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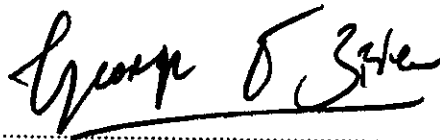
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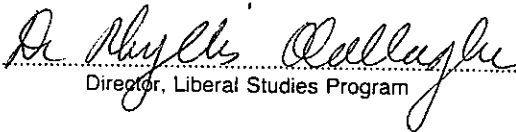
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"THE LAW AGAINST HENRY": THE MORAL CRISIS OF THE POETIC  
IMAGINATION IN JOHN BERRYMAN'S THE DREAM SONGS.

A Thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the  
degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

by

William Matthew Owens

School for Summer and Continuing Education  
Georgetown University  
Washington, D.C.

December 1, 1996

ABSTRACT

"THE LAW AGAINST HENRY": THE MORAL CRISIS OF THE POETIC  
IMAGINATION IN JOHN BERRYMAN'S THE DREAM SONGS

William Matthew Owens

Mentor: George O'Brien, Ph.D.

The problem of the moral crisis of a poetic imagination, and how it is explored and demonstrated within John Berryman's poetic opus, The Dream Songs, was approached in terms of the textual evidence that supports the assumption that the main figure of the work, Henry, suffered an "irreversible loss" that precipitated a distinct moral crisis. The thesis illustrates that the "moral crisis" discernible within the work is characterized by: (i) Berryman's intense subjective appraisal of a shifting set of literary values (as influenced by cultural values) within a specific period of American culture, (ii) Berryman's consciousness of (and reaction to) a growing sense of alienation in the face of the "postmodern" condition of the social matrix in which he lived, and

(iii) ultimately the attempt of Berryman's poetic sensibility to struggle and come to terms with the moral criteria (reflected in his acute awareness of the relationship between the individuated freedom of his subject, Henry, and the Divinity) that is irreconcilable to the demands of the body and the demands of an artistic temperament as it is specifically expressed within The Dream Songs.

Several factors characterize the dilemma of moral crisis, and how Berryman specifically establishes and attempts to resolve it within The Dream Songs, which include concepts of (a) literary persona, (b) identity and character dynamics as evoked principally by image, and (c) its formal contextual representation as an expression of the "confessional" poetic genre. This formal expression is characteristic of a movement in American literature called the confessional lyric, as is often associated with poets Robert Lowell and John Berryman. The thesis critically delineates and analyzes the unique moral conflict

established rhetorically and imagistically within  
Berryman's The Dream Songs, and concludes that the "law  
against Henry" is a moral one.

## PREFACE

This thesis was prepared under the supervision of Professor George O'Brien of the English Department of Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. in 1996. To the best of my knowledge, and to the extent afforded by my research, the work contained herein is an original interpretation based principally upon a textual analysis of John Berryman's The Dream Songs.

Furthermore, this thesis was researched and written in compliance with all of Georgetown University's standards and policies governing academic integrity. I wish to expressly thank Professor O'Brien for his insights, his meticulous suggestions and his encouragement.

It should be noted that the unorthodox stylizations, spellings and punctuation of Berryman's poetry appear as they do in the original text, and are entirely his own.

In some small way, it is my hope that this thesis represents a renewed interest in John Berryman and his work, the legacy of which deserves the critical attention of a new generation of scholarship.

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For Christina, who cares

## CHAPTER 1

### THESIS STATEMENT AND DEFINITIONS

*Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law  
against Henry.*

*--Mr. Bones: there is.*

John Berryman, The Dream Songs

John Berryman's The Dream Songs, the first installment of which was conceived between the years 1955 and 1964, comprising the first three of seven books, remains, within the canon of twentieth century American poetry, an enigmatic work that has confounded the sensibilities of modern readers while polarizing critical opinion within the literary community. It also remains, however, an example of rigorous structural detail, thematic complexity and a formal significance that invites critical attention and scholarship by the sheer enormity of Mr. Berryman's project. Making certain allowances, therefore, for the scope of the work and the many and divergent possible avenues of meaning, this thesis intends to critically examine the imagistic and rhetorical evidence that

supports the possibility that, indeed, the "law against Henry" is a moral one.

Before an attempt is made to delineate the supporting imagery and to assign possible meanings to those images, it is necessary to define the moral "law" as a component of "moral crisis." Furthermore, it is necessary to look at concepts organic to the poetic genre of the "confessional lyric", to characterize that literary movement and to analyze its possible function within the American canon of the twentieth century. Additionally, we must characterize the aesthetics, the formal arrangement and certain mechanics of style within The Dream Songs in a manner that satisfies the general demands of this inquiry.

### **The Text**

The text that will serve as the primary source for this analysis is The Dream Songs by John Berryman. The text is a collection of two volumes comprising a total of seven books and 385 individual songs. The first 77 individual songs (Books I - III) were published in 1964 as

77 Dream Songs, and Books IV - VII appeared in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest in 1968. A more detailed structural analysis will follow.

### **Modern and Postmodern Aesthetics.**

Though The Dream Songs achieves its dramatic impact in part as a result of its formal structure, which is characterized by an adherence to an application of "modern" aesthetics, its thematic elements, it has been observed, express a "postmodern" sensibility. The conflicting classification of The Dream Songs is apparent, in part, in an understanding of the critical differences between such distinctions. In his work, The New Poets, M.L. Rosenthal characterizes modern American and British poets by establishing the following criteria:

First, then the point of view that modern poetry expresses toward life in general is that of a Romantic aestheticism. The Self seeks to discover itself through the energy of its insights into Reality and through the sensuous excitement generated by the experience of reality.

Secondly, our poetry of political and cultural criticism centers on the individual as victim. In the work of the older aestheticism moderns the poet is generally a sort of cultural hero, by implication (if only negative) at least, fighting for true self-realization in the face of all that

victimizes us and sometimes for the arts as its greatest source.

Thirdly--an extension from the previous point--the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme. Often, it is felt at the same time as a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis. Hence, the idiom of our poetry can be at once private and public, lyrical and rhetorical. Again, the continuing power of the Romantic tradition is clear, the specifically modern turn being the strongly confessional literally self-exposing vulnerability characteristic of the statement.<sup>1</sup>

In accordance with these criteria, Berryman's The Dream Songs clearly falls within the modern aestheticism, in that its subject is the self, replete with its sufferings, its desires, and, in short, the material which requires the poet to confess through the conscious application of modern devices (e.g., the mask of persona that provides shelter from the intensity of the material). Berryman's public and private idiom, too, supports Rosenthal's third criterion for a modern poem. Berryman was concerned not only with the language of the self, but also a highly charged language aimed at the political and cultural environment from which he had written.

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<sup>1</sup> M.L. Rosenthal. The New Poets. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 13-15.

Berryman's adherence to a formal and disciplined structure is an indication of certain "modern" influences, while the thematic concerns of the poet, mediated by his use of Henry as persona, indicate the possibilities for a postmodern aesthetic.

To further qualify the need to classify the poetry in one way or the other (or in this case, since both possibilities exist) it is useful to analyze a certain tension of perspective in The Dream Songs. That which characterizes The Dream Songs as a candidate for postmodern poetics is the achievement of a perspective that, while maintaining the tension of a "confessional" Romantic point of view, threatens that very point of view with a stylistic disruption using mixed voices, secondary personae and seemingly arbitrary shifts among first, second and third points of view. This representational "collapse" of the modern confessional narrative voice heightens the dramaturgical dilemma, and lends perspectival tension to the confessional crisis. In short, Berryman eludes the

criteria of the modern by creating a vocabulary not for the self, but for many selves.

Unlike other confessional poets, among whom Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton are notable examples, Berryman illustrates a possible postmodern technique by confounding the dramaturgical and thematic meanings using the literary persona to chronicle the sufferings of his poetic representative, Henry, while maintaining the modern predilection for a highly stylized and disciplined formal structure that attempts a vocabulary of the self (or at least the self that is Henry). Thus by using a formal poetic sequence, a definitive adherence to the modern aesthetic is maintained, while making allowances for various postmodern thematic possibilities.

However, Berryman, as critic and scholar, was conscious of the techniques he employed in reaction to an established American and English tradition in modern poetry. Though his consciousness of his approach does not necessarily and automatically qualify his work as

"postmodern", it nonetheless indicates an awareness and sensitivity to the changing values that are reflected in and by the changing shape of poetry in the mid-twentieth century. For example, in a speech in which he accepted the National Book Award (for His Toy, His Dream, His Rest), Berryman stated:

I set up the *Bradstreet* poem as an attack on The Waste Land: personality, and plot. . . I set up The Dream Songs as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry. . . The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined, in one case feminine, in the other masculine.<sup>2</sup>

Berryman's approach, therefore, signifies a deliberate and hostile attack of the modern tendencies that M.L. Rosenthal took great care to delineate. There exists an intimate relationship, as I have observed, between the "postmodern" lyric (which would be characterized by the "hostility" that Berryman suggests), and the confessional genre. This relationship will be analyzed more closely in section below that deals with the confessional lyric. My

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<sup>2</sup> John Haffenden. John Berryman: A Critical Commentary. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 5-6.



analysis of this relationship (and Berryman's conscious application of a "hostile" aesthetic) will propose that, while Berryman's intentions are to react against a prevalent tendency in modern American and English poetry, he nonetheless, and to a greater extent than he might have hoped, owes a debt to the modern tradition that is made evident by his conscious application of certain stylistic devices that are characteristic of the "moderns".

**Moral Crisis.**

The question of the interaction between the formal arrangement of the material and its impact on possible meanings must be addressed in the context of the "confessional" lyric and the question of "moral crisis". And it is at this point that the title of the work might be put into a meaningful context. Returning to M.L. Rosenthal's observation that the modern is concerned with expressing a "psychological crisis" applies clearly to Berryman's self-conscious use of the dream narrative to convey a complex, multi-layered psychological crisis of sorts. It is important to recall that Berryman, in

addition to a poet, was a scholar and a critic. His exhaustive work on Stephen Crane, for example, was characterized by a Freudian literary interpretation. Furthermore, in a collection of his essays<sup>3</sup>, Berryman analyzed Joseph Conrad's The Heart of Darkness using a Freudian critical approach, replete with the trappings of a staid, psychoanalytical language.

If we consider the title in the context of Berryman's preference for Freudian analysis as a literary critic, then notions of a possible "moral crisis" become obscured, since the vocabulary of Freudian thought does not, in general, accommodate "moral" afflictions. In order to make room, then, for the moral law against Henry, we must take a step beyond the title of the work. If a dream provides the psychic landscape that Freud endeavored during the course of his life to map out with a vocabulary and the authority of scientific inquiry, then one must question the origins of the "psychological crises" that are translated within that landscape. Citing a moral failing as a potential

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<sup>3</sup> John Berryman. The Freedom of the Poet. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 107-115.

source for a psychological crisis, then naturally, a moral conflict can be accommodated, therefore, even within the unbending paradigm of Freudian theory.

The problem of defining the moral crisis will remain a primary thematic concern within this analysis. As a way of understanding the complexity of the moral law against Henry, the poems that contain specific religious imagery and rhetoric will be analyzed in considerable detail. The evidence is divided into two possible types: rhetorical and imagistic. Rhetorical evidence is of a basically confessional nature, and when employed, is often quite explicit in its moral thematic content. That is, it appears in the first person singular voice, which admittedly at times cannot be distinguished from the voice of the persona Henry, the voice of the poet, or the voice of Henry's nameless friend, who will be discussed later. In terms of imagistic evidence, this analysis will attempt to present theological images in an effort to characterize those images as components of the moral law against Henry. An effort will be made at interpretive sobriety with regard

to these images. But if images, in general, invite Freudian interpretation, so, too, is it possible to allow the images an opportunity to support other possible meanings.

### **Confessional Poetry and its Function**

The confessional poets were writing at the literary-historical intersection of the moderns and the postmoderns. The moderns, as we have seen, were concerned with the problem of expressing in art the nature and the complexities of the various psychological crises of the artist. They wrote from the deepest of Romantic convictions that expressed the need for a poetic voice that transcended form and illuminated the landscape of the Self.

The genre of confessional poetry, however, applies to a divergent representative group of poets. M. L. Rosenthal and others agree that with the publication of Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959, confessional poetry "emerged" simultaneously with the beginnings of the postmodern lyric. The confessional movement might be

considered the bridge between the modern and postmodern in the sense that the poetic vocabulary of the self, with which the confessionals created the impression of subjective dissolution of the Romantic ideal, emerges with a raw intensity, an alienated intensity that decries the role of the poet in the middle of twentieth century America. The postmodern tendency to pollute the former platitudes or insights of the self with alcohol, drugs, sexual indulgence and civil "impropriety" is the essence of the confessional imagination.

However, it is not sufficient to define confessional poetry in such a codified manner. It did not emerge as a literary genre from a vacuum. Since expression necessarily involves the self in any form of artwork, it cannot be said that confessional poetry is uniquely different from its historic precedents. What does define the confessional movement, I think, is its notable distinction from the poetry of their modern predecessors, like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. Eliot, in particular, espoused

a poetry that was distanced from the poet himself, so that the self was obscured by the masks of literary character-types like J. Alfred Prufrock. In his work on confessional poetry, Robert Phillips states:

In refusing to don the Eliotic mantle of reticence, these new confessional poets give to the public those outpourings previously reserved for the Father Confessor or the analyst. For nearly fifteen hundred years the priest and church gave relief to the morally isolated and disturbed. When the Church proved incapable of maintaining her leadership in intellectual circles, creative people in particular turned to analysts for self-understanding. Yet even this form of confession became, for some, as morally crippling as that to the priest. Thus many have turned to the more Protestant form of individual confession on the printed page--getting it all out in the open, with no second party between them and the "sinful" thoughts or deeds which estrange them from themselves and others.<sup>4</sup>

From Phillips' observation we get a general idea as to the function of confessional literature. In the secular vacuum of the postmodern American condition, confessional poetry places the conflicted self, the morally conflicted self, at the center of the poems. Indeed, the role of the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Phillips. The Confessional Poets. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 5.

"Father Confessor" is diminished in part as a reflection of his diminished role in the culture which encourages the confessional aesthetic almost by default (that is, a culture in crisis will naturally produce a literature of crisis) and which encourages evaluations of the self in terms of a psychological methodology. His diminished role is also symptomatic of a society in which general permissiveness has fostered a moral relativism. The moral distinctions which necessitated confession as a doctrinal exercise, especially within the Catholic church, have lost their potency in an environment of dull passivity, and rigorous moral neglect. In a good confessional poem, then, the self confesses to itself and to the reader the nature of the morally and psychologically conflicted self as its poetic subject. Here, the landscape of the self contains varying points of crisis, with varying degrees of intensity. In general, a confessional poem is a testament to the poet's moral courage, and his or her willingness to make naked assessments regarding the nature of the complexity that is the self.

However, Robert Phillips, in his assessment of John Berryman's poetry, unkindly notes that the function of Berryman's confessional isn't so much to re-establish his fallen faith, nor to "purge" his imagination. Rather, he states:

Instead of confession for therapeutic or purgative purposes, he appears to have done so to gratify his formidable ego. (William Wasserstrom posits the theory that the Dream Songs' Henry was the embodiment of Berryman's ego, Mr. Bones the id.) Rather than displaying moral courage, these poems display instead immoral callowness. In place of love and fame, we have lust and notoriety.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to Mr. Phillip's impressions of The Dream Songs, the way in which Berryman expresses the moral crisis of his poetic imagination relies on his use (and vast knowledge) of theological imagery, and allusions to the theological canon, to define and characterize the moral law against Henry. The material of the confession, therefore, in this case, is the confession of Henry's lost faith in the context of a culture that, too, has abandoned God and

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<sup>5</sup> Phillips, p. 97.



the moral requirements attendant upon an understanding of the Divine in those terms.

Phillips' first mistake is in confusing Henry with John Berryman, a fatal flaw for any critic who has carefully read Mr. Berryman's comments on the distinction between Henry and John Berryman himself. Secondly, Phillips illustrates the difficult task that he poses to himself in the distinctions between postmodern and modern aesthetics. He states that the confessional poets (postmodern) refuse to "don the Eliotic mantle of reticence" and that they placed no "second party" between themselves and the printed page. I submit that, if not "Eliotic reticence", Berryman employs the "Eliotic" mask of personae, stylized dialect, and arbitrary shifts in perspective, thus classifying his poetry not as "postmodern", and confessional in the most basic sense, but as a minstrel homage to the moderns, indeed, caricaturing the modern's reticence, while employing their very devices. Berryman successfully mirrors the moderns, their reticence, and their "donning" of "Eliotic" masks, caricatures their

stand-offish and refined aestheticism, and delivers the perplexing and challenging work that is The Dream Songs.

The poet Berryman stands masked in a room full of mirrors: a white man in black face caricaturing his own failures, his own moral weakness, and all of human experience.

Suffice it to say, therefore, that confessional poetry fulfills the requirements of an art that attempts to deal basically and honestly with the self in a cultural environment that has forsaken its historical, moral and ethical values; but at the same time confessional poetry confounds any criteria as such that attempt to codify the movement. The material of the confession is the artist's attempt to come to terms with the demands of his temperament, his sensitivity, and his various indulgences in an atmosphere that clearly permits, if not encourages moral indiscretion and apathy. If the artist serves as a barometer of the complexities of his culture, and as a precursor of what is to come, then the confessional poem has significant public value since it mirrors the

influences that shaped it and the culture from which it is written.

There are clear cases where Berryman's Dream Songs disqualify most of any codified criteria, especially in terms of "free verse" and "open form" and his "Eliotic" mask of Henry. Therefore, it is my understanding that Berryman cannot be characterized as postmodern as a result of the evidence to the contrary. At any rate, the characteristics of The Dream Songs that I have attempted to briefly outline provide a model for the confessional lyric, as well as a good starting point for the analysis of the moral law against Henry, and Henry's attendant moral crisis.

#### **John Berryman and Henry**

The relationship between John Berryman and his persona Henry has been debated seemingly since 77 Dream Songs was first published in 1964. One is obligated to approach The Dream Songs with the understanding that Henry is not John Berryman if one is to remain true to the original text.

This analysis does not assume the contrary to Berryman's own disclaimer, which is quite clear on the matter:

The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in black face, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the case, we can only know Henry in the context of The Dream Songs: that is, as a literary character in crisis, having suffered an "irreversible loss".

There are two possibilities regarding the loss that precipitates the crisis. The literal loss, it has been assumed by scholars and critics who blur the distinction between Henry and John Berryman, is the loss of his (Henry's and Berryman's) father to a violent suicide. The second possibility, which is, I would submit, far more appropriate in the context of a moral law against Henry, is that Henry's is the loss of faith in the confusion of modernity, and its attendant moral bankruptcy. It seems

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<sup>6</sup> John Berryman. The Dream Songs. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991; reprint), forward "Note". (page references are to reprint edition).

unsatisfying on a basic level to interpret the father's suicide as the critical event of the crisis. This is not to conclude that the loss of a father under such dramatic and violent circumstances is not sufficient to activate a psychological crisis; however, the poet's attempt to make mourning and loss the subject of an "epic" poem might be suspected of mawkish melodrama in that case. In short, the thematics of a purely psychological nature could not adequately sustain the structure and the scope of Berryman's poetic sequence as it exists.

Henry is fully named only twice within the text as "Henry House" and "Henry Pussycat", along with the variants of Mr. Bones (e.g., Sir Bones, Dr. Bones). Henry has distinct desires for women and alcohol which he satisfies with guilt, self-loathing and the doom of the moral crisis; all of which, of course, is played out in full, disturbing details within the songs. Notable, too, is a dramaturgical subtext throughout The Dream Songs which involves the elaborate stage imagery of the traditional American minstrel shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. In this context, Henry is referred to as Mr. Bones by his nameless friend who is, assumingly, the "interlocutor" of the minstrel tradition. Accompanying the elaborate minstrel metaphor is the employment of a distinct Negro dialect, which Henry uses in addition to a disturbing syntax, various and arcane references, and anachronistic expressions. In short, persona Henry remains obscured by several layers of complexity, thus making the search for John Berryman among those layers a difficult one at best.

I have suggested that the psychological crisis, precipitated by the suicide of Henry's father is interpretatively "easy". It is, in part, the result of extensive theological references, and not Freudian or psychological allusions, that appear consistently throughout The Dream Songs and that allow for the secondary possibilities of the moral crisis, which was precipitated by the "irreversible" loss of faith.

Biographically, John Berryman's life reads like a litany of personal failures, which include failed marriages, various job problems and an alcoholic condition

exacerbated by an extreme nervous affliction. His literary reputation, it might be argued, was firmly established, at least in academic circles, by the critical reception of his first long work Homage to Mistress Bradstreet in 1956, confirming his status as a poet of considerable strength and confidence. Berryman at an early stage had mastered the sonnet sequence, and utilized it as his primary form of expression, usually writing several per day for the various women with whom he maintained adulterous relationships throughout his life. Despite the anecdotal source of these sonnets, this seemingly anachronistic use of form within his poetry indicates two influences which help to further characterize The Dream Songs: (i) attention to and experience with form and meter, and (ii) an explicit academic influence which is evidenced by obscure literary, theological and historical allusions; that is, the sonnet form indicates the work of a disciplined and learned craftsman.

In the following chapters, we will look closer at specific examples of Henry's central plight, evidence that

suggests that his loss of faith is relative to a moral crisis, and evidence that supports certain criteria for a "confessional" long poem, with its complement of characteristics. The following analyses are not intended to morally condemn John Berryman, since the subject is Henry's crisis, confessed in accordance with certain criteria for the confessional modern lyric, and not, per se, John Berryman's. The existing biographical evidence of John Berryman, however, mirrors the life of Henry sometimes too closely to be discounted. I am avoiding the issue, in part, because of the very specific, and conscious employment of the persona which provides Berryman his "Eliotic" mask, and which diminishes the immediate impact of the poet's possible dilemma.

The methodology will consist of an analysis of the individual songs, as they characterize a "moral law" against Henry. The following chapters will approach each section of the entire work by the arrangement of the text itself. In other words, individual songs from books I through III will be analyzed, then IV and V, then VI and



VII. It is not possible, obviously, to critically analyze each and every of the 385 individual songs, at least not within this format. Furthermore, where appropriate, the entire song will be cited in an effort to ensure critical comprehensiveness, and an understanding of its interaction with successive and preceding songs.

Difficult, too, are the chores of explicating the obscure allusions (for a noble effort, see John Haffenden's John Berryman: A Critical Commentary<sup>7</sup>); researching and analyzing the epigraphs; and delineating, or at least probing for possible mathematical meanings within the arrangement of the material. Most of these have been previously attempted, some with more success than others.

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<sup>7</sup> John Haffenden, 79-122.

## CHAPTER II

### 77 DREAM SONGS BOOKS I - III.

#### Book I.

The Dream Songs consist of 385 individual poems, some with titles, most without, and is divided into seven books which comprise two volumes. When the Harvard Advocate interviewed him in the spring of 1969<sup>8</sup>, Berryman was asked about the formal structure of each individual song (as well as the overall structure of the entire work). He responded to questions regarding overall structure with ambiguity, intimating that there is no over-reaching paradigm by which he structured his work accordingly. His responses to these questions are elliptical and quirky, and at times seem to challenge the reader to search out and "discover" the grand design of his work. His contemporary critics and scholars did, in fact, attempt such vague (and often fruitless) missions.

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<sup>8</sup> Harvard Advocate 103, no. 1 (Spring 1969), as appears in Berryman's Understanding (ed. Harry Thomas. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 3-17.

But in response to the question of the individual form of the songs, Berryman was not elusive at all, probably because one cannot conceal their basic design.

Berryman stated:

The stanza is complicated. It goes 5-5-3-5-5-3, 5-5-3-5-5-3, 5-5-3-5-5-3 -- that's the business -- and it's variously rhymed, and often it has no rhyme at all, but it sounds as if it rhymed. That I got from Yeats -- three six-line stanzas. His songs don't really resemble mine, but I did get that from him. It's rather like an extended, three-part sonnet.<sup>9</sup>

In general, Berryman's own explication of the meter and arrangement of the individual song will serve the purposes of this analysis. He does not, rightly, indicate a metrical foot, because such an imposition would be an exercise in futility (and such an attempt would render the sounds of the songs foolish). The lack of a rhythmic foot is more than compensated by a tone and syntactic style that creates conversational rhythmic meter, coupled with dramatic, effective and often startling enjambments.

The title of this thesis, and indeed, the way I chose to enter into the work, is found in Dream Song 4, which

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 12.

concludes that there exists a "law against Henry". This admission, this confession, is made in the context of Henry's struggle with his overwhelming desire for a woman in a restaurant. The critical question is established in the conclusion of the poem. The exposition is an "Eliotic" rendering of the individual neurosis (and specifically male neurosis) of desire. While I characterize Henry's desire, here, as "neurotic", it is not by way of psychology that we can understand the final sentiment. Citing the entire poem here would be excessive, but it will be necessary to observe Berryman's form in subsequent songs, when establishing the context of Henry's crisis. Dream Song 4 (untitled) is, however, emblematic of the types of songs encountered in the work, and the types of themes that emerge from the individual songs. Each song, it might be argued, is a song of crisis, each contributing evidence to the law against Henry.

Songs 12 and 13 from Book I introduce Henry's initial understanding of the law against him, in terms of the God

that has imposed that law. In order to see clearly that the law against Henry is a moral one, an understanding of morality's language is necessary. Concepts of "ought" and "ought not" (as in, "there ought to be a law against Henry") belong almost exclusively to the vocabulary of morality and ethics. Without introducing here a vast "genealogy of morals", and if we can accept that "ought" indicates an imminent authority (not external to the realities of a theological domain), then we can proceed with Henry's understanding of God, and the moral law He has imposed on him.

Song 12, titled "Sabbath", introduces the concept of fear, and its very real impact on Henry. The first stanza is heavy with imagery, some of which is complicated by possible religious overtones. It begins:

There is an eye, there was a slit.  
 Nights walk, and confer on him fear.  
 The strangler tree, the dancing mouse  
 confound his vision; then they loosen it.  
 Henry widens. How did Henry House  
 himself ever come here?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Berryman. The Dream Songs, 14.

How does Henry House find himself, here on the Sabbath, in a state of fear? The question that begs response by implication, remains, within the subsequent stanzas of the poem, unanswered. The songs, in addition to being characterized by "confessional" rhetoric and images, are dialogically rhetorical. In a conversation ostensibly with the God that imposes "moral" laws upon Henry (who suffers as a result), questions must remain dialogically unanswered. There is the possibility, too, that such questions are directed at his nameless friend, who has never been correctly identified by any critic. According to Berryman in his interview in The Harvard Advocate, he states: "I wanted someone for Henry to talk to, so I took up another minstrel, the interlocutor, and made him a friend of my friend Henry. He is never named; I know his name, but the critics haven't caught on yet."<sup>11</sup>

The question that Henry House poses to himself (or to his friend) is an echo of similar questions that appear throughout the songs, and is an echo, specifically, of the

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<sup>11</sup> John Berryman, in Berryman's Understanding (ed. Harry Thomas), 8.

question from Song 4: "Where did it all go wrong?" These are questions of crisis, existential and deliberate, and are intended, I think, to give expression to the dramaturgical intensity of Henry's irreversible loss.

An additional note from the first stanza of "Sabbath": the strangler tree is a menacing image of the crucifixion, and the tree, in general, is a repeating motif within the songs. Keeping in mind that much imagery is developed as a result of minstrel shows and Negro dialect, the image, here, assumes a dual nature: the hanging (lynching) of men from trees and the crucifixion of Christ. If morality has put into motion the crisis from which Henry suffers, there must be at least three distinct themes that complicate the crisis: an understanding (or lack thereof) of Divine authority, an awareness and fear of death, and a dialogue with the cultural images of his minstrel metaphor.

I have discovered, too, that a titled song usually interacts very well with the material of its succeeding song (or songs), so that a kind of conversation can be interpreted among them. This, however, is not a consistent

pattern, but when employed, it is rather effective. Therefore, song 13 follows with an interesting delineation of Henry's understanding of the relationship between him and his God. The two lines of stanza one read: "God bless Henry. He lived like a rat,/with a thatch of hair on his head/in the beginning."<sup>12</sup> Though not consistent, this pattern, of establishing expository imagery in the first stanza, wrestling with that imagery in the second stanza, and concluding with an "open" tone of defeat or doom (usually in the form of a rhetorical question), is facilitated by his three stanza structure (and might be construed as dialectical; however, no real synthesis is ever achieved -- there are, after all, a total of 385 songs). Often, transitions are characterized by a violent enjambments, but are sometimes smoother, and more "traditional" and aesthetically pleasing.

The first line of stanza two of song 13 reads: "So may be Henry was a human being."<sup>13</sup> This represents a clean break from the initial stanza, and establishes Henry's

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<sup>12</sup> John Berryman. The Dream Songs, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., line 7.



humanity (infant Henry as a rat is the disturbing birth-image of Henry). But when we notice the verb tense of the confession, meaning is confounded. Henry is referring to himself (as Berryman warned in his forward note to the volume) in the third person, but also in the past tense. Three lines later into the stanza, the tense shifts to the present: "He is a human American man."<sup>14</sup> The implication, I think, is that there is a distinction between the time that Henry was a human being (before the "irreversible loss"), and the time that he is merely a "man", suffering the attendant desires and complications of, perhaps, the "postmodern" man. The reason, in part, to discuss the verb tenses, and the shifts of perspective, is necessitated by their prevalence within the songs. A close analysis cannot be accommodated without attention to the details of style and technique.

The final stanza, then, captures fully the opposition of God to Henry:

God's Henry's enemy. We're in business. . . Why,  
what business must be clear.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., line 10.

A cornering.  
I couldn't feel more like it. -- Mr. Bones,  
as I look on the saffron sky,  
you strikes me as ornery.<sup>15</sup>

This stanza is an excellent and thorough example of what must be considered Berryman's confessional stylization. There are three voices employed, the minstrel metaphor, its dialect, and the secondary persona of Mr. Bones (who is Henry). The admission, or confession, that God is Henry's enemy clearly defines the conflict, the moral crisis, that will plague Henry throughout the remaining books. Specifically opposed to each other are Henry's desires and God's moral law, which stands firmly against Henry, which drives him to despair, and which "corners" him.

A final song from Book I that, I think, deserves attention is Song 20, "The Secret of Wisdom". The final stanza of "The Secret of Wisdom" defines the concept of "sin" and how it might affect, and complicate Henry's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., lines 13-18.

crisis. It is an odd stanza that confounds an attempt at immediate understanding, but which is nonetheless significant as the result of the duality of sin and grace, concepts that are doctrinal and are inherent in the moral law against Henry:

An evil kneel & adore.  
 This is human. Hurl, God who found  
 us in this, down  
 something . . . We hear the more  
 sin has increast, the more  
 grace has been caused to abound.<sup>16</sup>

If the secret of wisdom is Henry's, then the song indicates an awareness of the paradoxical relationship between sin and grace. This possibility introduces new levels of complexity regarding the moral law with which Henry struggles. It also introduces the paradox of the pleasures of sin, and that to experience sin is a seemingly human requisite. Without complicating the interpretation with theological doctrinal possibilities, suffice it to say that Henry is aware of sin (his own and the sins of the world), and is also aware of the Original Sin (the

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<sup>16</sup> Berryman, 22.

"strangler tree") that was hurled down to those that suffer from the consciousness of sin. The opposition, again, of Divine expectation and human reality (and specifically the terrors of Henry's reality) is made clear.

Technically, the use of the second person plural which observes the relationship of sin to grace complicates the realization that it expresses. One is tempted, at times, to think about the poet's possible consciousness of martyrdom and the concept of theodicy; though in this stanza, these concepts seem anecdotal, since Henry is noncommittal ("We hear..."). One is, I think, also tempted to consider St. Augustine's Confessions, in particular, whose own "abounding" grace (and martyrdom) resulted from "increased" sin, and the account of those sins.

#### **Books II and III.**

Song 51 (untitled) from Book II provides a lyrical example of the existential tension of the crisis. That is, the question is raised whether Henry, in the face of the mutable though indifferent universe, has to confess at all (and to whom shall he confess?). The tone of song 51 is,

in the first two stanzas, subdued and masterful. Berryman is, at times, stunning in his lyricism, just as he is jarring in his use of the unconventional enjambment or the "crumpled" syntax at other times. Song 51 begins:

Our wounds to time, from all the other times,  
 sea-times slow, the times of galaxies  
 fleeing, the dwarfs' dead times,  
 lessen so little that if here in his crude rimes  
 Henry them mentions, do not hold it, please,  
 for a putting of man down.

Ol' Marster, being bound you do your best  
 versus we coons, spare now a cagey John  
 a whilom bits that whip:  
 who'll tell your fortune, when you have confessed  
 whose & whose woundings--against the innocent stars  
 & remorseless seas--<sup>17</sup>

Here, Berryman employs a framing mechanism in order to provide clues as to the dimensions of Henry's frustrated attempts to reconcile his crisis with his understanding of the natural processes of time and space. The problem remains, in these stanzas, of investing the confession of various "woundings" with a satisfying meaning in the context of the enormity of time and space. Henry, here, suffers from the timelessness of his loss (as reflected by

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<sup>17</sup> Berryman, 55.

the timelessness of irreversibility); the loss of faith that suspends time, and renders the natural order of the universe relative (and accountable) to time. In short, these stanzas reflect the problem of Henry's accountability in the face of his loss of faith, and the constancy of the "innocent stars" and the "remorseless seas". Furthermore, they reflect Henry's need to "do his best" versus the "coons" of the minstrel show of life; those who, in living, caricature his own deep consciousness of his mortality (and quite possibly, his awareness of his moral dissolution).

In Book III appears a song titled "Henry's Confession" (76), which will be analyzed shortly. It is, in general, heavily anthologized, and attracts critical attention, in part, as a result of its tight thematic structure (it seems more accessible), and also, in part, as a result of the closeness of the material of the confession to the material of the poet's life.

But before we come to "Henry's Confession", there are other songs in Book III that attract attention for other reasons. Song 57, for example, recalls the image of the

tree (a lynching tree, most likely), while making a casual relationship between Henry's consciousness of sin, and the "hanging" which it causes him. Stanza one of 57 begins, "In a state of chortle sin--once he reflected,/swilling tomato juice--live I, and did/more than my thirstier years./To Hell then will it maul me?/for good talk,/and gripe of retail loss?"<sup>18</sup> Noting the pun on "chortle" and "mortal", the interpretation can be made that the tone of "chortle" isn't as confident as Henry might hope. Since, after the initial confession of line one (referring, ostensibly, to the thirstier years of Henry's alcoholism), the image of Hell is engendered, the swaggering notion of living in "chortle" sin is diminished; its bravado tinged with, of course, fear.

Stanza two reinforces the casual connection between "sin" and the "strangler tree". It is a vivid image which also draws an explicit relationship between Henry and a lynched Negro: the identification, taken one step further, is a Christian identification with mortification of the

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<sup>18</sup> Berryman, 64.

flesh, and the crucifixion of Christ (and the suspension of Henry's lost faith): "I recall a 'coon treed,/flashlights, & barks, and I was in that tree,/and something can (has) been said for sobriety/but very little."<sup>19</sup> Within these lines is the vivid nature of the "cultural" crucifixion, the horrors of a "sobriety" which must confront the cultural mortifications, the moral failings of that culture, and the identification with the consequences of living in "chortle" sin. The song concludes with the line: "I fell out of the tree." Thus, Henry is made to suffer by the repeatability of his cycle of despair; his inability to reconcile his moral failings, and his awareness of the irreversible movement of his loss.

Song 76, "Henry's Confession", I would suggest, is the dramatic focal point of Book III (if not the entire first volume). But what is interesting about the song particularly is the material of the confession: it fully captures the "irreversible loss" of Henry's father to suicide, and the resultant despair with which Henry has

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., lines 9-12.



been burdened. It is not so much a confession of a moral nature; but it does refer to the death of faith, and the existential futility of Henry's subsequent life:

#### Henry's Confession

Nothin very bad happen to me lately.  
 How you explain that? --I explain that, Mr Bones,  
 terms o' your bafflin odd sobriety.  
 Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones,  
 what could happen bad to Mr Bones?  
 --If life is a handkerchief sandwich,

in a modesty of death I join my father  
 who dared so long agone leave me.  
 A bullet on a concrete stoop  
 close by a smothering southern sea  
 spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.  
 --You is from hunger, Mr Bones,

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.<sup>20</sup>

Henry's confession is literally the event that precipitated the moral crisis (through the psychological crisis that is defined by the suicide of the father). The opening stanza reveals the intimate relationship between inebriation and moral weakness; that is, with sobriety

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<sup>20</sup> Berryman, 83.

comes a relative stasis for Henry, and with alcohol, the satisfaction of his very real (and relational) desires. From the seemingly innocuous morality of the first stanza, a transition is made into the brutal reality of the event which created (or gave birth to) such a vacuous moral assessment. That is, the grim suicide of the father is recalled in Henry's brief moment of sobriety. The strange metaphor, "life is a handkerchief sandwich", becomes important by the transitional point into the third stanza. The nameless friend, here, offers Henry life, and a "will" to survive (regardless of the fact that the will itself can only stagger with some assistance from the precipitating event itself, and the memory of that event). The final stanza is a grotesque dance, Mr. Bones and friend, animated by a caricaturing of human engagement, then rendered lamentable as the result of the final, lonely sentiment.

In general, the first volume of The Dream Songs contains poems of extraordinary vision and power. Most of the songs that are ever anthologized in other collections have come from 77 Dream Songs, which won the Pulitzer Prize

for Poetry in 1965. The immediate drama of Henry's crisis is, I think, more palpable and is rendered more expertly here than in the subsequent volume, though there are several examples that continue to offer evidence that supports the law against Henry. Selections from the remaining books will be analyzed in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### HIS TOY, HIS DREAM, HIS REST

##### **Books IV and V**

Book IV begins the second volume of The Dream Songs with another seemingly anachronistic stylistic device, which further alarms the reader's hope for comprehension. It begins with a posthumous sequence of poems, the paradox of Henry's death. One cannot accommodate the initial sequence of this book without an understanding of the device itself. And it is here that I refer again to yet additional layer of complexity, a setting of the stage which provides Berryman with his "modern" impersonalism; the poet is removed from his subject one step further by placing the persona Henry in the region of the dead.

The complexity of this paradox involves the dramaturgical "suspension of disbelief" that is required in an acceptance of a voice from "beyond the grave". In order to facilitate this acceptance, it is helpful to think of

the posthumous sequence, which number fourteen poems, in terms of a bitter and morbid irony of which the poet is fully conscious. It is also necessary not only to inquire into the mechanics of the device, but also the reasons for its employment.

By approaching this sequence in terms of the latter question, an argument can be made that the reasons for the death of Henry involve the complex disparity between Henry's physical demands (those desires that require gratification and fulfillment and which consequently make him conscious of the moral dynamics of those acts), and his "spiritual" demands, that are made manifest by Henry's over-riding desire to understand himself in terms of God.

The poet, in this sequence, employs a stylistic device that is not modern in the historical sense: he pays homage, obviously, to the poets of the regions of the dead, Virgil and Dante. But unlike Virgil and Dante, who were paradoxically alive in the dead regions, Henry is dead and is sustained only by the imagination of Berryman. The relationship, then, between Berryman and Henry becomes at

this point in the work a complex arrangement; Berryman puts before himself the daunting task of an imagined death.

Furthermore, this "imagined death" allows Henry the opportunity to fully explore his relationship to the Divine judgment (or his apparent lack thereof) in an environment of non-accountability. The death of Henry, in other words, is the death of his desires, his life within the world. This premature death allows Henry to fully reconcile himself to the consciousness of mortality which so burdens him throughout the songs. Also, it raises the eschatological questions necessary for an understanding of morality's vocabulary.

That said, I think that the sequence of fourteen poems represent another complexity of metaphor on the same grounds as the elaborate minstrel metaphor. There is a danger, however, in the employment of the metaphor itself. The paradox of active imagination in the region of the dead unbalances the dramaturgical unity, say, of the songs that deal with the accessible experiences of the world, so that the reader may find the extreme confessions of a dead man

almost too ironic, and almost savage in its Nietzschean brutality. Not that the sequence is particularly offensive, but that it strives for an "epic" segment within a work that deals with the overall complexity of human engagement in the twentieth century. We can forgive Berryman for being, here, too academic, if only with an understanding that he was a poet writing Petrarchan sonnets also in the twentieth century.

There are passages within Book IV that deal thematically with the constancy of the moral law against Henry, even within the paradox of Henry's death of the body. There is, in "Op. posth. no. 3" (Dream Song 80), the pained questions of Henry's relationship to the God that has imposed the laws of morality. Of interest in this song is the relationship between the first two stanzas that deal with questions of crisis: the voice of Henry is separated from the body of Henry (or, in terms of the crisis of poetic imagination, it is the imagination that is separated from the mortal requirements of the body).





This is, again, an example of the dialogical nature of the songs. The second stanza asks the rhetorical questions of the dialogue, the questions of crisis that deal with God. Henry asks in stanza two, "Does He love me?/over & flout./Goodness is bits of outer God."<sup>22</sup> The dual nature of the "He" in this sentiment refers, ostensibly to God, and less tangibly to the suicidal father. It is my understanding that, as a result of its capitalization, the He refers to the God of the following lines.

There remain unanswered questions within this troubling sequence that comprises book IV. It is not so much a failure of the poetic imagination that is evidenced by the basic lack of eschatological concerns, since the imagination is strengthened by the exercise of separating itself from its subject entirely. I fear, however, that one comes away from Book IV with the feeling that the posthumous sequence was merely that: the exercise of a poetic imagination that has, by this point in the work, the command and confidence

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., lines 8-10.

necessary to sustain an "epic" device. But what are the effects of such a device?

It remains clear that the death's metaphorical landscape provides Henry the dramatic energy necessary for a truly probing analysis of his mortality in relationship to the desires of the body, and the desire to accommodate and understand the moral law that we have attempted to discover. But somehow that dramatic energy and its attendant tensions doesn't ever escape from the highly stylized tone that is firmly established within the second volume. The stylization of the songs, in short, compels the material forward seemingly of its own accord, so that it becomes possible for the reader to assimilate the information, the disturbing or perplexing poetic renderings, without the reflection (or the knowledge) that is necessary. Secondly, one gets the impression that Berryman's use of irony is almost mean-spirited, and sneering, or at times bombastic to the point that it overshadows the original subtlety of such impressions.

For example, in "Op. posth. no. 5" (Dream Song 82) Henry states, "From a cozy grave/rainbow I scornful laughings."<sup>23</sup> There seems to me, in lines that are emblematic of his scorn and violent indifference, a very real aspect of Henry's insecurity and fear. And it is this notion of "hiding" behind Henry's many layers, and the metaphors that accumulate atop one another, that ultimately brings critical attention to such lines. It is almost as though Berryman the poet is challenging the reader to remove the masks, to pluck Henry from the dead lands, and to hold him accountable, in a relational sense, to the God (Henry's enemy) and to his moral failings. However, ultimately, the general feeling of the posthumous sequence is facilitated by a tone of doom-struck despair; the unendurable agony of the conditions of modernity, and the relief Henry imagines for himself with the death of his body, which cannot be reconciled to the God with whom he struggles. The final lines of 82 read: "We was had./O visit me in my last tomb. -- Perché?/--is a nice pit."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Berryman, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., lines 16-18.

From the transitory device of Book IV, we move into the sequence of songs which number from song 92 to song 145. Henry, by the end of the posthumous sequence, retrieves his illness-plagued body, and returns to the world of bills, taxes and ex-wives. Book V, therefore, is a return to the world in which the moral law against Henry is an active, less "theoretical" concept than during his death sequence. The settings of Book V change variously (as they will throughout the entire volume which comprises books IV-VII). It cannot be readily discerned what effect the varying scenes have on the overall achievement of broader concepts, like tone, image, and the dramaturgical effects of the moral crisis. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the settings have a definite dramaturgical purpose: images in the context of their settings add to the meaning of those images, but for the purposes of this analysis it remains unclear if they are significant in any real way. The first song of this book, for example, is set within a hospital of some sort (one is biographically tempted to

imagine the hospital as a mental illness ward, into which Berryman often was admitted). The hospital setting is interesting, since it follows upon the heels of Henry's paradoxical death, but insofar as it adds to the totality of Henry's moral struggle, the hospital scenes provide a setting in which Henry is physically sustained, while left "alone" to catalog the inventory of his sufferings.

It is in Book V, too, that the language of morality becomes even more explicit than in the preceding books. Thematically, the law against Henry becomes fleshed out with issues concerning the "freedom of the soul", remorse and guilt, moral accountability, and the recurring antagonism between Henry and God.

For example, in Song 113, the law against Henry is made clear by a the physical nature of a very explicit metaphor. It will be productive, here, to delineate the entire song (the title of which is "or Amy Vladeck or Riva Freifeld") in an effort to observe the metaphorical manifestation of the law against Henry, the conflict

between the mortal demands of the body and the moral requirements of the imagination, and finally the freedom that is threatened by Divine judgment.

That isna Henry limping. That's a hobble  
clapped on mere Henry by the most high GOD  
for the freedom of Henry's soul.  
--The body's foul, cried god, once, twice, & bound  
it--  
For many years I hid it from him successfully--  
I'm not clear how he found it

But now he has it--much good may it do him  
in the vacant *spiritual* of space--  
only Russians & Americans  
to as it were converse with--weel, one Frenchman  
to liven up the airless with one nose  
& opinions clever & grim.

God declared war on Valerie Trueblood,  
against Miss Kaplan he had much to say  
O much to say too.  
My memory of his kindness comes like a flood  
for which I flush with gratitude; yet away  
he shouldna have put down Miss Trueblood.<sup>25</sup>

By approaching this entire song with an analysis of each stanza, we can observe the relationship of the various components of the law against Henry. The exposition of the first stanza, in this case, makes the physical metaphor,

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<sup>25</sup> John Berryman, 130.

the "hobbling" of Henry, very clear and distinct. Not only is the law against Henry moral, and by implication, metaphysical, but it is also a very real handicap, by virtue of the physical metaphor Berryman employs here. The image is an old one: the "mortal coil" and the imprisonment of the body by an external Divine reality seems Shakespearean. At any rate, the metaphor is significant to the discussion of Henry's impressions of Divine authority, and how it directly interferes with his poetic temperament, and more importantly, his freedom.

The question of Henry's freedom relates directly to the law against Henry, insofar as it indicates that Henry's freedom is compromised and is limited by two factors: his enemy (God), and the demands of desire. (The women in the title and within the song were John Berryman's former students at Brown University<sup>26</sup>). Henry, I would submit, struggles ultimately with the freedom that allows for an apathetic moral perspective, or at least the perspective

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<sup>26</sup> Haffenden, p. 106.

that allows him to "freely" desire the various women of the poem (given the complexities of that freedom and the dimensions of a contextual time and space which are seemingly indifferent to his desire and sufferings).

God's "discovery" of Henry's body, and the activities of his body, indicates Henry's extraordinary sensitivity to his moral failings, and the infringement upon his freedom by an external, though metaphysical conceptualization. He is aware, on some level, that he cannot conceal his immorality, any more than he can conceal his body. The complexity of this awareness, this discovery, cannot be underestimated. Henry's freedom is relational, then, to Divine freedom in a manner that seems constantly at odds. A moral explanation seems to satisfy the conditions of this relationship, but let it be noted also, that it is an antagonistic relationship, a crippling one.

The transition into the second stanza, then, reveals the relational angst that Henry experiences with regard to the God that has imposed on him the moral law, and that has "hobbled" him. The second stanza illustrates the third



component of Henry's relational freedom, by indicating, within the "vacant spiritual of space" the presence of others: Americans, Russians and Frenchmen. The intended meaning of introducing the cultural dimensions found within such space is unclear. One is tempted, I think, to regard this as a specific cultural allusion possibly involving the nascent space program, and its cultural/political challenges (i.e., the Russian advance of technology versus the American advances in technology). However, such a metaphor (if there exists one) would be misleading, and perhaps, unproductive.

In short, the second stanza introduces a cultural component to the law against Henry (and specifically the "hobbling" of Henry's metaphysical freedom), while simultaneously adding an existential note with the image of the "vacant spiritual of space". Interestingly, the word spiritual, as it appears above within the song, is italicized in such a way as to accent "ritual", so that the image of the cosmos assumes its existential, "remorseless" dimensions which Henry has recognized in earlier books. It

also implies that there is a distinct ritualization of space and time; ritual connotes a repetition that is (if not meaningless) certainly treated, here, ironically.

The third stanza, then, is characterized again by the violence of God's justice and judgment, with regard to women with whom, presumably, Henry had relationships. But there is another disturbing referential twist within the third stanza, and that involves the uncertain distinction of the pronoun "his". God is arguably the subject of the entire song, but as Berryman had warned the reader, the "his" in this final might refer to Henry, or even Henry's father. The use of the first person singular voice, of course, further creates perspectival conflicts; but if it is God's "kindness" that "comes like a flood", then the opening line of stanza three is loosened of its original intensity. The image of God as a despotic menace (though repeated elsewhere) is, of course, a fearful one, and His "declared war" is not, one might argue, a war against these women; rather, it is the war against Henry, which he hopes

to slough off with a tone of childishly wounded pride, or casual irony.

A final selection from Book V that has immediate relevance to the thesis as I have stated it, occurs toward the end of Book V in a moment of typical self-searching for Henry, who has just congratulated himself for abstaining from an adulterous liaison. The important themes that are illustrated in stanza three of Song 142 include notions of atonement, faith and morality. The transition from stanza two into three includes, again, the dialogical component of the crisis, and the questions that a moral position necessarily provoke in Henry. The final lines of stanza two read: "If this lady he had had/scarcely could he have have ever forgiven himself/and how would he have atoned?"<sup>27</sup>

Thus establishing the dialogical question that seeks a morally redemptive answer, the poem concludes in stanza three with a conversation between Mr. Bones (who is Henry), and the nameless interlocutor:

--Mr Bones, you strong on moral these days, hey?  
It's good to be faithful but it ain't natural,

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<sup>27</sup> Berryman, 159.

as you knows.

--I knew what I knew when I knew when I was astray,  
all those bright painful years, forgiving all  
but when Henry & his wives came to blows.<sup>28</sup>

After the question of atonement is posed, Henry is responding to the question with characteristic dismissiveness, noting that to be faithful to a wife is not "natural". Thus, the moral law is contrary to the "natural" law with which Henry more readily and agreeably identifies. The question of atonement, therefore, in the light of a "natural" law that seems more favorable to immoral Henry, is never fully answered, at least not in any satisfactory way. The stylistic devices, as we have seen, are employed heavily in this stanza which deals, obviously, with the moral crisis that Henry is attempting to reconcile. Had Henry been satisfied, then, with his understanding of the natural law which disqualifies the metaphysics of a moral law, it can be argued that The Dream Songs would not exist in its present form. Its dramatic integrity would be extraordinarily compromised if Henry held fast to his natural explanation of the remorseless

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., lines 13-18.

nature of the vacant and ritualistic universe full of its "innocent" stars.

### **Books VI and VII**

Before we begin by looking at yet more examples from books VI and VII of The Dream Songs that provide more of the evidence we have been collecting in an effort to delineate the moral law against Henry, some general remarks about the final books of this "epic" might be appropriate.

There are, obviously, certain aspects of the work that this analysis has neglected, in part as a result of the format of this analysis, and in part as the result of the enormity of Berryman's poetic sequence. The question that naturally arises as a result of a systematic analysis of each individual book is the question of dramatic unity, and the relationship of each book to the other books. And it is here that I must admit that such a relationship, if it exists, would be better left to another discussion entirely. Berryman, it seems, had in mind something of the poetic epic before he began The Dream Songs, and had

envisioned the work not as a series of poems, but as a singular unit of poetry, the sum of its parts. However, this relationship has its distinct problems, which arise when the relationship among the various books is brought into question. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the dramatic unity of the individual books is difficult to establish, and at best, this analysis hopes only to characterize those individual books, then bring to light the critical songs that support the main thesis.

Book VI, then, is characterized by the gravely critical events to which Henry reacts with perplexity, horror and remorse; themes which, in these books, are nothing that should surprise the reader by this point. And of course, the blame of the events that cause Henry his deepest sense of remorse and sorrow rests squarely on Henry's enemy, God. In the context of Book VI, Henry experiences the loss of his friends and fellow poets, affecting him to the point of confessing in Dream Song 153, "I'm cross with god who has wrecked this generation."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Berryman, 179.

Reflecting, thus, on the various poets who have died by their own hands, or suffering the indignities of their lost art (or their lost minds), Henry's returning obsession with his own suicide remains in Book VI very clear.

In Dream Song 159, for example, lamenting the fates of friends lost in earlier songs (most notably, Delmore Schwartz), Henry complains in stanza three: "I feel a final chill. This is cold sweat/that will not leave me now. Maybe it's time/to throw in my own hand./But there are secrets, secrets, I may yet--/hidden in history & theology, hidden in rhyme--/come on to understand."<sup>30</sup> It is clear that Henry has sought refuge from the pain of loss, and the pain of the consciousness of mortality, in poetry, history and theology. The secrets that he wishes to fathom, I would submit, involve the law against Henry, and how Henry, "pried open for all the world to see"<sup>31</sup>, can reconcile his morality with the ephemeral nature of the universe and the mortal reminders of his dying generation, and, in short, survive.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. lines 13-18.

<sup>31</sup> Berryman, 3 (lines 11-12).

Only two things can save Henry from the deep consciousness of the self (as well as the consciousness of his moral condition): women and alcohol. And these seem only to provide him with attendant fear and trembling, so that, metaphorically, he confuses the conditions that faith requires, and the conditions of erotic love. Notice, for example, in the first stanza of Dream Song 192: "Love me love me love me love me/I am in need thereof, I mean of love,/I married her./That was a hasty & a violent step/like an unhopeful Kierkegardian leap,/wasn't it dear?"<sup>32</sup> The simile employed here refers to Kierkegaard's concept of Christian existentialism, and the metaphor of the leap of faith (which is a necessary condition for the faithful). Here, Berryman employs the metaphor in relation to Henry's marriage, so that there is a fundamental confusion, the wish-fulfillment of the erotic impulse to see within human engagement qualities that are Divine. The mistake, the unhopeful leap, therefore, is Henry's awareness that his lost faith cannot be found in the

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<sup>32</sup> Berryman, 230.



marriages into which he constantly enters. In short, his suffering cannot be mitigated by the world of sensuality, the physical world to which he repeatedly returns with abandon.

In general, the subject material of book VI involves a probing of the secrets of theology and history. It involves, too, Henry's sensitive cultural awareness in a period of American history in which the moral standards were changing at an alarming rate. The use of cultural-historical allusions in Books VI and VII recur more often than in the previous four books, which, to me, indicates that the songs reflect the period of time in which Berryman was writing. I think it is safe to categorize the time period from the late 1950s until the late 1960s as a time period which radically altered moral standards, and the perceptions of those standards. Berryman's (and Henry's) sensitivity, then, throughout these books is heightened by the morally relativist vacuum created during a time of great political, social and cultural "unrest".

For the purposes of this analysis, there are several songs in Book VI that involve specific theological references, some of which are difficult to untangle, and some of which are obscured by intimate allusions that are seemingly impossible to discern. The thematic material, however, within Books VI and VII remains theological, but not purely theoretical. Henry desires an understanding of God, in very real cultural and social terms as well. The problem of analyzing each theological reference is obviated by the methodology of this analysis: the thesis does not speculate about the nature of theological doctrinal tenets, no matter how they are managed by the poet. Rather, the thesis hopes to ascertain the relationship of the theological material with the moral components of that material, then delineate it where appropriate.

A final song from these sections that involves not so much a theological meditation, but a moral one, is Dream Song 239, the first stanza of which satisfies many of the conditions I have attempted to illustrate which are indications of the moral law against Henry. Stanza one of

239 is dialogically rhetorical, involving the two personae, Henry and friend: "Am I a bad man? Am I a good man?/--Hard to say, Brother Bones. Maybe you both,/like most of we./The evidence is difficult to structure towards deliberate evil./But what of the rest? Does it wax for wrath/in its infinite complexity?"<sup>33</sup> The question, as posed, remains necessarily unanswered, and in any case, unanswerable. It is the final question of a character plagued by his own consciousness of morality, and the critical impact of that consciousness on questions relating to the theological component of any value system. The "infinite complexity" refers to the magnitude of moral crisis, and an individual's attempt to come to terms with that crisis.

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<sup>33</sup> Berryman, 258.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: "THE LAW AGAINST HENRY"

The capacity of the poetic imagination, at times of moral crisis, involves the "infinite complexity" of "deliberate evil", as Henry questions in Dream Song 239. Henry's crisis is a complex one that involves a reconciliation with the power of the individual and free imagination, and a underlying sense of its integrity and majesty. At odds with the consciousness and the knowledge of the precedent of theological inquiry into notions of faith, value and morality, is the artistic temperament itself, and the demands of mortality. Chief among these demands are the organic desires of the body, and the need to express the more troubling aspects of their satisfaction.

Henry's moral crisis, therefore, is a crisis of faith within a mutable time period of American literary and cultural history. His lost faith is emblematic, and is not a unique dilemma in the twentieth century. However, what

remains important is the intersection of art and morality, and this thesis, by way of analyzing a poetic sequence that I think best exemplifies this intersection, has attempted to prove that "the law against Henry" remains a moral one.

One comes away from The Dream Songs with the sense that Henry is the figure of the imagination, an extreme poetic figure whose identity and whose struggles are essentially universal (if one considers the work successful in the literary sense). Therefore, the overall effect of the moral crisis is, rather than to answer a question, to pose the question that seeks the final claims of morality and that attempts also to fathom the mystery of faith and the demands placed upon that faith.

The "law against Henry", then, as it is expressed by the evidence I have presented, is characterized by Henry's sensitivity to the limitations of the poetic imagination, as it attempts to find meaning in the demands of mortality (i.e., desire) and the demands of the artistic temperament. This sensitivity is heightened by an attempt to understand the theology and the vocabulary of morality, while

maintaining the integrity and tension of the imagination in crisis.

Stylistically, Berryman's approach is a reaction to an older poetic approach which is characterized by a dramatic distance which was traditionally placed between the poet and the subject. In The Dream Songs, the subject of the self serves as the thematic umbrella under which the individual songs allow for further thematic complexity. Berryman's The Dream Songs represents his study of the masculine soul, and how it is expected to engage the world around him.

It is also an example of the "confessional" poem, whose characteristics have been delineated, and analyzed for the purposes of this inquiry. To satisfy the need to classify The Dream Songs as a "postmodern" work, I have pointed out that the confessional genre, in general, bridges the modern and the postmodern aesthetic tendencies. However, I have submitted that Berryman cannot cleanly distance himself from the modern aesthetic by virtue of his employment of several stylistic devices that owe themselves

to an analysis which categorizes the work as "modern". Whatever the case, Berryman uses "Eliotic" masks, several layered metaphors and the long poetic sequence to chronicle the postmodern condition. Indeed, the classification is problematic, and perhaps not worthy of a conclusive statement here. Suffice it to say, therefore, that in any attempt to characterize the work in a literary paradigm, it is necessary to consolidate and to over-compensate for the various failings of either classification.

We have observed, too, the dramaturgical tension created by Berryman's use of perspectival shifts that are facilitated by fluctuating referential pronouns, and secondary personae. The tension is further heightened by a disturbed syntax, coupled with the use of slang, dialect and startling poetic enjambments that, for some readers, render the work inaccessible.

I have attempted to delineate the imagery that supports the profound "dream-like" intensity of Henry's theological awareness and understanding, as well as the confessional rhetoric that reflects that awareness. The

individual songs were analyzed in accordance with their relationship to the work as a whole, and in terms of a unifying thematic approach. So, too, were the mechanics of the individual songs analyzed in order to facilitate an understanding of the relationship of stanza to stanza, as well as line to line, and how that relationship impacted upon the thematic approach.

The moral "law against Henry", therefore, is a law that transcends immediate experience, and that confounds the questions that are posed to it, that attempt to undermine the law, or that flagrantly violate the law (as Henry so often does). The inherent value of the law is not so much that it generates a significantly troubling crisis for Henry, but that it requires Henry (and the reader) to assess the quality of a life that ignores the magnitude of that "law", and to make certain judgments based upon that assessment. In Henry's case, the results were extreme, and, the reality of non-existence provided for him constant (though horrible) solace from the realities of the crippling of his "soul" by the external "reality" of the



moral law imposed upon him. Suicide, for Henry, was always an option, that found expression in its recurring references, and the strange epic stylization of the death sequence.

Finally, one is forced, if not by the evidence of The Dream Songs, but by the questions it raises, to answer whether they are a "good man or a bad man" or, quite possibly, both, as Henry has significantly failed to determine. The questions are dialogically rhetorical, meant only to continue the conversation that began with a word or two concerning morality and its relationship to human values, and a long poem that attempted to give artistic form to that conversation.

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