barrenness and anguish of modern life.

¹² Helen in Greek mythology is considered the most beautiful of women. Courted by many suitors, she married Menelaus. When Paris awarded the apple of discord to Aphrodite, the goddess in turn gave him Helen. He took his "prize" to Troy, precipitating the Trojan war.

Isolde, in the Arthurian legend, was to be the wife of King Mark in Cornwall. But when Tristram went to Ireland to bring Isolde to the kingdom, they unknowingly drank a potion which made them fall in love.

and repetition of history. Yet the lyrical "I" speaks as a philosophical, generic voice: "Helen and Isotta: toys/To times late action...." Then calm, sweet memories bring another change in tone. The speaker pays respectful homage to his "Lady," elevating her into the realm of great literature, great beauty and passion: making her immortal. The beauty of the mistress is illustrated by the conceit of extraordinary "grey blue" eyes. They are the curse and the cure of his "sins."

This is a very artistic "Sonnet," which illuminates Berryman's clever handling of emotions, use of tradition, irony and manipulation of his poetic skills.

In this poem, the explicit, graphic material in other sonnets (1, 7, 23, and others) that reveals the sexual dimensions of the affair is overpowered by the speaker's dignified worship of the "girl." This sets up a contrast with the ironical tone of the poem that enhances the spiritual nature of their relationship.

This lively, humorous, artistic mode of combining love, life in general, history and literature is not a characteristic of *Poems* or *The Dispossessed*. Berryman's proximity to "Chris" and his perception of her as a whole person is not his first love affair. The reader recalls the presence of "Beatrice." Yet the radiance of the mutual sexual attraction accounts for some intense, poetic utterings.

In the Renaissance fashion, Berryman elevates the "Lady" to the throne of Muse; the speaker sees himself, as he had before described Yeats, as an "Argent" craftsman ("Sonnet 40"). The literary landscape in which he moved, because it permitted him to project a dignified and idealized image of himself, could only exacerbate his depressive feelings of conflict and betrayal. The speaker was aware of them: "Troubling are masks" ("Sonnet 31"). The concluding lines of this poem are instructive: "I am dreaming on the hour when I can hear/My last lie rattle, and then lie truly still." These thoughts of "easeful death" stress the

speaker's personal warfare; in voicing them, he reveals not only a new strength, but also his severance from his recurrent, ideal worlds populated by heroes and heroines--"Isolde," "Tristan," "Pindar"--who had the courage and sagacity to live by the law of honesty with themselves and others.

But what does the speaker mean by, "then lie truly still"? Is he showing the superiority of literature over life? He learned how to hide behind voices, words, images, and now other practices and conventions, the archive of centuries. Even "A 'broken heart'" ("Sonnet 103") can be calmed by "Three thousand years of poetic tradition" and wisdom.

What he wrote, he could not directly express to the other. It is possible that in the *Sonnets'* Whitmanesque imagery of "nakedness" and "grass" there is a need for exposure, a breaking of masks. But when the agony of being alone again wounds, the nostalgic brooding of the past surfaces:

Dazzle, before I abandon you, my eyes
 my eyes which I need for journeys
 difficult
 in which case it may be said that I
 survive you.

("Sonnet 112")

If the "lady came not" anymore, and if she was
 the text ("Sonnet 114")--the subject and the
 object--of creativity, how is the poet to continue?

At the end of 1947, Mariani notes,

'[M]iraculously,' he could begin to be
 his own man again. The 'mad sonnets'
 were history, and he was busy now getting
 a book of poems ready for the printer's,
 glad to have Chris out of his life. He
 hoped never again to go through what he'd
 gone through with her. Still, he had to
 admit ... he did feel young again, 'full
 of energy ... & invention & judgment.'
 In the long run, perhaps the most
 important thing about the affair was the
 poems and even the prose. He realized
 now that he was actually writing better

than he'd ever written before in his
life. (204)

This "writing better" implicitly insists on models
and practice:

'Originality in poetry,' he exclaimed,
consisted 'less in the invention of the
materials than in the subsuming of
materials into a moving and fresh unity
.... Style and the inscrutable operation
of personality' held the poem together.
(190)

The *Sonnets* place many demands on the reader,
which speaks for their artistry. They don't
prepare us for, as Conarroe implies, a "so-called
confessional mode" (67). They have opened higher
levels of artistic sophistication, pointing to new
creative exigencies. Their emotional qualities are
inseparable from the intellectual. They are
flights through direct statements, allusions and
conceits to personal, inner worlds, individual,
communal mythologies¹³, and literarily-charged

¹³ "Mythologies" is used in the structuralist sense of how
systems of conventions are organized. For example, what and
how a culture eats, dresses and the like. I am thinking of

realms. These are the frames for *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.

Berryman's symbols in Princeton, New York, in American Society: the ice cream, the juke-box, the daiquiris, the scotch, the billiard ball, etc.

*Chapter IV**Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*

As a conclusion to the *Sonnets to Chris*, the speaker offers literature and the activity of writing ("Sonnet 117") as a remedy for love sickness. If the end of his affair with "Chris" does not bring him closer to his wife, it evidently destroys several "masks" ("Sonnet 31"). He becomes more authentic: his personal voice superseded the impersonal, introspection finds expression in lyricism, colloquial language becomes a conveyor of emotions, and a sonnet-sequence of more or less independent poems with a narrative line serves to record external and internal events. Moreover, he learns that poetry does not fully exorcise his passion. He also understands that spiritual and sexual love are equally important. Finally, he believes that for love he will deviate from decorum, despite family or social expectations. In clearly singing: "neither [his] fondness nor [his]

pity can/O no more bend [him] to Eileen with love" ("Sonnet 83"), he is restoring some dignity to his private/family life. Even if the romance is over, he acknowledges, "she" (his muse) "[w]ill come for years, above, below/& through to interrupt [his] study..." ("Sonnet 114").

Although he is aware of the power of such sexual passion, he chooses death over that life. In writing "Fare Well," after the *Sonnets*, the poet traces his journey back to the world of the dead. And at the end of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, the speaker explains: "Love has no body and presides the sun" ("Stanza 57"). He moves from "Chris," particular sexual passion, to a general concept of love. From the time of "The Animal Trainer I," in which the speaker perceived the "sun" as the great poetic passion (poetic inspiration and fame), to "Chris," the "topaz woman," who was the sunlight, at the end of *Homage*, Berryman judges "sun" as inferior to any kind of love. This seems to announce that actual love was more important than the rewards of artistic quest, yet *Homage* denies this conclusion

by giving primacy to creativity.

When Berryman began this poem, he realized that he was still battling feelings of betrayal and guilt, thinking of his father and mother, obsessed with his illicit affair. This discovery calls up the only dream in the *Sonnets* (79) in which the speaker visits the "asylum" (the image that appears in "Meditation"), where

Chris comes up in a matron's uniform

And with a look (I saw once) infinitely
sad

In her grey eyes takes [the milk] away
from me.

Berryman realized that this masochistic apparition united the lover and the mother into one, as before, in the early poems, "Cleopatra" was "Beatrice" and "the mother."

The new face of motherhood bears a name: Anne Dudley, born in 1612 and married at sixteen to Simon Bradstreet, a Cambridge man. Wife, mother and poet, she becomes an obsession for both Berryman and the speaker in his poems, as the ghosts of "Lise/Chris," mother and father are.

To join her, the speaker journeys into the underworld, like Orpheus, summoning her up from among the dead. With his music, Mariani notes, he was:

trying to breathe life back into not one but two ghosts, Anne Bradstreet and Shakespeare. For years, he'd believed he might actually discover in Shakespeare's plays the lineaments of a real man, and the Bradstreet was, really, another facet of that desire to breathe life into the dead. (246)

Symbolically, the death of "Chris's" love for him brings back old evasive ways: concern with the dead and literature as his real life. Alienated from his wife, family, friends, and work, the speaker wishes to be born again in the encounter with "Anne," who is also estranged from her husband, her father, and her religion, and unable to suppress her longings even in the bliss of childbirth. "Anne" speaks for her and for him; his life is her agony and comfort as well.

In "Bradstreet's" life, he discovered energy and passion again. To build her world, the intellectual Berryman devoured the work of the Puritan poet and of the history of colonial America; he read Helen Campbell's biography of Bradstreet and studied John Winthrop's papers¹. When the poem first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1953, without explanatory notes, its demands on the readers were serious. Three years later, however, a beautiful book replete with notes and ink drawings by Ben Shahn was published. Edmund Wilson, the most important critic in the country, greeted it as "'the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*'" (Conarroe 70).

This subtle, critical association of Eliot and Berryman speaks also for the poet. He was an admirer of Eliot's work. In 1952, he praised Eliot as the "'greatest living poet' in the language"²

¹ While writing *Homage*, Berryman read Helen Campbell's sixty-year-old biography of the poet, *Anne Bradstreet and Her Times*, John Winthrop's *Journals* and Perry Miller's *New England Mind*. For further information on this subject, see Mariani 245.

² Vivid language of disease and death, pain and torture pervades *Homage*. It was through Eliot that Berryman was first acquainted with the metaphysical poets of the 17th

(Mariani 244). For Berryman, as Mariani explains, *Homage* was an experiment with language:

With its fresh amalgam of styles ranging from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth, [*Homage*] was a farewell and a new birth.... Now, in his new poem, he was far closer to achieving what he'd tried to do in his sonnets in merging the tradition to the present. (256)

Both the language of the poem and its thematic elements prove the breakthrough that carries out earlier promises and announces new ones. In *Homage* Berryman brought together several preoccupations that he had dealt with in his earlier poems, and are to manifest themselves in his later work: loss, rebellion, submission, and his need of a family. The most central idea of the poem was the tempting "of Anne" by the speaker of the poem. In this way, Berryman partially projects onto history the illicit affair recorded in the century, who were preoccupied with decay. This inspired his experimentation with the kind of graphic description which can be seen in certain lines about the death of "Bradstreet's" father and her own physical deterioration ("Stanzas 43, 46 and 47").

Sonnets. The new speaker can free himself from his old spiritual fetters by making "Mistress Bradstreet" repeat "Chris's" words. The poet appropriates them in this line from the sonnet: "I want to take you for my lover." They bring together poetry, life and memory. What were once "Chris's" wishes now belong to the poet's imagination and become part of his own psychic heritage. Similarly, the speaker repeats to "Anne" his reply to "Chris": "Do."

Half imprisoned, half liberated, Berryman's speaker is to be pulled again to the land of the dead, by the sorcery of a young woman's spirit, the first American poet. Stronger than the beauty of his Princeton mistress, is the personality of this New England muse he will reveal, through his hard-won wisdom, empathy and imagination, which will bridge time and space.

The experience of adultery with its fresh, innovative language was generalized in the predictable form of the *Sonnets*, but in *Homage*, the poet aims at creating a poem that blends narrative and lyrical modes, that includes

historical and personal voices. The heroine is also a muse. She is a "sourcing" of the speaker's renewed life and creation. In the beginning of the poem, he calls her up as if he were a medium: "Out of maize & air/your body's made, and moves. I summon, see, from the centuries it" ("Stanza 3"). This is the starting point of their encounter, which will unfold their similarities and their attraction.

This love poem is to make, however, more use of the story-telling mode. Its stanzaic form had to provide narrative flow and lyrical outbursts. The poem's eight-line stanzas with their different line lengths and their mixture of short and long lines, allow for startling effects, the final alexandrine (a line in iambic hexameter) imposes a sense of dignity and formality. Each stanza is self-contained. Enjambment is frequently employed in narrative sections, stressing the motion of the story: "That beyond the Atlantic wound our woes enlarge/is hard, hard that starvation burnishes our fear," ("Stanza 8") or "Winter than summer worse, that first, like a file/on a quick..." (Stanza 9).

Beauty and movement coexist. The effective alliteration of the words and internal rhymes further underscore "Anne's" concerns and vary the rhythms, as though miming her consciousness.

The opening line of "Stanza 9) omits the predicate of the sentence, a salient feature of Berryman's style; these syntactic shifts produce unorthodox musical cadences. In "Stanza 42," the inversion of the phrase "my child" stresses the crucial presence of the mother, for whom identity comes from motherhood: "when by me in the dusk my child sits down/I am myself." This kind of deviation is so striking that it seems to alter the entire pattern of the poem. However, most lines are simple sentences, and the syntactic displacements are built within that structure: "The Governor your husband lived so long/moved you not..." ("Stanza 1") or "Vanity & the follies of youth took hold of me" ("Stanza 14"). Berryman also strives to construct a singular rhythmical pattern. Most of the lines are iambic, but emotional passages display more unaccented

syllables as a tool of propelling the action forward: "I'll háve you láter Wómen do endúre/... and it pásses the wréthced tráp whélming and í am mé..." ("Stanza 20"). *Homage* thus presents an organized and complex set of rhythms and cadences.

Homage is divided into five quite self-contained sections. In the first group ("Stanzas 1-4"), the first stanza is an invocation by the speaker. "Anne Bradstreet," long dead, is called forth. Section two ends in "Stanza 25"; it is a monologue by "Anne," about her life up to the birth of her first child, interrupted once by the speaker's comment on her "bald abstract didactic rime" ("Stanza 12"). "Stanzas 25 to 29" establish a lovers' dialogue, between the poet and "Anne" full of seduction:

"--I miss you, Anne,...

("Stanza 25")

O my love, my heart is breaking,...

("Stanza 26")

Brood I do on my self naked...

--I have earned the right to be alone
with you

("Stanza 27")

The fourth section brings "Anne" to the past but also treats her later life and her death. She remains alone on the stage while the speaker disappears until his entrance again in the final four stanzas. These bring the poem to a hopeful conclusion although they describe a burial in contrast to the first four that present a resurrection. The structure of *Homage* is beautifully balanced, almost symmetrical. First, Berryman speaks, next Anne Bradstreet, followed by the dialogue, and again her voice and then his. This circular arrangement reinforces the sense of closure attained by the poetic and metrical devices: the last section's repeated end words, "loves/loves" ("Stanza 57"), and rhyming lines.

The opening voice of the poem is the male voice, but besides being dignified, it is also soft and loving. Naturally, because the speaker warmly defined "Anne's" presence, he welcomes her. His

voice is also hers. She destroys silence with her adventurous narrative. Accustomed as Berryman is to his own visions--father, mother, lovers, poets--he uses these tools easily to introduce "Anne." First, she is in her grave awaiting her husband, "Simon," who, although he was older than she, outlived her by several years. Next, her apparition appears in front of a fire, reading poetasters "Sylvester" and "Quarles," her favorite authors. After that, her "mild eyes" are the focus of his new vision. The last image of her is how he imagines her: young, "pockmarked," arriving in the New World.

These opening stanzas establish the setting of the poem. This creative gesture is not accomplished by direct references, but by evocation as in Berryman's early poems. The contrast, however, feeds off a new intimacy of voice, and the absence of thickly classical allusions. The environment is not explicitly one in which classic heroes/heroines move and justify their extraordinary actions. It is the "pioneering" space with its daily hardships.

Yet, in allowing her to tell the great crossing of the "Atlantic," the speaker is introducing "Anne" as a character of tales of adventure. This is part of Berryman's courtly and heroic ideal. "Anne's" courage and stamina contrast with her "mild eyes." Eyes have been a central image in Berryman's poetry. He often alluded to "Chris's grey blue" eyes, equating her with the muses of the Renaissance sonneteers Petrarch and Sidney ("Laura," "Stella"). Yet "Bradstreet's" "mild eyes" reveal her spiritual and physical strength.

This stanza reveals her power:

By the week we landed we were, most, used
 up.
 Strange ships across us, after a
 fortnight's winds
 unfavouring, frightened us;
 bone-sad cold, sleet, scurvy; so were ill
 many as one day we could have no sermons;
 broils, quelled; a fatherless child
 unkennelled; vermin
 crowding & waiting: waiting.

And the day itself he leapt ashore young
Henry Winthrop.

("Stanza 5")

In this controlled narrative, the speaker, in referring to the people on the ship by the pronoun "we," generalizes and equalizes tribulations. "Anne" does not stand out. Yet the gloom, the horror of her descriptions create the mood and speak for her courage. The notion of time is subtly introduced by the anaphora: "waiting: waiting." The reader feels with them their long open road. The recurrent image of the "bone" (bone-sad cold) brings back by repetition and contrast the image of "a bone sunned white" in the opening sonnet. Life in that poem is suspended with the memory of Bhain's death; as in *Homage* it is paralleled by the drowning of "Winthrop." This stanza elicits the atmosphere in the ship as the opening stanzas suggest the "climate" of the New World.

"Anne's" monologue continues for nineteen more stanzas, which constitute the second section of the

poem. First, she describes the hardships of the first New England summer and winter. Gradually, in shifting to private matters, her voice becomes intimate. She tells of her barren state (her first child was only conceived five years after the marriage), her libertarian teenage years, far from God, her conversion, her husband's courtship, her household obligations, and theological debates. These situations are a preparation to the agonizing birth scene:

So squeezed, wince you I scream? I love
you & hate
off with you. Ages! *Useless.* Below my
waist
he has me in Hell's vise.
Stalling. He let go. Come back: brace
me somewhere. No. No. Yes!
everything down
hardens I press with horrible joy down
my back cracks like a wrist
shame I am voiding oh behind it is too
late

("Stanza 19")

hide me forever I work thrust I must free
 now I all muscles & bones concentrate
 what is living from dying?
 Simon I must leave you so untidy
 Monster you are killing me Be sure
 I'll have you later women do endure

("Stanza 20")

This narrative of childbirth reinforces "Anne's" stature. She is psychologically strong; she can deal with her emotions when in pain; she is not ashamed of being human. It is a vivid tribute. The violent vocabulary and inversions--"hate off with you," "Hell's vise," "back cracks," "Monster you are killing me"--stress the speaker's severe pain and distress, leading her to an epiphany: "What is living from dying?" "Anne" acquires depth. She is perceptive and brave. Like the speaker in the *Sonnets*, she can say, "I was there," "I am a savant of the problem on both sides," but her pains are joyous, "horrible joy" is the name of life and not of death.

"Anne's" growth in candor is presented as a process of learning, of a gradual consciousness-raising:

I revolt from I am like, these savage
foresters

("Stanza 17")

whose passionless dicker in the shade,
whose glance
impassive & scant, belie their murderous
cries
when quarry seems to show.

("Stanza 18")

In maturing, she sees the link between behavior and emotional freedom. Her labor is the occasion for assessing choices, for growing. Her baby is the reward allowing her to purify previous angry emotions: "Blossomed Sarah, and I/blossom."

The reference to "Sarah"³ expands the earlier biblical allusion, "and I am Ruth/away,"⁴

³ Sarah or Sara was the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac. She was one of the four Jewish matriarchs. After she gave birth to Isaac in her old age, she became jealous of her handmaid Hagar, Abraham's concubine, and drove her into the desert (Gen. 11-23).

living amid alien corn in a foreign country. The choice of the name "Sarah" is a symbol of what "women do endure." There is a parallel between the speaker's pains and the suffering of "Sarah." "Anne's" husband is often away. She feels neglected and vulnerable. The newborn named for her does not embody this distress, but "Sarah's" determination and strength are "Bradstreet's" ideals.

In "Stanza 24," "Sarah's" resistance is to unfold into another variation of feminine power: "Anne Hutchinson," whom Berryman introduces as one of "Bradstreet's" dear friends. There is no historical evidence that Hutchinson and Bradstreet ever met. Their relationship is Berryman's fiction, his way of stressing the imaginary quality of the poem:

Now Mistress Hutchinson rings forth a

⁴ The book of the Old Testament, eight in the Authorized Versions, tells the story of the fidelity of a Moabite widow, Ruth, to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth returns with Naomi from Moab to Bethlehem and there got married to Naomi's kinsman Boaz.

Certainly "Bradstreet," by comparing herself with "Ruth," means to highlight her sense of propriety and integration in her society, despite the fact she is rebellious as well.

call--
 should she? many creep out at a broken
 wall--
 affirming the Holy Ghost
 dwells in one justified. Factioning
 passion blinds

("Stanza 24")

However, these lines connect the world of the poem with that of Mistress Hutchinson, who was accused of heresy by the orthodox clergy when she admitted to having experienced personal revelation. "She got into the technical doctrinal debate over the issue of grace versus works ..." (Conarroe 76).

The authorities also accused her of inciting people to revolt against the State. She became the symbol of rebelliousness against conformity, not just for women but for all of the citizens. She was exiled to Rhode Island in 1638; she is one of the founders of the state.

The intimate relationship between the two "Annes" shows again Berryman's way of promoting his heroine, "Bradstreet," who gradually gains

intellectual grandeur as she moves from the sphere of domestic life and motherhood to the affairs of the world. The harshness of the New England climate and the hostility of the Indians were not the only causes of her distress. As the new society becomes more organized and stronger, it grows more repressive:

... I remember who
in meeting smiled & was punisht, and I
know whispered & was stockt.
We lead a thoughtful life. But Boston's
cage we shun.

("Stanza 16")

The subtle irony of "We lead a thoughtful life" increases as the poem advances. By "Stanza 24," just before "Anne's" dialogue with the poet, her irony is blunt sarcasm: "Forswearing in otherwise, they starch their minds." "Anne" does not find any interest or peace in her social or family life. Her marriage proves to be another trial.

She is dissatisfied with her marriage and worried about her sanity: "Women have gone mad/at twenty one" ("Stanza 15"). The birth of her first

child brought love, however, to her marriage and saved her from madness and adultery. The birth of her child is for "Anne" a moment of joy, triumph and affirmation of faith. But these feelings do not last. The specific conflicts in her life change, but her mind's problems do not. Her sense of herself and her family is a bulwark against the repression of her society, against which she rebels but which she does not reject.

"Bradstreet's" address to "Hutchinson" is Berryman's method of abandoning the previous, imprecise allusions and the vague theological material and attitudes toward death that cluttered his poems and charts a more personal pilgrimage. All this time Berryman has been a silent spectator. The absence of "Hutchinson" symbolically corresponds to the foreshadowing of the poet's loss of "Bradstreet." Again in despair and lonely, she explores the possibilities of adultery with the poet. He and "Anne" are both attracted and kept away by the desire they feel for each other. Their love duet begins:

Bitter sister, victim! I miss you.

--I miss you, Anne,
 day or night weak as a child,
 tender & empty, doomed, quick to no
 tryst.

--I hear you. Be kind, you who leaguer
 my image in the mist.

--Be kind you, to one unchained eager far
 & wild.

("Stanza 25")

and if, O my love, my heart is breaking,
 please

neglect my cries and I will spare you.

Deep

in Time's grave, Love's, you lie still.

Lie still. --Now? That happy shape

my forehead had under my most long, rare,

ravendark, hidden, soft bodiless hair

you award me still.

You must not love me, but I do not bid
 you cease.

("Stanza 26")

These concluding emotional commands exhibit

the strong temptation of seduction. She knows the rules of decorum and the art of love: she is moved by this passionate lover. The intense affectionate contest continues for fourteen stanzas. She feels delight and fear in the relationship. "Anne," like Berryman's speaker in the *Sonnets*, sees herself violating moral law:

Falls on me what I like a witch,
For lawless holds, annihilations of law
which Time and he and man abhor,
foresaw...

("Stanza 28")

Yet unlike the speaker in the *Sonnets*, "Anne" stops this love duet in the 39th stanza when she goes back to her past. She knows that the consequence of her violation is damnation. "I fear Hell's hammer-wind" ("Stanza 37"). At the same time, she continues to be tempted and rebellious: "I am yielding," and "I throw hostile glances toward God." The poet is sure that "Man is entirely alone/may be" ("Stanza 35"). He also fears a hellish life. They overcome their fears, and they touch and kiss. When "Anne" requests that

the poet talk to her, he answers with extreme poetic sensuality:

--It is Spring's New England. Pussy
 Willows
 up in the wet. Milky crestings, fringed
 yellow, in heaven, eyed
 by the melting hand-in-hand or mere
 desirers single, heavy-footed, rapt,
 make surge poor human hearts. Venus is
 trapt--
 the hefty pike shifts, sheer--
 in Orion blazing.

("Stanza 31")

But the concluding lines reveal this special moment of intimacy not as a soft, tender episode, but as a cosmic struggle that bursts like an exploding star: it's the continuous strife with themselves. "Anne's" choice is to return to the family. It is in her children that she gains her most durable sense of identity. She projects her previous affirmation at the instant of her child's birth--"I am me"--into the third section when she is again

herself, close to her child ("Stanza 42"). The bonds of family persist although its individual members cannot survive. Her choice proves her submission to the laws of her religion, but she still rebels: "Hard at the outset; in the ending thus hard, thus" (Stanza 46).

The enchanter must overcome this powerful, abrupt breaking off. The speaker is eliminated from the poem until the end when he pays her his last homage with his farewell address. Yet he is not freed from his passion for her: "I must pretend to leave you." Pretense is a fictional device, a resolution Berryman had played with in early poems and in the *Sonnets*.

But to linger in the mind of the lover is the final, great honor he is offering her. A sense of lasting connection and nostalgia are his dominant feelings for this new love, symbolizing other loves and the passion for "Chris."

Mariani explains that Berryman thought

if he was ever to work well again, he
would have to rid himself of his
demons.... If only he could get it

right, he thought, the new poem he had in mind (since the sonnets would have to remain hidden from view for a long time yet) would reveal obliquely the story of his crime and subsequent return to society. (208)

Catharsis only worked at the literary level. Pretending gives the poet the possibility to continue with double voices and to spin fictions out of life. The speaker's gain is a new freedom of expression, a very personal voice. He restrains its value, however, by giving his utmost affection to a spirit. If it is true that the memory of a dead love is often stronger than an actual one--as so movingly depicted by Joyce in "The Dead"⁵--the historical gap between these lovers, beautifully represented in the difference of their language and some concerns, makes *Homage* the product of highly artistic intentions, in which the speakers are perceived as actors in a scene. These dramatic

⁵ In Joyce's short story "The Dead" contained in *Dubliners* the main characters are Gabriel and Gretta Conroy, a married couple. At the end of the story, Gabriel learns from his wife that the love that has sustained her is the affection of a young boy, Michael Furey, who "died" of love for her.

dramatic characters dare to reveal what in reality would have to be silenced due to social and family decorum.

Berryman projected into his characters his chronic, old conflicts about love, his need of people who could nourish him ("We are on each other's hands/ Who care"), his conviction that certain loves control the "will" ("How do we/linger, diminished in our lovers' air"), and his renewed ambition of having "a concord of [lovers'] thought."

This last idea recalls his encounter with "Beatrice." At the end of his life, he had been separated from her for over twenty years, but he still enshrined her as his immortal beloved. Yet if "Bradstreet" is the new pretext for literary and spiritual renovation, the poet had already erected a barrier between him and a wide range of emotions by resorting again to denial and self-torment. In his love affirmations "Women serve my turn," "O all your ages at the mercy of my loves." "Bradstreet" is, then, the product of Berryman's restless

preoccupation with women. Mariani illuminates those affirmations by writing:

For twenty years and more Berryman had hungered for the love of women, and, as he came into his own power and women responded to his intellectual and physical energy, he had found himself craving and hurting them ... he has no difficulty in identifying with the Tempter carrying hell with him everywhere he went. (246)

This is a negative image of the poet. By putting himself in the role of the "Tempter," he is assuming that he has the power to cause pain. By ascribing to himself superior qualities and diminishing those of women, he denies his extreme emotions and needs.

The speaker who represents those views wants to eliminate the voice of the *Sonnets*, and in order to do that, he displays, in concluding the poem, the poet's old tactic: protection. The insecure voice has to dismiss the suffering exhibited in the *Sonnets*. In this way, Berryman

insists on the literary and fictional quality of *Homage*. He also informs us that, even though his love stories were unhappy, he chose them. Each time he entered a relationship, he knew he had found just one aspect of love. It seems that, for personal renewal and different creativity, he needed the conflict this lack of completeness would cause. He embraced his curses to be the poet.

The speaker in *Homage* was "happy once." Now, however, he is "a man of griefs & fits trying to be his friend," "a closet of secrets dying." This new speaker, born after the death of the one driven by physical passion in the *Sonnets*, revels in his womanizing, drinks heavily, breaks down often, and is closer to madness and death. And yet he was still able to write more vividly and artistically in *The Dream Songs*.

The speaker of *Homage*, finally, was able to assume in the love duet a sustained lyrical voice. But that is a public voice which could be accepted even in a puritanical society. The poem is dramatic subterfuge rather than a personal lyric. However, to openly "dissect" all of the layers of

desire, betrayal, fantasy, and death wish, and to make direct critical references to people and situations, the poet needed a multivoice, with would speak freely with intellectual power and talent. For Berryman, the use of disguise is a steady literary method: "Henry" is born.

The Dream Songs speak eloquently for Berryman's craft and imagination. Its sad content found its expression in a tragi-comic, multivoiced story teller, "Henry," who has "I," "Mr. Bones" and others to listen to his "long wonder." With "Henry," Berryman continues to delve deeper into subconscious realities.

Conclusion

"Henry" demands to be introduced. His full name is "Henry House," but he has an array of aliases: "Henry Cat," "Pussycat," "Henry of Donnybrook," "Sir Henry," "Senator Cat," and "Henry Hankovitch." He has a friend, a kind of Job's comforter, who is not always in agreement with him. This friend is sometimes unnamed; at other times he is "Mr. Bones," "Sir Bones," "Dr. Bones," "Brother Bones," or "Galahad." "Henry," too, occasionally answers to these names.

"Henry," who is vulnerable, does not enjoy hearing and balks at heeding his friend's reasonable advice. "Henry" is a man of griefs and fears whose broodings on diverse events in his life can be distilled into these gloomy lines: "What he has now to say is a long/wonder the world can bear & be" ("Dream Song 1"). The narrative of this long poem is woven of "coming together" between these fictional characters. The modulations of the voices in those encounters are sometimes clear

because the life of the characters at times is simple and content: "Henry sats in de plane & was gay ... [i]ndustrious, affable ... a merry old soul" ("Dream Songs 5, 58, 175"). This Old King Cole mood reveals itself fitfully despite the threatening, ingrained puritanical sense of guilt and the weary signs of time that burden Henry; at other times, the voices are heavy, desperate because the character's memory is flooded with losses and failures:

--If life is a handkerchief sandwich,

in a modesty of death I join my father
who dared so long ago leave me.

A bullet on a concrete stoop
close my a smothering southern sea

.....

--I saw nobody coming, so I went instead.

("Dream Song 76")

I can't go into the meaning of the dream
except to say a sense of total loss
afflicted me thereof:

an absolute disappearance of continuity &
love ...

("Dream Song 101")

Furthermore, the speaker continues:

'Down with them all!'. . .

Their deaths were theirs. I wait on for
my own,

.....

I have tried to be them, god knows I have
tried

("Dream Song 146")

These perceptions of failure and incompleteness, of irritability and self-hate, due to divided or unrequited loves: "the horror of unlove" ("Dream song 74"); "I loved her and she killed me" ("Dream Song 250"); "[h]e was always in love with the wrong woman" ("Dream Song 213"). And the voice questions: "why did he leave her?--" ("Dream Song 139").

None of "Henry's" many loves erased his guilt, which was aggravated by his shame at the sexual love infidelities he couldn't control:

Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad,
survived

('should always reproach himself.' [sic]

("Dream Song 66")

--Mr. Bones, please.

--Vouchsafe me, Sleepless One,

a personal experience of the body of Mrs.

Boogry

before I pass from lust!

("Dream Song 69")

It's good to be faithful but it ain't
natural, as you know.

("Dream Song 142")

... Hey: an empty girl.

Fill 'er, pal.

("Dream Song 250")

Henry, a foreigner, lustful & old

("Dream Song 365")

The reader feels the character's need in his

love quest (despite everything) to coerce lust into coinciding with joy and an internal, idealized model of spiritual love. This quest never achieves its desired aim and never ends, because the idea that physical love and idealized love were mutually exclusive was subconsciously imprinted at a impressionable age by the death of his father and the fact of his mother's erratic, possessive behavior. He saw her as the perfect woman, yet her rapid remarriage (like Gertrude, Hamlet's mother) and her flirtatiousness and extramarital affairs undermined his need to idolize her.

His father's departure makes *The Dream Songs* the story of Oedipus. "Henry's" insuperable loss is the structural foundation of the poems. "Then came a departure ... I don't see how Henry ... survived" ("Dream Song 1"). Oedipal guilt, the parricide's guilt, are the crimes of "Henry"; they are important motifs in *The Dream Songs*. The idea of loss sets a view and a tone, and generates all of the other themes in Berryman's poetry. "Henry's" complexes are both matters of life and

art. Living his life--which includes questioning, reassessing, narrating and repeating it--is accomplished by "Henry" splitting his poetic self into different voices. In spite of the "make-believe" and chorus of voices, the illusion of the unified poetic self lingers like music in the poem's atmosphere.

The voices, change, divide, and then join together. *The Dream Songs* continue the modulation from reporting or narrating to a fierce, personal voice that marked Berryman's previous collections:

It was wet & white & swift and where I am
we don't know. I was dark and then
it isn't.

.....

... I am unusually tried.

I'm alone too.

("Dream Song 28")

Yet at times a song begins immediately in a very personal voice, for example, in "Dream Song 155": "I can't get him out of my mind, out of my mind." The following song begins with the boozy, lachrymose thoughts of "Henry":

Henry sats in de bar & was odd,
 off in the glass from the glass,
 at odds wif de world & its god...

(“Dream Song 5”)

Moreover, “Henry is old, old, for Henry remembers” (“Dream Song 7”) as the spirit whimsically prompts him. The voice that begins by reporting shifts to anecdotes or gripes about others, delivered in third person plural. Note the paranoid inventory:

The weather was fine. They took away his
 teeth,
 white & helpful; bothered his backhand;
 halved his green hair.

.....

They blew out his loves, his interests.

(“Dream Song 8”)

In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman’s desire to tell his tale (the drunk’s loosened tongue) is heard in both reporting and narrating: he lurches from the personal to the generic voice. In “Dream Song 168” the speaker repeats this ominous, tragic secret recreating the suspense when, of stanza one, where

he spoke of his tale of "wonder": "I have a story to tell you which is the worse/story to tell that ever once I heard." The speaker "fought madness" ("Dream Song 201"), was "about to die" ("Dream Song 56"), and was "frightened by the waves upon the shore" ("Dream Song 381"). These fears were imposed on him by his father's threats: not only of suicide, but of drowning his children with him.

However, "Henry" is also the comical figure/actor, who plays humorous roles and whose verbal routines occasionally turn black. "Henry" in *The Dream Songs* lives and presents a prosaic and heroic story, boasts of the daring of his experiences, plays sensitive or critical self-pitying losers, takes pratfalls, prays. The audience shares with "Henry" his fears, his failures, and his victories. Certainly Berryman intended this complex relationship with his main character: "Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand, I am not Henry, you know, I pay income tax; Henry pays no income tax" (Linebarger 80). This is the poet's credo: Personality and the personal have a role in art;

however, craft is not biography. With the same humor, Berryman adds: "The only happy people in the world/are those who do not have to write long poems" ("Dream Song 354").

If humor is one of Berryman's tricks, it is shared with "Henry/I/Mr. Bones"; they have suffering in common:

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

(repeatedly) '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,

who loves people and valiant art, which
 bores me.

And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like
 a drag

and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably
 away

into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

 ("Dream Song 14")

The speaker in this poem declares he is "heavy bored." Life bores him, as does "Henry." He distances himself from "Henry," describing him in a way that emphasizes his feeling that it is difficult to deal with "Henry" because of his "plights & gripes." The "I" appears as an uninteresting character, half dead and isolated.

And yet in making the connection between "[A]chilles" and "Henry," he is placing himself in an intellectual environment. At least, he tackles ancient history and mythology, even if his perception is distorted.

"[A]chilles" is "Henry"; but he is a demoted figure whose name does not have the right to be capitalized. With this ironic allusion, the speaker reveals himself and implicitly describes occurrences of his life and his environment.

In this as in all of the dream songs, the speaker's repressed life comes to the surface. In dreams, he is free; he can easily narrate them. In dreams the speaker does not use the civic voice of the rational man. He can be frank and daring. His declaration is unambiguous: "Life, friends is boring." However, immediately after this affirmation, his reasonable, censoring, communal voice--that of his conscience, "we"--wants to distance him from such openness: "We must not say so." The common sense voice counterbalances his description of "life [as] boring]," by stressing a romantic nature as a source of beauty, of magic and

regeneration. "After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns...." Metaphors, personifications: these are old tools which Berryman developed in his early poems when he used nature to reflect the speaker's psychological life.

Berryman was exposed quite early to that critical voice of society. The connection is made to the speaker's mother's judgmental certainty about boredom. The speaker's spontaneous view on life is transformed into an instant of self-recrimination. However, the speaker addresses the fact that "[he has] no inner resources." This public perception is a liberation from the world of the mother. The cause for his tedium are various: people, literature and "Henry." By comparing and contrasting himself to "Henry," his views are stressed. Ironically, his world is one of cultural reverberations and resonances, but his half-serious, half-comic existence is ultimately melancholic. His conscience offers an alternative for his despondency: the pastoral, regenerative dream: "tranquil hills" or the long journey by alcohol. But both of them are unattractive, even

if the faithful man's companion--"the dog"--abandons him. With its departure, the speaker identifies himself with the animal--"me, wag"--pointing to the instinctual life only possible in dreams.

Throughout the poem, the voice of the speaker is clear, straight forward, subtle and ironic. This irony is established by the tension created between the words "I" and "we." The conflict created between them, the clear sentence structure of the first half line, gains intensity; but the speaker's urgent message about being definitely bored foreshadows loneliness and isolation. It is an ominous protest against life. The speaker's certainty in the opening line fades because the old, soothing metaphors are no longer dangerous and do not speak spontaneously. The voice of society coincides with the authoritarian advice/demands of the mother. The juxtaposition of high serious language and low comedy makes one smile with a sad face. However, it is not tragedy; catharsis is not yet needed. Alliteration, anaphora, simile, long and short lines, rhyme or enjambement all help to

stress the speaker's certainty: "Life ... is boring." Those devices highlight the short lines with the compressed thoughts: "We ourselves flash and yearn," but "[p]eoples bore me." For the speaker there is no way out of his inner, private self-imposed exile, but he has his own inner sincerity as wisdom and as a comical resource. It is a sad story; it is a funny story. The voice criticizes, parodying the clichés of life in society, of existence and of suffering. And mortality is their human condition.

The Dream Songs open with a birth, and after "Henry's" death the dream songs are sung by a Lazarus who comes back, possibly to tell all. In the first 77 *Dream Songs*, the separation of "Henry" from "I"--the invented character--is obvious, but in the last book the distinction is too coarse because old "Henry" encompasses everybody and everything. His memory is blurred and his knowledge uncertain: "My daughter's heavier. Light leaves are flying/...Once I knew such things" ("Dream Song 385). These sad, nostalgic ruminations foreshadow the poet's end.

Berryman's "Henry" as "Lear," whose mind was brought to clarity at the brink of derangement, posed questions about human existence. "Henry saw with Tolstoyan clarity/his muffled purpose" ("Dream Song 370"). Furthermore, he asked tough questions about the durability of poetic achievement that inform about himself, others, life and death. His songs betray his stories and dreams. "Buoyant, chockful of stories, Henry lingered" ("Dream Song 182"), and "Henry's dreams are vivid" ("Dream Song 292").

The fabric of the dreams and stories is personal, public, social, or political. They also instruct us about Berryman's methods of poetic composition, reflecting his skilled timing for bringing a voice that is and is not the poet's, almost as if a dramatic character (voice) were reciting a "part," speaking not only for himself, but for all of us. No wonder that in his entire work the pronouns mutate, sometimes speaking for the speaker, and often with great pain and urgency to each of us. The human lot is the catalyst for

either a deeply personal or a penetrating impersonal voice. To have taken the individual self in isolation and set it singing and orating in multifarious voices--our different voices--is a great achievement. Berryman intelligently looked at the spotted world and listened to him.

The act of communication between oneself, isolated, and all other selves is the aim of lyric poetry, but the tension and fiction between the multiple facets of the self make Berryman's poetry dramatic. His voice and styles were formed slowly and with difficulty. He described his early verse, correctly, as having "no voice of [its] own," and he added that he only discovered in "The Ball Poem" that when "the boy does and does not become [the poet] ... we are confronted with a process which is at once a process of life and a process of art" (Thornbury 1vii).

Yet Berryman learned how to train his own voice. *The Dream Songs* is about hearing and singing. In this most praised poem, he combines the intensity of the lyric with the scope of the long poem, thereby embracing life and death and

singing both in fear and in jubilation. Like his other poems, *The Dream Songs* anatomizes what it really means to be alive and to be human. All the poems resist paraphrase. The reader feels, however, that they deal with alienation from others, but especially from oneself. Miraculously or shrewdly, Berryman avoids abstractness. *The Dream Songs* is saturated with stories, historical, literary allusions (to Dante, Coleridge, Poe, Rimbaud, Frost, Whitman, Crane, Pound, Delmore, Williams, Stevens, Plath, Kafka, Beckett, Brodsky and many more), metaphors, wars, sexual fantasies, carnival, colors, landscapes, seasons and cities (Atlantic City, Avignon, Avila, Bangkok, Cambridge, Calcutta, Delhi, Hong-Kong, Paris, Tangier and so many others). These offer the poem its exotic resonance and intensify its meanings.

And yet the poem also recapitulates life and death in general terms; old, repetitious ideals, and philosophical assumptions or proverbial conclusions pass by in a straggly parade. Its pattern, as in Berryman's first volumes of poetry, is motion, not rest. Consequently, Berryman

imposed no systematic faith on the reader. Imagination and art ultimately transcend fear and self-deception.

As Saul Bellow says in his moving foreword to *Recovery*, Berryman's posthumous novel, what his "pal" needed for his art "had been supplied by his own person, by his mind, his wit...." Berryman's intellectual power, mastery of literary traditions, personal pains, and difficulties in being in touch with the root of his suffering, established and hardened his several tactics of protection.

Impersonality, heroic identification, idealized, artistic worlds, voices, characters, conventional literary forms and themes (descent into Hades, dialogues with the dead) are some of the poetic devices that kept the aesthetic distance between the poet and his poetic material. In this light, Berryman's view of poetry resurfaces as a means of resolving anger, or conveying wisdom, of terrifying and consoling. Poetry, time, memory, and love are his agents for transfiguring and reassessing his life. For him they are pedagogical instruments.

Berryman's poetry is too intellectual, too literary, and *The Dream Songs* are too tragic, too playful and ironic to be described as just a revelation of the poet's personal problems. Berryman's poetry, as this study points out, subtly manipulates poetic devices that conceal the personal and yet also reveal it. However, Berryman's poetry should not be called "confessional" because of its high artistry.

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