

Dream Songs and Nightmare Songs: The Balance of Style in the Later Poems of John Berryman

Jeffery Alan Triggs

1988

There can be no doubt that John Berryman was one of the most original poets in recent decades.¹ Of course, it is almost too common for contemporary writers to represent the “adversary culture,” and certainly there has been no shortage of writers seeking surreal energy in the unconscious. In these respects, the Berryman of *77 Dream Songs* (1964) was no more than a man of his age, just as the Berryman of *The Dispossessed* (1948) was a man of what we now see was a different poetic age. What is unique in Berryman is neither his pose nor his failure, but the style of his later poems, the curious amalgam of disgruntled or disillusioned voices, the clash of erudition and vulgarity, the angry dislocations of language (“Crumpling a syntax at a sudden need,” Sonnet 47), the dialogue form of a divided self pushed to schizophrenic limits. In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, (1956) and more especially in *77 Dream Songs*, Berryman’s style enacts the madness enforced by what he came to see as the cursed fate of life in a world gone mad. Very much a poet on the cutting edge of life, Berryman managed with this style a precarious balance which could not last long. The later “Dream Songs” collected in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), are spiritually and stylistically a different work, flatter, more mechanical, less rigorously selected, and more openly autobiographical.

It is as a modern *poete maudit* that Berryman clearly perceives and presents himself in the earlier sequence. In the sixteenth “Dream Song,” for instance, Berryman writes of his alter ego, Henry, that his “pelt was put on sundry walls / where it did much resemble Henry.” Henry’s tortured sensibility always ex-

¹Copyright ©1988 by Jeffery Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *South Dakota Review* 15.2 (Summer 1988): 70-74.

presses itself in such curious twistings of archaic diction, at once bookish and mad. What is even more interesting here is the subtle allusion to Michelangelo's famous self-portrait as a skin in "The Last Judgment," suggesting that Henry too, though in the less grand company of his "sundry walls," is damned. Significantly, this spectacle of the self (we should keep in mind the autobiographical impulse that underlies so much romantic and post-romantic art) is admired by a leering public, "Especially his long & glowing tail." The modern poet exposes himself as a sort of petty devil, and having accomplished this "mission," is ignored again by the public which returns to its usual forms of oblivion:

Two daiqueries
 withdraw into a corner of the gorgeous room
 and one told the other a lie. (#16)

In the poem that immediately follows this, Berryman treats his damnation from a different, allegorical perspective; Henry prays that his "madnesses have cease," and Lucifer answers him: "I smell you for my own" (#17). If Henry is a "Faust" here, he is a Faust without hope of redemption, denied, as we will see, the comfort of the *ewig Weibliche*.

In the fourteenth "Dream Song," Berryman proposes his own version of Baudelairean ennui:

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 the mountains or sea or sky, leaving
 behind: me, wag. (#14)

This is a subtly organized poem, whose theme is well realized in its language. The incessant “ands,” the persistent refusal of the syntax to come to rest, the literate colloquial tone all contribute to the poem’s feeling of restless dissatisfaction. Berryman satirizes in particular middle class ecstasy over the common functioning of nature (“the sky flashes, the great sea yearns”), which borders on pathetic fallacy (“we ourselves flash and yearn”). The speaker who does not respond to all this flashing and yearning must alienate himself from the mainstream of society, represented by his mother, and conclude that he has “no inner resources.” But even the Baudelairean stance of the alienated or adversary poet is boring, as are the artificial paradises of “tranquil hills” and “gin.” The speaker himself is a wraith, an empty gesture, the “wag” of a vanished dog. All that is left standing is the elegant structure of the unrhymed stanza Berryman so often uses with its alternating long and short lines in the pattern: A,A,B,A,A,B. Composing his poem with three such stanzas, Berryman aims at the local intensity of a sonnet within a sequence. (Indeed, reviving the idea of the poetic sequence as opposed to the isolated well-made lyrics of the new critics is one of Berryman’s real contributions to contemporary American poetry.)

As we have seen, emptiness and boredom extend even to Berryman’s elegant persona, Henry, the professor gone astray, “unappeasable Henry” who “hid the day” (#1). As if to counter his zombied intellectual self, Berryman repeatedly conjures a second, incongruous persona, the dialect-speaking Negro, who addresses him as Mr. Bones, and who echoes something of the stoic vitality found in the blues:

Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
 it all this way to that bed on these feet
 where peoples said to meet.
 Maybe but even if I see my son
 forever never, get back on the take,
 free, black & forty-one. (#40)

The “Bones” voice fades in and out in dialogue with Henry’s, a sort of earthy conscience commenting on and exposing Henry’s world-weariness. The black interlocutor follows naturally his animal instincts (“Le’s do a hoedown, gal, / one blue, one shuffle, / if them is all you seem to require. Strip, / ol banger, skip us we,

sugar”), where Henry lusts, equally vulgar in his way, after poeticized and often unattainable women:

Filling her compact & delicious body
with chicken paprika, she glanced at me
twice.
Fainting with interest, I hungered back
and only the fact that her husband & four other people
kept me from springing on her

or falling at her little feet and crying
‘You are the hottest one for years of night
Henry’s dazed eyes
have enjoyed, Brilliance.’ I advanced upon
(despairing) my spumoni. —Sir Bones: is stuffed,
de world, wif feeding girls.

—Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes
downcast... The slob beside her feasts... What wonders is
she sitting on, over there?
The restaurant buzzes. She might as well be on Mars.
Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
—Mr. Bones: there is.(#4)

This is one of Berryman’s finest erotic poems with its mixture of grotesque and elegant, literary and colloquial tones. There is an elegant wit here (“I advanced upon / (despairing) my spumoni.”) worthy of James Merrill at his best. Henry’s literate though clownish lust is punctuated and exposed by the black man’s earthy remarks. He knows better than Henry that in the contemporary world the search for Love and Beauty has been reduced to bar hopping in the hope of casual sex, the “good lay” that so often eludes Henry:

Let us suppose, valleys & such ago,
one pal unwinding from his labours in
one bar of Chicago,
and this did actual happen. This was so.
And many graces are slipped, & many a sin
even that laid man low

but this will be remembered & told over,
 that she was heard at last, haughty & greasy,
 to bawl in that low bar:
 'You can biff me, you can bang me, get it you'll never.
 I may be only a Polack broad but I don't lay easy.
 Kiss my ass, that's what you are.'(#15)

In the twentieth century, so the suggestion goes, all human life is similarly devalued. In one of the many guilt poems (#43), Henry imagines himself "charged" as "The Man Who Did Not Deliver," and comments wryly to the effect that being has been reduced to limp consisting: "Be. / I warned him, of a summer night; consist, / Consist"(#43). Interestingly, chief among the ridiculers and accusers are "Ex-wives."

The central experience of *77 Dream Songs* is certainly that of loss. Berryman himself, looking back from the perspective of the later dream songs of *His Toy*, *His Dream*, *His Rest*, described Henry as "a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss"(Prefatory Note). Just what the "loss" is, however, is not a simple question. Like Hamlet's notoriously mysterious motivation, for which there is no clear "objective correlative," the loss that motivates Henry's *Weltschmerz* is never definitively located, though there are a number of possibilities hinted at in different "series" of poems: the loss of sex or love, the loss of religion, the loss of friends and fellow poets.

I mentioned above that one of Henry's roles was that of a Faust without the salvation of the eternal feminine. A number of the songs treat the theme of the loss of love. Song #44 suggests this theme with an ironic parody of a number of traditional love lyrics:

Tell it to the forest fire, tell it to the moon,
 mention it in general to the moon
 on the way down,
 he's about to have his lady, permanent;
 and this is the worst of all came ever sent
 writhing Henry's way.

The seeming satisfaction of desire, for which many poets who "lie down alone" have longed, is for Berryman "the worst of all came ever sent [the fractured syntax here considers out loud various possibilities of expression] / writhing Henry's way." Henry as alienated, betraying outsider ("fifth column, quisling, genocide"),

writhes at the “loverly time” other men might look for as their salvation. A socially acceptable form of love, as in marriage, is for Henry unacceptable (“Bars will be closed. / No girl will again / conceive above your throes.”) and bound for a short duration (“A fine thunder peals / will with its friends and soon, from agony / put the fire out.”). Indeed, for Henry love cannot be disentangled from his boastful (and doubtless insecure) sexuality:

The glories of the world struck me, made me aria, once.
 —What happen then, Mr. Bones?
 if be you cares to say.
 —Henry. Henry became interested in women’s bodies,
 his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement.
 Stupor. Knees, dear. Pray. (#26)

Stupor is what Henry is left with, in lieu of love, and it is more easily accommodated by the *poete maudit* in him. But the question of loss is not satisfied. Henry cannot be said to have lost what he claims never to have wanted.

The injunction, addressed ironically to his knees, to pray (for salvation from the “achievement” of his loins?) touches on another possible loss, that of religion. A number of poems, such as “April Fool’s Day, or, St Mary of Egypt” (#47), deal ironically with religious themes. The real St. Mary of Egypt was for many years an actress and prostitute, interestingly for motives of lust rather than money. Even when she joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she continued corrupting her fellow pilgrims. When she tried to enter the church at Jerusalem with the others, however, a mysterious force prevented her from entering, and recognizing her sin, she repented. Praying to the Virgin Mary for guidance, she was told to go into the desert beyond the River Jordon, where she lived naked and in great privation for forty-seven years before making herself known to a holy man, Father Zosimus, and dying in holiness. The cloak he lent her was treasured as a holy relic. Berryman retells her story with the interesting variation that Mary is not prevented from entering the church, but recognizes her own unworthiness before God:

—When down she saw her feet, sweet fish, on the threshold,
 she considered her fair shoulders
 and all the hundreds who have held them, all
 the more who to her mime thickened & maled
 from the supple stage,

and seeing her feet, in a visit, side by side

paused on the sill of The Tomb, she shrank: 'No.
They are not worthy,
fondled by many' and rushed from the Crucified...

Berryman's Mary is curiously modern in her sins and self-awareness, a female counterpart of Henry, who rushes "out of the city ho / across the suburbs, plucky / to dare my desert in her late daylight / of animals and sands." Mary rushes, as it were, through time, not to the desert outside Jordon, but to Henry's desert. Like him, she refuses the possibility of salvation. Her nakedness and barrenness, as Berryman's updated imagery suggests, are the nakedness and barrenness of Henry, and by extension, of modern man. "She fall prone. / Only wind whistled. / And forty-seven years went by like Einstein." In keeping with this parallel, and against tradition, Berryman maintains that God "has not visited" Mary. Her fate is acted out not with the intercession of the Virgin Mary, but according to the dictates of her own psychology. Her story ends not with a holy death, but a barren, impersonal, scientifically modern passing of the years "like Einstein." And in a kind of ironic April Fool's joke, Berryman moves her feast day from April second to April first. It is a joke suggesting not saintliness, but the failure of religion.

The next "Dream Song" (#48) is one of Berryman's most direct confrontations with the possibilities of salvation through religion. It is composed in Henry's typical mixture of erudite standard English and slang, filled with ironic puns that suggest the clash of modern man's historical and every-day experience:

He yelled at me in Greek,
my God!—It's not his language
and I'm no good at—his is Aramaic,
was—I am a monoglot of English
(American version) and, say pieces from
a baker's dozen others: where's the bread?

but rising in the Second Gospel, pal:
The seed goes down, god dies.
a rising happens,
some crust, and then occurs an eating. He said so,
a Greek idea,
troublesome to imaginary Jews,

like bitter Henry, full of the death of love,
Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning

the whole implausible necessary thing.
 He dropped his voice & sybilled of
 the death of the death of love.
 I ought to get going.

If Mary was uncomfortable in the presence of The Tomb, how is Henry, the bitter “monoglot of English,” to do any better? Jesus is known to Henry through his scholarship (imperfectly known through the biblical languages, Greek and Aramaic, and what Henry has evidently picked up from Frazer’s writings on the dying and reviving gods), but for an impure, modern man, an “imaginary Jew” like Henry, Jesus’ “Greek idea” of salvation through the sacrificial rite of the Mass is “troublesome” and ultimately impossible. Like the “Old Pussy-cat” in the next poem, “Blind” (#49), Henry “wants to have eaten,” but the bread and “eating” of the Mass, implausible and necessary though they may be, make him “Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious.” The allusion to Macbeth seems paradoxical juxtaposed with the adjective “disambitious,” but we may suppose Henry a jaded, timid, modern sort of Macbeth, unready to take up an energetic destiny of any kind. Having turned away from the possibility of salvation through love, Henry is “full of the death of love,” and he turns also from Jesus’ prophecy of “the death of the death of love.” The religious mood, like the mood of love, is one Henry samples and rejects. The poem ends, like a number of others in the sequence, with the suggestion that Henry should be moving on (“I ought to get going.”), though exactly where he can go is questionable. The questions point to a death wish, which has been there from the beginning but which Henry continually delays long enough to write more poems.

One of the most common types of poem in the sequence embodies these death wishes and what might be called statements of *ars poetica*. Indeed, poetry is Berryman’s only enduring life-giving force, and without it the death wish has free play. The twenty-sixth “Dream Song,” alluded to in part above, picks up both these themes in its last two stanzas:

All the knobs & softnesses of, my God,
 the ducking & trouble it swarm on Henry,
 at one time.
 —What happen then, Mr Bones?
 you seems excited-like.
 —Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime
 besides a sense of others, my God, my God,

and a jealousy for the honor (alive) of his country,
 what can get more odd?
 and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.
 —What happen then, Mr Bones?
 —I had a most marvelous piece of luck. I died.

Henry falls from the original sin of stanza one (as from all his sins) to “the original crime” of his poetry. This is something rather different from Wilde’s defiant sense of the artist as criminal in a bourgeoisie society. Berryman’s line has a tone of self-mocking desperation. The vocation of the artist helps him to exist, or “consist” in his claimed state of inanition, but it is no less painful than the other requirements of life, and in a world where “gangs & pride” regularly thrive, it threatens constantly to degenerate. The death wish, the ironic “piece of luck” in the last line, is seen as the only ultimate mitigation of Henry’s discontent.

Poetry, whose “weapons” are the sharp pencils Henry classes with “Grenades, the portable rack, the yellow spout / of the anthrax-ray”(#50), offers only provisional solutions to the problems of a life Henry equates, like Mallarmé, with life in a hospital with “NO VISITORS” posted on his door:

Comfortable on my horseblanket
 I prop on the costly bed & dream of my wife,
 my first wife,
 and my second wife & my son.

Insulting, they put guardrails up,
 as if it were a crib!
 I growl at the head nurse; we compose on one.
 I have been operating from *nothing*,
 like a dog after its tail
 more slowly, losing altitude. (#54)

Rather disturbingly, Berryman seems to drop the mask of Henry in this poem and to offer the primal cry of a man isolated from the world and even from his family in a forced state of infantile helplessness. In an earlier poem, he was the empty “wag” of a vanished dog; now he is a dog itself, chasing its tail in a helpless circle, “operating from *nothing*” and “losing altitude.” In his poetry, Berryman may give life “the worst look” he has left (#52), but the crash is coming. The *ars poetica* becomes an art of silence, longing for death. In a remarkable poem (#67), Henry imagines his role as a poet to be that of a doctor who must operate on himself:

I don't operate often. When I do,
 persons take note.
 Nurses look amazed. They pale.
 The patient is brought back to life, or so.

* * * * *

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
 operations of great delicacy
 on my self.
 —Mr Bones, you terrifies me.
 No wonder they don't pay you. Will you die?
 —My friend, I succeeded. Later.

Here is Berryman's cynical passion at its best. The voice is jaded, the death wish assertive. The compulsion to practice his art, absurd in worldly terms ("I have a living to fail— / because of my wife & son—to keep from earning"), is the only call to life, and even this, as his play with time in the last lines suggests, is doomed to failure. Interestingly, the first group of songs in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* are titled "Opus posth." Art, no more than love or religion, can effect salvation. Berryman begins an elegy for Faulkner (one of many elegies for writers in the sequence) with a line of gruesome resonance: "The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there" (#36)? The song about Henry finally putting "forth his book" (#75), the "unshedding bulky bole-proud blue-green moist / thing made by savage & thoughtful / surviving Henry," is filled with ironic despair. Henry has published his book "like a madman," and though harmless it is an object of contempt: "Bare dogs drew closer for a second look / and performed their friendly operations there." Indeed, the "operations" of the dogs may be said to recall ironically the operations Henry has had to perform on himself to produce the book.

This despair, which is not motiveless but certainly in search of adequate motivation, is the real mystery of Berryman's later work, and it consumes the literate pose of his persona. Somewhat paradoxically, our best insights into its cause come not in the fully realized poems about Henry, but those poems where Berryman drops the mask and speaks of what is transparently his own grief. The death wishes and suicidal hints come into focus when Berryman forces himself to consider the event in his life no pose could ironize or mitigate, the suicide of his father. Significantly, the penultimate poems in both *77 Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* deal with his father's death and Berryman's inability to come to terms with it. The dread beneath all of "Henry's" ennui is that the father's end has somehow fated the son's also. "Henry's Confession" (#76) offers a first

tentative and incomplete attempt to treat this theme:

in a modesty of death I join my father
 who dared so long ago leave me.
 A bullet on a concrete stoop
 close by a smothering southern sea
 spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.

The voice here, with its different, quieter rawness, is Berryman's and not Henry's, but the solution, dictated by context and form, must be Henry's and proves inadequate:

I offers you this handkerchief, now set
 your left foot by my right foot,
 shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
 arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
 hum a little, Mr Bones.
 —I saw nobody coming, so I went instead. (#76)

"Seedy Henry," if not Berryman, is now once more "stript down to move on" (#77) in his world of fallen men: "Henry likes Fall. / Henry would be prepared to live in a world of Fall" (#77). And he is prepared to continue writing away death, to the tune of three hundred and eight more "Dream Songs," but the precarious balance of 77 *Dreams Songs* is gone. The persona has exhausted its possibilities.

William J. Martz is certainly right that in the later poems "Henry as picaresque hero gives way to the quasi-fictional John Berryman" (41), a development he terms "unsettling" (40). This is not to suggest that there are not any number of moving poems in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. There are many, such as the elegy for "Richard & Randall, & one who never did, / two who will never cross this sea again, / & Delmore" (#282), Berryman's fellow poets and tragic friends, or the evocation of Berryman's increasingly dark God, "a slob, / playful, vast, rough-hewn," who "resembles one of the last etchings of Goya" (#238). Even Henry's characteristic lust is given rehearsals: "sad sights. A crumpled, empty cigarette pack. / O empty bottle. Hey: an empty girl. / Fill 'er up, pal" (#250). But the tone is flatter, darker, the desperation less under Berryman's artistic control. And there are more desperate attempts by Berryman to come to terms with his father.

One of the songs (#143) deals with Berryman's fears that his father would murder him along with himself:

When he began taking the pistol out & along,

you was just a little; but gross fears
 accompanied us along the beaches, pal.
 My mother was scared almost to death.
 He was going to swim out, with me, forever,
 and a swimmer strong he was in the phosphorescent Gulf,
 but he decided on lead.

The use of the slang of the earlier songs (“pal,” “forevers”) cannot disguise the marked change of tone and control from 77 *Dream Songs*. In these later poems there is a new desperation that “Henry” cannot domesticate. In the next song (#144), we learn that “death grew tall / up Henry as a child,” and that “he feels his death tugging within him.” The sins of the father, he fears, are visited upon him. Yet there are desperate attempts to forgive his father: “Also I love him: me he’s done no wrong / for going on forty years—forgiveness time— / I touch now his despair” (#145).

Ultimately, however, Berryman cannot forgive his father. The second to last poem of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (#384), where he visits his father’s grave, is one of unleavened bitterness. The “Henry” in this poem is the thinnest of disguises for Berryman himself, stripped of his irony, boastfulness, and self-mockery:

The marker slants, flowerless, day’s almost done,
 I stand above my father’s grave with rage,
 often, often before
 I’ve made this awful pilgrimage to one
 who cannot visit me, who tore his page
 out; I come back for more,

 I spit upon this dreadful banker’s grave
 who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn
 O ho alas alas
 When will indifference come, I moan & rave
 I’d like to scabble till I got right down
 away down under the grass

 and ax the casket open ha to see
 just how he’s taking it, which he sought so hard
 we’ll tear apart
 the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry
 will heft the ax once more, his final card,
 and fell it on the start.

This is a very powerful and very sad poem, and one of Berryman's most brilliant, but it embodies, in the fullest form he could give it, the obsession that tore apart his life and work. The balance between anguished confession and objective statement that Berryman established with the character of Henry in *77 Dream Songs* is completely destroyed. Their style, the mad comic jumble of voices that performed a strange and wonderful colloquy of the damned, has thinned to a single voice, overtly confessional, tragic, and helpless in the face of experience. As Wendell Berry has noted of these later poems, "brilliant as they sometimes are," they represent "the mortifications of a splendid intelligence helpless before its salient occasions"(19).

Whether Berryman will ever escape the judgment of brilliant but flawed is doubtful. Like Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath and Delmore Schwartz, Berryman seems to be one of those poets for whom, in his friend Richard Blackmur's phrase, "experience proved too much." And yet without a doubt the *Dream Songs*, in spite of their flaws, and perhaps in part because of them, are a vast and continually intriguing achievement, and deserve a prominent place in the history of twentieth century American poetry.

Works Cited

- Berry, Wendell. *Standing by Words: Essays by Wendell Berry*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.
- Berryman, John. *Berryman's Sonnets*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.
- . *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.
- . *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956.
- . *77 Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964.
- . *The Dispossessed*. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948.
- Martz, William J. *John Berryman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.