

Henry House or The White House: The Political John Berryman

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Abstract :

For several decades now, John Berryman (1914-1972) has been classified as a Confessional poet; a categorization that has nonetheless been used to dismiss his claims to public concern. Critics as diverse as M. L. Rosenthal, Bruce Bawer, Marjorie Perloff, Michael Hofmann, Joel Conarroe, Luke Spencer, and many others have been persistent in censuring Berryman as a poet who lacks broader social and political scopes; who “expresses his own confusion and irresolution in the face of current events”; who “cannot make things cohere on the level of international politics any more than he can on the level of

his own life”; and who fails “to become the public poet he wanted to be.” Besides, critics claim, that even when Berryman is overtly political by any definition, his words lack real public significance or resonance, and his writings are hollow or failed gestures.

As the confusion between the “personal” and the “public” in John Berryman’s poetry has always puzzled critics and readers alike, this essay attempts to resolve this critical debate in his works. The essay examines *The Dream Songs* and the life they represent in the larger context of Berryman’s country and period—America in the middle forty

years of the twentieth century—to demonstrate that, against that backdrop, the poems are political at the profoundest level, where “the personal is political.” The essay also shows that Berryman, like Henry, his alterego in the *Dream Songs*, broke the silence of his personal despair to make poetry of it; poems in which personal and spiritual dilemmas are brought together with the political events that are evidence of his entire nation’s moral and spiritual difficulties.

Keywords:

John Berryman, Confessional poetry, Personal/Public, The Dream Songs, Henry

المخلص :

يوصف الشاعر «جون بيريمن» (١٩١٤-١٩٧٢) بالاعتراضي على مدار عقودٍ عديدة حتى الآن؛ وهو تصنيفٌ استُخدم على النقيض لضحد رؤية الشعوية. فكثيرٌ من النقاد مثل (م. ل. روسينثال) و«بروس باور» و«مارجوري بيرلوف» و«مايكل هوفمان» و«جويل كاناروي» و«لوك سبنسر» وآخرون

ثبتوا على تصنيفهم «بيريمن» كشاعرٍ يفتقر إلى الأبعاد الاجتماعية والسياسية، حيث أنه «يعبر عن ارتباك وحيرته في وجه الأحداث الراهنة» كما أنه «يفتقد إلى قدره على خلق تلاحم بين الأشياء على مستوى السياسة العالمية كما هو الحال في حياته الشخصية»، وأيضاً لفشله كشاعرٍ في أن «يصل إلى المكانة الشعوية التي كان يأملها لنفسه». كما يرى النقاد أنه على الرغم من أن نزعته السياسية التي قد تظهر أحياناً بشكلٍ علني، على أي مقياس، إلا أن كلماته لا تفرح جرساً ولا تلفت انتباهاً، وكتاباتهِ تبدو خاوية أو مهزوزة الإشارات.

وحيث أن ذلك الارتباك بين «الشخصنة» و«الشعوية» في شعر «بيريمن» قد حير النقاد والقراء على حدٍ سواء، فإن هذه المقالة تحاول إيجاد حلٍ لهذا النزاع النقدي حول أعماله. وعليه، تضع هذه المقالة مجموعته الشعرية «أغاني الأحلام»، والحياة التي ترسمها، في سياقٍ أكبر ذي صلةٍ وثيقةٍ ببلدٍ وزمان «بيريمن»—الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في منتصف أربعينات القرن العشرين—تحت المنظار افتراضاً بأنه على الرغم مما تنال أبياته من انتقاد فإنها سياسيةٌ في صميم صميمها؛ حيث أن لكل تفصيلةٍ «شخصية» بُعد «سياسي». كما أن هذه المقالة تبرز أيضاً كيف استطاع بيريمن—كما هو الحال مع «هنري»، نفس بيريمن الثانية في مجموعته الشعرية

«أغاني الأحلام» — كسر حاجز الصمت الذي أسدله قنوطه الشخصي وذلك عن طريق إيجاد اللمسة الشعرية لكتابة قصائد شعرية، تتراص فيها العضلات الشخصية والروحية إلى جانب الأحداث السياسية المعبرة عن الصعوبات الأخلاقية والروحية التي تعم البلاد كلها.

الكلمات الدالة :

جون بيريمان - الشخصية «و» الشعبية -

«أغاني الأحلام» - الشعر الاعترافي

*Shadow & act, shadow & act
Now Apollo Now Narcissus But
neither, and yet both Re-forming
Both gods and men For the same
purpose and effect Now Bacchus
Now Telémakhos Forever at war
within a single body All things are
in his power The undying, the ever-
new And now Zeus Now veteran of
being immortal*

*John Berryman, Dream Song #
119*

Introduction:

The political is not what it used to be, as everyone is now aware, even those who deplore the fact. John Berryman (1914-

1972) would probably approve of the critical and theoretical changes that in the United States have taken place mostly since his death in 1972, changes in perspective and perception which have revealed the ubiquity of "politics" even as they have rescued the art work from its isolation in a putative autonomy. Berryman might be surprised to find himself sanctioning the insights of a women's movement he never knew existed, but he recognized early in his career that "the personal is political," and his writing has always reflected that fact. Interpretations of his work, however, have benefited curiously little from modern and recent critical developments, despite his anticipation of so many of them.

John Berryman was categorized as a confessional poet; a term that has often been used in the discussion of his poetry. This term was first used by M. L. Rosenthal, who introduced it in his 1959 review

of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, called "Poetry as Confession" (154-155), and then endorsed it in his book, *The Modern Poet*, in 1967⁽¹⁾ It is associated with a group of poets including Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Delmore Schwartz, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and John Berryman, who deviated from the modernist poetics and leaned towards a more personal, autobiographical confessional poetry at the beginning of World War II. In her essay "What Was Confessional Poetry?" Diane Wood Middlebrook notes, "confessional referred to content, not technique" (633). Confessional poetry is apparently autobiographical, and the poems, she remarks, present a "first-person speaker" who "seems to refer" to the poet (636). It addressed the mid-century Americans, Middlebrook continues, with appropriate themes such as "psychoanalysis as a mode

of address to postwar existential misery, anticommunism as a pressure on American artists and intellectuals, and television as a solvent of boundaries between public and domestic life" (633). It is a view which Helen Vendler promotes, in *The Given and the Made*, as "the therapeutic hour" of these confessional poets (31), and Joel Conarroe, similarly, confirms, in a slightly older but still forceful approach, in *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry*, that "Berryman's intent was plainly therapeutic: 'his interest is mainly in saving himself from himself'" (qtd. in Meek 510).⁽²⁾

In his 2005 critical book, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, Adam Kirsch lays forward his view that "they [confessional poets] all wrote in opposition to the dictum that poetry must be impersonal, as set forth by the much-admired poet T. S. Eliot prior

to World War II” (3)—a view which David Yezzi similarly supports in stating that, “confessional poetry directly and vociferously opposed the ‘impersonality’ argued for by T. S. Eliot in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ “ (15). Otherwise, “These poets,” Kirsch proclaims, “were modernists who broke the so-called rules of their day and wrote highly personal poems that often revealed the inner turmoil of their lives” (viii).

As “[t]he term has always been ambiguous,” Brian Brodhead Glaser acknowledges, in 2009, that “[c]onfessional poetry is being redefined.” He states that “over the last decade the very validity of the name has come into question, and the poets traditionally read through a confessional paradigm are being approached in new ways” (25). Unequivocally, one of these new oppositions to the confessional paradigm is presented by Adam Kirsch, who dismisses

the term “confessional” entirely. “In confession,” Kirsch asserts, “[criticism] found a bad metaphor for what the most gifted of these poets were doing” (x); a metaphor implicit in the book’s title, *The Wounded Surgeon*, which Kirsch draws from stanza 1 of Part IV, of T. S. Eliot’s “East Coker”: “The wounded surgeon plies the steel / That questions the distempered part” (Eliot 127). Kirsch’s objection to the confessional paradigm resonates with what Thomas Travisano declares, in *Midcentury Quartet*, that “the confessional paradigm has prejudiced, and is still prejudicing, artistic evaluation” (44). Thus, both Kirsch and Travisano emphasize that the act of confession is an act of perplexity and hindrance to the fulfillment of artistic creation.

Within such objections to confessional poetry in general, Adam Kirsch maintains that “[n]one of [Berryman’s]

contemporaries better illustrates the deeply ambiguous relationship between a poet's private experience and the public language of art" (102). Moreover, a recent article, by Mihaela Prioteasa and Gabriel Ungureanu, traces the life of John Berryman and declares that he "centred his career on the public aspects of confessional poetry, which made him one of the most productive elegists of his generation, possessing the ability to prefigure the connection between public image, [and] personal drama . . ." (185).

So, the confusion between the "personal" and the "public" in confessional poetry in general, and in John Berryman in specific, has always puzzled critics and readers alike. This essay attempts to resolve this critical debate over the public/private opposition in Berryman's works. It seeks to demonstrate that in his poetry "the personal is political," and that he broke the

silence of his personal despair to make poetry of it, poems in which personal and spiritual dilemmas are brought together with the political events that are evidence of his entire nation's moral and spiritual difficulties.

Berryman was classified as a confessional poet only in the face of his "Rage and contempt!" (Stitt 181).⁽³⁾ But that classification has nonetheless been used to dismiss his claims to public concern, a critical fate shared by all the Confessional poets except Lowell. Lowell has been perceived as engagée not only because of his poetry's often public subjects, but because of extra-poetic politics: his being a conscientious objector in World War II, his participation in the writers' anti-Vietnam protest against the Pentagon in 1967, and, inevitably, his aristocratic family's long history of public prominence. Yet when Alan Williamson writes a book on *The Political Vision*

of Robert Lowell, he begins by taking "politics" in the widest possible terms, "ranging from the pressure of a family on an anarchic individual to the cumulative action of almost the entire human race in the current crisis of technology and ecology" (1). Such a redefinition of the "political" could help rescue most of the "Confessional" poets from their ghettoization in "the private." Lowell's poetry, says Williamson, is concerned with

the confused interaction of the individual consciousness and its world. Hence, there is no dividing Lowell into a "personal" and a "public" poet; he is almost continuously being both. (4)

Virtually the same statement could be made of Berryman, but in his case the "confused interaction" of public and private is seen as a defect rather than a virtue. Thus, Bruce Bawer pronounced that "Berryman is no Robert Bly, offering a comment upon world

affairs which he hopes will be influential; rather, he is expressing his own confusion and irresolution in the face of current events" (165). He also says, "Berryman cannot make things cohere on the level of international politics any more than he can on the level of his own life" (165), as if anyone were making things cohere on the level of international politics. Marjorie Perloff, likewise, excludes Berryman and Lowell as poets without any broader social and political scope, asserting that "[t]he real turn, in Lowell's as in Berryman's poetry, is inward. In the classroom civilization in which poets now began to move, there was precious little material to write poems about except the self" (113). Correspondingly, Michael Hofmann holds a similar view of Berryman, when he describes him as a poet of "naked distress," "extremism," "self-destructiveness," and "loss of

control” (viii, ix, xi).

Even when Berryman is overtly political by any definition, ways are found to discount real public significance or resonance for his words. Joel Conarroe says conclusively, “Berryman’s subject is Henry House, not the White House” (147). M. L. Rosenthal, the likely coiner of the infamous term “confessional,” does not quite deny any political field of reference, but like Conarroe assumes superficiality: Berryman, he says, “commandeers political themes too facilely or fashionably” (119-122).

When Berryman writes a poem that would be called political if written by a poet not already pigeon-holed as “subjective,” it is seen as simply a hollow or a failed gesture. Bawer again says “there are poems in Love and Fame which may appear at first glance to be objective political poems. However, they are in reality not

about politics but about a state of mind” (165, my emphasis). It seems not to occur to him that what the national or international political scene does to one’s state of mind is also a political matter, a point made clearly by Berryman in his 1970 “Conversation” with Richard Kostelanetz: “The current American society would drive anybody out of his skull, anybody who is at all responsive; it is almost unbearable . . . From public officials we expect to get lies, and we get them in profusion” (344-5). Conarroe quotes these comments, but then performs the familiar discrediting operation:

This sounds distressingly like interview rhetoric . . . Berryman was not equipped, either by talent or by disposition, to suggest solutions to the problems of civilization, and if Ezra Pound could experience real outrage in the face of something as remote from himself as interest rates, the sources of Berryman’s

emotions were always much more personal, rooted invariably in his own history. (146)

The most thorough-going argument of this sort is by the British critic, Luke Spencer, who initially makes the remarkable (indeed unique) claim that “The Dream Songs owes its shape and substance as much to the way Berryman responded to public issues and to the terms in which he viewed his relation to American society as to any more narrowly temperamental factors” (Spencer 38). He quotes both the interview and Conarroe’s comment above, and faults the latter: “Henry House or the White House: it is a very simplistic way of characterizing the relation between personality and politics” (39). But his own characterization is, if slightly less simplistic, no more sympathetic, for he considers this attribution of personal angst to public causes to be a matter of “false-consciousness

that was common to that whole poetic generation’s perception of its relation to the social relations of post-war America . . . a piece of ideological mystification” (39). While the essay seems to me to suffer from some rather basic errors of logic and reasoning, it is worth closer attention if only because it broadens the arena of the discussion, and places the poems squarely in their particular historical context.

Spencer concludes the essay with the opinion that not only an entire poetic generation, but indeed

American intellectuals en masse were guilty, after World War II, of what Christopher Lasch has called a ‘wholesale defection . . . from social criticism’ which—in the words of another commentator—kept American society ‘provincial and decentralized without a center of cultural intelligence and sanity.’ (46)

That this “enormous collective

failure” is due to historical reasons (46), too large to be examined in the essay, does not keep the critic from blaming Berryman personally for his “fear of a public stance” and for his “absolute and final failure to become the public poet he wanted to be” (40). Finally, he quotes another critic, Aleksander Nejgebauer, with yet another version of this failure: “Ultimately, Berryman fails to qualify as a tragic culture-hero, to resolve the self versus culture dilemma of his generation by transcending the ‘normal’ self” (46).

The language here, like Bawer’s (“objective political poems”), betrays the assumption which produces the judgments in the first place: that the personal is private and the political public, categories not merely distinct but mutually exclusive. But that assumption was not Berryman’s. (Nor Pound’s. From what we know Pound experienced interest rates not at

all as “something remote from himself.” On the contrary: living in penury, engaged all his life in obtaining monies for artists living in societies which did not value artists enough to feed them, Pound experienced issues of economic distribution as intimately personal, as did Berryman.)⁽⁴⁾

The public/private opposition is deconstructed by simply a close enough inspection of the constitution of the “individual” within and by the culture. So, when Freud pits the self against society in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—a book that Berryman said he knew “almost word by word” (Stitt 191)—he undermines that very opposition through the clarity with which he sees how the individual becomes a distinct ego only in and through the process of internalizing “civilization.” In quite a literal sense then the self is Other, or “Je est un autre,” as Berryman liked to quote Rimbaud.⁽⁵⁾

That implication of Freud's writing, among others, has been made explicit by the rereading of Jacques Lacan. While Berryman had no knowledge of "French Freud," by the 1960s such a redefined notion of "self" was multiply available, a post-Marxian, post-Freudian subject that is not at all simply a reassertion of a Romantic self (though even the Romantic self is far from simply egoistic, as Berryman's discussions of Keats and Whitman are at pains to point out). That profound interpenetration of public and private, or personal and political, is something he seems always to have been aware of. That consciousness is everywhere apparent in his criticism of nearly forty years, collected in *The Freedom of the Poet*. The idea of "freedom" itself (what Christina Zwarg calls "the American metanarrative of emancipation" [11]) is one that cuts across the private-public boundary.

The Eliotic doctrine of impersonality and the associated complex of the autotelic art object, against which the "Confessionals"—and most of their generation—were reacting, were principles which detached art from the public as well as the private self. When the poets of the 1960s reclaimed that self, they reclaimed its public role as well as its private assertion. As Alan Williamson wrote, in *Eloquence and Mere Life*, in the 1960s political activism was seen as allied with inwardness rather than opposed to it (13).

Certainly, in the case of a poet like Allen Ginsberg, it seems obvious and inarguable that the rejection of New Critical artistic detachment included as well a rejection of an apolitical stance. Even if one reads him and his cohorts, as Romantic throwbacks or avatars, their tradition is one in which the poet's alienation from

society entails not the eschewing of politics but rather the espousal of resistance or counter-hegemonic politics: the anti-imperialist, the revolutionary.

When the politics in question are sexual politics (as in part, of course, they were with Ginsberg too), the “interaction of the individual consciousness and its world” likewise seems clear and indisputable. So, such poets as Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich often make connections between national politics and their own states of mind without being seen as yoking mutually exclusive areas of interest by violence together. Nor have they been stigmatized by the “confessional” label, partly because the political legitimacy of women’s personal concerns has now been firmly established. If that much-rejected label is to be retained at all, those still bearing it need to be freed from the critical misjudgments it fosters, especially

the mistaken assumption that “confession” excludes public or communal matters.

Berryman had been concerned about what the madness of the daily news would do to a mind that fully understood it as early as 1939 at least. That May, he wrote a poem called “World-Telegram” that until its last stanza simply itemizes, in the poem’s own phrase, “News of one day, one afternoon one time.” The poem 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,
Stoptrains, breakupthecity’sfoodsupply,
And perfectly demoralize the
nation. (New Republic 225)

Just a couple of weeks earlier he had met Delmore Schwartz for the first time, and wrote him then, reports biographer Paul Mariani, to the effect that:

it was no accident that his poems were violent, since violence

was the mark of the time. Were not the newspapers and the radio reports continually forecasting violence? How then could poets avoid the issue, particularly on the eve of another world war? (101-102)

But the mere existence of explicitly political poems and multitudinous political references in *The Dream Songs* will of course not change the mind of anyone already convinced that even when Berryman sounds political, “in reality” he is not. That assertion by its nature admits of no refutation. So rather than multiplying instances, I would like first to look at *The Dream Songs* and the life they represent in the larger context of Berryman’s country and period: America in the middle forty years of the twentieth century. Against that backdrop the poems can be seen as political at the profoundest level, where “politics” is not simply a “public” matter, outside the “self.”

Then perhaps their narrower, more traditionally political references can be taken seriously as well.⁽⁶⁾

Even a brief survey of Berryman’s life and career makes clear with what various political and social awarenesses it necessarily supplied him. His responses show, not simply how literary he was, but how completely the “literary” incorporated “real life” for him, and in its public as well as its private aspects.

His father was a banker, as was also his stepfather, a “funny money-man,” as he called Wallace Stevens (DS 219), and like Pound’s father, a mint assayer. The oil-boom Oklahoma and land-speculation boom-and-bust Florida of his unsettled boyhood would have given Berryman a vivid personal sense not only of economic power and uncertainty, but also of the relation of money to the national ambition, the American Dream in both its personal and public forms.

For the Tampa police, his father's death was just "one more casualty of the Florida land bust and the failure of the American Dream," says Mariani (13). Economic and "personal" (romantic, sexual) issues were inextricably tangled, as they seem to have been in the father's reasons for suicide.⁽⁷⁾

The family drama took place self-consciously within the national drama: Ethan Allen was claimed as an ancestor on his father's side, while his mother's grandfather was a Civil War hero. Partly for that reason, perhaps, "Henry was a shameless patriot"⁸ (DS 339), as his creator was, "at once jealous of the national honor," as Charles Thornbury says, "and chagrined by Americans' shallow knowledge of their country's history" (CP xxiii).

The ancestors are personally addressed in the early poem "A Point of Age" (CP 7), to which Berryman adverted repeatedly in the dream record manuscript that

stands behind *The Dream Songs*, "St. Pancras Braser." He was in New York for the last of the 20s and the Crash. And there in the early 1930s, he went to Columbia, where he emulated teachers who saw themselves as intellectuals in a community engaging issues of national politics, and engaging likewise the national power structure. As an undergraduate, he published in *The Nation*, and later, in 1939, became the magazine's poetry editor. While he accepted many elements of the New Criticism, he located versions of it that did not cut art off from "life," public or private. James Bloom has detailed the way in which Richard Blackmur provided a version that saw poetry as shaping actuality, or as "equipment for living," in Kenneth Burke's phrase (qtd. in *Des Pres* xiii). Bloom also points out that Christopher Lasch, in the same book, to which Spencer refers, *The Culture of Narcissism*

(1978), “cites Blackmur’s 1954 essay ‘Toward a Modus Vivendi’ as a prophecy of contemporary intellectual life,” with its “increasingly ‘marginal’ status of intellectual pursuits in our culture” (25; Lasch 224-5). That is, Blackmur foresaw the trend Lasch deplores, and he, himself a force against it, through thirty years of passionately independent critical writing, deplored it in advance. Berryman, an ardent reader and a friend of Blackmur, shared that opposition as many others.

After graduation Berryman spent two years at Cambridge on a Shakespeare scholarship, refining and expanding his knowledge of Elizabethan literature—not exactly a politically detached oeuvre—and able to view his country from across an ocean. He was in England and even vacationing in Germany during the years Hitler’s regime was taking shape, in his own words making “extended visits to France

and Germany, especially one of the Nazi strongholds, Heidelberg” (Freedom 325), a fact he offered as context for “Winter Landscape,” written in 1939 and now the first selection in *Collected Poems*. It describes a Brueghel painting with reference to what Mariani calls “a world in danger of being crucified by the terror gathering then in Europe” (99). It expressed, Berryman said, “a certain stubborn incredulity—as the hunters are loosed while the peaceful nations plunge again into war” (Freedom 325). The poem’s method is to make its political point through what is not said, as Berryman explained it, but it does explicitly invoke “the evil waste of history / Outstretched.” The day after he finished the poem, Yeats died. In Auden’s elegy for Yeats appears the endlessly quoted apothegm, “Poetry makes nothing happen” (Auden 80). Berryman never believed it.

After his return from Europe, his English fiancée was in Austria and Switzerland assisting refugees before she came to stay with him in New York, and his gloomy poems from those years are frequently about the warring world, like “Nineteen Thirty-eight” (“Across the frontiers of the helpless world / The great planes swarm”)(CP 274). The Yeats who, he said, saved him from the all-pervasive Auden flat style (Freedom 323-4), was just as powerful a political influence, and the early poems, even when on personal topics, are full of political concerns and references, even if these are often veiled and oblique. His further career up to *The Dream Songs* demonstrates a consistent interest in the clearly political.

His focus on the self is on the citizen, the individual in the framework of the state. In his unsuccessful plays, individuals embody explicitly political themes: he finished *The Dictator* in early

1939 (Mariani 99), and began a play on Mirabeau, the French political economist who “abandoned his military career for literature” and wrote a “radical criticism of Louis XIV’s centralized bureaucracy” (*Britannica* 1963).

His politics were not always anti-establishment: he spoke of his “dislike of Communist theory and practice” (*Freedom* 327), and Mariani says that “[h]e was also moved—nearly to tears—by news of the Hungarian uprising” against the Soviets in 1956 (305-6). (“History seemed real again, and people truly people” [306].) *The Dream Songs* seem to accept the Cold War assessment of “the faceless monsters of the Soviet Unions” (*DS* 140), though there the hint of parody in the rhetoric is reinforced by the declaration “It’s a race with Time & that is all it is,” where the capital *T* suggests the magazine as well as to the phenomenon.

But Berryman's beloved friend and colleague at Wayne State, Bhain Campbell, was a Marxist, and, according to Mariani, in "Berryman he believed he had found the beginnings" of a new kind of poetry that could "capture the turbulence of the time with sociology and psychology" (98). While Berryman resisted the role, he must have come away with some heightened awareness of how cultural particulars, including one's own "personal" values, are shaped by larger historical forces. And the later choice of Anne Bradstreet as the subject of his first long poem was a gesture that linked him not only to America's earliest literary past, but to a society in which—as in most of human history—"politics" obviously could not be separated out from spiritual issues or the rest of the culture.

At the University of Iowa, in 1954, Berryman lectured so passionately and persuasively on

Walt Whitman that he started a small Whitman revival there, both of his biographers attest. His close reading of *Song of Myself*, collected in *The Freedom of the Poet*, makes clear that he understood Whitman as a poet encompassing a national breadth within his "ego." The "personal," the fourth of Whitman's "intentions" as Berryman found them articulated within the poem, turns out to include the national, the political. Whitman's intermingling or mutuality of public and private remained a standard in and for *The Dream Songs*.

Berryman's arrest for public intoxication and disorderly conduct, which forced him to leave Iowa (Mariani 279-80; Haffenden 243), also accounts for some of the anti-police sentiment in the *Dream Songs* and for part of the lawlessness in the *Songs of "criminal Henry,"* but these have a wider reference too, as vivid evocations of the individual

against the state (and vice-versa). His rescuer, and mentor at the University of Minnesota, was his old friend, Allen Tate, who, as a member first of the Fugitives, and then of the more overtly political Agrarians, was actively engaged in literary politics of a magnitude he hoped, at least, would have an impact on national life.

In Minneapolis, Berryman taught in the Humanities Program of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, rather than in English, and his courses included such topics as “The American Character” and “The European Heritage.” In his first quarter there, Winter 1954, he taught two sections of a Medieval course, and gleefully detailed his reading list: “After a bit w[ith] late Roman philosophy, I’m using the New Testament, a collection of *Documents* [of the Christian Church, edited by Henry Bettenson] illustrating the history of the Church, Augustine, Aquinas,

Dante. Isn’t that ravishing?” (Kelly 283). Later courses repeated those selections and added readings from Cervantes, Luther, Freud, and Lenin (“Chronology,” *CP* Ixv).

So, he was immersed in St. Augustine, among others, while analyzing his own dreams, and then writing the poems that followed. Augustine shows up frequently in these dream analyses, and was acknowledged by Berryman as an important influence on *The Dream Songs*.⁽⁹⁾ In fact, Augustine’s was the one use of the term “confession” that Berryman accepted as applicable to his own work. That may seem rather a large admission if we accept M. H. Abram’s opinion that Augustine is “the source of all our important ‘confessional’ writing” (83-87, 95; Bloom 110). But the point is that, although Augustine wrote the first “Confessions,” he is not . . . confessional—and nobody has accused him of it—in the

sense in which that term is used of contemporary poetry, as implying a therapeutic or merely expressive motive and—therefore, the assumption is—a sharply reduced sphere of interest and range of relevance, cutting the author off from valid comment on realms of public concern.

Augustine wrote for a public purpose; his personal and spiritual goals having been met by action in the progress of the Confessions record. Augustine thus offers himself as a model or an example, both positive and negative: “Let the mind of my brethren love that in me which You teach to be worthy of love, and grieve for that in me which You teach to be worthy of grief” (X.iv.5). Berryman offers himself—and Henry—in a similar spirit.

In *The Dream Songs*, after all, Berryman elected a form he always called a “long poem,” the poetic counterpart of the novel,

though a sequence of individual “Songs” preserving some of the qualities of personal lyrics. The epic tradition that is invoked by Henry’s Achilles-like hiding out in Dream Song 1 (and the explicit mention of Achilles in Dream Song 14) is by definition a public genre, even when the epic is ironic and parodic, as it must be when community is the question, not the background or *donnée*. Joseph Campbell’s *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, probably still the best and most inclusive presentation of the quest-journey structure underlying the most diverse epics, legends, and myths, the “monomyth,” was first published in 1948. That Berryman knew and used Campbell (though probably not extensively) is attested to by his manuscript notes and his underlined copy of the book. Campbell explains:

Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream

are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind. (19)

Berryman kept some of the quirks of his own actual dreams, but always subsumed them to larger literary and mythic patterns.

The modernist internalization of the quest-myth, whereby the hero becomes the artist, does not eliminate its trans-personal or public significance, as demonstrated (if demonstration were needed) by Berryman's great modernist predecessors, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Williams. (Their claim was, of course, that in a culture that has lost its traditional mythology, its God, the artist is more essential than ever, as creator and keeper of the powers myth

preserves and disseminates.⁽¹⁰⁾ As Campbell lengthily demonstrates, psychoanalysis simply provides an additional understanding of the spiritual search embodied in myth: "The key to modern systems of psychological interpretation therefore is this: the metaphysical realm = the unconscious" (259). The hero whose quest is into his own mind does not thereby remove himself from the public realm, then, but just otherwise: he demonstrates precisely that what seems most private, perhaps idiosyncratic, even pathological, is in fact widely shared, fundamentally human.

This apparent paradox is of course a psychoanalytic commonplace, but what it might imply for the individual's relations to society seems to have escaped many of modern poetry's critics, even while becoming one of the major topics of poststructuralist theory. A failure to grasp the point would seem to be what causes

Spencer to write off as false consciousness the connections poets make between their suffering and larger social wrongs. But among other things, most of the poets making any such claim meant not merely that the larger suffering pained them—although of course that might be true as well—but that the unjust society makes itself felt privately and invisibly, especially by the sensitive and the critical, as well as in highly visible large-scale atrocities, “These massacres of the superior peoples, / the Armenians, the Jews, the Ibos” (DS 353).

In Marx’s sense of the term, “false consciousness” covers exactly that sort of American (or British) individualism which could suppose that a poet’s personal dilemmas were not created to a significant degree by the culture in and by which his consciousness was shaped, and therefore supposes that he can somehow act independently of both the dilemmas and the

culture.

Berryman himself had no such illusions. There is no reason to believe that even when suffering one of his fits of compensatory grandiosity, he was trying “to qualify as a tragic culture-hero,” for all that he deliberately places himself in the epic tradition. His training, his friends, the very regard in which he held literature, can leave little doubt that he had as great a desire as any critic for a coherent intellectual and artistic community that could issue humane and cogent social criticism to a responsive and responsible public and government. But poems and interviews alike testify to his excruciating awareness of how remote America was from any such an ideal. He often despaired or was self-describedly “apoplectic” over what he saw happening to the culture. The much-touted political involvement of the literature of the 1930s—including Berryman’s

mentors—had after all been unable to prevent the long-foreseen Second World War. Auden's famous public disavowal of his activism was made the year Hitler marched into Poland.

Berryman, after widely scattered jobs, taught the last 16 years of his life at a large but remote state university, while continuing to travel frequently. Thus, in immediate contact with the changed and changing nature of American higher education, and necessarily aware of the dispersal of the academic and intellectual establishment, he is not likely to have thought he could transcend "the self versus culture dilemma of his generation"—certainly not by "transcending the 'normal' self" (Nejgebauer 46). (In fact, his deliberate presentation of Henry's ordinariness is what gives the term "confessional" any possible validity at all for *The Dream Songs*). Nor was he sanguine

about the audience for poetry in twentieth-century America: "Henry's listeners / make up a gallant few" (DS 333).

Thus, Henry is a comic hero, an anti-hero, the only kind the culture can produce. To blame him for not being a hero on the classical model he parodies is to miss the point—which is a political one. When he speaks of "Senator Cat," it is a joke, less at the expense of Henry than of Senators who at the public cost take "blissful trips" like the one Henry is at that point enjoying in California (DS 65).

Henry's fall begins *The Dream Songs*, invoking this time the Judeo-Christian myth. That remains central, as does Henry's fallen condition. Personal loss is thus cast in public terms, and the poet's dead father conflated with the *deus absconditus*. Henry's being "pried / open" suggests that the private life cannot be maintained separately from a public world even

when one would wish that isolation, and dozens of later Songs, indeed Henry's whole paranoiac vision, confirm that view. The result here is an outward focus: "What he has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be" (DS 13-14). The closing elegiac lines lament eroding shores and emptying beds, as nearly "universal" a condition as one could wish.

Dream Song 2, "The jane is zoned," comically bemoans precisely the private difficulty of a public situation, and vice-versa. Berryman emphatically identifies with his "private-life" wife who is pregnant. But he makes from that material a public picture of zoning and a town deserted. Henry too loses a degree of his own maleness by an assimilation of her state of immobility: "I votes in my hole" (DS 15). Thus, his use of public and even political language is subsumed on a private level also, and serves to conflate further the distinction

between public and private, self and "other," and problematizes what the confessional itself really entails.

When Henry, "the abominable & semi-mortal Cat," is buried, in the Opus Posthumous Songs (DS 78-91) that make up the central Book IV, he does not have time to acquire any very full "knowings" of the beyond (though in the grave he remarks, "The military establishments perpetuate themselves forever," DS 84). His situation there is figured in his position at the end of DS 2, both hiding out and keeping his hand in, a further meaning of "I votes in my hole." He does not get to make the archetypal heroic return to the world Campbell describes: "to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (20). Instead Henry is dug up, confronted by importunate wives and microphones, and so little does he enjoy the life to which

he returns that “a fortnight later” he is “digging like mad, Lazarus with a plan / to get his own back.”

77 *Dream Songs* appeared to loud acclaim in 1964, and won the 1965 Pulitzer Prize. Berryman was on his way to fame. “[S]ervant Henry” (DS 24) had already visited India for the State Department. While still at work on the remainder of *The Dream Songs*, he was interviewed in Ireland by Jane Howard for *Life* magazine. The published article, titled “Whiskey and ink, whiskey and ink,” included many photographs of Berryman bearded and bardic against the Irish landscape, especially large stones.

He became, then, a public figure, if not a “culture hero,” giving enormously popular readings at college campuses all over the country at a time when a new sense of power and possibility was quickening both students and faculty. He might have been

accused of grandstanding, but not of “fear of a public stance.” Among his most popular selections for readings were “Of 1826” (DS 22), “The Lay of Ike” (DS 23), and “MLA” (DS 35), a satirical attack on the Modern Language Association’s annual convention, that is, on the academic establishment. (Significantly, his parody of Eisenhower targets his language—or lack of it. Eisenhower’s losing opponent in the 1956 election, Adlai Stevenson, was famous for being articulate, a man of whom it was said that voting against him was like voting against the English language. The Song ends, “wide empty grin / that never lost a vote.”)

His more public status produced more conspicuously public topics. As Helen Vendler points out in her 1968 review of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, the second and final volume of *The Dream Songs*:

These ambitious poems take in the world of eleven years: the public world of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Kennedy; the newspaper world of Christine Keeler and Speck and Lana Turner's daughter; the inner world of poets—Eliot, Stevens, Williams, Yeats; the tragic world of lost friends—Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell. (119)

We might protest that the “world of poets” is equally public, though the order of publicity is different from politics and newspapers. But even without that modification, Vendler's comment at least recognizes Berryman's concern for and presentation of public issues.

Public material filtered (and criticized) through the personal is found in “Vietnam” (DS 162), which begins with Henry's reaction: “Henry shuddered,” then moves on to the reasons: “a war which was

no war, / the enemy was not our enemy / but theirs whoever they are.” References remain external, with just one occurrence of the first-person singular, when he speaks of “the disgusting number given I on my front page, at which, my love, I stare.” (“Us” and “we” elsewhere in the poem refer to the whole U.S.) For comparison, he draws on the experience of reading, a private participation in a public or shared world, particularly in this case: “treaty-end that might conclude it more / unimaginable than Alice's third volume—eee—.”

The last stanza expresses the perception, manifest elsewhere in *The Dream Songs* as well, that American atrocities are economically driven: “an end to aggression will open up new markets / and other quarter-lies,” a point reinforced by the off-rhyme “targets / markets.” Indeed, most of the rhymes here help to carry

the political message, as “—eee—” with “enemy,” and “war” with “more.” The poem’s most cogent criticism is carried in the rhyming lines that link stanzas one and two: “somehow our policy bare // in eighteen costumes kept us unaware / that we were killing Asiatics, daily.” The multiple and changing disguises of policy delude the general public; that unawareness is contrasted to Henry’s appalled attention through the further rhyme “stare.” “[B]are / in eighteen costumes” is a kind of antithetical correlate to “Naked the man came forth in his mask, to be” in *Dream Song 370*, where Henry’s attempts at full disclosure are thwarted by the nature of language and the mind which operates in and through it. Here official lies and half-truths (“quarter-lies” is a pun which makes the very denomination of the periodical the vehicle of falsity) conceal murderousness, but the

government’s attempts at cover-up fail to disguise the ugliness of what the body politic has become.

They fail with Henry, at any rate, who is more alert than the average citizen, even when in disguise himself:

When he dressed up & up, his costumes varied
with the southeast wind, but he remained aware.
Awareness was most of what he had. (Ds 370)

Although that very awareness is of course the source of much of his pain, and motivates his desire to escape into death (for which the oblivion of drink stands in), unawareness and ignorance are nonetheless what he most deplors. Berryman may not have been quite a “priest of consciousness” like his friend Conrad Aiken, from whom, I contend, he learned the metafictional form in which consciousness expresses its awareness of itself as consciousness; but for him as for the postmoderns to follow, politics begins in personal awareness:

“Because I am not able to forget / Henry is dreaming of society” (DS 181).

As the political failure of American citizens is couched in terms of reading and language, so in “The Translator - I” (DS 180), the Soviets are reproached for “their odium of imagination.” That richly ambiguous phrase suggests their own lack of imagination as well as their dislike of imagination in others, and the odiousness of such an attitude, or their odiousness to an imaginative vision.

It is Henry’s imaginative brotherhood with Joseph Brodsky, as fellow poet, that causes him to decide that Brodsky’s trial in far-off Leningrad is “Henry’s matter, after all,” reversing the Song’s opening attempt at disavowal: “Henry rushes not in here. The matter’s their matter,” followed in the next line by what presumably is our matter, America’s characteristic economic

hostility to poets: “and Hart Crane drowned himself some over money.”

A similar understanding of interconnectedness actually ameliorates blame in DS 216. Initially it seems a wholesale condemnation of “the ‘teens’ of line one, “liars & gluttons & cowards,” but then their moral weakness is seen as the fault of their over-indulgent parents, who supply “deep-freeze, & snacks / would keep a Hindu family-group alive.” These in turn are seen as part of a larger pattern of the country’s image of itself: “It’s the Land of Plenty, maybe about to sigh” (where the manuscript show “sigh” changed from “die”), and its hypocritical militaristic activity: “(The tanks of the elders roll, in exercise, on the German plain.)” When the last stanza raises the possibility of greater civility (phrased again in terms of language: “learn how to speak / modestly, & with exactness”), the

suggestion is met by a sardonic refusal: “come off it.” Such flat cynicism is justified by reference to Francis Gary Powers, the pilot who took his U-2 spy plane into Russia. (Powers’ name is itself nicely ironic here.) “[T]he feted traitor, / became so in hours,” says the Song, asking by implication how can one develop a respectful (DS 370) “sense of the country” when the media—and their audience—make a man a hero for a treasonous act. The same point is made about “whore Keeler” of the British Profumo scandal (DS 348). The teens, then, are merely the kind of children such a morally bankrupt society can expect to produce.

Berryman’s use of the term “hegemony” alone expresses the domestic incursions of public forces: “Why shouldn’t they terrify / with hegemony Dad (stupido Dad)?” The Song’s final line is prescient in that it

could apply equally to several succeeding presidents: “and the President, ignorant, didn’t even lie.” This easy reference points to another aspect of the public (and political) operations within the (would-be) private. In the secure hierarchy of established monarchy, “Heaven is high and the emperor far away,” as the Chinese proverb has it. By contrast, Henry’s democracy, however inadequate, is egalitarian enough (at least in the view of arrogant Henry) to make the presidents an immediate part of his daily reality, brought home to him literally by the pervasive communications media of twentieth-century America. Microphones and public address systems figure prominently in a number of Songs; in DS 203 forms of electronic intrusion are catalogued:

taperecorders, cameras,
the best ways of getting at you

so far invented save the
telephone
and it cost money now to be alone
I read the 'paper gingerly lest I
grieve,
ignore the radio & TV, don't go
downtown:
truly isolated, pal.

However, I shudder & the world
shrugs in

One of the most vivid illustrations of the public in the private is DS 66, which literally interweaves the "personal," the words of an ascetic hermetic seeker of spiritual fulfillment (but thus engaged in "universal" effort) with the most egregiously public and political events, such scandals and deaths as would have been reported in the *Time* magazine Berryman read faithfully if furiously every week. Henry's own self-pitying "confessional" mode comes in at the end.

" 'All virtues enter into this

world:')

" begins the Song, the words of the fourth century Abba Pimen, a figure of renunciation thus linked with the first item in the week's news list, "A Buddhist, doused in the street, serenely burned." Right at the center of the poem, physically and literally, are the beautiful lyric lines (a little reminiscent of Williams) "the sun in the willow shivers & shakes itself green-yellow"—separating Abba Pimen's dictum, on the existence of an essential virtue, from the question about what it is.

Stanza three begins with Henry's own question: "How feel a fellow then when he arrive / in fame but lost?" The Abba's response begins—"that a man"—and then the man is mentioned: "Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad, survived." The last line is made up of the main part of the Abba's response: "[that a man] should always reproach himself"—which

perhaps Henry, feeling bad, has already done, but which in any case Berryman, as poet, is doing in the very process of writing that line.

Jack Barbera says that the isolation of the Abba's words in parentheses keeps what goes on in the poem "from being an interaction" (148). But I think those parentheses are merely a verbal or graphic equivalent of the monastery. By no means do they prevent interaction; indeed, the Song is structured exactly by an interaction that not only brings its various strands to closure simultaneously, but that makes the Abba's words an answer to Henry's dilemma, and brings Henry into the monastery.

DS 370 says "Stability, I will stay / in my monastery until my death / & the fate my actions have so hardly earned" (with the traditional pun on "hardly"). But

this monastery is not a retreat from the world and Henry's awareness of it. What sort of monk he might be is given in the third epigraph of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*: "I am pickt up and sorted to a pip. My imagination is a monastery and I am its monk. Keats to Shelley." Barbera observes that the parentheses enclosing the Abba's words are open at beginning and end, and suggests that this is an openness to eternity (160). But that clever notion takes on far more resonance in connection with Helen Waddell's claim about the Desert Fathers' relation to eternity. Monks of the open (Pimen among them), through the very extremity of "their ravaged lives" brought a new understanding of eternity to time-bound men, she says:

paradoxical as it seems, their denial of the life of earth has been the incalculable enriching of it, and they have affected the

consciousness of generations to which they are not even a name. They thought to devalue time by setting it over against eternity, and instead they have given it an unplumbed depth. It is as though they first conceived of eternity as everlastingness, the production to infinity of a straight line, and in time men came to know it vertical as well as horizontal, and to judge an experience by its quality rather than its duration. The sense of infinity is now in our blood: and even to those of us who see our life as a span long, beginning in the womb and ending in the coffin or a shovelful of grey ash, each moment of it has its eternal freight. (24-24)

The monastery of the imagination is also one that is open to eternity, and open to the world by the way. Waddell says of the Fathers, “the extravagance of their

lives is the extravagance of poetry” (24). Henry’s extravagance also drives him to extremes of retreat, to caves and hospitals and the womb-wish for the grave, as in the *Opus Posthumous Songs*, where he actually attains it. But he never hides out for long. The Augustine who was more a model for Berryman than Abba Pimen was deeply inspired by the Desert Fathers, but ultimately chose (or was chosen for) another way, the way of the world also. “Experience was to bring compromise,” Waddell explains, for him as for churchmen afterward, “the *vita mixta* of action and contemplation, ‘wherein,’ says Augustine, ‘the love of truth doth ask a holy quiet, and the necessity of love doth accept a righteous busyness’ “ (24; Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, xix, 19). The monastery of the imagination sends one back out into the world. The city of God demands action in the city of man.

Henry never stays buried long; even in his hole he remains the citizen; he votes.

Conclusion

If Berryman's subject is Henry House, his very surname tells us he is a communal creature, member of a family, resident of a neighborhood. So far from standing in the way of his observation of the White House, his self-observation provides a further motive, for he knows that the big House protects the little house—or not; that he cannot understand himself in isolation from his culture, his country, his world.

One of the passages that Berryman had marked in his copy of Campbell is the one that ends the book:

The modern hero, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding.

“Live,” Nietzsche says, “as though the day were here.” It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. (391)

What follows from this, however, is no assertion that one can and ought to act, but only the recognition that suffering is meaningful: “And so everyone of us shares the supreme ordeal— carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair” (Campbell 391).

Like Henry, Berryman voted. He broke the silence of his personal despair to make poetry of it, poems in which personal and spiritual dilemmas, both banal and profound, are brought together with the political events that are evidence of the entire nation's moral and spiritual difficulties. It is time now that he was freed from

the distortions of false dichotomies he labored to deconstruct.

Notes :

1 - In his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Rosenthal wrote that "Life Studies is confessional because Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (155).

2- In this respect, Jonathon Holden defines the confessional poem as "a poem whose form is derived by analogy from the ritual of 'confession,' a ritual which in its religious aspect is Roman Catholic and in its secular aspect is psychoanalytic" (26). Hence the "confession," in its religious and secular connotations, suggests a kind of a guilty personal detail for emotional effect. Through its record of sins, the confessional poem appears as a tragic self-portrait of its creator. In the act of confession, the poet tries

to purify himself of a sin, grief, or worry, and to confirm his salvation or remedy from a psychological disturbance. Consistent with this is Joel Conarroe's realization that Berryman's *Dream Songs* "represent Berryman's attempts to get his guilt and fear out in the open as a means of exorcizing them" ("After Mr. Bones" 3).

3- This interview was conducted in 1970, at St. Mary's Hospital, in Minneapolis, with Peter Stitt, who had been a student of Berryman a few years earlier.

4- Hemingway wrote of Ezra Pound in 1925: "He defends [his friends] when they are attacked, he gets them into magazines and out of jail. . . . He introduces them to wealthy women. He gets publishers to take their books. He sits up all night with them when they claim to be dying . . . he advances them hospital expenses and dissuades them from suicide" (5-6).

5- "Je est un autre" (I is another) is a

famous dictum by Arthur Rimbaud, which he explains, “[i]n two famous letters of May 1871,” to Georges Izambard, the meaning of “Je est un autre.” He says, it is “a phrasing in which a statement of principled self-alienation is closely related to the declaration of a resublimated pariah status of ‘Je est une bête un négro’ “ (qtd. in Rawson 3).

6- John Berryman: *Collected Poems 1937-1971* includes all of John Berryman’s poetry, except for his epic *The Dream Songs*. So, subsequent reference citations to *Collected Poems* will be identified as CP, *The Dream Songs* as DS, followed by the number of the individual song, *The Freedom of the Poet as Freedom*.

7- According to Jeffrey Meyers of *National Review*, Berryman’s father committed suicide when Berryman was only twelve (49). In a different story, Paul Mariani supposes, in his biography, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*, “that the suicide

may have really been a murder orchestrated by Berryman’s mother.”

In a latter essay, Mariani “reiterates this disturbing possibility.” He says that Berryman “lost his father through suicide or, worse, with the complicity of the boy’s own mother” (qtd. in Dodson 64).

8- Henry is a significant literary character throughout *77 Dream Songs*.

9- For a strong point of view on this issue, see Miranda Sherwin’s “Confessional” Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination, in which she argues for a psychoanalytic approach to confessional writing. In her view, John Berryman should be studied in the context of the confessional tradition dating from Augustine and continuing through such contemporary cultural forms as tell-all memoirs and reality television (3-4).

10- Linda Wagner-Martin writes “[i]n the absence of religious conviction, the artist and writer took on the role of

philosophical authority. Early in this period, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford . . . created the figure of artist-god" (470).

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