“The soul has ears”: Music and Movement in the Poetry of John Berryman

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis explores Berryman's poetic engagement with various musical traditions and personalities, demonstrating how this musical immersement played a key role in shaping the trajectory of his poetic thinking and career. The introduction sets the scene of Berryman's lifelong engagement with music, drawing attention to the need for such research and marking the parameters for this particular study.

Chapter One looks at Berryman's first poetic expressions of musical interest in *The Dispossessed* (1948), and considers how musical allusion and ideas become bound up with early questions of instability and dispossession (both personal and public) that lie at the heart of the book. A close reading of the epithalamion 'Canto Amor' brings to light the musical context of the poem's composition – the many musical letters that Berryman sent to his first wife, Eileen Simpson. Yet in exploring Berryman's delineation of marriage as a kind of music, I discuss the ways in which the poem constitutes a more complex enquiry into the imaginative possibilities of music both personally and poetically. Likewise, in 'The Nervous Songs,' a sequence based on Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Stimmen* (The Voices, *The Book of Images*), Berryman sets in motion another key strand in his poetic thinking regarding the instrument of the voice and the value of song as an emotionally charged yet social medium.

Chapter Two moves on to discuss the poet's continuing momentum toward a musically suffused verse in *Berryman's Sonnets*. This project was begun in 1947, before the publication of *The Dispossessed*, yet it remained unpublished until 1967 on account of its reliance on intimate material relating to the poet's extra-marital affair. The chapter takes its cue from archival notes that reveal how Berryman's conceptual for the project was musically grounded, suggesting that he was imagining a way beyond the Sonnet (or "little song") and into something more hospitable to American expression. "Of Bach," wrote Berryman, it was suggested that "before he began to extemporise he preferred to play something already familiar, as though his inventiveness needed stimulus." [1] This extra-textual note, which also glosses Mallarmé, Schubert, and Beethoven, signals to broader musical operations within the

[1] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, JBP.

work itself. The chapter opens with a consideration of Berryman's attempts to access a musically suggestive language modelled on (French) symbolism before moving on to a discussion of connections forged between the experience of music and the erotic subject. Berryman also draws on the song cycles of Schubert as a paradigm for his own story. The chapter is closed by a discussion of how Berryman's "little songs," which were published (with an additional five Sonnets) some decades after the fact of the affair, and after the first instalment of Berryman's Dream Songs, reflect back on the significance of this musically-oriented work for Berryman's poetic development.

Chapter Three considers the energetic collision of Berryman's musical interests as he moves towards an exploration of the American subject in the project of *The Dream Songs*. Focusing particularly on *77 Dream Songs* (1964), it begins with the re-evaluation of Berryman's blackface minstrelsy as a broader engagement with one of America's first cultural industries and a deepening of the voice experiment begun in 'The Nervous Songs.' The chapter progresses into a deeper discussion of the poet's blues interest, uncovering the rich structural and emotional currency of the blues within *The Dream Songs*. While the first two sections of this chapter examine how the interlocking yet distinct traditions of minstrelsy and blues become part of the poem's central nervous system, the third moves into the later instalment of Dream Songs, *His Toy His Dream, His Rest* (1968), and considers how Berryman's work undergoes a musical sea-change. In the third part of this chapter, Berryman's redirection toward classical composers is seen to point to new concerns with artistic sublimity and terminal experience.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis picks up on different manifestations of late style in connection with music and memory. In discussion of *Love & Fame* (1970), it considers why Berryman returns, in the first two parts of the book, to musically significant memories of the 1930s and '40s, before examining how the poet finds a way, through music, to sit comfortably with his past. As he moves into his final and posthumous collection, *Delusions, Etc.* (1972), music becomes associated with legacy, and a close reading of the musical biopic 'Beethoven Triumphant' illuminates the ways in which the poet gives his own testimony through the study of an enduring musical hero.

Finally, the conclusion reflects on how an understanding of Berryman's musical engagement enhances our sense of his poetry at large, and points to avenues for future research.

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A Note on Sources

This study draws on a range of published and unpublished material from across John Berryman's career. For ease of reference, Charles Thornbury's *John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937—1971*, originally published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1989 (and republished by Faber and Faber in 1990), will provide the main source text throughout. However, for reasons that will be explained, *Berryman's Sonnets* (the version that the poet himself saw through to print in 1967) will provide the text for Chapter Two, and individual Sonnets will be indicated, where necessary, with the abbreviation BS.

The Dream Songs, which does not feature in Thornbury's *Collected Poems*, is the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition, originally published with 'Author's Note' by Berryman in 1969, and with additional introduction by W. S. Merwin in 1997. The abbreviation DS will be used to indicate an individual Dream Song rather than a page number.

A variety of archives are deployed across this study. For the sake of clarity, and on account of the volume of sources, the exact location of archival material will be indicated in a footnote, and dates provided where available. The largest portion of this material is from the **John Berryman Papers (Mss 43)** at The Andersen Library, University of Minnesota Libraries. The collection contains manuscripts, notes, typescripts, galleys and proofs of works in poetry and prose. It also includes photographs, diaries, awards, financial records and other personal papers. Resources from this archive will be indicated with the abbreviation JBP.

A more modest amount of material can be found at Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. **Ms Coll Berryman-Haffenden (MS#0115)** includes material gathered by John Haffenden for the authorised biography of John Berryman, commissioned by Faber and Faber. **Ms Spec Coll Berryman (MS#0114)** includes correspondence, manuscripts, and proofs of writings by and about John Berryman collected by his friend and critic, William Meredith. A number of items pertaining to Berryman are also found amongst the **Mark Van Doren Papers [ca. 1917]-1976 (MS#1288),** also accessed at the University of Columbia.

The Boydell Papers (Ms 11128), housed at the Manuscripts & Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin, are also briefly drawn on.

Introduction: "Something worth hearing"

Considering his poetic objectives in an early verse fragment, and under the heading of "Maxims," John Berryman wrote the following:

> Selbst
>
> Some bones, and old clothes, and remorse, two eyes
> None of the best, and if it has a soul
> The soul has ears[1]

This sombre tercet, which reduces the human body down to the calciferous and material remainders of the 'Selbst,' or self, finds dignity in the artifact through the unearthed connection of soul and ears – both of which are enduring. Berryman's 'Selbst' is musically conceived – the repeated "b" and "s" sounds of the title breathe new life into the degraded object – and says something important about the soul. Such an alignment forms the basis of this study, which assesses the impact of music on Berryman's poetic development and approach. Throughout his career, the poet expressed a profound preoccupation with musical listening, and music becomes an agent of change not only on the level of the poem but also in a broader schematic sense. From the early songs of *The Dispossessed* (1948) to his musical portraits in *Delusions, Etc.* (1972), Berryman's poetry draws on music to speak to matters both private and social, to reimagine the scope of poetic language and the responsibilities of the poet.

Berryman's musical interest, particularly in *The Dream Songs* (1969), has not gone unnoticed by critics of his work, yet such pronouncements are generally speculative and have largely been relegated to the critical introduction. Charles Thornbury's preface to the *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, though brief, represents probably the most general assessment of Berryman's central theme of "hearing" (xxxiv) and of his musical aspirations – Berryman is "the lover of Bessie Smith, Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart," (xxiii), writes Thornbury, his poetry, "makes a bid for readers to become members of both the choir and the orchestra" (xx). Thornbury's

[1] Miscellaneous Poetry (Unpublished), Folder 4, Verse Fragments, JBP. The note suggests a date of "8 Aug 1948."

introduction points to some important schematic operations of music within Berryman's poetry – but it is a point of departure rather than the final word. Similarly, W. S. Merwin's introduction to *The Dream Songs* imagines the poet's "Syntax, tone, diction, and movement" as "cadenzas on carefully tuned strings," noting how Berryman's "elaborately rearranged word order and sentence structure played with the pitch and current of his verse" (Introduction to *The Dream Songs*, xxiii). Introductory appraisals like these highlight important tendencies and preoccupations in the poet's work but leave much more to the imagination. More recently, Maria Johnston's article '"We write with our ears": Berryman's music' has entered into a more sustained engagement with the musical protagonists of Berryman's poetry, before moving onto a discussion of various settings of Berryman's work. Once again, while this essay is sensitive to the musical meaning of Berryman's poetry it is clear that there remains much room for further engagement. This thesis diverges from all of the above in its exploration of Berryman's career-long engagement with music, its poetic function on the level of both language and form, and the ways in which it comes to support the larger arc of Berryman's development.

Berryman's recourse to music is not only evidenced by the poetry itself, and in various biographies and memoirs drawn upon throughout this discussion – including Eileen Simpson's *Poets in their Youth*, E. M. Halliday's *John Berryman and the Thirties*, and John Haffenden's *The Life of John Berryman* – but by Berryman's literary archive, housed at the University of Minnesota. The John Berryman Papers contain a wealth of resources that demonstrate the lineaments of the poet's musical interest and engagement, and the study of these unpublished works – including diaries, correspondence, sketches and typescripts – forms a key part of this study's methodological approach. Berryman's personal library, also housed at his archive, equally enhances our understanding of the poet's musical absorption. Amongst the collection are various musical biographies and many (uncatalogued) opera scores, mostly Mozart, on which he made various markings and notes.[2] Moreover, the books of poetry that Berryman owned, and the poets with whom he aligned himself in general, suggests a continual curiosity regarding the ways in which music can enter and occupy the space of the poem. Like Pound, Berryman was fascinated by "musical

[2] Berryman owned multiple copies of some of these operas, particularly *Don Giovanni*, the ending of which he took "very seriously" and would play "over and over again" (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 164).

forms and the literary uses that might be made of them" as well as in releasing "poetry from the cramped metres and forms that had imprisoned it for so long" (Murray Schafer, *Ezra Pound and Music*, 6). His work displays an endless desire to "make it new," and to do so through a musical reimagining. Looking at Berryman's personal library it becomes clear that the poet took great care to school himself in Pound's readings of troubadour poets such as Arnaut Daniel, underlining sections of Pound's essays concerning the rationale behind their singing. "There was an unspeakable boredom in the castles," writes Pound, "the chivalric singing was devised to lighten the boredom; and this very singing became itself in due time, in the manner of all things, an ennui."[3] As will be seen in Chapter Three, such a statement resonates more broadly with Berryman's blues idiom and suggests that Berryman was continually looking for correspondence between his musical method and those of other poets. Berryman's notes on Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' in *Leaves of Grass* (incidentally, a poem that has been set to music)[4] likewise suggest his attention to the musical resonance of poetic structure; in the margins he suggests various musical pitches and tempos for the work, calling attention to the "operatic form" of the stanzas that close the poem:

> But fuse the song of my dusky demon brother,
> That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
> With the thousand songs awaked from that hour,
> And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
> The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
> That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
> (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments,
> bending aside,)
> The sea whisper'd me.[5]

This undulating passage speaks to Berryman's larger poetic project and musical engagement within the historical tradition of the poet as singer. Indeed, Berryman was a poet of the oral tradition, one for whom the term "poem" was interchangeable with "song"; his own iconic performances testify to his awareness of the innate sonic qualities of spoken language. Berryman's poetic mythos in Dream Song 166 adheres

[3] Ezra Pound, *Make it New: Essays*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935, JBP.
[4] See Frederick Delius' *Sea Drift*, a work for baritone, chorus and orchestra, completed between 1903 and 1904.
[5] Berryman's copy of Walt Whitman, *Whitman: Selections from "Leaves of Grass."* New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1959 p. 142, JBP.

closely to Whitman's:

> Henry began to poke his head from Venus' foam
> toward the grand shore, where all them ears would be
> if any.
> Thus his art started [. . .]
>
> He strained his eyes, his brain, his nervous system,
> for a beginning; cracked an ankle & arm;
> it cannot well be denied
> that nearly all the rest of him came to harm
> too . . . Only his ears sat with his theme
> in the splices of his pride.

Dream Song 166, which considers the endurance of the ears and their alignment with the poet's theme, of course, also reflects back on the much earlier fragment of 'Selbst.' In another archival item, the draft of a preamble for a reading the poet gave, he re-emphasises these ideas, priming his audience for what lay ahead: "And what about a poet, reading his poems aloud in public ~~as I have done before~~ since 1936, an old hand, a con man [. . .] Still I want, out of respect, to make certain that you hear <u>something</u> <u>worth</u> <u>hearing</u> this evening."[6] This aspect of performance was always at the heart of Berryman's project.

The poet's engagement with various musically-minded (and often performative) poets will be explored across all four chapters of this thesis – indeed it is remarkable the degree to which Berryman found himself naturally drawn to poets of particular musical interest – poets such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, all of whom have attracted scholarship in this area.[7] Yet in looking at Berryman's poetic antecedents in connection with music, some lesser-explored connections emerge. The influence of Stéphane Mallarmé, Rainer Maria Rilke and Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, for example, shine through – particularly in Chapter One of this thesis – as significant and often under-acknowledged sources. Thus, examining Berryman's poetic sources in terms of musical engagement, a new picture of the

[6] Diary 1965-1972, Notes & Undated, Folder 8 (Undated), JBP.
[7] See, for example:
Clark, David R. *Yeats at Songs and Choruses.* Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983. Print.
Xiros Cooper, John. *T.S. Eliot's Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*. New York and London: Garland, 2000. Print.
Fitzgerald, William. "'Music Is Feeling, Then, Not Sound': Wallace Stevens and the Body of Music." *SubStance* 21.1 (1992): 44-60. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 March 2017.

poet's transnationalism comes to light.

All of these sources, poetic and personal, will be used to demonstrate the fact that music was one of Berryman's central guiding principles, helping the poet give credence to Stevens' poetic maxim (in 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction') that "it must change" (336). Indeed, often Berryman's musical engagement allowed him to adhere more closely to Stevens' other two principles: "It must be abstract" (329) and "It must give pleasure" (344). It is important to note, however, that while music gave Berryman great pleasure, the poet was by no means a musical expert. Berryman played no instrument and had only a basic knowledge of written music. It was perhaps in his sense of himself as a relative outsider to the discipline of music, moreover, that the poet was spurred in his quest for comprehension. Berryman's musical interest was ultimately shaped by a handful of more musically skilled individuals, many of whom operated (often unknowingly) as musical mentors to the poet. Over the course of his career Berryman curated friendships with a variety of musical figures, which was to have both personal and material consequences. Some of these personalities are mentioned in the poetry itself, while others form a significant backdrop to his larger creative project. The correspondence between these parties, and the letters that Berryman wrote pertaining to particular encounters, speak powerfully to his engagement with music throughout his career and will be examined briefly ahead of the more poetically-focused discussion that follows. While Berryman's poetry does not address these encounters chronologically – and this thesis follows Berryman's site-specific engagements with music across the span of his major works – a sense of the chronology of key musical moments, friendships and collaborations within the poet's experience aids us in understanding his musical reference and orienting ourselves within his poetic works.

Berryman's musical interest is witnessed as early as his Columbia diaries, which span the period of 1932-1936. Here the poet discusses his attendance at a variety of burlesques and vaudeville concerts at the Savoy and the Apollo. As Ernest Halliday points out in his memoir, *John Berryman and the Thirties*, the poet's interest in African-American music can also be traced back to this period. The poetic significance of these early engagements are discussed in Chapter Three, which explores Berryman's vaudeville and blues mode in *The Dream Songs* (1969), and Chapter Four, which considers the poet's rehearsal of these memories in *Love & Fame* (1972). While Berryman's days at Columbia were certainly music-filled, he still

lacked the musical guidance that was required to bring his enthusiasm into full (poetic) expression. It was after meeting Brian Boydell, a young student of Natural Science at Cambridge and an aspiring composer, that Berryman developed a sudden musicophilia and began to take steps to enhance his musical understanding. His diaries for the period that he was studying at Cambridge (1936-1937) are swollen with notes on records and classical concerts that suggest the poet was taking his musical education seriously. "With time and listening," wrote Berryman, "and Brian's little books and the imposing but useful *History of Musical Thought* I got at Gordon's today. I'll learn. Such a blank were pitiful, and I think music may be the purest of the arts."[8] Berryman spent a good deal of time with Boydell during this period and the two collaborated on a 'Cradle Song' after their occult-like experience of listening to Warlock's 'The Curlew' "with the lights out" (*CP*, 194). As will be seen in Chapter Four, Berryman's memory of Boydell was one of particular endurance, making its way into the memory log of *Love & Fame* some thirty years on. Indeed, the poet's vivid memory of this time is undoubtedly related to his discovery of this new passion. In a letter to John Haffenden, now housed at Columbia University, Boydell responded to the biographer's request for information regarding his almost mythic status in *Love & Fame*. Boydell, then a Professor of Music at Trinity College Dublin, responded to say that his memory of Berryman was somewhat less potent:

> Unfortunately, it was only towards the end of my time at Cambridge that I really got to know John Berryman – and our rather short-lived friendship, intimate though it was for a time, did not have time to flourish sufficiently before I left Cambridge: the smaller details have therefore disappeared from my memory. Indeed I remember the 'cult' of listening to Warlock's 'Curlew' with all the lights out, and that John was an enthusiastic member of our frightfully aesthetic/intellectual group. I think it was through my friend Andrew Chiappe [. . .] that I was introduced to J.B. Andrew taught him chess, I think: anyway J.B. became so enthusiastic that he played chess continually for three days and three nights until he passed out . . . .[9]

Boydell's throwaway comment regarding Berryman's first encounters with chess reflects a kind of fanaticism that Boydell would have encountered as Berryman grew into his new passion for music. The composer's rather tepid response is telling of

[8] Sunday 24 October 1937, Diary for October 1937-December 1937, Diaries 1931-1957 (Incomplete), Old Boxes I-III, JBP.
[9] Brian Boydell to John Haffenden, 13 July 1972, Trinity College Dublin, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.

Berryman's tendency to over-amplify certain connections and experiences from his past – both tendencies which can be presumed to have some bearing on his comments regarding musical connections.[10] Yet Boydell's initial response must not be read as the final word on his relationship with the poet, since a later, almost apologetic letter to Haffenden, relates how having gone through his diary of engagements for the period, the composer was "most disturbed to find such a thick fog lying over that period of [his] life." "[I]n fact remembering as much as I do indicates that the impression he made was stronger than my faculty for memory has indicated," resolved Boydell.[11]

During his time at Cambridge, Berryman wrote many letters home to the US, most of them containing musical analysis and observation. He immersed himself in the work of Yeats and the French symbolists – all of whom would come to have some bearing on his musical poetics, and are discussed in more detail in the first two chapters of this thesis. A letter to Mark Van Doren, Berryman's earliest literary mentor at Columbia, suggests how the young poet was beginning to form lucid and imaginative connections between music and literature that would significantly inform his work down the line. In one letter Berryman describes how he was "just back from an exciting evening at Brian Boydell's" where he had been given a run-through of their finished 'Cradle Song'; he proceeds to describe his experience in listening to "the spectral profundity and tragic passion of the C# minor Sonata":

> I thought of Yeats', <u>At Algeciras – A meditation upon Death</u> and Hermione's:
>
> 'Sir, you speak a language that I understand not: my life stands in the level of your dreams, which I lay down.'
> How many lives have united meditation and passion? What else are we trying to do?
>
> John[12]

[10] Along with this letter, Boydell enclosed the song that was "written especially for me to set" and which was later incorporated into a "series of three songs for soprano and string quartet."
[11] Brian Boydell to John Haffenden, 25 July 1972, Derlamogue, Baily, Dublin, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.
[12] John Berryman to Mark Van Doren, 1 am, 29 April 1937, Cambridge, England, Mark Van Doren Papers [ca. 1917]-1976, MS#1288, Box 2.

The suggestive connection of music and dream image, as well as the fashioning of something novel from earlier literary fragments, would become hallmarks of Berryman's poetry. In addition to this, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Yeats's meditation on death – both conjured by Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' (Piano Sonata no. 14 in C# minor) – are two late works, a lifelong fascination of Berryman's that comes to fruition in his own last books, discussed in Chapter Four. Together these works encompass the young poet's vision: "what else are we trying to do?" Of course, Yeats's 'At Algeciras – A Meditation upon Death' also possesses the same poetic structure as the Dream Song form that now seems almost inborn in the poetics of John Berryman. In fact, a few letters previously Berryman had sent Van Doren a copy of what appear to be the first poems in the later Dream Song stanzas, one, written after seeing the film *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936), and another written on the occasion of his twenty-second birthday. The latter, which expresses how "This anniversary erects a pattern," is closed with a chillingly portentous mission statement:

> From this day forth I will absolute change.
> But order there and stilled
> Loud cries for novelty:
> What breaks about my head next year or next
> Let it be intolerable, let it be
> Agony's discipline, let it not be strange.
> (Twenty-second birthday.
> October 25, 1936).[13]

These changes, as already pointed out, were continuous in Berryman's poetic project – yet his "cries for novelty" always returned him to an idea somehow "not strange" though usually uncanny; in much of Berryman's most powerful work there is an acute sense of the poem's having already been heard before, a haunting network of subliminal connections ready to be uncovered.

It was B. H. Haggin who replaced Boydell in his capacity as musical mentor when Berryman returned to America. In 1942, the poet began a long correspondence with the famous musicologist, mostly with regard to his attempts to purchase Haggin's gramophone, initially for his mother and then for himself. Haggin's musical manual, *Music on Records*, also became something of a religious text for the poet. In

[13] John Berryman to Mark Van Doren, 14 November 1936, Cambridge, England, Mark Van Doren Papers [ca. 1917]-1976, MS#1288, Box 2.

her memoir, *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson, then Berryman's wife, comments sardonically on the poet's painstaking attention to Haggin's dictum:

> Haggin said one should begin not with Beethoven, Mozart or Bach, but with Schubert. John began with Schubert. Haggin said to buy this or that recording. John scoured second-hand shops on Sixth Avenue in the West Forties to find it. He set about building a record library with the same care he had taken in building up his library books.
>
> When he returned to the below-ground room with his treasure, he followed Haggin's directions about the order in which the movements should be played, put the needle down again and again at a theme Haggin had pointed out, listening to a work twenty, thirty, forty or more times until he knew it. Reading Sir Donald Tovey, also recommended by Haggin, he anchored firmly in mind dates, biographical data, opus numbers and, for Mozart, Köchel listings. (17-18)

The influence of Haggin on Berryman's musical predilections cannot be overstated, and the letters that went between Berryman and Simpson during the period leading up to their marriage are testament to his discipleship. This correspondence, which formed the backdrop to the poetry of *The Dispossessed*, is discussed in more detail in Chapter One. Haggin's impact on the poet was enduring and his book informed Berryman's tastes in both blues and classical traditions.[14] One collector's list in the poet's archive is titled with a giveaway quotation – "a well-rounded collection to begin with" – and followed by a list of musical figures that were to become firm favourites of the poet, including Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. The other side of the note contains a variety of blues items and names including Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday, all of whom either appear or feature in the background of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman's magnum opus.[15] On this early list, which points to the poet's dual musical interest, musical items were listed under the categories "Listen" and "Get," while the bottom of the page counts a total of "96 records" – Berryman collected many more than this in his lifetime. Unfortunately, these are not amongst the items at the University of Minnesota. Berryman himself shared a number of literary suggestions with Haggin across their lengthy correspondence, and even recommended the musicologist listen to Warlock's 'The Curlew' – a record that Haggin thanks

[14] Haggin's *Music on Records* extols the virtues of blues artists such as Bessie Smith, for example, in his section on "Jazz: Some Outstanding Performances" (244).
[15] Diary 1965-1972, Folder 8 (Undated), JBP.

Berryman for giving him the "chance to discover" he did not like.[16] Berryman's efforts to share his own literary and musical predilections with his musical mentors suggest his hope that influence in these relationships flowed in more than one direction.

While he was working as Associate in Creative Writing at Princeton University from 1946, Berryman found himself interacting with another musical aficionado, the composer Edward Toner Cone, then a graduate student and part-time instructor in the history of music, who recalls learning much from Berryman. Over the period of their friendship, which Cone notes as spanning the period of Spring 1946 – Spring 1953, the composer remembers Berryman correcting his essay on Verdi and scoffing at the punctuation: "we continued to talk about punctuation, and how it can be used, not just to obey the rules, but really to give structure to one's ideas. It was an eye-opener to me," remembers Cone in a letter to John Haffenden, "and I imagine it would be to most writers."[17] Cone also set some of Berryman's poems to music, which were "sung in 1951."[18] The 'Triptych,' a work for Tenor or Soprano, comprises three poems for Bhain Campbell, a close friend of the poet's whom he lost to cancer in 1940. These poems are some of the most personal of Berryman's early work and contain a raw vocality that makes it easy to see why Cone considered them apt for setting. The words are sensitively scored. Cone's piano passages, which open into Berryman's 'Dedication' to Campbell in *Poems* (1942) – "I said I said I said heart will mend / body will break & mend" – echo the poet's sobbing and the monotony of his grief.[19] Conversely, the centerpiece, 'A Poem For Bhain,'[20] replays the poet's joyful memories of Campbell, where Berryman's description of the "Two white birds following their profession / Of flight [. . .] Certain of the nature and station of their mission" (a nod to the Whitman poem mentioned earlier) is rendered in soaring triplets. In its third part, Cone's 'Triptych' returns to the haunting 'Epilogue' of *Poems* (1942) as the work peters out in a desolate diminuendo (*"dim. multo.*") to

[16] "Thanks again for bringing the Warlock piece, which I am glad to have had a chance to discover I don't like." B. H. Haggin to John Berryman, 4 April 1942, 111 Seaman Avenue, Correspondence 1942-April 1943, Folder 3 (1942-4, 1942), JBP.
[17] Edward Toner Cone to John Haffenden, Princeton, NJ, 10 October 1972, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Dedication 'To Bhain Campbell, 1911-1940,' *Poems* (1942), (*CP*, 278).
[20] *The Dispossessed* (*CP*, 40).

pianissimo: "nouns, verbs do not exist for what I feel."[21] The work was performed on 13 January 1951 at The Seventh Annual Symposium on Music at Princeton, and sung on this occasion by Bethany Beardslee.[22] "He must have heard them," recalls Cone, "but I have no direct recollection of his comments [. . .] if he heard them he must have liked them, for he suggested we write an opera together."[23] Berryman's eagerness to collaborate with Cone, and vice versa, speaks to his increased confidence as a librettist, after his work with Boydell, and a sketch of the "grand opera," based on Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, can be found at the University of Minnesota.[24] "The central character was to be the little girl, Pearl," notes Cone,

> Pearl was to be the first word heard, and the last word [. . .] I remember that, with fine disregard of anachronism, he wanted to begin with a chorus singing the hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation" (pure 19th century). I foresaw some arguments over that. Of course, the libretto never materialized.[25]

In its dramatisation of a Puritan mindset and symbology, this "opera" was to continue in the same vein as *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953), begun in 1948 while the poet was at Princeton.[26] Cone himself recalls being amongst the audience of the poem's "first private reading" as well as helping to arrange what he believes was the first "public reading," to which he provided the introduction.[27] Berryman's exploration of the person of Anne Bradstreet, then – in a poem that has been aptly described, by at least one critic, as a "duet" (Connaroe, 2) – must have forced him to reconsider the musical and dramatic resources at his disposal in his quest to represent an American experience.

In 2008, Kate (Berryman) Donahue received a letter from a Mr. Jerry Farrington with an enclosed a copy of Cone's 'Tryptich' and another undated composition, 'Sir Thomas' House' – a work of a more satirical nature for which

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[21] 'Triptych' score, Awards, Degrees, Honours, OS Box 3, JBP.
See also *CP*, 282.
[22] The programme can be found along with the 'Triptych' score in Awards, Degrees, Honours, OS Box 3, JBP.
[23] Edward Toner Cone to John Haffenden, Princeton, NJ, 10 October 1972, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.
[24] Plays (Unpublished), Box 4, 'A Scarlet Letter' (Opera), JBP.
[25] In Berryman's notes the word "girl" (which comes at the end of the opening chorus, or "Prologue" as he calls it), appears to set the scene for the dramatic action. To this word he has attached the note, "(last word of opera: 'pearl')."
Ibid.
[26] First published in *Partisan Review*, VXX. 5 (September-October 1953): 489-592.
[27] Plays (Unpublished), Box 4, 'A Scarlet Letter' (Opera), JBP.

Berryman also performed the role of librettist.[28] Whilst Cone is not mentioned among Berryman's published works, and is therefore absent from the general discussion of this thesis, their collaborative relationship undoubtedly had an impact on the way in which Berryman thought about music and poetry – and these compositions remain a historical, though until now overlooked, marker of their exchange.[29]

Berryman did finally partake in a collaboration of grander proportions when he began working with the composer Antal Dorati in 1956. Dorati, who got in touch with Berryman via their mutual friend, Ralph Ross, tasked Berryman with a translation of Paul Claudel's 'Le Chemin de la croix' for the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, then under his direction. The collaboration, at least on Berryman's side, was not always an easy one, as can be discovered from his diary at the time: "call the damn Dorati's office!" he wrote in the Memoranda section for the week beginning 1 October 1956.[30] Still, the poet's experience of translation appears to have been a focused, and even generative, one. His handwritten translations display his own efforts at musical notation alongside the script, and contain side notes that suggest his awareness of the medium: "Just as good or better for singing!"[31] In a letter to Haffenden, Dorati commented that the collaboration was a close one – "he had already composed the piece to the French text, so the English version had to comply to a neat extent with what already existed."[32] According to the composer, this he did "superbly."[33] The two met during the course of the collaboration but did not sustain a

[28] Jerry Farrington to Kate Donahue Berryman, 7 March 2008, enclosed copy of 'Tryptich' and 'Sir Thomas' House,' Photographs, OS Box 1, JBP.
[29] In his letter to Haffenden, Cone provides a short poem that Berryman wrote for him on the occasion of his birthday:

> Toner is older;
> Oughter to bolder;
> "Finding his way" says the Herald-Tribune.
> O wiser be, Toner:
> Life is a boner.
> The hell with it, over it
> Sing us to cover it
> A happy and horrible ancient no-tune.

Edward Toner Cone to John Haffenden, Princeton, NJ, 10 October 1972, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.
[30] J.B. Diary 1956, Diaries 1931-1957 (Incomplete), Old Boxes I-III, Diaries 1955-56, JBP.
[31] Prose (Unpublished), Box 6, Folder 2, JBP.
[32] Antal Dorati to John Haffenden, 17 September 1977, Walchwil, Switzerland, John Berryman Papers 1952-1978, MS#0115, Box 2.
[33] Ibid.

friendship. 'The Way of the Cross' (a Cantata Dramatica) was performed on 19 April 1957 at the Cyrus Northrop Memorial Auditorium at the University of Minnesota, and the programme, including Berryman's translation, can be found at the University of Minnesota.[34] Berryman's collaboration with Dorati, however, appears not to have entered *The Dream Songs*, a project then ongoing, in any direct way – indeed, to Berryman's mind, this long poem was always intended to be "unaccompanied," without "orchestration."[35] The poet's immersion in this sacred collaboration, of course, may have hovered in the background of his later composition of religious psalms, *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* (*Love & Fame*, 1970) and 'Opus Dei' (*Delusions, Etc*., 1972). Though these sequences suggest a broader connection with religious song, they yield little from any kind of musical exegesis and are not treated at length in the discussion that follows.

Taking Berryman's major works in chronological order allows this study to demonstrate the particulars of how the poetry does change, and how the poet's musical preoccupations come to govern that arc of change. This chronological approach ensures that the discussion remains poetically focused rather than more broadly suggestive. In discussing Berryman's musical engagement, then, this study does not seek to become encumbered by what musicologist Anthony Storr explains as debates over the relationship between "the ever related though never touching mediums of poetry and music" (24). Of course many of the poets whom Berryman admired had come up with their own theories on this subject. Eliot's lecture on 'The Music of Poetry' describes a somnambulist poetry on the borders of music – such poetry is "not vacuity of sense: it is parody of sense," notes Eliot, "and that is the sense of it [. . .] we enjoy the music, which is of a high order and we enjoy the feeling or irresponsibility towards the sense […] its obvious intention […] is to produce the effect of a dream" (14). It is clear that Berryman, in his exploration of infancy, in "dream" as well as "song," privileges states and modes of communication in which sound and atmosphere predominate over sense, and Eliot's theories speak powerfully to Berryman's general approach in *The Dream Songs*. In fact, this particular work could also be understood to exhibit what Pound described as melopoeia: "a force tending to lull, or to distract the reader from the exact sense of the language. It is a

[34] Prose (Unpublished), Box 6, Folder 2, JBP.
[35] Diary 1965-1972, Notes & Undated, Folder 6 (Diary – Notes), JBP.

poetry on the borders of music" (*Literary Essays*, 26).[36] While these concepts form a backdrop to this analysis of Berryman's musical engagement, any mention of such qualities in Berryman's work will be in relation to the poet's own explanation of the relationship between word and music – as is the case with Mallarmé in Chapter Two – or in connection with musical allusion. In Berryman's poetry, musical reference generally also marks the site of a deeper structural engagement. In assessing the significance of music within each individual text, then, both formal and thematic considerations are at play; for Berryman, the language and the form of a poem are almost never distinct. "Only by the form, the pattern / Can words or music reach," (183) asserts Eliot in *Four Quartets*, lines with which Berryman would certainly have concurred. As such, while a theoretical reading of Berryman's "musical method" is certainly possible, it is not necessarily desirable. A self-conscious exploration of the relationship between word and music is not a constant in Berryman's poetry, and such a reading risks detracting from the actual significance of various musical traditions across the work, and his use of the song as an emotive social medium.[37]

Berryman's poetry poses its own difficulties, and as a body of work it has been immensely polarising. For those who "hear" Berryman's poetry, the difficulty is simply part of his linguistic play and ingenuity, but for others, his poetry poses too many challenges to the poetic *status quo*. Randall Jarrell, renowned for his close reading, questioned the status of items within *The Dream Songs* as poems at all, demoting them instead to the category of "pseudo-poem" (qtd. in Mariani, 27). Stephen Minot finds himself similarly disorientated in Berryman's work: "Close reading had failed me," resolves the critic, in an essay that takes Berryman to task for willed obscurity. "No matter how conscientiously I struggled to find poetic quality, I failed; and in that failure I was no closer in my search to determine its appeal" (429). Yet perhaps by substituting "prose translation" for Minot's "close reading" we are closer to the problem at hand and to an understanding of the type of critique that is manifest throughout his reading. This is, after all, a critic who discounts "appeal" as a

[36] There are, of course, many examples of musically engaged poetry during the twentieth century, though Berryman's interest is nearer to Eliot, Yeats and Pound than his closer contemporaries, the Black Mountain and Beat Poets.

[37] The question of silence, or the absence of sound, which also naturally emerges in connection with the subject of music has been ably handled by Philip McGowan in "John Berryman and the Writing of Silence" ("*After thirty Falls*," 241-255). While this subject has not yet been exhausted, it is more theoretical in scope.

marker of poetic quality. Still, even for critics who do "hear" Berryman's poetry, the peculiar developments that occur over the duration of his career can pose a stumbling block. In the introduction to his 2004 *Selected Poems*, Kevin Young comments acutely on this issue: "Whether he's the craftsman of the early poems, the bon vivant obsessed with death of *The Dream Songs*, or the overconfident boor of the late, uneven *Love & Fame*, Berryman's career reflects his rapid, even frustrating changes," writes Young (xviii). Young moves on to point out the ways in which these changes are also witnessed on the level of the individual collection or poem – "In their use of personae and of disconnection," which Berryman "later describes, in the brilliant prose statement 'One Answer to a Question: Changes' (1965), as his primary concern: 'one personality shifting into another'" (Young, xx). An understanding of Berryman's musical preoccupations certainly helps in making sense of these "frustrating changes," incongruities and shifting pronouns. For Young too, "these vertiginous shifts are at the core of why [Berryman] matters as a poet" (xviii).

Moving through Berryman's work chronologically, this study not only uncovers a musical meaning and schema behind these changes, but examines some key aspects of Berryman's lesser-studied books before *The Dream Songs*. These works suggest the presence of a larger structure and style in motion from very early in the poet's career. It is in the musically-oriented poems of *The Dispossessed*, for example, that the poet's most recognisable voice – full of energy and anachronism – first reveals itself. If Berryman's work is full of change, music offers a way of finding continuity. This musical continuity will be discussed in the relation to Berryman's major works, with one notable omission. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,* begun in 1948 and completed five years later, constitutes a major development for Berryman and the poetry of his era. The poem contains no musical allusion, but represents one of Berryman's earliest voice experiments. As Connaroe suggests, the book does well to be read as a "duet" (2) in its modulation between the voices of Berryman and Anne Bradstreet, and could even be said to possess an operatic quality in its muscular sense of drama (perhaps relating to the poet's unfinished opera, 'A Scarlet Letter'). Berryman's *Homage* is not granted a more thorough discussion because of an otherwise scant musical significance. Another early vocal experiment is witnessed in 'The Nervous Songs,' begun in 1945 and discussed at length in Chapter One. While *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* does not merit a full chapter in itself, it does emerge briefly in connection with other musically-oriented works. While 'The Nervous

Songs' form a kind of blueprint for *The Dream Songs*, the celebrated homage creates a pattern for Berryman's later portrait, 'Beethoven Triumphant' (*Delusions, Etc*.), and the way it strives to achieve intimacy with the dead composer. In all of Berryman's musical portraits, moreover, Berryman was intent on drawing upon all resources – testing the scope of the poetic voice – to find "continuity with lovers dead" (Berryman, qtd. in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 177).

This study was fortunate to have come into being during something of a renaissance in Berryman studies. The centenary of Berryman's birth in October 2014 marked a significant landmark in the study of his poetry. Celebrations took place at the University of Minnesota and at Trinity College Dublin, encompassing critical and creative responses to Berryman's life and work.[38] Alongside my own paper on John Berryman and Beethoven, Radu Vancu offered a challenging comparison of Berryman and Romanian poet Mircea Ivănescu, with particular recourse to the music of Bach in Berryman's late poetry.[39] The event in Dublin closed with various musical performances of Berryman's poetry, including new settings of *The Dream Songs* by Katharine Holland and a performance of the 'Cradle Song' that Berryman produced with Boydell. At the Minnesota event, Berryman's music was interpreted by Greg Brosofske in an audiovisual performance.

A selection of papers collected from these symposia and published in *John Berryman: Centenary Essays* reflects on the poet's continuing resonance, and considers Berryman's creative afterlives not only in literature, but in the arts more broadly. "There has been a discernible increase in critical attention on the poetry in recent years," write Coleman and Campion in their introduction to the book, "but the range of artistic responses to Berryman is in many ways a more interesting phenomenon, not least because it encompasses a wide variety of art forms, from poetry and fiction to popular music and the visual arts" (3). In terms of music, the editors cite the names of composers Greg Brosofske and Janika Vandervelde along with the more popular responses of The Hold Steady in 'Stuck Between Stations' (*Boys and Girls in America,* 2006), the Okkervil River 'John Allyn Smyth Sails' (*The*

[38] John Berryman Centenary Symposium, Trinity College, the University of Dublin and Mater Dei Institute, Dublin City University, 10-11 October 2014.
John Berryman at 100: A Centenary Conference at the University of Minnesota, 24-26 October, 2015.

[39] This paper was published under the title 'Confessional Poetry and Music: John Berryman and Mircea Ivănescu.' *Primerjalna književnost* (Ljubljana) 38.2 (2015): 129-144. Web.

Stage Names, 2007) and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 'We call Upon the Author' (*Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!*, 2008).[40] To this list Michael Hinds adds John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats (Hinds, 167). Such a wealth of musical response is surely bound up with Berryman's own musical preoccupations and the sonic appeal of his poetry.[41] Indeed, while such interpretations are not the subject of this study, they offer ripe opportunity for further research. And if poet Kevin Young's assessment of Berryman is anything to go by, such creative interpretations should be likely to continue: "The fearlessness with which Berryman breaks through the polite diction of academic poetry into a liberating variety of idioms is a major part of his legacy," asserts Young (Introduction, xxiv).[42]

In recent years, studies of Berryman have become increasingly alive to the depth and scope of Berryman's creative vision, his interaction with other disciplines and his significance as a writer of the public domain. Philip Coleman's recent reappraisal, *John Berryman's Public Vision: Relocating the Scene of Disorder* (2014), published to coincide with the centenary celebrations, has enlarged our understanding of Berryman beyond the "confessional."[43] The celebration of various centenaries over the past few years has occasioned new and challenging readings of Berryman's generation more broadly. In a recent centenary lecture entitled 'Robert Lowell in a Dark Time,' Stephen Gould Axelrod described what he considered the "circumambient" quality of the personal and the political within Lowell's work, and

[40] "For example, see Greg Brosofske, *Strange is the Heart*, which is described online on the American Composers Forum website: <https:// composersforum.org/ discover/ articles/greg-brosofske-and-life-john-berryman> (accessed 9 August 2016). See also Janika Vandervelde, 'Henry's Fate' (1983), described online at: <http://www.janika vandervelde.com/catalog.html> (accessed 9 August 2016). More recent responses in popular music include: The Hold Steady, 'Stuck Between Stations' on their album *Boys and Girls in America* (Vagrant Records, 2006); Okkervil River, 'John Allyn Smyth Sails' on their album *The Stage Names* (Jagjaguwar, 2007); Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 'We Call Upon the Author' on their album *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* (Mute Records, 2008). Nick Cave provided a blurb for the 2014 re-issue of Berryman's *The Dream Songs*" (3).

[41] As noted previously, this has also been examined by Maria Johnston in '"We write with our ears': Berryman's music.' "*After thirty Falls*": *New Essays on John Berryman*. Eds. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007. Print.

[42] In a prefatory poem to *John Berryman: A Descriptive Bibliography*, Ernest C. Stefanik also gestures to these qualities of Berryman's verse in his 'One for John Berryman: Honouring the Burnt Cork.' "A grief or so ago," concludes the poet, "that dancing man's musick / Brought us to our feet. / But now all that is left is the memory / And the dream of the night he leapt the footlights" (x).

[43] The publication of selected letters by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae will elucidate this further.

the continuing credibility of this approach.[44] Such a relationship between the personal and political is witnessed in Berryman's engagement of music and song, which speaks to forces interior and exterior, often at the same time. In a reading of Berryman's music, moreover, a multidimensional poet emerges – "the lover"[45] of Beethoven and Bessie Smith, a poet of change and continuity – whose words continue to shock and enthrall.

[44] Steven Gould Axelrod, 'Robert Lowell in a Dark Time,' Robert Lowell and Ireland: A Centenary Symposium, Trinity College Dublin, 3 March 2017.
[45] Thornbury (xxiii).

Chapter 1. "New musics!" in *The Dispossessed*

The Dispossessed bears witness to Berryman's early, and often frustrated, search for a poetic voice. Published in 1948, and showcasing the work of more than a decade, it represents the poet's first major publication, though by no means his most successful or cohesive.[1] "Berryman's most well-disposed readers have found it difficult to respond positively to his poetry of the 1940s" (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 44), writes Philip Coleman, explaining one reason for the lacuna in critical debates. The work lacks a larger structuring principle, and suggests an over-dependency on early poetic models such as W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, whose voices rather than supporting, have a tendency to drown the poet's own. Yet for all of its imperfections, the book is not without merit, and is deserving of much greater recognition, if only for the ways in which it elucidates Berryman's growth into a style uniquely his own. It is in *The Dispossessed*, moreover, that Berryman begins his first explorations into the theme of music. The musical poems of part IV are not only some of the finest in the book, but demonstrate something of a breakthrough in terms of his poetic idiom. 'Canto Amor,' the poem that opens this newly invigorated section, represents a complex enquiry into the capabilities of music, while 'The Nervous Songs' that follow it (and which Berryman marked out as being modelled on Rilke's *Die Stimmen*) consider the scope of the voice as a private-public medium.[2] "In the final two sections of the book in particular," asserts Coleman, "his poetry begins to explore stylistic possibilities that are quite unlike anything else being written by an American at the time" (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 73).

Berryman's recourse to music in this early work is bound up with the ideas of instability and dispossession (both personal and public) that lie at the heart of this collection. There is a growing concern throughout the book, which witnesses the outbreak of a global catastrophe, with what Berryman, referring to *The Dream Songs*, would later describe as "the turbulence of the modern world" (*The Freedom of the Poet*, 330); yet there is also a move toward an increasingly interior experience, or what Rosenthal would later term "confessionalism." Both 'Canto Amor' and 'The

[1] *Poems*, published six years earlier, in 1942, is a work much slighter in volume.
[2] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 1, JBP.

Nervous Songs' walk this tightrope. And though they may strike us as contextually divergent, these works share more in common than is initially apparent, not least the theme of music. While Berryman's anxiety in 'The Nervous Songs' is fully manifest, 'Canto Amor' – a celebratory poem in its final incarnation – can be understood as emerging from the same exasperated origins, out of the rocky first years of marriage. As Haffenden writes, "Berryman felt suddenly so exhausted one day soon after their marriage that he almost collapsed. Eileen failed to understand the incident – 'Why so nervous?' – which deeply disturbed her. Berryman hid his own dread of a recurrence of *petit mal*. 'This October,' he wrote at the end of the month, 'I think was the most racking month of my life'" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 139). While 'Canto Amor' features earlier in *The Dispossessed* than 'The Nervous Songs,' the epithalamion was not completed until almost two years after the event, while 'The Nervous Songs' were composed in the months that followed the wedding.[3] In *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson confirms that Berryman had indeed been grappling with the poem "in terza rima" for two years before he "sent it to Allen Tate, the editor of the *Sewanee Review*, who accepted it for publication" (102).[4] In fact, the whole experience of marriage was felt to be somewhat traumatic, emotions that are much clearer in the unpublished lyric, 'For His Marriage,' written nearer to the event itself.

> Lilies of the valley
> And the face of the priest.
> The pushing eyes
> Upon my back of guest and guest.
> Music, and crush of fear
> I never felt before.
> . . . .
> Resist, resist, pressed Heart,
> In the breast be still.
> If you can still and stay
> Perhaps I will
> Until comes lover to my side
> The terrifying Bride.
>
> (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 139)

[3] One draft contains the note, "Finished?! 8 March 1945." Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 1, JBP.

[4] Ibid. The work went through a process of serious redrafting, appearing under various titles including 'Canto: Farewell and Hail,' a version which Berryman gutted ruthlessly, and later, 'Canto Eileen.'

Perhaps on account of these obvious incongruities, the order of these musical poems was by no means static in early contents pages for *The Dispossessed*. One features 'For his Marriage' (after 'The Ball Poem') ahead of 'The Nervous Songs,' which it misleadingly suggests were begun in "'43," and envisages 'Canto Amor' at the close of the section.[5] Berryman's struggle to place these poems, of course, relates to a larger, rather uninventive, sense of structure for the collection. "With exceptions for a thematic reason, affecting Section One," he wrote in a later prefatory note, "the poems stand in what was roughly their order of writing."[6] Of course, it would be easy to presume a later publication date for 'The Nervous Songs,' when read against the often archaic canto, which one early reviewer of the collection described as "so encrusted with old jewelry that it barely moves" (Fitts).[7] It is likely that Berryman was aware of this seeming anachronism and placed the poems accordingly. Yet the breaking of his prescribed "completion date" system, more simply, is telling of a desire to maintain a chronology of actual rather than poetic events. Respecting Berryman's intentions, this chapter will treat the poems in the order that they appear, though the significance of their shared anxieties and compositional backdrop cannot be overstated. These anxieties are musically mediated, and mediated in a way that becomes central to Berryman's work.

'Canto Amor'

There is no doubt that Berryman had in mind the sixteenth century origins of the term "canto," for song, when composing this love poem for his new wife. Berryman's recourse to song, and more specifically, the *terza rima* of the troubadours, must have seemed an appropriate choice for the epithalamion – yet the poet had a further reason for wanting to celebrate the relationship within a musical context. In her memoir, *Poets in the Youth*, Eileen Simpson (nee Mulligan) suggests that Berryman's musicophilia was coterminous with their courtship. "John had become seriously interested in music at about the time I met him," writes Simpson.

[5] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 4, JBP.
[6] Page proofs of *The Dispossessed*, Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 1, JBP.
[7] Dudley Fitts 'Deep in the Unfriendly City,' Undated Clipping, The Dispossessed, Box 2, Folder 5 (Reviews), JBP.

> With characteristic enthusiasm and zeal, he had trained himself to listen to records with the help of B. H. Haggin's *Music of Records*, which begins: 'For my purpose in the book I am assuming that you have just bought a phonograph, are ready to buy your first set of records, and are asking me what I think it should be.'
>
> John had just bought a portable phonograph (or, as he called it, 'gramophone'), was ready to buy his first set of records and was indeed asking Haggin's advice. Having found a brilliant instructor, John became the kind of pupil teachers dream of. (17)

Berryman's musical interest, of course, had been ignited at Cambridge a few years previously, and having returned to the US, the poet was taking strides to increase his musical intelligence by stockpiling records. A considerable number of letters (in the form of postcards) between Berryman and his new musical mentor can be found among the poet's papers, a good many more between Berryman and Mulligan herself. These letters, brimming with enthusiasm, shed light on Berryman's developing tastes, and some contain exhaustive ramblings extending to five pages or more. In one letter to Mulligan, Berryman describes how he is seeking to cultivate an appreciation of opera, a form he had never much enjoyed before:

> In a few minutes I'm going off to hear a Philadelphia company do Figaro in English at the Opera House. Tonight opera & I come face to face. I am giving it every chance; but if it doesn't please me, woe!! I spent the afternoon reading the ridiculous libretto & listening to the Glynbourne recording, in Paine Hall at Harvard. That good music should be spent on such trash – it seems to me at this moment – is just short of criminal. To make matters worse, the translation I saw is of a blackness and vice unspeakable. The translator invents and omits as if he had no original; whenever a lyric occurs in the Italian the son of a bitch writes a lyric of his own – and quite the worst lyric I have ever seen; I could have translated the thing as well myself. Not that that piece of trash is worth my time – worth Mozart's how much less! [. . .] But Figaro's aria 'non più andrai' is one of the finest compositions I have heard, really magnificent.[8]

After a further list of criticisms, subsequent to his viewing of the production, the poet congratulates himself for staying until the end, and arriving at the discovery that "it is possible that opera and I will get on after all." "Near the end of Act I," concludes Berryman, "things must have gone well on the stage and in the pit, and suddenly I found I could not breathe. The excitement of great music. It was as simple & as

[8] John Berryman to Eileen Mulligan, 17 January 1942, Correspondence 1942 – April 1943, Folder 1, 1942 – 2, 1942, JBP.

amazing as that."[9] Berryman's musical tastes soon expanded to include opera. In fact, Robert Giroux, after declining Berryman's invitation to act as best man at their wedding, sent the couple a copy of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which Eileen remembers listening to while "drinking blistering hot chocolate from china mugs (another wedding gift) [and] burning rolled-up newspapers in the fireplace" (25).

Between 1941 and 1942 Berryman wrote to Eileen with concert reviews, record requests, and of his progress with the "gramophone," the icon that he went to great lengths to purchase from B. H. Haggin. As soon as he was sure that he had secured some teaching at Harvard he wrote immediately: "am buying THAT GRAMOPHONE. I swoon with delight."[10] Berryman's flirtation with music during this period in his life was unrelenting. In a later letter, commenting on time spent in the company of the Delmore Schwartz, the poet explains the deepening significance of music in his emotional life: "these conversations and Henry James and music (late Beethoven, late Beethoven) are my diversions, my way of getting from one day to the next."[11] The importance of Beethoven, who was to become one of Berryman's lifelong heroes, also comes into view in *The Dispossessed*, which celebrates the beauty of "soaring Beethoven" ('Boston Common'), visualising his "high variations" in connection with the rise of "tortured continents" (*CP*, 44). When Berryman and Eileen married he agreed to impose some new restrictions on his purchasing of books and records, but the epithalamion is testament to the burgeoning musical interest that provided the backdrop to their relationship, and the ways in which these passions intertwined.

Though certain of its status as a celebratory or occasional poem, 'Canto Amor' could hardly be described as a conventional love song, and its peculiar undertones can be understood as the by-product of its uneasy origins and the poet's exhaustive process of revision. The canto begins with a kind of riddle, a cryptic scene in which, we come to perceive, some trauma has occurred:

> Dream in a dream the heavy soul somewhere
> Struck suddenly & dark down to its knees.
> A griffin sighs off in the orphic air. (*CP*, 46)

[9] Ibid.
[10] John Berryman to Eileen Mulligan, undated Thursday in April, Correspondence 1942 – April 1943, Folder 3, 1942 – 4, 1942, JBP.
[11] John Berryman to Eileen Mulligan, 22 March 1942, Folder 3, 1942 – 4, 1942, JBP.

While the notion of a dream might conjure ideas of levity and transcendence, it becomes clear that this speaker's enfolded dreamscape is one of claustrophobia. The protagonist appears to have arrived here by some traumatic blow, recalled in the alliterative and hyper-sensory flashback: "struck suddenly & dark down to its knees." Yet much of the language needed to ascertain the exact happenings has been occluded, and it is not clear whether the "heavy soul" is the attacker or the attacked. Already we have entered a world of undefined and crippling fear in which dark forces, most likely internal, act without invitation upon the mind and body. The incidence of the word "heavy" – an adjective that appears continually through Berryman's poetry, and particularly in *The Dream Songs* – sounds here with new directedness, while the griffin's sigh, which closes the tercet, emerges from the same unhappy origin.

Calling on some 'Unknown Majesty,' the poet goes on to list (much in the style of Chaucer's Dorigen) the many things that ail him and stand against this deity's benign influence. Eileen proves the exception to this rule.

> If (Unknown Majesty) I not confess
> praise for the wrack the rock the live sailor
> under the blue sea, – yet I may You bless
>
> always for hér, in fear & joy for hér
> whose gesture summons ever when I grieve
> me back and is my mage and minister. (*CP*, 46)

Berryman's initial version of the poem, composed soon after their marriage, is much longer in lamenting. 'Canto: Fairwell and Hail' spends six stanzas establishing its murky backdrop.

> Rise from the dream and session of this youth
> With ceremony, with valedictory bells
> Which chiming in the dawn chime midnight truth.
>
> If, Unknown Majesty, for not much else. –
> Low in their notes that wilderness that rock
> Waste, the wide shadow from whose hollow wells
>
> Sorrow my taste is, nor the evil clock
> Twitching dim body, scarlet mind apart,
> Immortal night my shepherd, frenzy my flock;

Neither for the exile of enchanted heart
Far parting, waves and damage of the sea
Swelling across desire, the bandaged part,

The trash the rascal flesh the ruined-journey
The glacier life which one obscure caress
Would shake to flow like April's revelry, –

If not for these, nor for the fire's duress
Unstringing to his urn the caroller
I grieve again for – yet I may you bless [12]

Berryman aggressively excised these stanzas, along with the title, adding the personally derisive note in the margin: "miserable, all this."[13] The rest of the canto stayed largely intact.

While 'Canto Amor,' and the earlier 'Canto Eileen,' [14] demonstrate the successful compression of these anxieties into two stanzas, all three versions are indebted to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the originary *terza rima* poem in which the weary speaker finds himself "In the middle of the journey of our life" and lost in a psychic "dark wood" (Canto 1, line 1, 27). Like Dante's speaker, Berryman finds himself near the mid-point of his life – in "the disordered wood / grieving the midnight of [his] thirtieth year" (*CP*, 48) – and is likewise on a quest to rediscover the path of divine love. Eileen emerges in the third stanza (somewhat belatedly for a poem in her honour), where it finally becomes clear that the poem is one of celebration – Eileen's love is a moderating force. The canto's earliest title, 'Canto: Fairwell and Hail,' speaks to Eileen's gloom-dispelling powers, as well as the poet's transition into a new life in marriage, yet all of the successive versions are telling of his wife's unique abilities. Berryman's double accentuation of "hér" bestows upon his lover a solemn authority, while its thematic rhyme with "minister" confirms the poet's devotion to Eileen, and his hopes to locate a path through love. Though Berryman's canto is undoubtedly in search of a divine presence, it is not clear to which deity he makes his appeal, Eileen is both mage and minister, and the poem persists in this peculiar interbreeding of the divine.

In the fourth stanza a further invocation occurs:

[12] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 4, JBP.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

—Muses: whose worship I may never leave
but for this pensive woman, now I dare,
teach me her praise! With her my praise receive.— (*CP*, 47)

With this tercet the poem takes a sudden musical turn, justifying its canto status. Berryman calls upon the muses, though perhaps for the final time, since they now vie with another "pensive woman" for his attention. Eileen is deserving of his full amorous, creative and spiritual appreciation, and he wishes to honour her in song, in the highest way he knows. Though music does not emerge until some way through, it is woven into the epithalamion's chief themes of praise and transcendence.

The canto proper begins as Berryman sets the scene of their romance, which is also one of vexed origins:

Three years already of the round world's war
had rolled by stoned & disappointed eyes
when she and I came where we were made for. (*CP*, 47)

The couple has borne witness to a global catastrophe of Yeatsian stature, yet in the midst of it has found solace in their mutual fate. The passages that follow represent the marital ceremony with an effect so gentle and indirect that they seem to recount an entirely different occasion than 'For His Marriage' (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 139).

Pale as a star lost in returning skies,
more beautiful than midnight stars more frail
she moved towards me like chords, a sacrifice; (*CP*, 47)

As Eileen progresses down the aisle, the chords that are said to represent her mirror the effect of stars, with which they find a rhyme, and whose pulsations of light and sound now move toward the poet who awaits the offering. The tercet form is now obviously chordal, suggesting the evocative powers of music and a formal absorption of the amorous subject reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' (*Harmonium*, 1923), in which the speaker's thoughts turn to his lover as he plays, causing him to reconceptualise the very properties of music:

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the self-same sounds

On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you, (72)

Berryman goes on to describe the progression of these feminine chords toward an indeterminate scene of passion, in which the theme of vibration (or pulsation) is borne out further:

entombed in body trembling through the veil
arm upon arm, learning our ancient wound,
we see our one soul heal, recovering pale. (*CP*, 47)

The repeated "b" and liquid "l" sounds send a ripple of bodily pleasure and anticipation through the song. Yet as the poet faces Eileen for the "priestly sanction" he experiences a sudden "drop in sound" (*CP*, 47). As in 'For his Marriage,' Berryman's ceremony is couched in musical analogy, yet there has been a radical rewriting of the ceremonial music; instead of "Music, and crush of fear" ('For His Marriage'), Berryman experiences a sudden absence of music, perhaps the symptom of nervous anticipation, that provides a space into which new sounds might vibrate.

Such paradoxical possibilities are meted out in the stanzas that follow, in which the couple "quickly part to the cavern ever warm / deep from the march, body to body bound," and in this womb-like cavern encounter their own destruction and remaking:

descend (my soul) out of dismantling storm
into the darkness where the world is made.
. . Come back to the bright air. Love is multiform. (*CP*, 47)

The poet has descended with the drop of sound, to re-merge back into the "bright air" – a transformation that has playfully musical connotations. What's more, the paradoxical notion of progress by means of return is reflected in the *terza rima* itself, a scheme, as Edward Hirsch describes, which is "like moving through a series of interpenetrating rooms or going down a set of winding stairs: you are always traveling forward while looking back" (Hirsch, 632). In this place of remaking and return, the poet is better located to look on Eileen's soul:

Heartmating hesitating unafraid
although incredulous, she seemed to fill
the lilac shadow with light wherein she played,

whom sorry childhood had made sit quite still,
an orphan silence, unregarded sheen,
listening for any small soft note, not hopeful:

caricature: as once a maiden Queen,
flowering power comeliness kindness grace,
shattered her mirror, wept, would not be seen. (*CP*, 47-48)

Having emerged from his crippling inwardness (or singleness) Berryman finds that Eileen herself is no stranger to the heaviness that overwhelmed him at the outset of the lyric. While this shared sense of darkness must create a bond between the lovers, Berryman is more impressed by Eileen's ability to overcome her anxiety, to fill the "lilac shadow with light" in which she plays. In spite of her "orphan silence," then, Eileen has found a way to discover and embody music. Berryman's own music in these passages becomes suddenly jarring; there is a strong sense of compressed energy in the description of Eileen's characteristics, sans comma, that builds to the announcement of the shattered mirror. This linguistic energy, combined with the tercet's syntactical inversions, are characteristic, as Coleman has pointed out, of Victorian Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins.[15]

Following the shattering of her "caricature" (one that seems almost inevitable after the tension produced in the line), Berryman goes on to forge another mystical persona for his wife:

[. . .] Also above her face
serious or flushed, swayed her fire-gold
not earthly hair, now moonless to unlace,

resistless flame, now in a sun more cold
great shells to whorl about each secret ear,
mysterious histories, white shores, unfold. (*CP*, 48)

These sibilant passages are full of the sounds of the ocean, and though not strictly iambic are much smoother than the preceding lines. Now Eileen is styled as Botticelli's goddess, Venus, and the shells placed strategically about her ears are the

[15] "The accents on 'hér' here are characteristically Hopkinsian, as are the many syntactical inversions that occur throughout the poem" (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 73).

gateway to untapped sounds and histories. The poet is propelled into what feels suddenly a deeper understanding of his theme:

> New musics! One the music that we hear,
> this is the music which the masters make
> out of their minds, profound solemn & clear.
>
> And then the other music in whose sake
> all men perceive a gladness but we are drawn
> less for that joy than utterly to take
>
> our trial, naked in the music's vision,
> the flowing ceremony of trouble and light,
> all Loves becoming, none to flag upon. (*CP*, 48)

These passages assert themselves at the very heart of the poem's intention. And when Berryman hails these "New musics!" he is also embracing new possibilities of sound and motion in his verse. There is renewed excitement as the poet announces his musical epiphany.

Berryman's first example, of the "music that we hear," poses no initial difficulty; it is the music "which the Masters make," and which has formed the backdrop to his romance with Eileen. Yet the poet subtly complicates his definition by suggesting that this music emerges "out of their minds," thus redirecting us to the question of instability and depression that hovers over the first stanza. Berryman's second definition – which echoes Wallace Stevens' hypothesis that "music is feeling then not sound" (72) – is the more immediately bewildering. This music, "in whose sake / all men perceive a gladness but [. . .] are drawn utterly to take [their] trial," is clearly being mapped out as a kind of bodily experience, even sacrifice. Rather than an immediately appealing or pleasurable experience, this music poses a challenge to anyone that chooses to engage it. While these two "musics" are said to be different, then, both can be understood as emerging from the frail and mortal body.

Berryman's description of the vulnerable subject as "naked in the music's vision" gives to music a divine and piercing quality as a force that searches and fortifies the spirit. Maintaining the status of a "trial," this process is also an act of devotion that involves the whole body. It is this second kind of music that Berryman associates with the person of Mozart: "an ear so delicate / he fainted at a trumpet call, a child / so delicate" (*CP*, 48). These lines suggest the unusual acuteness of Mozart's

ear, and his devotion to the work; yet music is also a force that emerges in spite of his physical (and psychological) shortcomings. Indeed, Mozart's embodiment as a child links him back not only to the orphaned Eileen, but becomes, in all its stumbling frailty, a model for the poet's own course: "we follow rapt who ran a-wild" (*CP*, 48).

These "New musics!" which emerge from the agitated and vulnerable body were clearly intended to have some bearing on the poet's own practice. "It is clear that Berryman is [. . .] striving to create a new kind of poetry out of old materials here," writes Coleman,

> one in which his own poetic voice might be heard. That voice is almost subdued by the dulcet music of poetic tradition in 'Canto Amor,' but the poem nonetheless points to an interesting change of direction in Berryman's early poetic methods. (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 73)

The uniqueness of the poet's voice is felt in the deftness of his modulations, his ability to negotiate the confines of the *terza rima* to find a cadence that moves swiftly with his changing emotions. A number of marginal comments and changes on Berryman's "finished?!" draft of "8 March 1945" also demonstrate this sudden change in direction.[16] Marking the draft in pencil, the poet has replaced his ands with the characteristic ampersand, while each run on line now appears in lower case. Yet even more significantly, the words "New musics!" have come to replace "Two musics!," and another exclamatory note – "Orpheus!" – appears in the margins.[17] This connection to Orpheus, as well as the late insertion of the word "New" confirms our suspicions that these "musics" have a close relationship to Berryman's own verse. In particular, the note calls to mind Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), which as Erika M. Nelson writes, also moves towards a "redefinition of the poet in the way that it links poetry, life, death, love, and creation." Rilke's "'new' Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes," claims Nelson, "have psychological depth. They appear as individuals experiencing grief, loss, confusion, and perhaps even tragedy in the modern sense [. . .] Rilke resignifies the myth's link to present patterns of cultural, social and personal experience" (78-79). Berryman's "New musics" are preoccupied with such terminal experiences, with plumbing the depths of the human psyche to represent tragedy in

[16] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 4, JBP.
[17] Ibid.

the modern sense. Indeed, music, for both poets, (and particularly the musical parable) becomes a vehicle through which to explore such possibilities.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Berryman's canto moves toward a definition of marriage within this context: "Marriage is the second music, and thereof / we hear what we can bear, faithful & mild" (*CP*, 48). There is a ritual, or trial, associated with this second music, since like the art of poetry, the art of marriage demands complete devotion and the acknowledgement of vulnerability. As such, Berryman might have found his way back to the divine path he searched for at the poem's opening, yet the "flowing ceremony of trouble and light" is not reminiscent of any Christian ritual. In fact it has more in common with Berryman's description of rapture during the performance of Mozart's *Figaro*: "I listen & watch. I am absorbed in each scene & I worry neither about the past nor the future. Such continuity as interests me is musical."[18] In 'Canto Amor' this musical absorption takes on a new kind of religious fervor, one that lies outside the ambit of Christian theology: Berryman now sees his enlightenment taking place within an ecstatic context of music and dance.

> Dance for this music, Mistress to music dear,
> more, that storm worries the disordered wood
> grieving the midnight of my thirtieth year (*CP*, 48)

The poet's principles seem more aligned with mystic Islam here, where his ceremony of "becoming," or continuous motion, would represent the whirling ritual, in which any distraction from the divine subject might disrupt the mesmeric flow. Berryman's mesmeric turn is particularly reminiscent of the practices of the Mevlevi order – begun by the thirteenth century Persian poet and mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī – a tradition in which music and dance are sacred activities to draw the soul to God. "There is no mind/body division in Rumi's world view," explains Raficq Abdulla,

> Everything is in flux, flowing constantly from one situation to another; everything is a manifestation of the Divine, emanations transmitted like light from the sun through our solar system. We are particles in orbit about this

[18] John Berryman to Eileen Mulligan, 17 January 1942, Correspondence 1942 – April 1943, Folder 1, 1942 – 2, 1942, JBP.
Of course, the experience of engaging with the notoriously complex plot of *Figaro* itself poses something of a challenge.

> wonderful source of power and love – this sun – longing to return to it, to be annihilated by it and discover our true nature. Rumi's verse exemplifies this mercurial quality of loss, longing and love – we always look for completion, and the only true completion we find is in losing ourselves in the Beloved. (Introduction, *Rumi: Words of Paradise*, 9-10)

After the initial reference to Dante, in its denouement 'Canto Amor' calls upon the example of non-Christian religions to bolster the poet's suggestion that true devotion is best discovered as the result of personal trials. The theme of worship, or supplication, is extended out to another ceremony of mystery and light, the Ancient Roman tradition of Nemoralia (or festival of torches).

> Therefore the streaming torches in the grove
> through dark or bright, swiftly & now more near
> cherish a festival of anxious love. (*CP*, 48)

It is in light of such discoveries that the poet is better able to cherish his own tempestuous relations with Eileen. The second ceremony described in the poem has little to do with the traditional wedding service itself; rather, it signifies the challenge and rewards of marriage, a radically re-imagined love ritual in which the poet now asks his wife to join him.

> dance for this music, Mistress to music dear,
> more, that storm worries the disordered wood
> grieving the midnight of my thirtieth year
>
> and only the trial of our music should
> still this irresolute air, only your voice
> spelling the tempest may compel our good:
>
> Sigh then beyond my song: whirl & rejoice! (*CP*, 48-49)

Berryman's amorous discovery is awash with paradox, a paradox to which music remains central. As was witnessed in the first ceremony – in which the soul was submerged in the "dismantling storm" (*CP*, 47) – destruction is considered prerequisite for growth. While Eileen's voice is understood to play a role in this tempest, it is only by engaging it head on that the poet can expect their relationship to flourish.

The closing stanza returns full circle to the fatigued yet curiously "orphic" sigh of the first. Yet the meaning here is clearer – it comes now as a release from psychic tension and in the recognition of transcendent freedoms beyond the lyric. The correspondence between these lines also returns us to the image of the griffin, a potent symbol that has its correlative, amongst other things, in the Simurgh (or Simorḡ), a wise female bird that appears throughout Sufi literature to herald the divine presence. Finally, Berryman's injunction to "Whirl and rejoice," through all the storms marital life, echoes Rumi's ecstatic sentiments in 'Seeking the Beloved':

> Whirl and rejoice, find the ruby of your heart
> Through circling degrees, your body becoming
> A planet of the soul embedded in still serenity.
> You are your arching senses sending energy
> To the centre of the dance; the Beloved calls out
> To himself rising like a leviathan rejoicing.
> Wars are fought here in your dancing blood
> Chamber convulsed with joy, it looks upon God
> From the famine of its lowly state with longing sighs.
> Angels pierce you in your turning with the cool
> Needles of their eyes, you are wounded with
> their peace you whirl and rejoice happily drowning
> in that enchantment where no body may enter
> no sun no moon, as the dancer brings forth the dance.
>
> (qtd. in Abdulla, *Rumi: Words of Paradise*, 98)

Like Rumi's, Berryman's music in 'Canto Amor' is "not ordinary music [. . .] it is music you drink with your whole body, your whole being [. . .] you live this music" (qtd. in Friedlander, 129). It is in such an embodied act of worship that the melancholy singer finally discovers a path to lead him out of the dark wood and into a view of the Beloved.

'The Nervous Songs'

In *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson provides some context for the curious sequence of Nervous Songs, begun a few months into their marriage, that follow 'Canto Amor' in part IV of *The Dispossessed*.

> On December 31st, at the end of the day, I found John standing outside the office building where I worked [. . .] While he was reluctant, for superstitious reasons, to celebrate New Year's Eve, he suggested that we go to a movie and then have dinner: a rare treat. In the restaurant, he told me he had made up a list of resolutions for the New Year [. . .] At midnight, as we toasted each other, he said that a list of dream songs headed it. Now that he had sent off his book to Morley at Harcourt Brace, he was eager to begin something new. Rubbing his hands together in a gesture of anticipation he said 'Ha! You'll see. I'll make my name yet.'
>
> The dream songs, which appeared later in *The Dispossessed* as 'The Nervous Songs,' were begun early in the New Year. Determined to put *Partisan Review*'s rejection of 'Boston Common' [. . .] out of his mind, he worked with greater concentration than he had since we married. That Delmore [Schwartz] liked 'Young Woman's Song,' and remarked that it showed no strong influence, pleased and encouraged him. The rush of ideas for other songs – 'The Demented Priest,' 'The Young Hawaiian' – led him to set himself the impossible goal of writing one a week. (41-42)

The sequence, which, as Simpson points out, was conceived as part of the larger Dream Song project, displays an entirely new relationship to language, and marks a modulation out of the collection's original key. Yet while Schwartz was quick to point out that the work showed no "strong influence," the sequence makes recourse to at least two other "Song" works.

As Stephen Matterson has suggested, the "most obvious" connection between the Nervous and Dream Songs (which do in fact diverge in a number of important ways) is the fact "that they are designed as 'songs'" and share the same poetic structure (*Berryman and Lowell*, 40). In an interview with Berryman in 1968, John Plotz called attention to this structural congruity, asking whether the poet had "*any idea of this particular length* [of three stanzas] *from earlier poems, specifically* 'The Nervous Songs.'" Berryman's response highlights one of his sources.

> Yes, well, 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. (qtd. in Plotz, 12)

Yeats, of course, was generally a strong influence on the poet during this period, and though Berryman does not specify any text in particular, the form is shared by four of

Yeats's songs in 'Words for Music Perhaps.'[19] Like Berryman's, Yeats's songs were composed during a trying period in the poet's life; he began the series, notes biographer Richard Ellmann, "while recovering from Malta fever in 1929, when his physical powers flagged to the point where he had to compensate for their insufficiency by giving the body more complete pre-eminence in his verse than he usually accorded it" (272). Berryman's lyrics also afford much attention to the agitated body, and mark an attempt to channel personal experience through a fictional character. Indeed, Coleman has already pointed to Yeats's impact on this cycle, and particularly with regard to "its manipulation of voices and masks" (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 64).

In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, on 2 March 1929, Yeats commented that his recent series of twelve poems, 'Words for Music Perhaps,' was written not "so much that they may be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself. I want them to be all emotion and all impersonal [. . .] They are the opposite of my recent work and all praise of joyous life, though in the best of them it is a dry bone on the shore that sings the praise" (qtd. in Clark, 43). Berryman's songs may be significantly less joyous than Yeats's, but the concept of the voice at once emotional and impersonal offers an important piece of connective tissue. Yeats's singing bone offers itself as yet another suggestive emblem when read within the context of *The Dream Songs*.[20] And Berryman's sequence also shares Yeats's metaphysical curiosities, Richard Eberhart describing it as an "excellent series, in three six-line stanzas [in which] often the truth or a truth is arrived at by purposive obliqueness and by paradox – by a sense and sensitivity of disposition" (43).

It is hardly surprising then that in a draft introduction to *The Dispossessed*, Berryman mentions Yeats among his influences, naming him "the master of my youth."[21] Yet alongside Yeats he mentions a further point of departure that embeds his work still deeper within the song tradition: "The Songs grew out of my love for the *Stimmen* of Rilke," writes Berryman.[22] This comment was erased in subsequent versions, but the connection remains important to placing these poems within the

[19] See 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman,' 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop,' 'Three Things,' 'Mad in the Mist and Snow.'
[20] Yeats's bone image is repeated in another poem of the same form, 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman.'
[21] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 1, JBP.
[22] Ibid.

musical context that Berryman sought to give them. Indeed, Berryman was later to make his debt explicit: "Rilke was a jerk, I admit his griefs and music," he asserts in Dream Song 3. Like Yeats's, Rilke's voices speak from the margins of society, but unlike Crazy Jane, most of these characters are unable to find consolation in body or in spirit. Rilke's voices, though multiple, face enduring isolation and any dialogue that occurs within the poem takes the form of an inward conversation. Still, the two works contain an uncanny number of similarities, not least their frequent recourse to the three-stanza formation – 'Song of the Blind Man,' in particular, shares the magical configuration discussed above (though there is no evidence to suggest that Yeats modelled his sequence on Rilke's). While Yeats's Crazy Jane poems may be nearer to Berryman's in terms of form, it is undoubtedly the German sequence that shares the poet's unmixed negativity, and from which the key (and plural) notion of "voices" can be seen to emerge. In fact, like 'Canto Amor,' these songs engage with Rilke's concept of Orphic verse. "Rilke clearly believed in the historical power of this figure," writes Nelson, "as a way to explore an alternative poetic identity, 'mask' or 'role' that Rilke himself, like many of his contemporaries, needed to fashion for self-development and self-understanding in an era of drastic change" (77). Berryman's "mask" first emerges in 'The Nervous Songs,' and like Rilke's, his songs engage with historical forms and paradigms in order to explore "the modern disintegration of personality," to convey their sense of "alienation and isolation in the modern world" (Nelson, 77). "Once and for all / it's Orpheus when there's singing" asserts Rilke in one of his eponymous Sonnets (Sonnet 5, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 25); Berryman's songs follow closely in line.

'The Nervous Songs,' however, are not much interested in the experience of musical listening (as Berryman's later work so often is), nor do they suggest themselves as unusually musical in form. Instead, these are folk songs in the same vein as that of Yeats and Rilke, and it is their Orphic engagement that grants them musical status. As Denis Donoghue writes of Yeats's 'Words for Music Perhaps,' "The words are for music, not because they are to be sung, but because their burden, like that of the ballads, belongs to the folk" ('The Vigour of Its Blood,' 379). In 'The Nervous Songs,' writes Matterson, Berryman was "realising in part the possibilities offered through the use of a variety of persona speaking (or singing) from the borders of common experience" (*Berryman and Lowell*, 43).

Rilke's 'Title Leaf' sheds valuable light on the particular brand of folk singing that forms the basis of the sequence.

> The rich and the fortunate can well keep quiet,
> nobody wants to know what they are.
> But the destitute have to show themselves,
> have to say: I am blind
> or: I am about to become so
> or: nothing on earth works out for me
> or: I have a sick child
> or: right here I am pieced together . . .
>
> And perhaps even that won't suffice.
>
> And since otherwise people pass by them
> the way they pass things, they have to sing.
>
> And the songs you hear there can be really good.
>
> True, human beings are strange; they'd rather
> hear castrati in boy's choirs.
>
> But God himself comes and stays a long time
> whenever *these* maimed ones bother him. (*The Book of Images*, 185)

This, certainly, is a poet who seeks to represent the voice of the margins, and it emerges as a voice of particular power in Rilke's 'Title Leaf.' As a medium the song is arresting, subversive and democratic – it is of the folk. Rilke's detailing of the various ways in which the body must voice itself – "I am blind / or: I am about to become so / or: nothing works out for me" – is distinctly reminiscent of Berryman's idiom in 'The Nervous Songs' and in *The Dream Songs* that follow them, and these plights first emerge from a shared sense of struggle, or chorus.[23]

In comparison to Yeats, Berryman's indebtedness to Rilke has been little discussed and demands further exploration, as does Rilke's legacy in the poetry of the middle generation more generally. In his brief essay 'Rilke in America,' Christopher Benfey puts forward the claim that "Rilke's work is hardly a presence in American poetry until after World War II, by which time his reputation had long been established in Europe" (32). "It was Jarrell's generation, the cold war poets, that first

[23] As he came to compose the sequence Berryman was no doubt also thinking of William Blake, whose *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789-1794) use a kind of folk song to access difficult truths about the individual within society.

'received' Rilke,'" writes Benfey, and "at times rockily." Benfey goes on to use Berryman's "snide comments about Rilke" as "an indication, if a negative one, of Rilke's prominence during the 1950s" (32). It is not untrue that Berryman's admiration for Rilke's work was tempered by uncertainty regarding the character of the man himself – "wisdom in every line while his wife cried upstairs / disgusting Emerson and Rilke" (DS 294), fumes Berryman in one Dream Song. Yet contrary to Benfey's claims, the deep influence of Rilke on Berryman's verse was begun *during* World War II, perhaps making him one of the earliest of his generation to "receive" this European influence. Indeed Benfey's claim that Rilke helped Jarrell and Lowell to "'personalize' their own poetic language in the treatment of family history and gender reversal" (33) also resonates strongly with Berryman's strategy in 'The Nervous Songs.'

Berryman's lyrics, however, significantly update Rilke's series of unhappy vignettes, planting them within a contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Instead of the dwarf or beggar, Berryman's work features the professor and the pacifist, for the blind man and widow, Berryman substitutes the forsaken artist (Gauguin) and tortured girl, the possible prisoner of a Nazi death camp. Yet not all of the isolated protagonists within Berryman's cycle are unhappy navel-gazers; 'Song of the Young Hawaiian' features (if not a little problematically) the happy-go-lucky island bachelor who swims alone and refuses to be joined to just "one" lover – "no no, I dance them all" (*CP*, 50). Yet in the background the youth hears "strange languages" and feels the need to point out his sense that "rarely a child sings now" (*CP*, 50). A similar threat is perceived in 'Song of the Demented Priest,' in which the protagonist finds himself alien to his own parish and feels put upon by suggested invaders – "someone interferes / Everywhere with me" (*CP*, 49-50). He laments the passing of his original communion with God, who used to walk with him, "Showing me / Serpents and small flowers," before the invasion of "the violent and formal dancers" (*CP*, 50). The connection with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* here points to the salient theme of island invasion within the sequence, and the sequence is often punctuated by moments of odd exoticism, a number of scenes playing out far away from the poet's own shores. Any "explorer" in 'The Nervous Songs,' however, rarely comes off well. 'The Captain's Song' navigates the relocation of one such figure who sails out, "Forsaking wife and child," only to dream reluctantly of home.

Baffle this memory from my return,
That in the coldest nights, murmuring her name
I sought her two feet with my feet, my feet
Were warm and hers were ice and I warmed her
With both of mine. Will I warm her with one? (*CP*, 52)

The ominous ending of this song gestures to the destructive outcomes of the Captain's voyage, challenging the idealisms associated with war and colonialism. 'Song of the Man Forsaken and Obsessed' is another example of a song that takes place in an "exotic" location, representing a disease-ridden Gauguin stranded far from health on the Marquesas Islands.[24] Like the Captain, this artist abandons wife and child in pursuit of his artistic "calling," and the impulse toward artistic inspiration at all costs comes under significant scrutiny. Gauguin's illness is attributed to his syphilitic condition – "My legs, my decayed feet, cock and heart" (*CP*, 53) – that constrains him to his bed where he is waited on hand and foot by "the brown girl [who] brings me rice" (*CP*, 53).[25] A persistent preoccupation with immobility and bodily dismemberment, as well as psychic injury can be observed throughout the sequence.[26] Rilke's songs are similarly focused on physical ailment and disability – typified by the voice of the dwarf, the leper, and the blind man – but not all of Berryman's characters command an equal measure of sympathy.

In Berryman's songs the borders of experience are increasingly global, and represent a spirit faced with the challenges of war, consumerism and cultural imperialism – however, these struggles cannot be disentangled from the more intimate ones that form the backdrop to the sequence. Like Rilke's songs, these lyrics try to "accommodate not just the inner self, but the outer, often social determinants of that self"; they use "the personal to move into the historical and social" (Nelson, 78). Expounding upon Rilke's influence in mid-century America, Benfey argues that Rilke

[24] In some later reflections in the unpublished dream work *St. Pancras Braser*, Berryman makes clear that the artist in question here is Gauguin, reaffirming the place of 'The Nervous Songs' within the larger dream project. St. Pancras Braser (notes, drafts), Folder 6, Dreams 1-12 (early versions), JBP.

[25] These questions also reflect a more Yeatsian concern, that of whether it is more apposite for the poet to strive toward the perfection of his works or the perfection of his life. As Eileen Simpson notes, these issues were immediately pressing for Berryman as he came to write these songs. "Responsibility towards marriage vs. responsibility toward art became a serious conflict for one who was almost as ambitious to be a good husband as a good poet," writes Simpson (42).

[26] This interest is pervasive in *The Dream Songs* and is likely connected to Berryman's admiration for John Crowe Ransom's poem 'Captain Carpenter,' which he expounds upon in his essay 'The Sorrows of Captain Carpenter' (*The Freedom of the Poet*, 279-281).

helped poets such as Jarrell and Lowell to "personalize" their own poetic language, "in the treatment of family history and gender reversal," while "certain [other] influential poets of the '60s found in Rilke ways to go beyond or beneath the merely personal" (33). For Berryman, writing these lyrics much before the period discussed by Benfey, Rilke became an essential model for how it was possible to achieve both.

This is well represented by the first in the cycle, 'Young Woman's Song,' a lyric that also performs, via Rilke, the gender reversal that Benfey notices as a feature in the work of Berryman's peers.[27] According to Berryman, the lyric was "based on parts of a published journal I once read,"[28] and it is the first poem of *The Dispossessed* in which the poet tries on a persona that seems so distant from his own. Still, the poem is not lacking in emotional empathy. 'Young Woman's Song' begins with the speaker (or singer) observing her own body with appreciation: "The round and smooth, my body in my bath" (*CP*, 49). The Young Woman's words are correspondingly full of reflection and sound echoes, and are clearly savoured by the speaker. Yet this autoerotic experience is soon punctuated by concerns of isolation and non-reflection; as the Young Woman admires herself she begins to imagine her body in the eye of another beholder:

> If someone else would like it too.— I did,
> I wanted T. to think 'How interesting';
> Although I hate his voice and face, hate both.
> I hate this something like a bobbing cork
> Not going. I want something to hang to.— (*CP*, 49)

The sudden recollection of "T" is enough to rouse the woman out of her gentle thoughts, and gives rise to a burst of aggression that is immediately directed back toward herself. It must be a moment of traumatic disassociation that transforms the speaker's body from nubile bather into bobbing cork, an image which for all its oddity, has emotional weight, re-exposing the speaker to a moment of vulnerability:

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[27] He further suggests that "The two sides of Rilke's temperament, the martial and the effeminate, found echoes in the 'Confessional experiments' of Lowell and Jarrell" (32).

[28] Page proofs of *The Dispossessed*, Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 1, JBP. In the later unpublished dream work *St. Pancras Braser*, Berryman describes this song as a kind of blues work. Singling out the phrase "I did," he writes: "esp 'I did' in Young Woman — assoc to 'Young Woman's Blues'? Bessie Smith."
St Pancras Braser (notes, drafts), Folder 6, Dreams 1-12 (early versions), JBP.

A fierce wind roaring high up in the bare
Branches of trees,—I suppose it was lust
But it was holy and awful. (*CP*, 49)

It is suggested that some breach upon the woman's sense of personal safety has occurred, and though it is attributed to "lust" it is not clear whether this desire is her own or someone else's, perhaps "T's." Either way this lust is experienced as trauma and it is from inside this experience that the Young Woman now regards her sense of worth: "what have you done at last? / A little work, a little vague chat." The poem has much in common with Yeats's Crazy Jane insomuch as the sexualised and time-bound body becomes the focal point, yet in Berryman's lyric there is no underlying celebration of the body's foulness, nor any promise of wholeness for that which has been rent. Berryman's Young Woman seems more kindred to T. S. Eliot's despondent women of *The Waste Land* who have variously unremarkable sexual experiences – "well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over" (64) – and are forced to read their bodies in terms of exchange value – "if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said" (60). *The Waste Land*, or, as it was called in one of the early drafts, *He do the Police in Different Voices*, vies for a place among Berryman's source texts for this vocal score – and the person of "T" could easily gesture to T. S. Eliot's presence. Like Eliot's women, Berryman's Young Woman appears to be an urban dweller, and her personal dilemma is tied to such a context. Though less collected than Eliot's frustrated lover, "who smoothes her hair with automatic hand / and puts a record on the gramophone" (50), Berryman's Young Woman seeks to transcend her situation by means of consumption – "I want that £3.10 hat terribly" – yet these token efforts only hamper her progress towards self acceptance or actualisation. Of course, Berryman's mention of the Great British Pound, rather than the US Dollar, is another clue that his sources are European. The Young Woman's epiphany – "What I am looking for (I am) may be / Happening in the gaps of what I know" – is a discovery of lack, or absence and provides no ultimate comfort. Her closing words – "Where am I going? I am not afraid . . Only I would be lifted lost in the flood" (*CP*, 49) – are couched in the language of uncertainty and nihilism reminiscent of Rilke's 'The Song of the Suicide.'

I know that life is fine and good
and the world is full of pot,

but it doesn't flow into my blood,
it only rises to my head.

Others it feeds, me it sickens;
Try to understand: one *can* despise it.
For at least a thousand years now
I'll require a diet. (*The Book of Images*, 193)

Another gender reversal takes place in 'Song of the Tortured Girl,' a lyric in which the torture is set within a more obviously political context, and far removed from the poet's own experience. As Coleman has pointed out, the poem is among those early works of Berryman's that seek "to imagine an alternative textual space within which the specific or actual social or political events of the day may be given symbolic shape," and more particularly, the plight of European Jews under Hitler (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 69). Coleman suggests how the poem can be placed alongside a number of other works in which Berryman identifies with the Jewish people (many of which were composed within a few years of this song) such as the short story 'The Imaginary Jew' (1945), the abandoned sequence, 'The Black Book' (begun in 1948), and Berryman's later essay on 'The Development of Anne Frank' (1967) (Coleman, 69). He also draws attention to the poet's possible response to Adorno's pronouncement that to "write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"; yet "the fact that Berryman (and others) ultimately found the creative and intellectual resources to continue writing poetry during this period complicates Adorno's claim" (69). Berryman may have diverged from Adorno on this point, however his frequent recourse to song in dealing with this particular subject suggests that he may have considered it a more appropriate medium through which to navigate these issues. And it is not only 'Young Woman's Song' that deploys music to such an end; notes for 'The Black Book' make clear that Berryman envisioned the work as a Requiem Mass and made plans to "study Mozart and Verdi's."[29] Aware of the dramatic potential of this medium, Berryman imagined "a section alternating the screams & opera-singing," while the words attached to these screams – "I am a piece of shit" – suggest the forced degradation of the Jewish protagonists.[30]

In 'The Nervous Songs,' The Tortured Girl's excruciating isolation (and possibly terminal experience) is expressed through the more pared-back medium of

[29] Unpublished Miscellaneous Poetry, Box 1, Folder 25, JBP.
[30] Ibid.

art song. Unlike Berryman's Young Woman, the girl is faced with immediate physical threat, though she also finds herself experiencing symptoms of psychic dislocation.

> After a little I could not have told—
> But no one asked me this—why I was there.
> I asked. The ceiling of that place was high
> And there were sudden noises, which I made.
> I must have stayed there a long time today:
> My cup of soup was gone when they brought me back. (*CP*, 52)

Berryman's syntactical delay tactics, belatedly revealing that the noises were ones "which I made," suggest the woman's estrangement from her own body, as well as her inhuman status in the eyes of her torturers. Rilke's *Die Stimmen* features equally discomfiting screams and noises that emerge from his agitated and disoriented bodies. "I alone / live and suffer and make noise," opines the Blind Man,

> inside me there's an endless screaming,
> and I don't know if it's my heart
> or my gut the screams. (*The Book of Images*, 189)

Likewise, Rilke's Beggar considers how from his leveled position "my voice sounds to me / as if I'd never heard it," and how he cannot know "for sure who screams there, / me or someone else" (*The Book of Images*, 187). In Berryman's lyric the screaming is more obviously political, and the "strange room" where they "stretch my youth and throw a switch" (*CP*, 52) bears symbolic resemblance to the Nazi gas chamber or the rooms in which they carried out their torturous medical experiments.

Discussing Berryman's notes on Anne Frank in connection with the poet's other sympathetic works, Coleman points out that "Berryman makes an explicit connection between what he calls the Dutch Girl's 'imaginativeness – the ability to alter reality, to create a new reality' and her desire for survival (*FP* 97)" (*John Berryman's Public Vision*, 69). In 'Song of the Tortured Girl' we witness such a movement of the imagination as the protagonist searches for some means of escape:

> Through leafless branches the sweet wind blows
> Making a mild sound, softer than a moan;
> High in a pass once where we put our tent,
> Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy.
> —I no longer remember what they want.—
> Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy. (*CP*, 52)

Her imaginative retreat in the memory of the unsheltered tent, however, now reflects the Young Woman's current situation with its "blows" and "moans," and the attempted affirmation of the refrain – "minutes I lay awake to hear my joy" – rings, in its new context, with fresh uncertainties and a heightened awareness of the ticking clock. The incidence of the word "once" and the transcendent memory of being "High in a pass" also calls out to Berryman's later attempts to seek refuge in Dream Song 1, "Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang," and his ultimate failure to achieve it: "Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed."

'The Nervous Songs' has generally been read as an exercise in the development of poetic personalities distinct from the poet himself. This plurality of characters decidedly not the poet has often caused readers of the songs to mark this as a point of distinction between the early sequence and *The Dream Songs*. "In the Dream Songs Henry is Berryman and is not Berryman. 'The Nervous Songs' do not offer such a distorted relationship between Berryman and the singer of each song," writes Matterson (*Berryman and Lowell*, 41). It is true that *The Dream Songs* demonstrates an unadulterated leap into more personal material, however a few of these earlier lyrics reflect back, albeit indirectly, on some of the poet's own experiences. Like Rilke they use the personal experience as a point of entry to the sociohistorical axis. As Matterson points out, these poems are indeed "of distinct importance in Berryman's development" (41), and this is precisely because they negotiate the murky boundary between the singer and society, the personal and the collective.

'Song of the Bridegroom,' for example, clearly expresses some of the recently wedded Berryman's uneasiness regarding the subject of marriage (echoed, of course, in the 'Song of the Young Hawaiian'). In this song the speaker feels "A sort of anxiousness crystal in crystal has," and seeks refuge from the light that troubles his prism. "Because I am desolate I have – / Have emanations, and it is not safe" (*CP*, 53) – the exact type of emanations experienced by the speaker, with all their Blakean potential, are not perfectly clear, and the poem excludes any kind of descriptive material that would allow the speaker a definitive identity. He is Bridegroom, not poet, yet the bridegroom's unlikely position amid the tragic lineup in 'The Nervous Songs' suggests Berryman's personal imprint on the lyric. In fact, the poem contains a

good deal of the same imagery as 'Canto Amor,' presenting the marriage ceremony as taking place in some mythic cave of creation and destruction:

> Not long . . not long but like a journey home
> Frightening after so distant years
> And such despairs . . And then fatigue sets in.
> Lead me up blindly now where I began,
> I will not wince away into my one.
> I extend my hand and place it in the womb. (*CP*, 53)

A similar abstraction (or impersonalisation) of experience occurs in 'A Professor's Song,' adding another surprising character to the lineup, and with a role not unfamiliar to the poet himself. At the time of the poem's composition Berryman was working at Harvard and described himself as feeling "so helpless, so wild, bound to the insufferable University" (qtd. in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 141). Again, nothing in the poem is especially biographical; instead, what might be understood as personal experience is slanted or reconfigured through the prism of the poem, and in this case through the figure of the blathering Professor that Berryman fears he might become. The speaker of this poem appears to be the subject of some ridicule.

> (. . rabid or dog-dull.) Let me tell you how
> The Eighteenth Century couplet ended. Now
> Tell me. Troll me the sources of that Song—
> Assigned last week—by Blake. Come, come along,
> Gentlemen. (Fidget and huddle, do. Squint soon.)
> I want to end these fellows all by noon.
>
> 'That deep romantic chasm'—an early use;
> The word is from the French, by our abuse
> Fished out a bit. (Red all your eyes. O when?)
> 'A poet is a man speaking to men':
> But I am then a poet, am I not"—
> Ha ha. The radiator, please. Well, what?
>
> Alive now—no—Blake would have written prose,
> But movement following movement crisply flows,
> So much the better, better the much so,
> As burbleth Mozart. Twelve. The class can go.
> Until I meet you, then, in Upper Hell
> Convulsed, foaming immortal blood: farewell. (*CP*, 51)

This English teacher, who appears to be modelled on his professor in the later 'Crisis' – who "mouthed at me Wordsworth" and "tried to keep me from *graduating*" (*Love & Fame, CP,* 185-186) – makes no effort to lead his students in discussion, and baffles them with quotations that are divorced from their intended meanings. He shows general disdain for his students and makes a concentrated effort to widen the chasm between himself and the class. Another such professor appears in Berryman's short story 'Wash Far Away,' begun under the title of 'The Group' in 1947.[31] This elegiac story relates a high-minded professor's frustrations in teaching Milton's *Lycidas* to a class of undergraduates; and as manuscripts demonstrate, it has its roots in both personal and public issues. In some early notes for the work, headed 'The Group,' Berryman suggested that the piece of fiction was predominantly "about succumbing to routine of teaching," "about not being in war (especially after politics)," "about wife??," and especially "about surviving."[32] 'Wash Far Away' also contains some important musical imagery, and the narrative picks up a gear into resolution (and clarity) when the professor makes an analogy to Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto – in which the piano, not the orchestra, begins. The elegiac, even lyrical, story ends with a personal epiphany in which the speaker opens himself up to examination: "What situation will let you ask the most questions? A trial. An enquiry, a trial" (*The Freedom of The Poet,* 385). This question, though directed toward the class, is reflected in the trial that the poet undergoes in his own light-filled vision. Indeed, the passage bears striking resemblance to a moment in 'Canto Amor,' in which the couple take their "trial, naked in the music's vision / the flowing ceremony of trouble and light" (*CP*, 48). On one of the most finished drafts of 'Wash Far Away,' Berryman marks out another salient theme of the work: "Renewal in the middle of life," a concern that echoes his Dantesque quest in the canto; and, in both of these works, he achieves it.[33] In 'A Professor's Song' no such transcendence is in sight. Moreover, in

[31] The story also exists in draft from under the later title 'The Lesson and the Light.' The appended notes in *The Freedom of the Poet* point out that it was first printed in *American Review* 22, edited by Theodore Solotaroff, 1975, pp. 1-26. Here Robert Giroux also suggests that "it existed in draft form in 1957 and may have been written somewhat earlier." Indeed, the story was begun some ten years earlier under the title of 'The Group,' a name with clearly therapeutic associations.
Prose Works (Unpublished) Fiction, Box 3, The Lesson and the Light or Wash Far Away, JBP.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Berryman was clearly thinking a good deal about Dante during the first half of the 1940s. Indeed, in 'The Black Book: Berryman's Holocaust Requiem,' Matthew Boswell comments

an unpublished essay on Dante's relevance to in the contemporary world Berryman remarks on the "'impressive resemblances between Hell and Western Civilisation of 1945," a theme that certainly emerges in his depiction of the classroom.[34]

Like 'Canto Amor,' 'A Professor's Song' also contains a reference to Mozart, though this time it is not so much the composer's musical sublimity as his babbling juvenility that interests the poet. Berryman's quotation from Mozart – "so much the better, better the much so" – is taken from a letter to his cousin, Anna Maria Thekla, written on "November 7 1777."

> Dearest Coz Fuzz!
>
> I have received reprieved your dear letter, telling selling me that my uncle carbuncle, my aunt can't and you too are very well hell. Thank God, we too are in excellent health wealth. Today the letter setter from my Papa Ha! Ha! Dropped safely into my claws paws. I hope that you too have got shot the note dote which I wrote to you from Mannheim. If so, so much the better, better the much so [. . .] You write further, you pour out, disclose, divulge, notify, declare, signify, inform, acquaint me with the fact, make it quite clear, request, demand, desire, wish, would like, order me to send lend you my portrait. Eh bien, I shall certainly dispatch scratch it to you. Oui, par ma foi. I shit on your nose and it will run down your chin. A propos. Have you got that Spuni Cuni business? Do tell me! Do you still love me? I am sure you do! If so, so much the better, better the much so! (Letter 236, qtd. in Anderson, 358)

A margin more outrageous than Berryman's Professor, Mozart's exhaustive letter does contain a similar bent towards empty repetition and indulgent prattle. While there is a sense of playfulness and élan in the language, the poet's inclusion of the elliptical Mozart quotation only bolsters the Professor's appearance as derivative and

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that the work was to be "based on the *Divine Comedy*: it would be a kind of Inferno, with *Homage to Mistress* Bradstreet and The Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion providing equivalents for *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* respectively" (12).

[34] 'On the *Purgatorio* of Dante,' p. 2, Unpublished Non-Fiction Prose, Box 2, Folder 76, JBP. Berryman makes a further mention of Mozart in this essay, claiming that "All that the reader needs, having the Temple edition before him, is ~~some~~ acquaintance with Italian pronunciation (which can be painlessly acquired by listening, for example, with libretto,/to the Glyndebourne recordings of Mozart's operas, Don Giovanni or Figaro) and a general willingness to take some trouble for an indescribable reward" (p. 2). He progresses, on page four, to express a movement, such as that witnessed in both 'Canto Amor' and 'Wash Far Away,' into "the delicate experience of Absolute Hope [to which] we must be made sensitive again." "The opening cantos of the Purgatorio," urges Berryman, represent "the most remarkable transition in Western Art [. . .] This throwing open of the verse suddenly to effects unknown to the Inferno- - to a new language- - is infinitely surprising, and prepares the experience for a world of leisure and light and music [. . .] at the canto's end the reader is restored" (p. 4).

inappropriate. What's more, if Yeats's oracular Jane presses deeper into metaphysical truths by means of her baffling speech, Berryman's Professor is left alone in his "deep romantic chasm" (*CP*, 51). It is the artists and intellectuals that consistently come under fire in 'The Nervous Songs,' suggesting that Berryman was using this song sequence (and the poetic personality) as a means to reflect critically on his own creative practice.

It is only in the 'The Pacifist's Song,' the lyric that seals the sequence (though not the section), that any one of Berryman's voices is free to discover a sense of their purpose. This figure is also isolated from their larger society, but only by the staunchness of their vision.

> I am the same as you others, only –
> (Also for mé the plain where I was born,
> Bore Her look, bear love, makes its mindless pull
> And matters in my throat, also for me
> The many-murdered sway my dreams unshorn,
> Bearded with woe, their eyes blasted and dull) (*CP*, 54)

This matter in the throat is a distinctly political one, and its mattering has a visceral as well as intellectual meaning. Waking "out of the vision of death," the Pacifist understands that he must stand against the hatred of the masses: "Only I must forsake my country's wrath / Who am earth's citizen" (*CP*, 54). His call is to perpetual toil and struggle:

> Back to the old and serious labour, to
> My restless labour under the vigilant stars,
> From whom no broad storm ever long me hides.
> What I try, doomed, is hard enough to do. (*CP*, 54)

His ultimate discovery is also Berryman's – that war is both internal and external.

> We breed up in our breast our worse wars
> Who long since sealed ourselves Hers who abides. (*CP*, 54)

As has been seen, the personal and the political should not be read as discrete categories in Berryman's developing idiom. Like Rilke, Berryman was learning to use "the personal to move into the historical and social" (Nelson, 78), while also exploring the possibilities of the poetic persona to access intimate truths. The song

becomes a tool both to enter and to shed the ego. In ‘Canto Amor’ and ‘The Nervous Songs,’ Berryman’s “new musics” are capable of integrating both personal and collective concerns. The poet’s creation (or multiplication) of voices in ‘The Nervous Songs,’ and his enquiry into the very operations of music in ‘Canto Amor’ are central to his discovery of more malleable (and inclusive) forms beyond *The Dispossessed.*

Chapter 2. Familiar Little Songs: The Musical Meanings of *Berryman's Sonnets*

In February of 1947 Berryman began an affair that was to cause him huge emotional upheaval and propel him into a period of immense productivity. The affair was with Chris, the wife of one of his graduate students at Princeton and a friend of both his and Eileen's. By April he had begun a Sonnet sequence detailing the intricacies of his romantic entanglement. "Berryman's Sonnets sprang from a fevered experience," writes Haffenden,

> and were often written without pause for reflection or analysis. They dealt with the experience even as it occurred and gave aesthetic shape – a gradually emerging thematic structure – to a series of events in themselves apparently unpredicted . . . the poems actualise a tormenting experience as myth, as art. (*The Life of John Berryman*, 168)

The sequence was largely complete by July, when Berryman recorded feeling what he described as a "suspension of Sonnet pressure" (Haffenden, 180) and the poems remained substantially in the order in which they emerged. The John Berryman Papers at the University of Minnesota contain a variety of notebooks and schema for the work; Berryman's Sonnets have been organised into small notebooks, and contents pages are carefully drawn and largely unchanging. A final typescript of the work, labeled *Sonnets to Chris*, suggests that it was being prepared for publication. The contents page lists 100 Sonnets, though by the end of July Berryman had consolidated 110. "Although he wanted to write 111," comments Haffenden, "he felt sincerely that weeks of writing Sonnets had reached their period" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 180). Despite the fact that nearly all of the Sonnets were ready by July, however, they remained unpublished until 1967, when five Sonnets (107, 112, 113, 114, 115) and a prefatory poem were added to the sequence, prior to its publication as *Berryman's Sonnets* with Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

In *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, Charles Thornbury returns to the 1947 typescript of *Sonnets to Chris* in an attempt to uncover what he considers Berryman's earlier (and truer) intention for the work. His decision to also include the additional poems of *Berryman's Sonnets*, therefore, is somewhat contradictory. Complicating matters yet further, Thornbury includes two extra Sonnets, numbers 115 and 116, which are found neither in the original 1947 typescript nor the book that was printed

in 1967. According to the editor, these Sonnets were "sent to the publisher after the collection was in press" (Thornbury, 304), yet this version was never actualised even if it was at one point the poet's intention. Thornbury's amalgamation of multiple versions has led to the hardening of a text that Berryman himself had no hand in. What's more, as Kevin Young points out, by "substituting 'Lise' with 'Chris,' Thornbury reduces the persona and play of the Sonnets to mere biography" ('Responsible Delight,' 164).[1] This chapter draws from *Berryman's Sonnets*, the text that the poet saw through to print, and which differs intentionally from the 1947 typescript; earlier versions of the work will be drawn on for comparison.

As Berryman was revising the sequence for publication in 1966, he made another significant addition to suggest its resonance with his major poetic work then ongoing. Berryman's prefatory Dream Song casts a retrospective glance at the earlier relationship and sets the tenor of the events within:

> *He made, a thousand years ago, a-many songs*
> *for an excellent lady, wif whom he was in wuv,*
> *shall now he publish them?*
> *Has he the right, upon that old young man,*
> *To bare his nervous system*
> *& display all the clouds again as they were above?*
>
> *As a friend of the Court I would say, Let them die.*
> *What does anything matter? Burn them up,*
> *put them in a bank vault.*
> *I thought of that and when I returned to this country*
> *I took them out again. The original fault*
> *will not be undone by fire.*
>
> *The original fault was whether wickedness*
> *was soluble in art. History says it is,*
> *Jacques Maritain says it is,*
> *barely. So free them to the winds that play,*
> *let boys & girls with these old songs have holiday*
> *if they feel like it.*

The poet's "Note" that "These Sonnets, which were written many years ago, have nothing to do, of course, with my long poem in progress, *The Dream Songs*" ("Ballsbridge, Dublin, October 8th, 1966," *Berryman's Sonnets*) has long been understood as a lead in the wrong direction. As one early critic of the volume, Hayden

[1] Since *Berryman's Sonnets* has often been out of print (until its recent reissue in 2014) it is likely that Thornbury's text has been consistently read as the official version.

Carruth, has noted, "Readers who turn to them in search of the stylistic root of *The Dream Songs* will find it, sure enough" (120). This suspicion can be confirmed in the first two lines of this song alone, which meld the high language of the courtly love song, found throughout *Berryman's Sonnets*, with a baby speak native to *The Dream Songs* alone. Indeed Berryman's casual reference to these Sonnets as "old songs" points directly to this stylistic root. While "song" might be read superficially here as a term standing in for "Sonnet," the poet's positing of this central term at the head of the collection is more loaded than is first apparent. In fact Berryman's recourse to the word song signals a broader interest in the theme of music that is embedded within the collection and bound up with his movement into the larger Dream Song project. This chapter explores the ways in which Berryman seeks to situate his Sonnets within the tradition of song, a term that enjoins his two most expansive and courageous sequences.

As Alex Runchman has pointed out in '"Continuity with lovers dead': Berryman, Lowell and the Twentieth-Century American Sonnet,' Berryman's recourse to the Sonnet form during this period in American poetry was itself felt to be somewhat anachronistic; certain anxieties no doubt accompanied his engagement of what was recognised as being a largely European literary tradition at a time when most American poets were embracing increasingly flexible forms.[2] Runchman puts forward the persuasive claim that Berryman's Sonnets (as well as Lowell's) attempted "to reconcile the conventions and constraints of a typically European form with their American free verse heritage" but that "they also betrayed their doubts that this could be done or even that it was worth doing" (31). He duly notes "Berryman's consciousness of the form's history" and his "uneasiness about adapting it to treat [his] modern American love affair" (31). Not only this, but Berryman's attitude toward the Sonnet form in general was less than simply reverent. As Haffenden makes clear, Berryman's journal for 1947 (an account that is no longer extant) reflects the poet's genuine misgivings about the shape of the collection to the point that on 26 July he found himself asking why he had attempted "that exhausted and contemptible art-form the Sonnet sequence anyway" (qtd. in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 177).

[2] Indeed, perhaps it was Lowell's engagement with the Sonnet during the decades that followed the initial composition of the sequence that encouraged Berryman to finally "free [his] songs to the winds" of the 1960s.

Yet in expanding the concept of "Sonnet" to take in "song" (with all its musical associations) Berryman found something more fluid and possible, and gradually less contemptible. And if the poet draws upon the European tradition of the Sonnet to explore and negotiate his American identity, as Runchman suggests, he also engages a wealth of European song. How Berryman moves from one song cycle to the other is, to a degree, the business of this chapter, and his apprenticeship in the Sonnets, I argue, was one that he viewed predominantly through a musical lens. This is made particularly apparent in a schematic note that Berryman appended to one spiral bound notebook of Sonnets. Commenting on J. S. Bach (amongst other composers that emerge later in this discussion), Berryman observed that "before he began to extemporise he preferred to play something already familiar, as though his inventiveness needed stimulus."[3] This "something already familiar" was the Sonnet form itself, a shape that rooted him in poetic tradition while enabling him to think about the ways in which he might extend, innovate, or break with the form. In other words, it is clear that Berryman thought about these Sonnets, very literally, as little songs.

While exploring the various freedoms that music might bring to the structures of a poem, *Berryman's Sonnets* is interested, more broadly speaking, in the imaginative possibilities of music, particularly its impact on the mind and body. As his prefatory poem suggests, music possesses so profound a capacity for evocation that when the poet "free[s]" his songs, almost twenty years on, "to the winds that play," he is counting at least in part on music to "display the clouds again as they were above." It is perhaps unsurprising then that song has a deep association throughout the sequence with the person of Lise. As Julian Webb noted in his review for the *Financial Times*, "we learn little about her" apart from the fact that "she is blonde, likes Mozart and Schubert and has a reputation for keeping calm" ('Love Affairs,' 1968). Webb's assertion that Lise is a docile lover, if not sarcastic, is erroneous, but his emphasis on the many occasions in which Lise appears in the presence of music is not an unimportant point. Berryman's expression of Lise's body, character, and aura in connection with music will be examined throughout this discussion, where it will be seen that these thematic interests cannot be untangled from the question of the collection's musical structure and conception.

[3] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.

Berryman's musical vision was somewhat holistic. Music and song traditions pervade the sequence where they are used as an ordering principle, a model for artistic development and as a means to tell the adulterous story. The poems within reflect exhaustively on the relationship between poetry and song and the musical integrity of poetic language *per se*. As such, this chapter will itself form something of a medley in treating the various strands of Berryman's musical interest through these wicked and traditional songs. It begins with a discussion of Berryman's recourse to nineteenth-century French symbolism, and its attempts to discover a musical integrity in language itself, before moving on to consider Berryman's exploration of classical music in connection with the erotic subject and erotic feeling. Here music stands in for that which is found to be outside of the poet's linguistic grasp and musical allusion serves a Romantic, if not metonymic purpose. Yet if music is used to represent the heights of passion, it also aids the poet in voicing his despair; as I move on to examine the poet's romantic malaise, the tradition of Lieder, and particularly the cycles of Schubert will be explored, along with the musical sounds that appear throughout, humming, ringing and trilling out his fear (BS 12, 14, 51, 60). Finally, in returning to the musical schema behind the collection, and the question of its general trajectory, I discuss the ways in which *Berryman's Sonnets* – by engaging tradition as Bach did, in order to break with it – acted as a springboard to *The Dream Songs*.

What would Rilke or Baudelaire sound like if they "were writing now and in America?" asked Robert Lowell in his 1961 translation of symbolist verse in *Imitations* (qtd. in Hamilton, 289). Berryman had been thinking about this very question, at least as early as the inception of his Sonnet sequence. During his time at Cambridge the poet had become generally interested in French poetry – Haffenden lists "Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Laforgue as poets whom Berryman studied "to keep my sense of values straight" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 77) – and this was a curiosity that followed him into the 1940s when he continued to add to his collection of books by French symbolists, both original and translated versions, as well as purchasing a range of critical companions and biographies. Most of these works are considerably annotated and a number contain inserted reviews.[4] In the same

[4] For example, Berryman's copy of Grange Wooley's *Stéphane Mallarmé 1842-1898* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University, 1942), which contains a reflective note titled 'Mallarmé,' along with a newspaper profile on Mallarmé from the *Times Literary Supplement* (September 11 1948), headed 'The Hero as Artist' (the author's name does not appear).

year that Berryman began his affair with Lise he personally reviewed a new translation of Corbière's poems.[5]

Berryman's Sonnets draws form the work of a wide range of symbolist poets including Rilke, Yeats and Wallace Stevens, but it is the French poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Corbière, that appear most consistently, and, as we shall see, in connection with music. Sonnet 98, for example, invokes one of the foremost voices of French symbolism, beginning "Mallarmé siren upside down, rootedly!," while Sonnet 109 is devoted entirely to the subject of Tristan Corbière, drawing biographic parallels through their shared struggle of the "ménage a trois" though resolving: "there, of course, the resemblance ends." Berryman's flippant disavowal of this particular symbolist, of course, speaks volumes. While there has been relatively little scholarship surrounding Berryman's symbolist interest, a few critics have picked up on some significant points of connection between these poet adulterers. Quoting from Berryman's review of Corbière's *Poems*, Charles Thornbury claims that Berryman "found a kinsman in the French poet's 'abrupt phrasing,' 'violent shifts,' and 'lightning alternations of the sardonic and the profound'" (xviii). While speaking to the Sonnets more specifically, Gary Arpin draws further parallels. "There are," he writes,

> some indications in the sequence of the influence of Corbière's style on Berryman's. Berryman's description of himself in Sonnet 53, for example, '*Ermite-amateur* in the midst of boobs,' is taken from Corbière's description of himself in 'Le Poet Contumace': Un ermite-amatur, chassé par la rafale.' Minor aspects of Corbière's work, such as the use of dashes and ellipses in the place of more traditional punctuation marks, also seem to have influenced the Sonnets. More important, though, I think, is the more general liberating influence of Corbière's work in its distortions of syntax and in its emphasis on the internal effects of alliteration and internal rhyme. (45)

Of course Berryman would make his stylistic indebtedness (even envy) very clear in the dedication of his penultimate collection, *Love & Fame* (1970), "To the memory of / the suffering lover & young Breton master / who called himself 'Tristan Corbière,'"

Berryman's copy of Enid Starkie's *Baudelaire* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1933) contains an inserted clipping entitled 'Baudelaire's Satanism.' The newspaper from which the item has been taken is not identified on the clipping, nor is the name of its author.

[5] This review, entitled 'Nightingale of the Mire,' has been tucked into to the front of Berryman's copy of Tristan Corbière, *Poems*, Trans. Walter McElroy. New York: Banyan Press, 1947, JBP.

and its attendant aside, "(I wish I versed with his bite)" (*CP*, 167).

As Arpin points out, the French symbolist project of which Corbière was part was chiefly interested in testing the limits of poetic language. Indeed, while Berryman might have enjoyed casting himself as an *enfant terrible* there were clear stylistic elements in Corbière's verse, and in the verse of his compatriots, that Berryman sought to adopt for his own. In what follows I explore the ways in which Berryman's assimilation of particular strains in French symbolism melded with his American sensibilities, bringing out unique qualities that would touch his verse for the duration of his career.

Berryman was certainly not alone in this respect. In his survey *What is Symbolism*, Henri Peyre goes so far as to suggest that "The echoes of French symbolist poetry are discernable in nearly all twentieth-century poets of any eminence" (150), and many of Berryman's peers showed signs of a renewed interest in this tradition, drawing upon its styles and principles with mixed success. Perhaps Berryman was even spurred on to the belated publication of his Sonnets by Lowell's work of "translation" in *Imitations* (1961), not to mention *Notebook* (1969), his book of Sonnets soon to be printed (some of which had already appeared in major poetry magazines across the US). Either way, Lowell shared a strong sense of the value to be discovered in reconnecting with European models – though he was also keen to stress the formidable challenge that this task entailed. In 'Shifting Colors' (*Day by Day*, 1977), for example, he speaks of Mallarmé as a poet that "had the good fortune" to find "a style that made writing impossible" (*Collected Poems*, 830). This was certainly the case for Randall Jarrell who was reported, by Elizabeth Bishop, to have "adopted Corbière's system of hysterical punctuation" even to a fault, since it served only to bring "out more & more his rather morbid, maudlin streak" (letter 'To Carley Dawson,' *One Art*, 172). Meanwhile, the less than hysterical Bishop herself embraced Baudelaire in 'The Bight' where she ventured that "if one were Baudelaire / one could probably hear" the evaporating water in the bay "turning to marimba music" (*The Complete Poems*, 60). Here Bishop points to one of the central interests of the symbolist poets: the transformative capabilities of the musical imagination, a point with which Berryman had to concur. While Marjorie Perloff (citing Haffenden's list of Berryman's early literary paramours) has waived the significance of the French symbolists, claiming that it's "hard to see what real role these poets were to play in Berryman's own poetry" (33), Berryman's archive suggests the degree to which

European voices were part of the sequence's musical genesis and vision.

In fact, Berryman's schema for the Sonnets, found at the back of his spiral bound notebook, makes this connection resoundingly clear. On the same page that the poet remarks upon Bach's inventiveness, he quotes a passage of text that is attributed to Mallarmé. Here he notes down a few words in French: "Exlus-en . . . le réel parce que vil," which roughly translates as "exclude from it the real because it is vile," and beside this snatch of text writes "(i.e. too precise)."[6] Like Berryman, Mallarmé was a compulsive Sonneteer and his Sonnets adopt a mystical idiom, operating principally by way of suggestion and conveying meaning through their sonic properties as much as their semantic units. As L. J. Austin writes:

> what he primarily wished to win back for French poetry was the feeling for mystery, suggestive and evocative power, and, at the same time, a high degree of abstraction and immateriality. He wanted to save the language of poetry from bondage to the referential function of speech, and to liberate it of its connotational potentialities. That was the true 'property' that was to be reclaimed from music. (36)

Berryman's inclusion of this particular poet on his musical schema page was in no way coincidental, and though the work sets itself up generally within a symbolist tradition, it is Mallarmé who exerts the most significant force of influence on *Berryman's Sonnets*. In fact the source of Berryman's chosen fragment is one of Mallarmé's own Sonnets, in which he champions a vague and suggestive aesthetic over simple literalism:

> [Toute l'âme résumée . . .]
>
> Toute l'âme résumée
> Quand lente nous l'expirons
> Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée
> Abolis en autres ronds
>
> Atteste quelque cigare
> Brûlant savamment pour peu
> Que la cendre se sépare
> De son clair baiser de feu
>
> Ainsi le chœur des romances
> A la lèvre vole-t-il

[6] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.

Exclus-en si tu commences
Le réel parce que vil

Le sens trop précis rature
Ta vague littérature

['All the soul that we evoke . . . ']

All the soul that we evoke
when we shed it lingering
into various rings of smoke
each effaced by a new ring

testifies to some cigar
burning with much artifice
as the ash falls away far
from its lucid fiery kiss

should the choir of lyric art
fly toward your own lips thus
exclude from it if you start
the real which is villainous

sense too definite cancels your
indistinct literature

(*Collected Poems*, 210-211)

This Sonnet says a few things about Berryman's intention for his own sequence. Mallarmé's smoke rings have their origin in the real and in the body, but burn with artifice, creating the lingering impression of something spent. These insubstantial rings have a decidedly erotic, though deathly import, the poet's ash falling as it does "away far / from its lucid fiery kiss." Mallarmé's reference to the "chœur des romances," here translated as "the choir of lyric art" speaks not only to the musical, but also the erotic impulse of the poetic act as conceived by the French symbolist. And as shall be seen, Berryman's Sonnets burn with a similar intent as they trace the memory of spent kisses. These poems operate by way of evocation, privileging the perceptual and experiential as modes of understanding.

"Very early in his career," writes L. J. Austin, in *Mallarmé on Music and Letters*, "Mallarmé had defined his poetics in two words: 'to depict, not the thing, but the effect it produces,'" asserting, at the same time, "the rights of Poetry to Mystery, hitherto reserved to Music'" (31-32). A musical suggestiveness pervades *Berryman's*

Sonnets, in which oftentimes only syntax acts as a "guarantee of poetic intelligibility" (L. J. Austin, 22). Yet in adopting this poetic style Berryman was attempting to get at something he couldn't broach in regular speech, some kind of absolute. The first Sonnet in the sequence is particularly revealing of the poet's symbolist intent.

> I wished, all the mild days of middle March
> This special year, your blond good-nature might
> (Lady) admit—kicking abruptly tight
> With will and affection down your breast like starch—
> Me to your story, in Spring, and stretch, and arch.
> But who not flanks the wells of uncanny light
> Sudden in bright sand towering? A bone sunned white.
> Considering travellers bypass these and parch.
>
> This came to less yes than an ice cream cone
> Let stand . . though still my sense of it is brisk:
> Blond silky cream, sweet cold, aches: a door shut.
> Errors of order! Luck lies with the bone,
> Who rushed (and rests) to meet your small mouth, risk
> Your teeth irregular and passionate.

There is a sense here of that vague style that Berryman attributed to Mallarmé in his schema quote – the syntax is twisted and gnarled and images are connected with the loosest of threads so that the poet's intended meaning seems to be transmitted along vague telepathic wires, if at all. In terms of establishing some solid sense of location or timeframe for the poem, Berryman leaves the reader equally at sea – the language, which contains an odd mixture of the contemporary and the chivalric, straddles the realms of the personal and the archetypal. The poet has excluded from this work the vile qualities of what Mallarmé calls "the real," and established himself firmly in a mythic present.

On one early draft of this Sonnet Berryman makes explicit his debt to the symbolist movement. "obsessed w. Mallarmé all day. & Sunday," notes Berryman, before attributing the lines "But who fears not the wells of uncanny light / Sudden in the desert towering? A bone blown white" to "not only Mallarmé, but Poe [. . .]!"[7] Once again, this remark leads directly to another Mallarmé Sonnet; 'The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe' celebrates the American symbolist's dark and mysterious idiom:

[7] Delusions, Etc. Berryman's Sonnets, Folder 3, JBP.
This Sonnet was altered as Berryman prepared the work for publication in 1966.

Changed to Himself at last by eternity
with a bare sword the Poet bestirred
his age terrified that it failed to see
how death was glorying in that strange word. [voix étrange]

The spell was drunk, so they proclaimed aloud
(as vile freaks writhe when seraphim bestow
purer sense on the phrases of the crowd),
in some black brew's dishonorable flow.

If our idea can carve no bas-relief
from hostile clod and cloud, O struggling grief,
for the adornment of Poe's dazzling tomb,

at least this block dropped by an occult doom,
this calm granite, may limit all the glum
Blasphemy-flights dispersed in days to come. (*Collected Poems*, 71)

By invoking this particular poem at the beginning of his sequence, Berryman again foregrounds a few of the collection's central themes, particularly notions surrounding the poetic afterlife. And like Poe's dazzling Tomb, Berryman's "bone sunned white" is an object worthy of touristic attraction. Like Mallarmé, Berryman's concern is with bestirring an age, and (perhaps with the exception of 'The Nervous Songs,' which also heralds his later voice experiments) it is the Sonnets that represent Berryman's first forays into the truly strange word-world that his poetry hereafter inhabits. As the original French makes clear, it is Poe's strange *voice* [voix étrange] that acts as a carrier of his *sui generis* peculiarity, an oral strangeness that Berryman also wished to cultivate in his lyric art.

Returning to Sonnet 1, Berryman's relic bone, symbol of posterity, is bizarrely juxtaposed with the equally phallic though less arcane ice-cream cone, "let stand." Understood as an alternative sign of their relationship, this ice-cream cone, with its "blond silky cream" has obvious sensual connotations – though it is not, the poet makes clear, his preferred emblem; "Luck lies with the bone," claims Berryman, which risks the irregular and passionate teeth of Lise's mouth. The poem, in essence, then, is one of erotic meaning, but it is equally alive to the ever-present threat of death and loss – a central preoccupation of the symbolist poets, who aspired to represent the very poles of experience, or what may be termed the "absolute."

Berryman's recourse to such obscure imagery is more generally telling of his representational struggle. Though not overtly musical, the poet's initial Sonnet demonstrates a poetic vagueness that symbolist poets such as Mallarmé thought to operate along musical lines. Indeed in *Berryman's Sonnets* the thing beyond language proper is not only the relationship that the story details, but Lise herself. In Sonnet 66 Berryman laments that he has not word apt enough to "draw you even . . and to draw you near."

> I prod our English: cough me up a word,
> Slip me an epithet will justify
> My darling fondle, fumble of far fire
> Crackling nearby, unreasonable as a surd,
> A flash of light, and insight: I am the shy
> Vehicle of your cadmium shine . . your choir.

The image of the choir appears a number of times across the sequence, and is reversed in Sonnet 112 where Lise's voice is said to have "choired" into the poet's "transept." Lise's gift, her chorus, operates as a form of possession, and it is a music to which the poet must respond in kind. Throughout the course of the sequence, Berryman repeatedly suggests that his whole aesthetic and vocal style should be tailored to suit the demands of Lise as subject. His form, and especially his syntax, must yield to the subject at hand:

> Double I sing, I must, your utraquist
> Crumpling a syntax at a sudden need,
> Stridor of English softening to plead
> O to you plainly lest you more resist. (BS 47)

If Lowell considered Mallarmé a poet who made writing impossible, here Berryman has found a subject that poses an equal challenge but rewards the poet's struggle. Sonnet 32 offers the most extensive exploration of this stylistic overhaul and the byproducts of his efforts:

> How can I sing, Western, dry and thin
> You who for celebration, should cause flow,
> The sensual fanfare of D'Annuzio,
> Mozart's mischievous joy, the amaranthine
> Mild quirks of Marvell, Villon sharp as tin
> Solid as sword-death when the man blinks slow

> And accordions into the form he'll know
> Forever—voices can nearly make me sin
> With envy, so they sound. You they saw not,
> Natheless, alas, unto this epigone
> Descends the dread labour, the Olympic hour—
> When for the garden and the tape of what
> We trust, one runs until lung into bone
> Hardens, runs harder then . . lucky, a flower.

Here Berryman makes clear that he considers music, or a poetry close to music, to be the most fitting offering. In fact Sonnet 32 appears, in a few ways, to regard music as higher and more sensual than verse; and the motif of the singer persists throughout *Berryman's Sonnets* as if to suggest the superior capabilities of the double art of *minnesang*. Thus Berryman casts himself as a singer, but still fears that his Western words come off dry and thin – to express his love for Lise he demands a more sensual and mysterious idiom. Meanwhile, even the musical voices that almost make the poet "sin with envy" are not adequate – "You they saw not," reminds Berryman, who, while he takes something away from these predecessors, resolves to go his own way. In the *volta* he provides an unusual analogy for the process by which his poetry might capture the experience of Lise in all its sensual immediacy: "we trust," he writes, "one runs until lung into bone / Hardens, runs harder then . . lucky a flower." The symbol of the lungs suggest that the source of such an utterance will be rooted in the breath – it will issue from the body as song, yet at the same time, will receive a kind of permanence. The bone image at the close of the poem functions to represent this desired process of ossification, while the potential flowering points to a vitality or freedom that poetry might gain from musical suggestiveness, which registers here as a *jouissance*, or erotic excess. Moreover, it returns us to Sonnet 1 in which "luck [lay] with the bone" that risked the irregular teeth of the poet's mistress.[8] Both endings are sexually suggestive; and Sonnet 32, perhaps even more than Sonnet 1, suggests an inevitable connection of the musical with the erotic. The flower that Berryman conjures has sensual significance, but it also emerges as a kind of symbolic substitute, since the poet's original intention had been the representation of his mistress. For all its appeal, then, the image that closes the poem is odd and poetically isolated.

[8] The bone is an oft-exploited image in Berryman's poetry, of course, and it would be remiss not to mention the fact that Berryman's protagonist of *The Dream Songs* is also called Bones by his unnamed friend. Here the suggestion that luck lies with the bone is also significant of dice (often traditionally made of bone).

"Removed from the world of objects associated with ordinary reference, words share music's signifying patterns, writes Elizabeth McCombie, in an introduction to Mallarmé's *Collected Poems*.

> Mallarmé writes: 'I say a flower! And, beyond the oblivion to which my voice banishes no contour, as something other than the familiar calyces, arises musically the fragrant idea itself, the absent flower of all bouquets.' The word takes on a new and singular existence as a pure [and] 'musical' form. (*Collected Poems and Other Verse*, xvii)

The absent flower of all bouquets is not the object that the poet seeks to represent – though it has a pleasure and fragrance of its own. If we return for a moment to Mallarmé's suggestion that a poetic work expresses not the thing itself but the *effect* that it produces, we might reasonably see this flowering as an effect produced by Lise, and a decidedly erotic one at that. *Berryman's Sonnets* continually points to the erotic possibilities of musical expression – though his musical erotics are differently conceived than the music of marriage that was under examination in the earlier epithalamion, 'Canto Amor' (*The Dispossessed*).

In Sonnet 37 Berryman creates a scene in which both musical allusion and musical suggestion operate to increase the intensity of feeling and to enhance the eroticism of the scene he describes.

> Sigh as it ends . . . I keep an eye on your
> Amour with Scotch,—too *cher* to consummate;
> Faster your disappearing beer than late-
> ly mine; your naked passion for the floor;
> Your hollow leg; your hanker for one more
> Dark as the Sundam Trench; how you dilate
> Upon psychotics of this class, collate
> Stages, and . . how long since you, well, *forbore*.
>
> Ah, the high fire sings on to be fed
> Whipping our darkness by the lifting sea
> A while, O darling drinking like a clock.
> The tide comes on: spare, Time, from what you spread
> Her story,—tilting a frozen Daiquiri,
> Blonde, barefoot, beautiful,
> flat on the bare floor riveted to Bach.

Music, sensuality and intoxication all operate to similar effect, and this Sonnet in particular picks up on the poet's unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which developed

conterminously with this romance. Music is not a source of edification here, as it was in 'Canto Amor'; Lise herself represents a kind of excess, a spirit of sensuality, and it is music that comes to Berryman's aid in expressing his sense of the heady atmosphere that surrounds her. Berryman's representation of Lise here shares much in common with Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the "musical erotic," put forward in the 1842 volume, *Either/ Or*. During the early 1940s Berryman had been engaged in close study of Kierkegaard, and this particular work appears (among seven others by the same philosopher) on an invoice addressed to the poet from a Mr. N. B. Samuels at Princeton University Press.[9] It is hardly surprising therefore that his suggestive concepts regarding music managed to percolate into the poet's Sonnets – or that Sonnet 37 engages closely with these theories. In a chapter entitled 'The Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or Musical Erotic' Kierkegaard considers sensual love, or lust, to have its truest correlative in music: "If the spirit of the sensual erotic in all its immediacy demands expression," writes Kierkegaard, "the question is: what medium lends itself to that?" He supplies his own answer. "In its immediacy it can only be expressed in music. This is where the significance of music is revealed in its full validity [. . .] In the erotic sensual genius, music has its absolute object" (75-76). Kierkegaard's points on the musical erotic, in fact, emerge out of a broader discussion on the 'Aesthetic Validity of Marriage,' and the work as a whole therefore resonates almost self-beratingly with the project of the Sonnets.

In representing his extra-marital relationship, Berryman draws on music to express the intensity of his erotic love, and his recourse to Kierkegaard's notion of the musical erotic works in connection with the vague, or symbolic representation of his lover. "Sensual love can lump everything together," writers the philosopher.

> What is essential for it is woman quite in the abstract, and at most distinctions of the more sensual kind. Love from the soul is a continuation in time, sensual love a disappearance in time, but the medium which expresses this is precisely music. This is something music is excellently fitted to accomplish, since it is far more abstract than language and therefore does not express the particular but the general in all its generality, and yet it expresses the general, not in reflective abstraction, but in the concreteness of immediacy. (101)

[9] Receipt inserted into personal copy of Søren Kierkegaard's *Sickness onto Death*, Trans. Walter Lowerie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, JBP.

As has been seen in the poems discussed thus far, Lise is certainly "woman quite in the abstract." Moreover, the poet's mention of his lover's dilation under the influence of psychotics, which collates "Stages," as well the ensuing comment, "how long since you, well, *forbore*," could easily be a reference to Kierkegaard's "three stages" of the musical erotic. And in keeping with Kierkegaard's definition, both Lise and her lover take a more aesthetic or rawly passionate view of love than an ethical or socially sanctioned one. Likewise, the philosopher's suggestion of sensual love as a "disappearance in time" is expressed in connection with the lovers' voraciousness. There are many examples of consumption in the poem. "Faster your disappearing beer than late-/ ly mine," writes Berryman, orchestrating this vanishing trick through a break in the line. Lise's leg is hollow, she has "a hanker for one more." Berryman's lover is "drinking like a clock," but the poet suggests that the tide too is drinking time. Here music represents the intense and fleeting moment, the tide swell of erotic love; the scene is one of tumescence, but all that lies before them is vanishing fast. At the close of the poem, and against all of this "disappearance," Berryman describes his efforts to catch a sense of "Her story" in all its musical immediacy – "Blond, barefoot, beautiful, / Flat on the bare floor riveted to Bach." It is Berryman's gesture to Bach that asks his reader to *hear the music*, to comprehend this story, as much as it is the words he brings to it. As Kierkegaard writes: "when I have brought the reader to the point of being musically receptive enough to seem to hear the music although hearing nothing, I have completed my task, I make myself mute, I say to the reader as to myself: listen!" (94).

Kierkegaard's command to listen is well expressed in Sonnet 86, in which the poet considers his passion for Lise in terms of remembered sound, as "sounds inconceivable."

> Our lives before hopelessly our mistake!—
> We should have been together seething years,
> We should have been the tomb-bat hang and hears
> Sounds inconceivable, been a new snowflake,
> We should have been the bloom of a cockcrow lake.
>
> . . . A child's moon, a child's fire!—What I love of you
> *Inter alia* tingles like a whole good day,
> A hard wind, of a Strad's consummate pluck,
> Proficient, full and strong, shrewd as the blue
> Profound sky, pale as a winter sky you lay

And with these breasts whiter than stars gave suck.

Berryman's use of italics sends a shiver through the structure of the poem, registering their consummated love in terms of musical vibrations. And, once again, the female body is painted with the language of symbolist abstraction; Lise is "pale as a winter sky," her "breasts whiter than stars [giving] suck." The rhyming of "pluck" with "suck" gives a particularly aural/oral sensuality to the idea of music constructed within the poem.

As has been seen thus far, the poet's affair with Lise takes place very much in the presence of music, and musical sounds often appear both diegetically and imaginatively within his poetic spaces. In Sonnet 26 Bach exerts his presence once again, though unlike Sonnet 27, the poet is without his lover, who is somewhere far off in the distance. Picturing Lise "Crouched on a ridge sloping to where you pour / No doubt a new drink late this easy night," Berryman draws upon the auditory capabilities of the imagination to conjure up her image:

Hessians maraud no more, coaches no more
Crash off north, south; only a smooth car's flight
Hums where my brain rests, an old parasite
Sniff then for breakfast while from Bach you soar

Easy and live in the summer dawn, my striker!

Music and smell both function here as memory aids, and the music of Bach recalls vividly to Berryman (erotic) moments shared in the presence of music. As such, in many of these Sonnets music functions not only to present Lise's actual body in the abstract but (abstracting her further) gives a spectral presence to her absence. Berryman explores the way in which the memory of music has powers of evocation that may go beyond the poetic. This is a phenomenon that Kierkegaard discusses further in connection with Mozart, seeking to prove, through the works of this particular composer, that "music is a higher, or more spiritual art" than language (79). Mozart also appears a number of times throughout Berryman's Sonnet sequence and consistently in relation to memory. Sonnet 16 bestows on this composer the powers of evocation, as the poet discovers a new rough magic in musial sound. Lise is witnessed as a ghost in this lucid vignette, ushered in by mysterious tides and tolling:

Thrice, or I moved to sack, I saw you: how
Without siege laid I can as simply tell
As whether below the dreams of Astrophel
Lurks the wild fact some scholars would allow
And others will deny in ours! O now
The punishing girl met after Toynbees's bell
Tolled for us all I see too bloody well
To say why then I cheapened a blind bow.

Paid at the shore, eyes, ears, a shaking hand,
A pull of blood; behind you coming back.
Already holding, began to be borne away . .
Held. After Mozart, saw you bend and stand
Beside my seat . . held. I recovered . . Rack
The consumer! I rushed out Stockton street one day.

Here music holds the couple in a moment of suspense, though an imagined one. And it is not only Mozart but the bells that provide the musical backdrop to the poem – along with the sounds of the sea, a nautical and Shakespearean image that recurs time and time again though Berryman's poetry in connection with musical imagery. Yet if the bells foreshadow the end of the relationship, the music of Mozart enables a brief moment of togetherness, though Lise's return may be only a visitation. It is not only his lover's presence, therefore, but also her absence that registers in a musical way, and becomes the space into which an imagined music moves.

Mozart appears once again in Sonnet 72, where describing an encounter with his old friend from Cambridge, Berryman recalls how

[. . .] through the strain
Of ten-year-old talk cocktails partly loosed
I forgot you, forgot you, for the first
Hour in months of watches . . Mozart's pain
I heard then, in the cranny of the hurricane.

Again, time is a central concern, and the vacuum created by Lise's absence is the space in which the poet encounters Mozart. Berryman's expression of this forgetting or disappearance is also an incantation that plants the memory of their affair painfully within the poet's consciousness. What's more, the comparison with Mozart suggests that pain might be felt in a different way through the medium of music – and perhaps more keenly or immediately than poetic pain.

Sonnet 92 acts out this debate as the poet figures his romantic distress in connection with a number of classical composers:

> What can to you this music wakes my years
> (I work you here a wistful specimen)
> Be, to you affable and supple, when
> The music they call music fills your ears?
> Room still? Alive O to my animals' tears?
> Haunted by cagy sighs? The cries of men
> Versed are you in? . . Your Tetragrammaton—
> J.B. M·o, B·e, and F.S.—hears.
>
> No quarrel here once! Pindar sang both sides, —
> Two thousand years their easy marriage lasted,
> Until some coldness grew . . they moved apart . .
> Only one now to rile the other rides
> Sometimes, neither will say how he has fasted,
> They stare with desire, and spar . . and crib . . and part.

This poem not only provides further comment on the evocative powers that "wake my years," but considers the relationship between music and poetic language in a broader, more historical sense. Once again, a struggle emerges between the poetic and the musical – and the form of the Sonnet, or little song, is an apt medium in which to express it. A draft of the Sonnet in the poet's spiral notebook suggests that this particular item was "planned early," confirming the significance of this "quarrel" to the concept of the work.[10] The earlier Sonnet, however, is much more embattled – here the jealous poet derides and interrogates his lover: "The cries of men / touch ever you?" The revised version in *Berryman's Sonnets*, though less crass, maintains a sense of this erotic and artistic warfare. Lise is aligned with "the music they call music" while the poet has a different kind of arsenal. Indeed, it is through the lens of her musical sensibilities that Berryman asks Lise to understand his cagy cries and animal tears – which seems justified in light of his earlier comment that "poetry / you less than music stir to" (BS 24). When Berryman asks if Lise is alive to his "animals' tears" he is also asking whether she is attuned to emotion as it arises in poetry. Appealing to Lise yet further, Berryman inserts himself defiantly into the line of composers whose (sensual) cries he finds his lover to be versed in. Placing himself at the head of this "Tetragrammaton," in the disguise of Bach, or J.B., Berryman goes on to give the initials of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. In an earlier version of the

[10] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.

Sonnet, however, the names of "Bach, Mozart, Beethoven & Schubert" are unconcealed, suggesting that the most likely reason for the poet's revision was to carve out a place for himself in this musical signature. Berryman's decision to vary the notation of these initials (J.B. M·o, B·e, and F.S) is somewhat ambiguous, though perhaps the shared pattern of J.B. and F.S. suggests a stronger point of connection, Schubert being the most lyrical of the listed composers.

Indeed, throughout the sequence, the marriage of word and music is also modelled through the tradition of German Lieder, and particularly Schubert, whose song fragments are woven across the story and reflect the poet's romantic agony. Berryman's recourse to Lieder is hardly surprising since a composer such as Schubert managed not only to succeed in uniting the categories of poem and song in a way not previously achieved, but also composed a number of song cycles whose libretti reflect Berryman's own sense of personal tragedy. Between the years of 1823 and 1828 Schubert was engaged in setting two works by the lyric poet Wilhelm Müller, whose *Die Schöne Müllerin* (The Lovely Mill-Maiden, 1820) and *Winterreise* (Winter Journey, 1827) became two of the composer's greatest and most expansive works (in 1823 and 1827, respectively). Both are dramatic monologues for a solo tenor voice. Speaking of the former, Susan Youens writes that in this typical work of Müller's,

> The biographical entanglements were as complex as any Baroque opera plot and as perfervid as any Romantic melodrama – religious torment, unrequited love, four men in love with the same poetess, and a great writer at a literary cross-roads – but the players were real, not fictional, and included some of the foremost artists, composers and poets in Berlin after the Prussian War of Liberation. (Youens, *Schubert, Müller, and Die Schöne Müllerin*, 1)

Youens' description throws up many suggestive connections for the reader familiar with Berryman's work, not least the artist's recourse to personal material. The ripeness of the resemblance did not escape Berryman, who remarked on this very song cycle in his spiral notebook, alongside comments on Bach and Mallarmé. At the head of his schema page and beside the note "Schubert (Müllerin)," Berryman reminds himself that the "the right style came to him [Schubert] through rapt contemplation of the represented subject."[11] This is the kind of rapt contemplation required for the creation of a literary subject such as Lise, though delving further into Schubert's call we detect also the propulsion toward a location outside immediate

[11] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.

reality, a concept discussed in relation to the transcendent impulse of the symbolist poets. The term "rapt," in particular, carries with it notions of transportation and bewitchment, while maintaining, surely, a special auditory association. Berryman's quoted fragment gains one further dimension when we consider that it describes the contemplation of an *already* represented subject. This can be more easily understood in relation to Lawrence Kramer's claim that Schubert's Müller songs grew "from some inner place in the poem – from the crux of the poem or from an impalpable essence that invites [him] to express it in tone" (200). Conversely, for Berryman, Schubert's music speaks to the emotion at the heart of the poem – an emotion that the poet feels might be better expressed in connection with (remembered) music.

Schubert's place in Berryman's schema also draws attention to the cycle form itself – a term used for a grouping of songs or Sonnets. As Haffenden notes, Berryman actually preferred to think of this sequence as a cycle (*The Life of John Berryman,* 177), and there are certainly ways in which we might think of the work's structure in relation to Schubert's aforementioned song cycles, or even Schumann's later *Dicterliebe* (A Poet's Love, 1840). Such musical works (and particularly *Die Winterreise*) treat time in ways more complex than the traditional Sonnet sequence, and considering *Berryman's Sonnets* in this light might save the disoriented critic from forcing the rigid structure on the Sonnets that has too often been applied. Falling into this familiar trap, April Bernard's review of the recently republished work claims that "the 'plot' of *Berryman's Sonnets* follows that of Sidney's sequence: Passion sought; passion requited; passion delayed; and, finally, passion utterly thwarted" (June, 2014). While Berryman's sequence, or cycle, certainly draws from Sidney's, at least as much as any other, a critic attuned to the more musical operations at work would notice that its narrative trajectory is governed by looser and more suggestive structures of emotion. *Berryman's Sonnets* does not begin with "passion sought" but in the recollection of a sexual act, where Eros and Thanatos are found in equal balance – a trope as common to Lieder as any Sonnet sequence – the cycle's end is in its beginning. Indeed, the collection as a whole is full of scenes repeated as if contorted by the mind's eye (or ear). It is clear that this has a precedent, if not in the Sonnet sequence, then in the song. Both of the Schubert-Müller cycles "lack a clearly defined plot," writes Youens (51), but particularly the later *Winterreise*, "a wintery inner voyage" (*Retracing a Winter's Journey*, 51), which "traces thought processes and emotional states of being" and thus refuses to be read simply as "a conventional

narrative of actions and reactions" (23). In fact, the cycle is a "monodrama, a predecessor of Expressionist interior monologues" (*Retracing a Winter's Journey*, 51). The story can be outlined thus:

> The wanderer, after his lover forsakes him, embarks on a solitary journey into the depths of his being and there conducts a lengthy process of self-questioning. His attempts to understand his alienation from humanity are periodically interrupted by surges of emotional current and by increasingly urgent longings for a death that is always denied him [. . .] In order to trace what the poet Novalis called 'the path inward' (*der Weg nach Inner*), Müller does not invent a third-person narrator or any other speaker for this monodrama in twenty-four episodes. (*Retracing a Winter's Journey*, xii)

It is hardly surprising that Berryman looked to these European song cycles in seeking to discover a keener sense of music and drama in his verse. Novalis' "path inward" was one that the poet was beginning to walk with greater resolve and his Sonnets are the turbulent monodrama of a poet in an imbalanced love affair. While Berryman's paratextual commentary draws on Müller's earlier cycle, Sonnet 52 draws directly from *Die Winterreise.*

> A sullen brook hardly would satisfy
> The Winter-traveller slumps near, Stony Brook;
> Prattle of brooks it scorns, only in some crook
> Fetches again and now a muddy sigh
> Reaches me here.—A liner rocks the sky,
> I shudder beneath the trees. I brought a book,
> Shut on my brown knee. Once I rise and look
> Under the bridge-arch. The third day of July.
>
> Close, going back, I pass (still as a mouse)
> The fatuous stranger in the stone strong home
> Now you and my friend your husband are away.
> And I must gnaw there somewhy. Double day:
> In the end I race by cocky as a comb,
> Adust . . *Da ist meiner Liebstens Haus*.

Berryman's reimagining of himself as a "winter-traveller" in a poem that sets itself up as occurring on the third day of July undoubtedly draws attention to Schubert's looming presence. And like *Die Winterreise*, the song explores a winter of the mind as much as of landscape. As Youens notes:

> the passionate self-observation in *Die Winterreise* is intertwined with observation of the external world – aspects of the towns catch the wanderer's eye and impel wonderment about who he really is and why he acts as he does. The progression is one from outward to inward reference, in which impressions of the self are either corroborated or questioned in Nature's mirror. (*Retracing a Winter's Journey*, 20-21)

Berryman's yoking of mind and landscape, inner and outer weather, is well-observed in phrases such as "sullen brook" and "muddy sigh" as well as his leaf-like "shudder beneath the trees." And while the poet's intermittent pastoralism reflects the fact that the couple's passion was repeatedly quenched at an outdoor trysting place, the poem contains many tropes particular to nineteenth-century Lieder – stock images such as the brook, the small stone house and the lovelorn wanderer. Sonnet 52 could be read in connection with any number of songs from *Die Winterreise*, but particularly the paranoiac 'Die Wetterfahne' ('The Weather Vane'), in which Müller's sombre poet stands outside his lover's house and feels the weathervane mock him; or 'Rückblick' ('Backward Glance') in which the poet laments how he "long[s] to look back once again, long[s] to stumble back [. . .] and stand before her house" (Youens, 188); and, finally, the poem from which the final line derives, 'Wasserflut' ('Flood'), supplied in full below:

> Manche Trän' aus meinen Augen
> Ist gefallen in den Schnee;
> Seine kalten Flocken saugen
> Durstig ein das heiße Weh.
>
> Wenn die Gräser sprossen wollen
> Weht daher ein lauer Wind,
> Und das Eis zerspringt in Schollen
> Und der weiche Schnee zerrinnt.
>
> Schnee, du weißt von meinem Sehnen,
> Sag,' wohin doch geht dein Lauf?
> Folge nach nur meinen Tränen,
> Nimmt dich bald das Bächlein auf.
>
> Wirst mit ihm die Stadt durchziehen,
> Muntre Straßen ein und aus;
> Fühlst du meine Tränen glühen,
> Da ist meiner Liebsten Haus.

Flood

(Many a tear has fallen from my eyes into the snow; its cold flakes thirstily absorb my burning grief.

When the grass is ready to grow, a mild breeze blows, and the ice breaks into pieces, and the soft snow melts away.

Snow, you know my longing: tell me, where does your path go? You have only to follow my tears and the brook will soon absorb you.

You'll flow through the town with it, in and out of merry streets. When you feel my tears burning, that is my beloved's house.)

(Youens, *Retracing a Winter's Journey*, 170-171)

Berryman's inclusion, in the final line, of the obscure and unitalicised "Adust" speaks to the poet's subjectivity shot through the prism of Schubert's song world. While "glühen," the term supplied by Schubert, can be translated to mean "glow" (or burn with desire), Berryman's augmented version paints the lover as "inflamed" or "scorched." This change is significant not only because it represents Berryman's reinterpretation of the original but because of the selected word's particular orality, its staccato sensation in the mouth.

Sonnet 61 ventures further into the same disjunctive "winter-scene."

Languid songs I wish I willed . . I try . .
Smooth songs untroubled like a silver spoon
To pour your creamy beauty back, warm croon
Blind, soft . . but I have something in my eye,
I see by fits, see what there, rapid and sly,
Difficult, so that it will be off soon,
I'd better *fix* it! Frantic as a loon,
Smarting, world-churned, some convulsed song I cry.

Well . . (also I plead, I have something in mind,
My bobsled need, the need for me you'll find
If you look deeper: study our winter-scene) . .
Thinking is well, but worse still to be caught
The wholly beautiful just beyond thought,—
Small trees in mist far down an endless green!

Here the poet expresses a need to write "convulsed songs," and, like so many of the Sonnets, 61 contains disruptive expressions that are not native to the traditional sonnet. Berryman's wish to "*fix* it!" speaks to his belief in the commemorative, if not regenerative possibilities of art, yet his attempts to do so make him frantic as a loon.

Oppositional forces are at work here and the result is at once formal and excessive. Again, the emphasis on song as the mode of delivery suggests the poet's recourse to music in his attempts to restyle his verse. Schubert was similarly invested in discovering new possibilities of vocal expression in art song, and according to Marjorie Hirsch, his work often bears "closer resemblance to dramatic vocal genres such as the operatic scene and melodrama than to folk song." "His unusual stylistic characteristics fly in the face of traditional conceptions of the Lied," claims the musicologist, and "by combining elements of dramatic and traditional lyrical genres, he transformed the Lied into a highly expressive, flexible musical medium which could convey the complexities and nuances of the poetry" (Hirsch, 2-3). As Youens remarks: "the resultant text of *Die Winterreise* is a deliberately paradoxical fusion of folklike forms and unfolklike content" (Youens, *Retracing a Winter's Journey*, xii).

Schubert's comment that these mournful songs had "cost me more effort than any of my other songs" (qtd. in Bostridge, x) was surely a sentiment that Berryman could relate to. Yet the portended arousal and despair brought on by the relationship is felt to pave the way for new possibilities of musical expression. On one sheet of potential epigraphs/concepts for the collection, Berryman includes a quote by Kierkegaard (along with others by Rilke and Yeats) that serves to illustrate this creative quandary. "What is a poet?" asks Kierkegaard, before supplying (once again) his own answer: "An unhappy being whose heart is torn by secret sufferings, but whose lips are so strangely formed that when the sighs and the cries escape them, they sound like beautiful music."[12] Sonnet 88, amongst countless others, testifies to this bittersweet anguish.

> Anomalous I linger, and ignore
> My blue conviction she will not come
> Whose grey eyes blur before me like some sum
> A shifting riddle to fatigue . . I pore . .
> Faster they flicker, and flag, moving on slower,
> And I move with them—who am I? a scum
> Thickens on a victim, a delirium
> Begins to mutter, which I must explore.
>
> O rapt as Monteverdi's '. . *note* . . *note* . .'
> I glide aroused—a rumour? or a dream?
> An actual lover? Elmo's light? erlking?

[12] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Folder 4, JBP.

—'I know very well who I am' said Don Quixote.
The sourceless light laps my stare, the stream
Backs through the wood, the cosy spiders cling.

As before, it is the bewildering impact of his lover's absence that drives the poet to distraction; Berryman follows his "blue conviction" into a kind of aroused delirium that leads him to a less folk-like comparison – the musical polyphony of Monteverdi. Lise's music is no longer transcendent, but fitful and threatening; the locus of the poet's fear is found to lie within the inscrutable female subject. In a dream-like state, the poet muses over Lise's identity, asking himself whether she is his "actual lover" or might better be conceived of as something insubstantial and mythic. His distress manifests itself in a series of nightmarish, though erotically charged comparisons that once again lead indirectly back to Schubert. The first, Elmo's light – a phenomenon in which an imbalanced charge in the atmosphere creates the semblance of lightning – serves as a portent of Lise's striking and dangerous effect. The image of the erlking which follows it is equally insubstantial, though much more insidious. In early German and Danish folklore the elf king's daughter was a malevolent figure with a lust for male blood.[13] Goethe's later version of the tale, 'Erlkönig' (from the 1782 singspiel, *Die Fischerin)*, was set to music by Schubert in 1815, and provides a further musical context for this reference, though in this rendering it was the Elf King himself who operated as the malevolent figure. Berryman's allusion to Monteverdi, meanwhile, calls to mind his famous *L'Orfeo* (1607), an opera which presents Orpheus' descent into Hades in pursuit of his new bride, Euridice. The original tale sees Orpheus attacked by a group of maenads who dismember him in a fit of frenzied terror. [14] As such, Sonnet 88 contains a number of suggested accounts of female

[13] For example, in Johann Gottfried von Herder's ballad, 'Erlkönigs Tochter' (from the 1778 volume *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern),* Sir Olf, as he rides through the forest on the night before his marriage, finds himself entranced by the music of elves and falls into the hands of this possessive spirit. After his refusal to accept the elf daughter's gifts the groom is left for dead, and discovered by his wife on the morning of their intended matrimony.

[14] A number of the Sonnets also involve the trope of descent. Drawing similarly on the Orpheus myth, Sonnet 28 speaks of the poet's

[. . .]blue despair
To spell you lively in this summertime
Back from your death of distance, my lute tossed
Down, while my ears reel to your marriage, crossed
Brass endless, burning on my helpless glare.

Here Berryman's recollection of Lise's marriage registers as a kind of theft, and sounds as discordant music. Indeed, the Orpheus myth provides a musical parallel throughout as the

brutality in music and myth as well as in nature – not least the cosy spiders that cling at the close of the poem, reminding of the murderous female's post-coital intent.

In an article entitled 'Erato's Fool and Bitter Sister: Two Aspects of John Berryman,' Sarah Provost discusses how the "poet-lover continually describes himself in terms of victimization and masochism [. . .] as a sacrificial sheep in Sonnet 62, [. . .] a 'burnt offering' in 19, a 'slave and rebel' in 101 [. . .] And in Sonnet 110, the last he wrote during the course of the affair, Lise is described as 'the SS woman' with whip and file, as 'strip-murderer,' as 'hypocrite-perfect.' Berryman sees himself as powerless in this relationship," writes Provost, "at the mercy of Lise's whims and decisions" (71-72). This power dynamic is musically figured in Sonnet 65, which presents Lise as the merciless queen of the underworld:

> Once when they found me, some refrain *'Quoi faire?'*
> Striking my hands, they say repeatedly
> I muttered; although I could hear and see
> I knew no one.—I am silent in my chair,
> And stronger and more cold in my despair
> At last, for I have come into a country
> Whose vivid Queen upon no melody
> admits me. *Manchmal glaub ich, ich kann nicht mehr.*
>
> Song follows song, the chatterer to the fire
> Would soon . . Deep in Ur's royal pits
> Sit still the courtly bodies, a little bowl
> By each, attired to voluntary blitz . .
> In Shub-ad's grave the fingers of a girl
> Were touching still, when they found her, the strings of her lyre.

Here the poet, knowing Lise's musical predilection, seeks to bring the gift of music, but finds he is debarred. The German utterance – "*Manchmal glaub ich, ich kann nicht mehr*": sometimes I think I can't go on – is taken from Rilke's 'Das Lied des Idioten,' of the *Die Stimmen* sequence (*The Book of Images,* 196-197). As discussed in Chapter One, this work provided an important point of departure for Berryman in 'The Nervous Songs' (*The Dispossessed*, 1948), and it continued to shape the poet's expression into the project of *The Dream Songs* (1969). In Sonnet 65 Berryman draws on Rilke to express the negative capability of what he figures as a form of romantic enslavement. Yet while Berryman's singer insists that he can't go on, song follows

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poet discusses his musical efforts to resuscitate their relationship. Berryman expresses both a need and an inability to figure his deathly queen.

song in this sequence. This attitude is embedded within tradition of the cycle itself, and is made explicit in Sonnet 50, where the poet gazes "Fast on her image, for an exhaustless phrase," anticipating "decades of excited songs."

The fitful tenor of these songs is expressive of what the Irish poet John Montague, in a review of this collection, described as a "writing on the nerves" and Berryman's musical reference often serves as an expression of the nervous tension that this love excites.[15] These songs are both a gift and a curse to the poet, who is *compelled* to write them. In fact the image of Shub-ad entombed suggests the poet's intent to persist onto death. This particular image can be traced directly back to a newspaper clipping – which Berryman attached to a draft copy of the Sonnets – relating to Sir Leonard Woolley's discovery of Shub-ad's (or Puabi's) tomb:

> Sir Leonard Woolley describes vividly and impressively, within his brief space, the finding of the royal graves of the First Dynasty, deep in their burial pits, and around the royal bodies those of ministers, attendants and associates who had 'died without violence, to the accompaniment of music made by themselves and by means of a narcotic voluntarily drunk.' In one pit were found seventy-four bodies, six men and sixty-eight women, in court dress, each with a little drinking bowl by his or her side. In Queen Shub-ad's grave the fingers of a girl musician were still touching the strings of her lyre.[16]

In uncovering Shub-ad, Berryman was exhuming what was considered to be one of the world's oldest surviving stringed instruments – and if Lise is the queen, then presumably he sees his own fate reflected in that of the devout girl musician. Yet if this singing is a near deadly experience for the poet, it is also a music that he finds himself drawn to, inescapably. Sonnet 78 likewise presents these impulses toward self-destruction, describing a moment in which Lise's toxic influence breaks in to disrupt a spell of (imaginary) agricultural labour:

> On the wheat-sacks, sullen with the ceaseless damp,
> William and I sat for hours and talked of you,
> I talked of you. Potting porter. Just a few
> Fireflies were out, no stars, no moon; no lamp.
> The Great Dane licked my forearm like a stamp,
> Surprisingly, in total darkness. Who

[15] John Montague, 'I survive you,' review clipping, Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Folder 7, Reviews, JBP.
[16] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Folder 3, JBP.

Responds with peaceful gestures, calm and new
This while, your home-strong love's ferocious tramp?

Insonorous and easy night! I lusk,
Until we rise and strike rake-handles in
The nervous sacks to prod and mix with air;
Lest a flame sing out invisible and brusk
About the black barn . . Princeton (and my chin
Sank on the rake-end) suddenly
I longed for sick, your toxic music there.

In the 1947 typescript, *Sonnets to Chris*, Berryman gives his friend's surname as "Sidney" (*CP*, 109), a name his companion appears to have shared with the prolific Sonneteer, Sir Philip Sidney, and a happy coincidence for the poet. The poem presents a collaborative moment wherein Berryman pours out his romantic woes to (or even through) the more experienced bard. The "nervous sacks" that the poet tosses "to prod and mix with air; / lest a flame sing out" stand in for the poetic holdall of the Sonnet, being reshuffled and recalibrated by the two in unison. Yet suddenly and without expectation Berryman finds himself willing the bags to catch alight, his insonorous night to be filled with toxic music and singing flames. This would be the apotheosis of his toxic desire, the combined moment of death and renewal.

Such apocalyptic thinking, of course, has perplexed the Sonnets from the outset; and as already discussed, the poet's erotic desire carries within it an erotic end. This is observed in Sonnet 1, but also in Sonnet 3, which closes with an ill-omened waking:

This morning groping your hand moaning your name
I heard distinctly drip . . somewhere . . and see
Coiled in our joys flicker a tongue again,
The fall of your hair a cascade of white flame.

Sonnet 6 finds these catastrophic images to be stuck on repeat:

Rackman and victim grind: sounds all these weeks
Of seconds and hours and days not once are dumb,
And has your footfall really not come
Still? O interminable strength that leaks
All day away alert . . I am who seeks
As tautly now, whom the vague creakings strum
Jangled this instant, as when the monstrous hum
Your note began!—since when old silence spéaks.

Deep down this building do I sometimes hear
Below the sigh and flex of the travelling world
Pyromaniacal whispers? . . *Not to be*
They say would do us good . . easy . . the mere
Lick and a promise of a sweet flame curled
Fast on its wooden love: *silence our plea*.

Once again, the lens through which the poet reads their ruination is musical. Berryman hears vague creakings and worries over his jangled nerves, an anxiety that he traces back to the "monsterous hum / Your note began!" His accent over the word "spéaks" adds a musical inflection that will become a stock-in-trade of his later songs. In Sonnet 8 the poet bears witness to sounds that are not meant to be heard; the pyromaniacal whispers that he observes are expressive of his desire for death, death as "a sweet flame curled / Fast on its wooden love." Though he urges them back, these whispers have the final word: silence their plea.

Berryman's preoccupation with suicide, and the imagined death of the two lovers in unison might usefully be read as a kind of *liebestod* in a sequence full of both terminal and musical acts. Accordingly, Berryman entertains the thought of both partners singing onto death in Sonnet 40 where: "spasmodic as a wasp / About my windowpane, our short songs rasp— / Not those alone before their singers choke." In Richard Wagner's tragic opera *Tristan and Isolde* (based upon Gottfried von Strassburg's mythic tale) the *liebestod* – or love death – supplies the finale to the dramatic action, seeing the two lovers die in a tragic heave of passion. The couple's death is the result of their adulterous love – brought on by the accidental imbibing of a love potion – and their eventual separation occurs as the result of spousal jealousy, Tristan's wife falsely informing him that his lover has abandoned him. Berryman does not mention Wagner, but *Tristan and Isolde* shares a few things in common with these Sonnets, not least its adulterous context.[17] The concept of *liebestod*, or the love death, could be seen to function on a number of levels within the sequence, invoking ideas of the death drive and of *petit mort*. It is reflected in the breaking of spousal relationships, and in the ultimate death of the central romance. Meanwhile, the motif

[17] And perhaps his Sonnet regarding Tristan Corbière's "ménage a trios" (BS 109) is also a nod towards this opera. Berryman owned a large selection of Wagner's operas and copies of libretto in print (mostly from the Metropolitan Opera House). These include: *Lohengrin* (first performed in 1850), *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) and *Götterdämmerung* (1875).

of the love potion has its parallel in the many intoxicating drinks that are downed throughout the collection. The fact that Berryman was in Ireland as he finished off the sequence in 1966 adds another layer of connective tissue, since much of the dramatic action of Wagner's opera also takes place in Ireland.[18]

In both the 1947 typescript and *Berryman's Sonnets* the poet eventually rules out the possibility of a *liebestod* – and the two works claim to move beyond the affair to varying degrees. Sonnet 111 of *Berryman's Sonnets*, the last of the 1947 works to be collected (110 in the 1947 typescript), brings the work to an indefinite close:

> Christian to Try: 'I am so coxed in it,
> All I can do is pull, pull without shame,
> Backwards,—on the coxswain fall the fiery blame,
> I slump free and exhausted.'—'Stop a bit,'
> Try studied his sloe gin, 'if you must fit
> A trope so, you must hope to quit the game'
> Pursued my brown friend with the plausible name
> 'Before your heart enlarging mucks you. Minute
> By minute you pull faster.'—But I too
> Am named, though lost . . you learn God's will, give in,
> After whatever, you sit on, you sit.
> Try 'Quit' said 'and be free.' I freeze to you
> And I am free now of the fire of this sin
> I choose . . I lose, yes . . but then I submit!

Though Berryman submits here – "Christian to Try" – it is not entirely clear whether his submission is to God or Lise. What's more, the continual insinuation of backward-pulling forces suggests an overwhelming impulse to return that may not be convincingly overthrown by the chastening voice of "Quit." And like the poet's resolve, the end of the work is also provisional – even as he packaged the Sonnets into the 1947 typescript, Berryman considered adding more (*The Life of John Berryman*, 180). The items added to *Berryman's Sonnets* in 1966 give an even greater impression of the work as a cycle (with the imbedded impulse to return). Berryman gave lower case letters at the beginning of lines in these later Sonnets (107 and 112, 113, 114, 115) to distinguish them from those of 1947, though they sit reasonably within that "narrative." These Sonnets reflect back on the relationship (from within the cycle),

[18] Wagner himself had a profound interest in the relationship between poetry and music, and wrote extensively (with disputed competence) on this subject in *The Artwork of the Future* (1849). Wagner, like Berryman, was also a devotee of Beethoven and in 1870 composed an essay on the poetics of Beethoven's music. There was also strong tradition of influence between this composer and the symbolist poets of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

and consider, implicitly, the ways in which it has become key to the poet's development. While Berryman's relationship with Lise may be over, his muse's voice continues to move and inspire:

> I break my pace now for a sonic boom,
> the future's with & in us. I sit fired
> but comes on strong with the fire fatigue: I'm tired.
> I'd drive my car across the living-room
> if I could get it inside the house.' You loom
> less, less than before when your voice choired
> into my transept how I hear it now, not expired
> but half-dead with exhaustion, like Mr Bloom.
>
> Dazzle, before I abandon you, my eyes,
> my eyes which I need for journeys difficult
> in which case it may be said I survive you.
> Your voice continues with its lows & highs,
> and I am a willing accomplice in the cult
> and every word that I have grasped of you is true. (BS 12)

Berryman's assertion in this Sonnet that Lise "loom[s] less" here is partly owing to the poem's place in the cycle (at the end of the story) and partly to its later date of composition – the mention of Mr Bloom, of course, situates the poem conterminously in Dublin, its place of composition. Here Berryman acknowledges that the person of Lise is bound up with a new poetic idiom, an idiom that reverberates beyond the song cycle. Indeed Berryman was also deep in the throes of his Dream Song project, and this can be detected through various musical and stylistic idiosyncrasies (such as the ampersand) that these last Sonnets share with the longer cycle.

Adding yet another level of complexity to the work's sense of temporality is the fact that a good number of Sonnets written in the heat of the affair can also be seen to anticipate *The Dream Songs.* Sonnet 98 (*CP*, 119) in particular attends the beginnings of a new poetic world-view in the wake (or dwindling) of this relationship. The Sonnet begins with a nod toward a favourite French symbolist:

> Mallarmé siren upside down,—rootedly!
> Dare the top crotch, the utmost two limbs plume
> Cloudward, the bole swells just below . . See, from
> Her all these leaves and branches! . . world-green . . free
> To be herself: firm-subtle-grey-brown barky,
> A skin upon her gravest thought: to roam,
> Sea-disinclined . . through the round stair I come,

A hollow. Board loose down near your rooftree.

. . I biked our leisurely one day because
My heart was breaking, and swung up with the casual
Passion of May again your sycamore . .
Hand trembling on the top, everything was
Beautiful, inhuman, green and real as usual.—
Your hypocrite hangs on the truth, sea-shore. (BS 98)

It is from Lise's tree, and his inverted position, that the poet is able to imagine new growth – "see, from her all these leaves and branches."[19] According to Linebarger, "the image is from Mallarmé's 'Salut': '*De sirènes mainte à l'envers*'" (49). In fact, this appears to be the selfsame sycamore from which the poet sang, and from which he has fallen in Dream Song 1. It is also important to note here that the resulting language is the language of the fall, the language of "Mr Heartbreak the New Man, / come to farm a crazy land" (DS 5).

Apart from the obvious connection made by the Dream Song that prefaces the work, then, the poet makes casual idiomatic gestures to his later work throughout the collection – and words such as "cagy" are shared between the two. Sonnet 100, in a seemingly proleptic gesture to Dream Song 77, describes how the poet is "making ready" and mentions his use of "burnt cork" and "hindered characters," while Dream Song 103 very clearly gestures back to Sonnet 95, both poems considering their song "as hummingbird" and comparing their poetic art to actual music. This Dream Song turns back to the Sonnet as a point of musical reference, asking if "time [can] run backward [. . .] Scarlatti-supple" (DS 103). Yet in the Sonnet music operates to different effect; the poet's voice is mediated through Lise, and in connection with American folk song:

'Old smoky' when you sing with Robin, Chris,
Sometimes at night, and your small voices hover
Mother-and-son but sourceless, O yours over
The hesitating treble must be his,
I glide about my metamorphosis

[19] The Sonnet also recounts what Haffenden describes as "one memorable day" of play outdoors at Lise's house when Robert Lowell was visiting from Princeton. "Lowell and Berryman, both barefoot, were climbing up the big sycamore tree which shaded the small, stone Revolutionary house. Lowell was perched at the very top of the tree, on the uppermost branches. Just beneath him, trying to get higher than Lowell, was Berryman . . . in retrospect, it seemed a nice image of the intense rivalry between the two poets" (William Arrowsmith, qtd. in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 173).

Gently, a tryst of troubled joy—discover
Our pine-grove grown a mountain—the *true* lover
Soft as a flower, hummingbird-piercing, is.

I saw him stretch out farther than a wish
And have seem him gutted like a fish
At hipshot midnight for you, by your side.—
Last night there in your love-seat, you away,
I sang low to my niece your song, and stray
Still from myself into you singing slide. (*CP*, 118)[20]

The Sonnet's opening is full of lightness and hope – the lover is a flower, a song that delights the singer – yet by the end the poet has seen the robin "gutted like a fish" and finds himself drawn back to his violent lover without consent. This move to a more violent aesthetic is generally telling of the sea-change that is witnessed between the two cycles. By the time we reach Dream Song 95 even the lover has been occluded, though her "humming-bird" song continues, "missile-hard, & strange." Returning, for a final time, to the poet's musical schema page, it is evident that another of Berryman's sidelights, a vague comment pertaining to "Beethoven's onslaughts on the very materials of music," comes into play most fully in this later cycle.[21]

Berryman's final Sonnet, 115 (or 117 in Thornbury's edition), contains a number of tropes particular to *The Dream Songs*. It also represents a transition, the fall from sublimity and back into life, while reminding at the same time of the overarching significance of music as a means to tell their story.

All we were going strong last night this time,
the *mots* were flying & the frozen daiquiris
were downing, supine on the floor lay Lise
listening to Schubert grievous & sublime,
my head was frantic with a following rime:
it was a good evening, an evening to please,
I kissed her in the kitchen—ecstasies—
among so much good we tamped down the crime.

The weather's changing. This morning was cold,
as I made for the grove, without expectation,

[20] Though Berryman changes the protagonist's name to Lise in 1966, it is easy to see the place of the name Chris within the sequence's larger schema. As can be seen here through its rhyme with "metamorphosis." For the 1967 edition Berryman also changed the name of "Robin" to "Peter."
[21] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.

> some hundred Sonnets in my pocket, old,
> to read her if she came. Presently the sun
> yellowed the pines & my lady came not
> in blue jeans & a sweater. I sat down & wrote.

The scene of the first stanza mirrors that of Sonnet 37, though here Bach has been replaced by "Schubert grievous & sublime" and the scotch with frozen daiquiris – an image that anticipates the two (adulterous?) daiquiris of Dream Song 16: "Two daiquiris / withdrew into the corner of the gorgeous room / and one told the other a lie." As with number 37, the final Sonnet documents a moment of passion and excess; Berryman's lover is stretched out on the floor and the two are engaged in an act of musical consumption. Yet Schubert's presence in the place of Bach casts a more foreboding and melancholic atmosphere across the composition, invoking the various lieder that are dispersed throughout the sequence and suggesting a more lyrical backdrop. Indeed, Berryman's interest in Schubert here, and throughout the cycle, was in a large part owing to the composer's debt to poetry. As Kramer frames it, Schubert's

> was a sensibility [. . .] at once cognizant of the power of music to remake poetry and of the responsibility of the singer to the poet. For while Novalis, Schlegel, and their literary colleagues understood music to be the mysterious agent for the conveying of Romantic sentiment – music as the embodiment of Romantic idea itself – Schubert, their closest contemporary, whose music comes nearest to proving their claim, would never quite divest himself of an earlier sense of the composer as singer, as minstrel, as the modest servant of the poem. (218)

Berryman's cycle, like so much of his later poetry, aspires to such Romantic expression and strives to achieve it through the marriage of word and music, through the trope of the poet-singer. And while a number of these Sonnets strain towards something absolute, or outside of language, Berryman, like Schubert, held an ultimate belief in the power of the word. Correspondingly, the Sonnet of 1966 does not linger in the moment of musical ecstasy, but rather, shifts its focus onto the moment of poetic composition as Berryman becomes frantic with a "following rhyme," a musical pattern of his own to recall the vitality of lived experience. The sonic marriage of "rime" with "crime" anticipates Dream Song 26, where "Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime," and casts a glance back, at the same time, to the Dream Song that prefaces the Sonnets, in which the poet claims that "The original fault was

whether wickedness / was soluble in art." In the use of the verb "tamped" we have yet another echo, this time of the Orphic Dream Song 25: "all the bight heals he tamped— —Euphoria, / Mr Bones, euphoria." Likewise, the musically induced euphoria of this Dream Song is of a similar kind to the "ecstasies" described in Sonnet 115.

The *volta* in this final Sonnet, however, returns the poet from his musical heights to the "cold" of the present moment. Berryman's weather change ushers in a change of style, and the absence of the blue-jeaned lover creates a new imaginative space. There is an odd particularity to his heroine's absence – Berryman articulates what she is wearing, elsewhere. In this final Sonnet a more pronounced sense of anachronism emerges, and with it a contemporary and bebop idiom. Berryman's final few Sonnets, in fact, are testament to the success of his earlier quest for a means to tell their story, and the significance of music within this broader narrative. It is with this imperfect cadence, or blue moment, that the poet has discovered the musical style he searched for. "I sat down and wrote," concludes Berryman, effecting to draw the cycle to a close, though at the same time suggesting its inevitable continuation. This impulse toward generation is seen also in the 1947 typescript, to which Berryman appended the closing note of "Judges xvi.22" (*CP*, 129): "But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved." Indeed Berryman's cyclical movement within the work – and between the various versions of songs and Sonnets – is musically conceived. As Jacques Maritain writes:

> no more than the flow of time is music in itself limited and closed. Why should the song stop? Why should a musical work ever finish? It is not like a painting, there is no reason for it to finish . . . Let us say rather, that as the time of the world shall one day emerge into the instant of eternity, so music should cease only by emerging into a silence of another order, filled with a substantial voice, where the soul for a moment tastes that time no longer is. (57)

Chapter 3. "Bessie, Bop and Bach": Musical Personalities in *The Dream Songs*

Berryman's Dream Song project, which existed in embryo long before it received its working title in 1955, was published in two volumes, the initial *77 Dream Songs*, which appeared in 1964, followed by *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1968. Surveying the full work, collected as *The Dream Songs* in 1969, Berryman provided a summary for uncomprehending critics:

> 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 blackface, 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. Requiescant in pace. ('Author's Note,' *The Dream Songs*, xx)

This chapter is interested in the musical characters that form a significant part of Berryman's "wide cast" and speak to the poem's central themes of identity, voice, nationhood and loss. Indeed, throughout *The Dream Songs* Berryman draws on a variety of different registers and traditions, and the work represents an explosive point of convergence in the poet's musical interests.

The suggestion that *The Dream Songs* contains significant musical reference, or that it is somehow musical in itself, will hardly come as a surprise to readers of the work. If Berryman's music has been discussed at all, it has been in relation to this *magnum opus*. Yet *The Dream Songs* represents more a change of direction than a point of origin for Berryman's musical engagement. Like 'The Nervous Songs,' this work presses further into an exploration of the human voice, treating song as an apposite medium for the expression of personal and political oppression. Like *Berryman's Sonnets*, and, to an extent, 'Canto Amor,' it represents an enquiry into the transcendent possibilities of music, drawing on the suggestive musical techniques associated with (French) symbolism in gesturing to what is beyond easy semantic reach. More broadly speaking, *The Dream Songs* also expands or explodes the traditional structure of the Sonnet – a formal progression that was mapped out in the poet's musical schema for the Sonnet sequence, particularly the note "of Bach" that

"before he began to extemporise he preferred to play something already familiar, as though his inventiveness needed stimulus."[1]

As such, the project emerges within a musical continuum, yet also demonstrates changes in the poet's thinking. Degrees of change are also witnessed within the larger project of *The Dream Songs* itself, which was composed over a large span of time and in various locations across the US and Europe. While the two books that make up the 385 songs function as an integrated whole – and Berryman himself considered the work a "long poem"[2] – a number of tonal and thematic shifts also occur between the first and second volumes, which are borne out in the poem's musical reference and tonality. While music remains an unwavering presence throughout the collection, then, the weighting of the various traditions at play alters over the course of the work, and individual songs often find themselves thematically clustered.

In *77 Dream Songs,* Berryman's blues and minstrel songs are at their highest concentration. Through these traditions, Berryman establishes a musical method that enables him to press beyond the courtly muses of Europe and into issues of American identity. This chapter begins by exploring the significance of minstrelsy – a divisive subject among Berryman scholars – as it relates to Berryman's musical method. As Peter Maber noted in 2008, "there is an urgent need for a reassessment and indeed a reorientation of this perplexing and uncompromising aspect of one of the mid-twentieth century's most important poems [. . .] Surveying the whole body of criticism today it becomes clear that little perspective has ever been gained on this problematic mode" (129). Scholarly attempts to justify or defame Berryman on account of his minstrelsy have largely occluded useful discussion that assesses how it sits within his poetic project more broadly. Considering this American phenomenon as one of musical origin, it becomes clear that Berryman's minstrelsy emerges from the same vein as 'The Nervous Songs' (in its experimentation with voice and personality), even if it takes on a new level of complexity. Berryman was certainly aware of the indissoluble challenge that the spectre of minstrelsy posed to American society. These minstrel poems raise more questions than could possibly be answered

[1] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Sonnet Notebook, JBP.
[2] See, for example, his "Note" on *Berryman's Sonnets*: "These Sonnets, which were written many years ago, have nothing to do, of course, with my long poem in progress, *The Dream Songs*" ("Ballsbridge, Dublin, October 8th, 1966," *Berryman's Sonnets*).

here, and not all are musically interesting, yet it is important to establish a sense of how these lyrics grew up within the same context as the blues songs, and emerged from a broader musical concept for the collection.

Berryman's blues interest, which has received much less attention than his minstrelsy, is the subject of a more in-depth musical analysis in the second part of this chapter. These songs, which sometimes converge with the poet's minstrelsy, also constitute an exploration into the permeability of the lyric "I," following on from 'The Nervous Songs' and further exploring the relationship between self and society. Yet unlike the distinctly minstrel songs, they are in no way mocking, and serve to highlight the poet's sensitivity to the ongoing struggle of African Americans during the Civil Rights Era – the period during which the poem was being written. These lyrics celebrate a music that was, to Berryman's mind, one of the best things America had, and it is through the adoption of a blues voice that the poet finds a way to address, at some remove, his own blue experience.

With the publication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1968 Berryman's musical interest entered a markedly new phase, returning to the classical models that appear in his work before this project, yet retaining the bluesy slang that emerged with *77 Dream Songs* (1964). This closing instalment is preoccupied with commemoration, and moves from the public sphere into a mode more personal and reflective. The book contains a stream of lyrics that mourn the loss of loved ones and prepare for Henry's own death. It is predominantly through the language of classical music that Berryman navigates what he describes as "the world of anti-matter" (DS 103), and it is in musical listening that he hopes to access a world beyond the material. Such explorations were already at work in a poem such as 'Canto Amor' (begun in 1942), where music was central to the poet's unmaking and rebirth, and *The Dream Songs* takes these concepts to their apocalyptic limit.

It is the musical gestures of *The Dream Songs* that allow Berryman to ask what is possible in poetry and the fallen art of language. His experience of music enables him to reimagine "the glories of the world" – which in Dream Song 26, "made me aria, once" – and the dissonance of contemporary living. Berryman's most celebrated work not only delves into the historical relationship between poetry and song – and the similarities between the states of dream and song – it pits these terms against each other, using music to trouble the American dream.

"So-called *black*"

The figure of the minstrel is not unique to *The Dream Songs*, but appears much earlier in Berryman's poetic lexicon. As has been discussed in the previous two chapters, the poet's work is pervaded by a sense of the historic relationship between the arts of music and poetry. This can be seen in 'The Nervous Songs,' which he thought of as a kind of folk song, and *Berryman's Sonnets*, which situates itself within a larger troubadour tradition and draws from the cycles of Schubert. As he moves into *The Dream Songs*, however, the poet's minstrelsy takes on the more complex burden of American history. As Carl Wittke notes in *Tambo and Bones* (1930), the book that would become a touchstone for Berryman's minstrel engagement:

> The troubadours of the American burnt cork circle were utterly different from the minstrels of other lands and earlier times. There was little in the American minstrel show even remotely suggestive of the troubadours, *minnesingers*, *jongleurs* and bards or medieval Europe, except perhaps a genuine love for song and a common gift of improvising endless verses. (5)

Wittke goes on to describe how "The origin of American minstrelsy may be found in the singing and dancing of the slaves of the Southern plantations of ante-bellum days" (6), before becoming, eventually, an American spectacle:

> Add a banjo, the fiddle, and a few players who could perform singly, in duets, trios, and quartettes; interject a few conundrums and darky puns and jokes; and close with a 'hoe-down' dance in which every member could become as hilarious as he pleased, and the American minstrel show would be complete. (41)

This theatrical extravaganza, which combined music, verse and comedy, must have seemed an apposite structuring principle for Berryman, who planned to enlist a number of disparate musical and dramatic genres in the formation of a new kind of American verse. And as he came to conceive of a work that would speak more powerfully to American experience, Berryman was also enlisting the tradition as one of the "earliest cultural industries" (Lott, 8) in the US. "Minstrelsy not only affords a look at the emergent historical break between high and low cultures," writes Eric Lott, in his study of the dual motivations of "love" and "theft" that were integral to the minstrel tradition in the United States, "but also reveals popular culture to be a place

where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified – and contested" (*Love and Theft*, 8). This type of commodification, already established as a key concept in Berryman's work by this time, is something the poet stages in *The Dream Songs*, a work that explores the boundary between racial identities as well as "high and low cultures" (8), and does so through its musical engagement.

The kind of musical performance that Berryman hoped to stage is conveyed in miniature via the poem's three epigraphs. This epigraphic network has attracted the attention of many scholars, and is discussed at length by William Wasserstrom and Susan G. Berndt, yet the individual origin of each of these quotations warrants a brief rephrasing in order to establish their collective musical value. The first note in the triad, "GO IN, BRACK MAN, DE DAY'S YO OWN," is the same as that sounded in *Tambo and Bones* (1930), foregrounding the centrality of minstrelsy within the work but also indicating the poet's intended direction: into a simultaneously private and public space. The second, ". . . I AM THEIR MUSIK," is abstracted from *Lamentations* 3:63 and takes further the concepts of trial and embodiment (observed earlier in 'Canto Amor') through its recourse to Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. What is left out of this quotation, or given presence through the ellipsis, is almost as significant as that which is manifest. Returning to the source of this scripture, the particular nature of this music becomes clear, a number of versions describing this as a "mocking" song. "Look at them! Sitting or standing, they mock me in their songs" (Lam. 3:63, NIV). The type of poetic embodiment that occurs here is closely aligned with that in 'The Nervous Songs,' in which the poet identifies himself as an ally of the oppressed, yet the concept of the trial also returns us to the edifying music of 'Canto Amor' in which the poet was "naked in the music's vision" (*CP*, 48), suggesting that music is again bound up with the process of purification. The final epigraph, "BUT THERE IS ANOTHER METHOD," is from Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883). As William Wasserstrom has pointed out, Schreiner "defined two ways in which artists customarily depict 'truth.' The first, of which she disapproved, she named the 'stage method'" in which "people behave as puppets of the creator's will, character is cut and dried, [and] problems are devised so that solutions can be found" (qtd. in Wasserstrom, 169). But the other "method" prescribed by Schreiner is the "method of the life we all lead. Here nothing is prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away. When the crisis comes, the man who would fit it does not return. When the curtain falls, no

one is ready" (qtd. in Wasserstrom, 169).[3] The element of the unexpected is certainly one that Berryman's work shares with Schreiner's other "method." Berryman's poem, which was devised as a kind of piquaresque, is a lyric of unexpected turns; it aims to follow the complex flow of American life and increasingly refuses to anticipate its own direction. Yet Schreiner also earns her place in the epigraphic trio on account of her work in advocating for the rights of Afrikaners, Jews and Blacks. Her work speaks out boldly against the forces of cultural imperialism and hegemonic power structures.

Around the time that Berryman began 'The Nervous Songs' the poet was already thinking about how he might relate to a country that he felt regrettably estranged from, and that lacked a cohesive sense of national identity. In an unpublished essay, 'The American Intellectual and the American Dream,' written in 1947, Berryman explained his sense of antagonism towards the country of his birth. "I hate America," claimed the poet, "resentment and shame instead of acceptance and pride."[4] His frustrations are given musical analogy:

> America was dance music & oppression: we swayed locked in each other's arms, lulled by it, or we kicked out madly against it. What did it oppress: students, professors, writers, intellectuals, liberals, radicals, Jews, negroes, workers [. . .] America did not even understand its own, felt no responsibility to the few things it had [. . .] As for Jazz: the great records were regularly let go out of print by the damned companies, the damned public did not understand it, it was produced by an immigrant and oppressed people, and a Frenchman had written the only book on it worth a fuck (Panassie's Le jazz Hot) - - what could be more characteristic or revelatory?"[5]

In this passage Berryman's voice is possessed of the same prophetic ire and pity as the weeping prophet Jeremiah. It was also during this period that Berryman was beginning to engage with the subject of minstrelsy. On one sheet of notes for *The Dispossessed,* he suggests a possible minstrel epigraph: "'epig.' Black Sambo / on being asked to autograph H to A Clark."[6] Though the idea was subsequently abandoned, the note suggests that the subject of minstrelsy was weighing on

[3] Wasserstrom mistakenly attributes these quotations to Schreiner's later work, "*Dreams* (1914)" (169).
[4] 'The American Intellectual and the American Dream,' 17 November 1947, pp. 1-2, Prose Works (Unpublished) A-Mid, Box 1, JBP.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Published Poetry, Box 1A, The Dispossessed, Folder 4, JBP.

Berryman's mind long before the writing of *The Dream Songs*. This is not the understanding of most critics of the work, including Ernest J. Smith, who suggests that the poet's preoccupation with "Negro dialect" first emerges in the 1950s (434). Additionally, 'The Nervous Songs,' which explore the theme of travel, between different lands and subject positions, are alive to questions of colonial oppression and cultural appropriation. 'The Song of the Young Hawaiian' speaks scathingly of the white voices that encroach on his daily experience, while 'Song of the Man Forsaken and Obsessed' casts a dubious eye on the race relationships between Gauguin and the islanders. *The Dream Songs* continues this exploration of marginal voices – modelled in 'The Nervous Songs' through Rilke – translating them into a more specifically American context. The poet-prophet of *The Dream Songs* tasks himself with giving back to the American people a sense of their national music, and in doing so takes it upon himself, sometimes painfully, to embody it. Berryman's decision to resurrect minstrelsy at this juncture in American history was not an eschewal of contemporary race problems, therefore, but a symbolic return to the very root of the problem – an embodiment of "the mocking song."[7] As Helen Vendler suggests, in *The Given and the Made*:

> By giving his conscience a black voice – even if it is a white face in black voice – he embodied, too, the sustained reproof that white America faces from its dialectic companion blackness. His unruly poems of loss, guilt and fear are thus in the end symbolic of a larger disorder than the personal. (57)

Berryman's response to questions relating to his use of "Negro dialect" in a much later interview confirms that his ear was attuned to the dissonance of contemporary race relations:

> Well, that's a tough question. I'll tell you. I wrote a story once called 'The Imaginary Jew.' I was in Union Square in New York, waiting to see my girl, and I was taken for a Jew (I had a beard at the time). There was a tough Irishman who wanted to beat me up, and I got into the conversation, and I

[7] Berryman's concern here is also partially with America's estrangement from the person of the poet (or writer), and his recourse to the minstrel figure speaks also to his concerns regarding its possible obsolescence. As Maureen McLean writes: "If minstrels, historically understood, may be seen as the first performance poets, minstrelling discourse constantly poses the problem of what cultural work a modern poet might continue to perform, especially if poetry itself was perhaps obsolete" (444). For McLean, minstrelsy "is always imminently obsolete; thus it requires endless revival and equally relentless burial" (450).

> couldn't convince them that I wasn't a Jew. Well, the Negro business – the blackface – is related to that. That is, I feel extremely lucky to be white, let me put it that way, so that I don't have that problem. Friends of mine – Ralph Ellison, for example, in my opinion one of the best writers in the country – he has that problem. He's black, and he and Fanny, wherever they go, they are black. (qtd. in Plotz, 9)

Berryman's reply suggests a willed identification, but also acknowledges the awkward posturing involved in this type of act. At the same time as casting himself as the "imaginary Negro" (Davis, 33-34), then, Berryman was adopting the tradition of blackface, a mocking music, to critique his complicity in a society in which white power was taken as implicit, and religious or racial difference was cause for social exclusion. As he writes in Dream Song 119:

> Shadow & act, shadow & act,
> Better get white or you' get whacked,
> Or keep so-called *black*
> & raise new hell.

Here Berryman invokes Ellison once again in support of his poetic argument.[8] And as Anna Warso notes, it was in *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays on music and culture, that Ellison concisely dissected the "minstrel paradox," observing that "'out of the counterfeiting of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself'" (Ellison qtd. in Warso, 170). In Dream Song 119, these ideas are developed in connection with the popular 1930s protest song 'Black, Brown and White' by Big Bill Broonzy, who,

[8] In the much later poem 'Nowhere' (*Love & Fame*, 1970) the poet, who contemplates "Traitoring *words*," again sets himself up as an "imaginary Negro":

> More comfortable at the Apollo among blacks
> than in Hartley Hall where I hung out.
> A one named Brooks Johnson, with it in for Negroes,
> I told one noon I'd some coon blood myself
>
> and he spread the word wide while the campus laughed.
> Magical mourning blues,
> Victoria, Bessie. Teagarden. Pine-top Smith
> the sightless passionate constructor. (*CP*, 180-181)

Berryman's rather covert revolt, which he associates indirectly with an appreciation of the blues, is suggestively followed in the next stanza by a return to interwar Europe – "Anti-semitism through the purblind Houses. / News weird out of Germany" (*CP*, 181) – so that the politics of seeing (race) in this poem is twice tied up with the politics of listening.

coincidentally, learned his art from the black minstrel, Papa Charlie Jackson. From this song Berryman extracts the line "if you's black (oh brother) get back" and adjusts it to take on more violent connotations, while suggesting, at the same time, that racial identity might be imaginatively traversable. Yet Berryman's italics – "or keep so-called *black*" – suggest the degree of posturing required for such an act and signal his own concerns regarding authenticity. Here Berryman uses minstrelsy as a position of liminal advantage to probe prevailing discourses on race relations. As Maber points out, Berryman's minstrelsy becomes a means of "self-exploration and [of] racial exploration precisely because of its contradictions and its inauthenticity. The minstrel show figures as a site of inherent instability which climaxes in the possibility of a complete reversal: 'Some time we'll do it again, / in whiteface' (Song 220)" (134).

Although Berryman uses "Negro dialect" across the full span of *The Dream Songs*, the minstrel dimension is certainly strongest and most musically focused at the beginning of the work.[9] Dream Song 2, which introduces the theme, with the musical title *Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance*, reimagines Wittke's minstrel procession within a contemporary American context. On a draft of the song Berryman dedicated it to "the mem. of Daddy Rice," the father of American minstrelsy who adapted the slave song 'Jump Jim Crow.'[10] "It was Rice who gave the first entertainment in which a blackface performer was not only the main actor, but the entire act," writes Wittke, "Rice's mimicry was superb and absolutely true to life" (20). Berryman's song gives the performance an entirely new backdrop. As Haffenden points out, Dream Song 2 was written during Thanksgiving week of 1962, when Berryman was living in Providence, and "combines the frustration of finding all the bars legally closed" on Election Day "with that of being black and lacking legal rights" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 312).[11]

[9] As Kathe Davis notes, "even within *77 Dream Songs*, the concentration is toward the beginning: of the first fifteen songs, only four do not have at least an arguable trace. The upshot of all this is that the reader receives an initial impression of heavier dialect-use than the book really sustains" (36). Putting forward the argument that Berryman's dialect does not contribute to the work's obscurity, Davis also asserts that: "quantitatively, the dialect makes up only a small proportion of the language of the Songs. The songs that do use dialect mostly use it minimally, and even those few Songs that consist entirely of dialect are not incomprehensible on this account" (33).

[10] Published Poetry, 77 Dream Songs, Box 5 (Folders 1-6), Folder 1, JBP.

[11] In what appears to be an error in the text, Haffenden suggests that the occasion is Thanksgiving Day, an unlikely day for bars to close.

The jane is zoned! No nightspot here, no bar
there, no sweet freeway, and no premises
for business purposes,
no loiterers or needers. Henry are
baffled. Have ev'ybody head for Maine,
utility-man take a train?

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,
but is he come? Le's do a hoedown, gal,
one blue, one shuffle,
if them is all you seem to réquire. Strip,
ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on
one chaste evenin.

—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin
yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?
Honey dusk do sprawl.
— Hits hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing.
Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray.
I votes in my hole.

It is in connection with minstrelsy that Berryman introduces the concept of multiple voices to *The Dream Songs*, which had begun much earlier in 'The Nervous Songs.' Within Henry himself there is a multiplicity – "Henry are baffled" – as well as the additional voice of the unnamed friend, whose presence brings these lyrics somewhat closer to the model provided by Yeats in 'Words For Music Perhaps.'

Yet unlike Daddy Rice's performance, Berryman's is bound up with an amorous advance, and his musical act emerges as a bizarre show of sexual prowess that is set off inauthentically against the "chaste evenin." Henry's friend, who chimes in for the final stanza, draws attention to Bones' bravado by mocking his attempts to play the minstrel and the courtly lover. His blues-like interjection and advice, "Honey dusk do sprawl," speaks to his friend's relative privilege, urging him to take a fresh view of things.[12] Henry's response to this encouragement is unyielding – "Hits hard" – though he tries to find some levity – "Kinged or thinged though, fling & wing." In an earlier incarnation of the song Bones' response is overtly musical:

— Hit's hard. De only thing is: fling and sing,

[12] Throughout the songs the friend provides the function of chastening, cajoling and comforting Henry and often seems to take the form of a conscience or superego for Henry. However, it is not the case, as Helen Vendler suggests, that the two act in an entirely oppositional fashion, "Conscience" talking to "id [. . .] across a Void, never able to find common ground " (*The Given and the Made,* 36).

when the worl's & the gals sit down off from you sad.
Fing is: don't get mad.

For Bones, the act of performance is the proper response to such frustrations, or as Ellison expresses it: "Art – the blues, the spirituals, the jazz [. . .] [is] what we [find] in the place of freedom" (225). Where Berryman's original ending suggests the necessity of remaining cool in the face of personal frustrations – "don't get mad" – the amended ending is more politically charged. At its terminus the song becomes one of covert protest; "I votes in my hole" is at once a statement of retreat and a crude rejection of authority. Here, as in the traditional minstrel show "the language of revolt and the language of amusement" are "impossible to separate; they [bleed] into each other, the same words referring effortlessly to two, now necessarily related, phenomena" (Lott, 85).

Dream Song 2 remains alive to its political and historical contexts, though it enters them in a complex, minstrel fashion. It is through the musical theatrics of the minstrel tradition that Berryman deepens his Rilkean exploration of marginalised voices begun in 'The Nervous Songs,' though *The Dream Songs* adds an extra layer of complexity, by delving into an American tradition with so perplexed a history.

Living with the blues

While a number of Berryman's minstrel songs draw indirectly on the blues, many more are interested in this American tradition in its own right. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, Charles Thornbury asserts that "Berryman's lamentations [. . .] and blues require adept readers" (xix), yet any in-depth reading of this key feature in the poet's work has yet to emerge. As suggested earlier, the lack of available scholarship on this subject may have to do with the dialect content of these poems, which for some critics, has forced them into the category of minstrelsy, causing their rich deployment of the blues tradition to be forgotten altogether. Indeed, while there is invariably some overlap, Berryman's blues interest is much more than a corollary of his minstrelsy. If Berryman's minstrel songs seek to represent a rather complex staging of dispossession, and in the process to draw attention to their own inauthenticity, his blues lyrics are the more personal response to a musical tradition that played a profound role in the poet's life. An evaluation of the poet's "blues and

lamentations" demonstrates how Berryman's use of various blues structures and allusions underpins his engagement with typical blues themes: love, loss and the ability of artistic form to lend shape to human tragedy.

As Berryman highlighted in an interview with John Plotz (1969), the influence of the blues on the work is "Heavy." "I have been interested in the language of the blues and Negro dialects all my life," commented the poet, "always been. Especially Bessie. I picked all of it up from records, although while I was at Columbia the Apollo on 125th Street used to have blues singers. It was a completely coony house, and I used to go there sometimes; but mostly from records" (qtd. in Plotz, 8). And as Berryman himself makes clear, his preference was for records from the Classic Female, or Vaudeville Blues era, the genre's golden age when the blues first went on record. Berryman's affection for Vaudeville blues relates to the spectacular, even melodramatic quality of these performances, which, like the minstrel tradition, resonates with his larger dramatic aims. Yet unlike the minstrel tradition, the blues was fundamentally lyrical and emotional in nature, and thus provided a nearer paradigm for Berryman's lyric art. As Amiri Baraka writes in his seminal blues text, *Blues People*: "the lyrics of the African songs were usually as important or more important than the music [. . .] Even the purely instrumental music of the American Negro contains constant reference to vocal music," notes Baraka. "Blues-playing is the closest imitation of the human voice of any music I've heard" (Jones, 28). As a poet interested in the scope and reach of the human voice, the blues became, for Berryman, a uniquely powerful medium.

In the blues Berryman found a form that matched the psychological intensity of 'The Nervous Songs' and yet resonated with distinctly American problems. In an interview for the *Barat Review* in 1968, 'A Dialogue with his Audience,' Ellison explains the relationship between the blues and American consciousness – an assessment that Berryman cut out and carefully marked in pencil. "Here at home," writes Ellison, "I find existentialist consciousness to have been a property of the blues, for instance, because there's always a kind of uncertainty in American life."[13] That Berryman considered the black artist to be particularly adept at navigating this uncertainty is made clear by his markings on another annotated review from the same

[13] 'A Dialogue with his Audience,' an interview conducted by Leslie Dewart. This review has been inserted into Berryman's copy of Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act.* New York: Random House, 1964, JBP.

clipping. "McPherson's" assessment of Richard Wright's existentialist epic, *The Outsider*, quotes a white district attorney's words to black protagonist, Cross Damon:

> Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to know that they have these problems. They are going to be gifted with double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them. Negroes will develop unique and special defined psychological types. They will become psychological men, like the Jews. They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centres of knowing, so to speak. The political, social and psychological consequences of this will be enormous.[14]

Berryman's blues, more than his minstrelsy, addresses the black artist as outsider and existentialist centre of knowing. And, as is made clear in the 1969 interview with John Plotz, the poet had a few particular models in mind.

"It was Haggin who introduced John to Bessie Smith," recalls Eileen Simpson, "He listened to her singing with the same concentration he gave to a Mozart aria" (17-18). Berryman was evangelistic about his love for Smith's records, a passion that, more often than not, was met with the incomprehension of his friends. Remembering Schwartz's response to a record that Berryman had managed to force upon him, Simpson writes: "He sat quietly through 'Empty Bed Blues,' then began to wander around the room restlessly, examining books. At the end of the first side he said, 'John, I neither understand nor am capable of responding to such music'" (17-18). Berryman also tried the record out on Robert Giroux, who "liked Bessie Smith better than Delmore had [but] obviously didn't feel one had to listen to her in hushed silence, as John tended to do," recalls Simpson (22). Simpson's account presents Berryman's relationship to the blues as a profoundly personal one and gestures towards the greater importance of this particular musical form within his work. The figure of Bessie Smith, in particular, was so central to *The Dream Songs* that Berryman listed her among the key "Dram. Pers." of the poem, along with others such as Lucifer, Peter, and Christ.[15] Dream Song 1 is quick to establish an important place for the blues, and particularly Bessie Smith, within the larger Dream Song project.

[14] McPherson (first name not given) review of *The Outsider*, inserted into Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act.* New York: Random House, 1964, JBP.
[15] Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, (Folders 1-6/10), Folder 2, DS Conceptual, JBP.

Not only does the poem strike some rather bluesy chords with its general tone of estrangement, it makes the connection explicit by alluding, in its final two lines, to Smith's 'Empty Bed Blues' – a motif that recurs a number of times throughout the poem. If Berryman's song "in the sycamore" was, as the first dream song tells us, "once [. . .] glad," then his lyrics after the fall are something more adapted to the difficult terrain he now navigates: "Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed." This is the expression of an outsider, though one who is productively outside. It is already well-established that this initial Dream Song foregrounds almost all of the poem's central concerns, and the emergence of the blues in this frontispiece sets the poet's various gripes and grievances within a specifically blues context. Just like minstrelsy, the blues makes its way into the poem's central nervous system.

The themes that emerge in Berryman's blues-inflected Dream Songs are not, in fact, dissimilar to those that occur in the work of contemporary blues poets. In his most celebrated blues lyric, Langston Hughes presents one of the fundamental issues concerning the blues artist.

> I got the weary blues and can't be satisfied
> I got the weary blues and can't be satisfied
> I ain't happy no mo'
> And wish that I had died

repeats his "Negro singer" in a "melancholy tone" ('The Weary Blues,'1923, 33-34). Berryman's Henry, through all his picaresque adventures, appears also to persist in this devastated world-view. Like Hughes, Berryman's blues work emerges from such an agitated body and his inability to be satisfied, his boredom and frustration cause him to produce a verse of similar melancholy depths. The poet's relationship to a black poet such as Hughes, however, is always an indirect one. Berryman's noticeable lack of comment on poets of the Harlem Renaissance might suggest that he held the music of the blues in higher esteem than its poetic counterpart, though it could also speak to a latent anxiety surrounding his engagement with black art forms. Indeed while Berryman never acknowledged Hughes as a significant literary source in *The Dream Songs*, his presence is nonetheless palpable. Dream Song 14 presses further into the kind of frustrations presented in 'The Weary Blues.'

> 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
> (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
> means you have no
>
> Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
> inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
> Peoples bore me,
> literature bores me, especially great literature,
> Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
> as bad as achilles,
>
> who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
> And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
> and somehow a dog
> has taken itself & its tail considerably away
> into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
> behind: me, wag.

Here it is Henry's admission (or repetition) of his very lack of resources that enables the poem to exist as a creative entity. Similarly, the blues, which makes a feature of monotony and repetition, draws upon resources where they may have seemed non-existent, or at least in short supply. While this song has secured considerable critical attention, the influence of the blues tradition upon its language and form has been surprisingly neglected, though it is clear that Berryman's use of non-grammaticisms – "Life friends, is boring"; "peoples bore me"; "repeatingly" – are intended to confer on Dream Song 14 a dialect effect. And though often considered liturgical in its approach, the poem's echoes gain much more from being allied with the blues as a form similarly preoccupied with boredom and the question of "inner resources." Here the tradition makes itself manifest through subtle blues-like symptoms or tics on a structural level, and phrases such as "After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn" (DS 14) loosely follow an AAB pattern of repetition. The appeal of such a phrase is largely owing to its blues resonance. It is also worth noting the blues significance of the word "heavy," which returns in a number of the poet's most memorable songs ("there sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart só heavy" [DS 29], "my heavy daughter" [DS 385]).[16]

[16] Note Berryman's response to the question of blues influence: "heavy" (Plotz, 8). See also the unpublished 1962 Dream Song where the friend, in response to Bones' gripes about his

Another reason that the blues held such appeal for Berryman was that it issued directly from life. Berryman's general mode of expression throughout *The Dream Songs*, and increasingly through his later poetic projects, is rooted in personal experience; while Henry is "not the poet, not me" (*The Dream Songs*, xx), he occupies a rather complicated position, already discussed in relation to his minstrel play, between the real and the imaginative life. Correspondingly, one archival scrap relating to *The Dream Songs* instructs the poet to draw from intimate material, "Make available to D.S. my whole life since '53," writes Berryman, "esp. S-A & the Chaos in nyc, Iowa, Camb. [sic]."[17] As Ralph Ellison notes in 'Twentieth-Century Fiction, and the Black Mask of Humanity,'

> It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact [in this case the poem], and a man's life and his worship of his gods. Expression issued from life, and was beauty. But in the West, 'the triumph of the economic mind over the imaginative,' as Brooks Adams said, made possible this dreadful split between life and art. Hence, a music that is an 'art' music as distinguished from something someone would whistle in a tilling field. (*Shadow and Act*, 29)

Within *The Dream Songs*, in fact, the blues possesses the same value as the "high" or "Western" art of Berryman's favourite classical composers. In paying equal tribute to both Bessie Smith and Bach, then, Berryman might be said to attempt a bridging of the gap between "high" (classical/instrumental) and "low" (folk/vocal) art forms. This movement between classical and folk art is also observed in the way that the poem approaches language more generally, and particularly Dream Song 14, as a lyric that claims to be disenchanted by the language of "great literature" and "Peoples" yet finds recourse in both. Here Berryman draws upon the figure of Achilles (though he takes him down a peg through decapitalisation) while persisting, at the same time, with the colloquialisms and non-grammaticisms typical of the blues. Berryman's ingenuity in this poem is in the rather skillful yoking together of different traditions and incongruous scenes ("tranquil hills & gin" palaces) and in the mixing of linguistic palettes (the joining of archly poetic "plights" with typically informal "gripes").

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deteriorating state and reliance on "booze," responds "—That's heavy, Sir Bones" (Mariani, 376). And 'King David Dances' (*Delusions, Etc*., 1972): "with the ponder both of priesthood & of State / heavy upon me, yea, / all the black same time I danced my blue head off!" (*CP*, 264).

[17] Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, (Folders 1-6/10), Folder 2, DS Conceptual, JBP.

The fusion, or even collision, of these art forms within American society during the twentieth century is also a pervasive concern for Langston Hughes, whose narrator in 'Theme For English B' takes up his instructor's task to "write a page tonight. And let that page come out of you" (247). This poem aims at the expression or mediation of black identity – "Harlem I hear you" – within a context so void of black voices that the young narrator wonders "will my page be colored that I write?" He considers his daily motions and thoughts in relation to what he's read of white folks' lives and draws a comparison between the two:

> Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink and be in love.
> I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
> I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
> or records—Bessie, Bop, or Bach.
> I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
> the same thing other folks like who are other races.

Hughes' speaker finally comes to the conclusion that though his instructor is white he is "yet a part of me, as I am a part of you," concluding confidently: "That's American." His musical name-drops, choices of which Berryman would certainly have approved, serve here to back up his point on the interconnectedness of American peoples through music. Similarly, in 'Lady's Boogie' the narrator suggests that if "that Lady / dressed so fine" just listen closely to the "boogie-woogie" she might hear "Way up in the treble / The tingle of a tear. // *Be-Bach!*" (251). For both Berryman and Hughes, then, cultural exchange (and interchange) is well expressed or charted through musical allusion. And Berryman's varied musical reference within *The Dream Songs* shows it to be a product as well as a celebration of the multifarious in American culture during this time. As Ellison writes: "Living with music today we find Mozart and Ellington, Kirsten Flagstad and Chippie Hill, William L. Dawson and Carl Orff all forming part of our regular fare" (198).

While Berryman certainly held an interest in jazz as a tradition that emerged from the energetic collision of different musical disciplines (and racial identities), it was the blues that captured his lyric imagination. As he pointed out in his essay on 'The American Intellectual and the American Dream,' the poet believed jazz to be one of the best things America had, though "the damned public did not understand it"; the same argument could not have been made for the blues, which was popular and

even formulaic.[18] Calling upon Victoria Spivey to provide him with an epigraph to the second instalment of *The Dream Songs* (*His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*), Berryman explores a number of the issues specifically connected with the blues as an oral tradition and cultural phenomenon:

> He went away and never said goodbye.
> I could read his letters but I sure cant read his mind.
> I thought he's lovin me but he was leavin all the time.
> Now I know that my true love was blind.
>
> *Victoria Spivey?*

The poet's inability (even refusal) to confidently identify the source of these lyrics is itself a comment on the way the blues lyric functions as part of a collective American consciousness; through the subtle deposition of the question mark Berryman playfully calls into question the nature of authorship and the phenomenon of the "cover" in American blues history. As he later acknowledged in his interview with *The Harvard Advocate*: "I found out that it wasn't Victoria Spivey; it was Teddy Grace. As for others, oh, I could go down the line" (qtd. in Plotz, 8). While Teddy Grace may have covered these lyrics, neither she nor Spivey are in fact the original or most likely source for the epigraph, an extract from the 'Crazy Blues,' composed by Perry Bradford and made famous by Mammie Smith in 1920 when she became the first African-American to put the blues on record.

The question of authorship here is made yet more complex by the fact that Berryman's fourth epigraph is also a misquotation. Not only does the poet tamper with the original tense of the song (switching it from present to past), he significantly alters the excerpt's final line, which sounds in the original much more like, "Now I *see't* my *poor* love was blind" [emphasis mine]. The first line of Berryman's quatrain, which serves as a poetic distillation of the song's general thrust, does not in fact appear in 'Crazy Blues' at all. As Michael Taft comments, in *The Blues Lyric Formula*, "The commercial blues is a good example of [. . .] 'orally derived' literary poetry" (24), a phenomenon that accounted for the profusion of different versions that a single song might yield. Berryman's errors of transcription suggest that the quotation has been taken down from memory and serves, therefore, as a working

[18] 'The American Intellectual and the American Dream,' 17 November 1947, pp. 1-2, Prose Works (Unpublished) A-Mid Box 1, JBP.

example of the protean nature of the blues lyric, which is subject to change as it comes into the possession of each new performer. This fragment emerges from a tradition that centres upon repetition, recycling and shared formulas. As Spivey herself notes:

> In those days it was a matter of the dollar, all of us could write those blues a dime a dozen. [Lester] Melrose would talk to me tonight and tomorrow I would have him six tunes and the very next day knowing that we wouldn't get any royalties we forgot about them and would write six more. Those were the days. (qtd. in Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, 22)

This self-generative quality of the blues, as highlighted by Spivey, has a clear parallel in Berryman's Dream Song form, which is also by nature repetitiously productive. In *The Dream Songs* "the formulaic system" similarly "establishes *a priori* the poetic framework on which the story is built" (Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, 285). Indeed, after its inception in 'The Nervous Songs,' this eighteen line form – which the poet found he could easily manipulate and generate at a rapid pace – became one into which he channelled his energies time and time again.

Berryman's general approach to metre within *The Dream Songs* also bears some comparison with the AAB pattern of the blues. Explaining his method in the same interview with Plotz, Berryman comments: "Yes, well, 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 its rhymed" (12). While there is much rhythmical variation within the songs, then, Berryman recognised the underlying structure of his stanzas to be based upon a metrical pattern that shares the same DNA as the blues.[19] This is a formula repetitiously productive in nature, and as Berryman highlights, it's a business. As a project *The Dream Songs* hinges on the varied repetition of sonic and thematic patterns, overt blues theme or no, and it is possible to see how ideas of production and repetition (as well as expectation) throughout the larger work might owe a debt to the blues formula.

Tied in with the concept of mass production, of course, is mass destruction, and Spivey's concept of the formula-driven lyric as a kind of "disposable text" (Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, 22) shares something in common with Berryman's

[19] Likewise, as Taft notes, "there is no metrical demand on the blues formula" (*The Blues Lyric Formula*, 75).

approach to what was also a form well-suited to mass production. In the same interview as quoted above, Berryman comments on the songs that he discarded: "I killed about fifty in Greece. I killed about a hundred in Dublin, and I killed about fifty in Greece. I killed a lot of songs in Ireland, too" (qtd. in Plotz, 9). The process of rejection is, for Berryman, made difficult – even violent – by the sheer volume of songs from which he must select, yet it is an act that he is forced to perform in order to produce something of endurance. What's more, the repetition within the line itself – a kind of musical riffing – further consolidates the blues resonance of this "killing" activity.

Considering, finally, the epigraph's theme, one notices how significantly these four lines feed into Berryman's larger preoccupations throughout *The Dream Songs*. As such, while the epigraph, in its picture of the runaway lover, might recall Smith's 'Empty Bed Blues,' it equally gestures forward to Dream Song 145 where the poet, considering his father's abrupt departure, finds he "cannot read that wretched mind, so strong / & so undone." As in 'Crazy Blues,' the traumatic nature of such events is bound up with the narrator's inability to fully witness or comprehend them as they occurred, and in both instances the lonely protagonist must find a way "to live on" (DS 145), to sing through his grief.

While the whole body of *The Dream Songs*, and its mode of production, is arguably touched by the blues tradition, a number of songs – particularly within *77 Dream Songs* – are devoted entirely to blues subjects. Dream Song 68 is a detailed account of Berryman's personal experience as a listener of the blues, and joins a tradition of poems on the subject of blues listening, most notably Hughes' 'The Weary Blues,' where a Negro artist "Down on Lenox avenue" is overheard as he does his "lazy sway . . . . / to the tune o' those Weary Blues." Berryman's song in this instance is much more upbeat than lazy or melancholic, but both poems place similar importance on the art of listening and its imaginative possibilities.

> I heard, could be, a Hey there from the wing,
> and I went on: Miss Bessie soundin good
> that one, that night of all,
> I feelin fair myself, taxes and things
> seem to be back in line, like everybody should
> and nobody in the snow on call
>
> so, as I say, the house is givin hell
> to *Yellow Dog*, I blowin like it too

and Bessie always do
when she make a very big sound—after, well,
no sound—I see she totterin—I cross which stage
even at Henry's age

in 2-3 seconds: then we wait and see.
I hear strange horns, Pinetop he hit some chords,
Charlie Start *Empty Bed*,
They all come hangin Christmas on some tree
after trees thrown out—sick-house's white birds',
black to the birds instead.

On the surface, the song enacts a journey through a concert hall in which Bessie Smith and her band of blues musicians enchant their audience with renditions of 'Empty Bed' and 'Yellow Dog,' and while the poet acknowledges that he "never heard Bessie herself" (qtd. in Plotz. 8), the poem, like so many of *The Dream Songs*, creates the illusion of lived experience. As Paul Mariani notes, in his biographical portrait of the poet, Dream Song 68 was actually composed "the day after Christmas while Berryman was listening to these records on his mother's phonograph" (387). Yet if the concert is an imagined experience, it is also a surprisingly embodied one. Berryman "hear[s]" shouts from the wings and the excitement of the crowd as they cheer and participate in 'Yellow Dog'; he "see[s]" the songstress "totterin" on stage, and finds she's "soundin good / that one, that night of all." Berryman even imagines himself to participate bodily in the musical act: "I blowin like it too / and Bessie always do / when she make a very big sound—after, well, / no sound," the close rhyme drawing the poet and his heroine into closer artistic communion. In this particular song, Berryman shows himself to be a conscientious listener, capable of appreciating Smith's dramatic use of silence and dynamic features, and he creates space in his own line through the musical rest of the em-dash.

The journey is one through the poet's own psychological processes and becomes, as much as anything else, an enquiry into the impact of the blues (as stimulus) upon the poetic imagination. Berryman's assertion in the second line, "I went on" signals his intent not only to venture, on the level of the poem's narrative, further into the concert venue, but also his will to press deeper into dream and into the retelling of the imagined event. A sense of the immediacy of the musical atmosphere upon the senses is structurally achieved through the lengthy first sentence, which constitutes thirteen of the poem's eighteen lines and creates a sense of the poet being

carried along by the music. The blues, here, operates as creative stimulus – Berryman shows his mind to be running away with itself – and has clear generative possibilities for the poet.

Dream Song 68 also speaks to the power of blues song to embody and reflect the listener's subjectivity. The narrator of the song not only strives to participate in Smith's music, but also binds her experience to his own before extending it out to the collective:

> [. . .] Miss Bessie soundin good
> that one, that night of all,
> I feelin fair myself, taxes & things
> seem to be back in line, like everybody should
> and nobody in the snow on call

The singer's "soundin good" is not simply, for Berryman, an assessment of Smith's voice, but an evaluation (albeit a rather presumptuous one) of her state of mind, which he feels the music is powerful enough to communicate. The lyric serves as a reminder of the blues artist's ability to tap into something of shared human experience, to bring the listener around to their way of thinking.

The use of dialect throughout the song is an attempt to further dramatise an imagined artistic exchange, and the poet seeks to emulate (through his own song) some of the qualities of Smith's vocal line. He appears to have internalised the singer's voice, and clips the suffixes of his verbs in accordance with her bluesy speech patterns ("soundin good," "feelin fair," "givin hell"). The two blues songs from which the Dream Song draws – 'Empty Bed' and 'Yellow Dog' – also rely heavily upon the present participle (as is seen in 'Empty Bed's' "aching," "teaching" and 'Yellow Dog's' "moaning," "wondering"). However, Berryman actually goes further than Smith in his attempts to bolster the dialect content of his song, dropping auxiliary verbs such as "is" and "am" ("Miss Bessie soundin good," "I feelin fair"), so that while the line maintains semantic integrity, it loses some of its grammatical sense.

Being cognizant of the fine division between imitation and racial mimicry, Berryman sought to have the song approved by his friend, Ralph Ellison. As Ellison recounts: "During the period he was writing *Dream Songs* I grew to expect his drunken (sometimes) telephone calls [. . .] Usually he wanted my reaction to his uses of dialect" (qtd. in Mariani, 387). It is clear that Berryman, especially in his blues

songs, was eager to avoid racial insensitivity and considered Ellison a good sounding board for his blues experiments on at least two accounts. Moreover, Berryman must have found in Ellison the necessary affirmation he required for the blues tribute, for when "eighteen months later, he sent a copy of *77 Dream Songs* to Ralph and Fanny Ellison, he inscribed it, 'Affectionately & with thanks for help on 68'" (Mariani, 387).

As already pointed out, the poem was composed at the end of a year of particular turbulence in the poet's life. As Mariani records, 1962 was, in Berryman's own words, a year of "'monumental incompetent procrastination about taxes, bills, debts, insurance,' and even about keeping in touch with the people he loved" (372). As such, during this period Berryman had more than simply "taxes & things" to get in order – having been released from McLean's Hospital (where he was committed on account of his alcoholism and psychological vexation) only weeks before the song's composition. The very affairs that the song claims to be in order, then, are the problems that were nearest to Berryman's mind; Dream Song 68 acknowledges these affairs, yet enables the poet to set them briefly aside. This is done much in the style described by Ellison in 'Richard Wright's Blues,' where he asserts that: "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (*Shadow and Act*, 79).

Dream Song 68 is alive to these transcendent possibilities, and if a sense of reality has been passed over through the course of the poem, it is entirely broken down as the poet "crosses the stage," breaking through the fourth wall and moving into the performers' space. If the poem has been working the imagination toward a state of sublimity, then this is its apotheosis. The poem's ending is generally ambiguous but presents a transcendent vision through the collective images of the "horns," the "tree," and the "birds" (an image often associated with Charlie 'Bird' Parker). Yet the reference to the sick house tethers the poem, finally, back to earth. Juxtaposed with these images of lightness is a final reminder, in the allusion to Smith's death – a tragedy that resulted from a hospital's refusal to admit her along racial lines – of human suffering and inequality. "Sick house's white birds,' / Black to the birds instead." Meanwhile, below the seemingly benign gesture of "hangin Christmas" lies another more insidious act of racialised violence such as that presented in Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' (1939):

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves, blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. (qtd. in Davis, 181)[20]

In Berryman's song the body is also suggested as a waste product, "thrown out" to be picked over by birds. As is often the case in Berryman's songs, brutal reality is never far beneath the surface of dream – something that the blues will not let us easily forget. "As Billie reached the searing, climactic line, 'Here is a strange and bitter crop,'" writes Stuart Nicholson in his biography of the singer, "it was delivered with a power and emotion that chilled the blood, forcing her predominantly white, middle-class audience to stare unblinkingly into the face of racist violence" (113). Composed in the middle of the Civil Rights Era – the year before Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech and the death of four girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church – Dream Song 68 uses the blues and its exponents to call to mind the historical violence enacted upon African-American citizens, and to remind its audience of ongoing injustice. The fact that the lyrics of 'Strange Fruit' were composed by the white Jewish schoolteacher, Abel Meeropol, must have provided an additional layer of significance for Berryman, who was continually searching for correspondence between these two oppressed peoples and a means to express his solidarity.

"Bessie's" death appears to have been something of a fixation for Berryman, and is also the subject of one unpublished Dream Song, another elegy for the singer:

If Bessie gone, hardly it seem worthwhile
to hum & screw, hurt, sorrow, & admire,
shitheads put down & pray.
If clearly Queen <u>is</u> Gone, like the death of style,
who helped her so, behind, out of desire,
let's quit & shut up, say.

'Woke up this mawnin when chickens were crowin for day,'
and the best trombone in Coonland do a slide,
'Felt by the pillow, he left a note

[20] This was a song that Berryman responded to in his obscure dream work St. Pancras Brazer, though here it is in connection with Ella Fitzgerald. The note is characteristically garbled. "Ella F – at flame – Etta (Cambr.) – 'Strange fruit' – magnolia – hang – 'Sweet & fresh' – 'burning flesh,' black bodies swayin [. . .]."
St. Pancras Braser (Notes, Drafts), Folder 7, JBP.

reading' "I'm sorry, Jane, you got my goat" —
out of desire. Hell took a holiday
when on each other's side

they sang like canyons or a lofting tide.
We shivered & did not know where to looks.
—Mr Bones, they long gone,
leave um in peace's.[21]

This lyric is less concealed than Dream Song 68 about its desolate blue feelings. With the singer's death, suggests Berryman, style went also – high praise indeed. The poem commemorates Smith's practice by echoing lines from 'Empty Bed Blues': "I woke up this morning: with an awful aching head" (qtd. in Taft, *Talkin' to Myself,* 528). Yet it is not only the singer's death that is at issue here; the lyric progresses onto expressions of relational breakdown, abandonment, and even suicide. Undermining his friend's final instruction, Bones does not leave these artists "in peace's" – his songs exhume the pieces of a bygone blues era in order to speak to both personal and political griefs.

The date of Berryman's unpublished elegy for Smith is not clear, though December 1962 certainly appears to have been the period during which the poet was most absorbed by the mode. Along with Dream Song 68, Berryman composed Dream Song 40, a lyric that confirms his full retreat into the blues world during this trying period in his life. Though the lyric is often read in connection with the poem's minstrel dimension, Berryman clearly understood it as a blues work, one early version supplying the marginal note: "Blues: 30/- wk."[22] Written entirely in dialect, Dream Song 40 is the closest of *The Dream Songs* to becoming a fully-fledged blues lyric:

I'm scared a lonely. Never see my son,
easy be not to see anyone,
combers out to sea
know they're goin somewhere but not me.
Got a little poison, got a little gun,
I'm scared a lonely.

I'm scared a only one thing, which is me,
from othering I don't take nothin, see,
for any hound dog's sake.

[21] Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1 (Folders 7-10), Folder 7, JBP.
Line four of the song is not clear and might also read "If Charley Queen is gone."
[22] Published Poetry, 77 Dream Songs, Box 5 (Folders 1-6), Folder 6, JBP.

> But this is where I livin, where I rake
> my leaves and cop my promise, this' where we
> cry oursel's awake.
>
> 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.

Here Berryman is not only an observer, as he was in Dream Song 68, but a conscious participant in the blues tradition, and the poem is saturated with blues images of all kinds. It is easy to imagine the song being performed by one of Berryman's blues heroines, as the poet himself was more than likely doing when he composed these lyrics, and as Elizabeth Bishop did when she wrote her 'Songs for a Coloured Singer' "for Billie Holiday, but very vaguely" – it is doubtful, however, that Berryman ever intended to "[find] music" for these lyrics as Bishop did (*One Art*, 478).[23] Dream Song 40 inhabits the blues persona so entirely that the character of Henry, though a regular shape-shifter, seems either absent here, or masked beyond recognition. Still, while the character presented in the lyric – "free, black and 41" – might stand out from the other poetic personas in *The Dream Songs*, this figure shares a surprising number of misfortunes with the poet.[24]

> "The blues occurs," wrote Ernest Ansermet in 1918,
>
> > when the negro is sad, when he is far away from his home, his mother, or his sweetheart. Then he thinks of a motif or a preferred rhythm and takes his trombone, or his violin, or his banjo, or his clarinet, or his drum, or else he sings, or simply dances. And on the chosen motif, he plumbs the depths of his imagination. This makes his sadness pass away – it is the Blues. (qtd. in Baraka, 175)

It is the subject of being far from the loved one and the family that Dream Song 40 takes as its theme: love, loss and longing form the basic structures of feeling in the

[23] The lament is not dissimilar from the aforementioned 'Yellow Dog' where the protagonist, wondering where her "easy rider's gone," can be heard "moaning night and morn" – though here the trope of the absent lover is substituted for the son (qtd. in Taft, *Talkin' to Myself*, 523).

[24] There is a sense or irony, therefore, in the narrator's claim: "from othering I don't take nothin, see, / for any hound dog's sake," since it is clear that he is expressing, at least in part, a personal sense of isolation through the development of this *other* persona.

poem. The protagonist here is not dissimilar to Hughes' "Negro singer" who complains that they "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self" ('The Weary Blues'), or even Spivey in her famous blues track 'Lonesome with the Blues' (1930), in which the singer "ain't got nobody, nobody cares for me. I'm just as lonesome as a gal can be." Berryman's narrator, however, complains particularly of distance from their child as well as a generalised sense of psychological remoteness: "I scared a lonely. Never see my son / easy be not to see anyone." Berryman, who composed this poem from his hospital bed, was as psychologically distant from his family as ever and certainly in possession of some of those blue feelings set out by Ansermet. Having been discharged from McLean's, where he had been admitted "under pressure," the day before Martha's birth, the poet saw his daughter once before he was recommitted, this time to Jane Brown, on account of a taxi backing over his leg and leaving it quite disfigured" (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 313). And with the birth of his daughter Berryman must also have been reminded of his estrangement from his son, Paul, born in 1957 and now living with his mother Ann. Indeed, between 1961 and 1962 Berryman also composed 'A Father's Song' (unpublished) in whose bittersweet ending is found a blues-like admixture of pleasure and pain.

> (I promise nothing: the weird world is wide)
> of weeping that he's growing a great boy
> so far away, it's true with a dim eye
> (four he now is, four) I seethe for joy.[25]

The number of classical blues lyrics on the subject of relational breakdown, finance and alcohol are abundant, and Dream Song 40 sets itself up as part of a tradition whose troubling themes are not only foregrounded in the lyric itself, but form a broader imaginative backdrop. While the blues figure in the poem is "not the poet, not me" (*The Dream Songs*, xx), it is clear that the use of a poetic persona allows Berryman free reign of the imagination and a way to express his personal anxieties at some remove. As is typical in the blues lyric, Dream Song 40 is much more emotionally than narratively oriented and it is the overwhelming theme of loneliness that directs the poem's course. As Taft notes, "as lyrics" the blues are really

[25] Miscellaneous Unpublished Poems, Box 1, Folder 7, Pou-Poems Berkley, JBP.

> commentaries on some situation, rather than narratives about some situation. If there is an implied narrative in blues songs, this narrative is usually developed in an indirect fashion through pithy and aphoristic statements on the effect of the narrative on the persona, the persona's reaction to the narrative, or the emotional atmosphere that surrounds the narrative. (*The Blues Lyric Formula*, 17)

In line with this formula, Dream Song 40 offers its reader very little back-story; focusing on the emotional situation at hand, Berryman spins a symbolic web of images that serves to capture an atmosphere of loss and its impact on the psyche.[26] Taft's pithy, aphoristic qualities are also at play here, a quality helped along by the poet's punchy rhymes:

> combers out to sea
> know they're goin somewhere but not me.
> Got a little poison, got a little gun,
> I'm scared a lonely.

Berryman's landscape holds a mirror to his narrator's blue feelings, yet even the retreating waves appear to have more direction than the parent sans child.[27] Like Spivey's song where "blue sky, blue sea, blue hours, blue day" all reflect the narrator's state, Berryman's singer still feels able to assert that "nothing aint as blue as me," and takes no comfort in the comparison. All of the poet's seemingly free-floating images create a deliberate sense of foreboding; while not explicitly connected to one another, they foster an imaginative backdrop and gesture toward negative future outcomes of the narrator's isolating grief. Finally, the disclosure of hidden weapons brings into question the mental stability of the protagonist – are these objects to be used against the self? – before the stanza is enveloped by the beleaguering refrain: "I'm scared a lonely."

[26] "Instead of relating the event," writes Taft, blues singers "expressed their feelings about the event. Different aspects of this implicit narrative give rise to different emotions, dreams, and imaginary scenes. Singers were free to express these perceptions from the mind's eye in any sequence they chose. In effect, singers began with some implicit narrative and then made free associations around this event from stanza to stanza" (Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, 106).

[27] The connection between landscape and psyche is common fare in the blues and is at play throughout the longer poem, though it expressed most clearly in Dream Song 14 where "the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn."

The image of the gun, of course, also has clear personal resonances for Berryman, and the poem, which centres around the protagonist's loss of a child also gestures indirectly to the crippling impact of the lost father, namely John Allyn Smith who becomes part of "the emotional atmosphere that surrounds the narrative" (Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula*, 17). The trope of the sea, which is foregrounded in this poem, emerges repeatedly through Berryman's work in association with the father, who was known to roam the shoreline with his gun, and once swam out with one of his sons (Berryman was never quite sure which) in what Berryman's mother, Martha Berryman, regarded as an attempt to drown both himself and his child (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 24-25). Berryman more than once exploits the blues as a means of reimagining his own paternal loss. Of course, the poet's father shares a surname with his favourite blues artist, an uncanny resonance that is borne out in the poems themselves. Clear poetic connections are made as early as Dream Song 1, which explores the impact of a central "departure" in connection with Smith's 'Empty Bed Blues': "Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed."[28] Dream Song 34 is another example of a song that reaches toward the blues as it considers the violent actions of "One man, wide in the mind, and tendoned like a grizzly, pried to his trigger-digit, pal." Here Berryman, with unusual coolness, reasons out his father's suicide: "I guess he didn't feel the best, Sister,—felt less / and more about less than us." Similarly, in Dream Song 241 "Father" is "the loneliest word in the one language [. . .] a fraction of sun & guns / 'way 'way ago." The place of isolation (the "empty bed") provides the exact co-ordinates of grief where most blues songs can be seen to pick up, and Berryman's anxiety over being left alone is one that is continually tracked back to this original loss.

The representation of the father as a blues figure is made yet more explicit in Dream Song 70, a poem written in the Autumn of 1962, some months before Berryman's most blues-heavy poems, that identifies Smith as "the blue father" – an identity that is confirmed in the manuscript note, "Allyn" (Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, 103). A further manuscript note, in which Berryman details the significance of various colours in *The Dream Songs*, ascribes to blue "All." This

[28] Similarly, the aforementioned "*Spivey?*" epigraph, "he went away and never said goodbye / I could read his letters but I sure can't read his mind" finds itself significantly echoed in the later, "I cannot read that wretched mind, so strong / & so undone" (DS 145), a poem in which Henry is "left to live on," as "scared a lonely" as the protagonist of Dream Song 40.

colour is therefore an appropriate symbolic choice for Dream Song 70 (perhaps even shorthand for Smith's first name), not least because it represents a figure whom Berryman considered the *point d'appui* of his psychological problems (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 29). In line with this, Dream Song 70 carries with it the suggestion that Berryman's inability to be satisfied is owing to the shadow cast by his father's death and the poem, which sets out to celebrate an undergraduate rowing victory, steers rather sharply into the "weird" post-traumatic "regattas of the afterworld."[29] This is an afterworld in which Berryman is set, counter-intuitively, to "cheer for the foe," and finds himself timing (the traumatic return of) "the blue father." Smith's ghostly presence is felt in the poem's end-rhymes (or near-end rhymes) which themselves spin out from the word "father" – "feathering," "after," "rather" – so that his presence is strangely, even unconsciously, established as something repressed before it is announced in the final line.[30]

If, like Spivey, Berryman is 'Haunted by the Blues' (1930), it is the spectre of the father that cannot be dispelled. "Each night as I lay thinking, there's a lot of things I dread," sings Spivey in a lyric that must have resonated with Berryman on a very personal level,

> But when I awake the blues is round my bed.
>
> When I wake he's knocking at my door.
> When I wake he's knocking at my door.
> Can't you see I don't like you,
> Don't come here no more.

While such blues lyrics generally lament the loss of an absconding lover, the departure of the father in *The Dream Songs* clearly leaves the son with a similar sense of gloom. What's more, the preponderance of the word "daddy," as a label for the male lover in the blues, could hardly have escaped the poet's attention, and generic lyrics such as "my daddy's gone and left me," must have taken on a differently inflected (though painfully literal) meaning for Berryman. Returning to the poet's

[29] This is reiterated in one of Berryman's notes of dream analysis: "So dream is my bloody father looking down at me, whom he's just fucked by killing himself, making me into shit: and taunting me before he flushes me away" (qtd in. Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 248).

[30] See also 'Tampa Stomp': "Half the fish now in half the time / since those blue days died. We're running out of time & fathers, sore, artless about it" (*CP*, 247-248).

unpublished elegy for Bessie Smith, it becomes clear that the note discovered in the second stanza – "I'm sorry, Jane, you got my goat" – and the suggested progress "out of desire" cannot be read apart from his personal loss to suicide.[31]

Considering Dream Song 40 in terms of its sonic qualities, then, we might read the refrain as denoting a form of psychological haunting, as a statement of isolation that repeatedly – even involuntarily – flags a significant absence, and charts the ongoing impact of Berryman's paternal loss as both a father and a son. As already mentioned, the repeated phrase "I scared a lonely" encloses the first stanza, and while it returns expectedly at the beginning of the second, it does not recur in the third. Notably, Berryman's third repetition of the refrain – "I scared a only one thing" – is a permutation of the phrase, a disruption that corresponds directly with a blues technique, known as "'worrying' the line," in which "the repeated statement changes in meter or sound" (Feinstein, 51).[32] Here "lonely" is substituted for its near cousin, "only," and the sentence is extended as the narrator elaborates and draws out the locus of their fear, "which is me." These varied repetitions work to unsettle the reader; appealing to a pre-established blues order, they play upon expectation and at the same time defy it, by refusing to appear with any regularity. This "worrying" technique comes through in a number of subtler ways within the texture of the poem. Berryman's refrain is echoed in various end-rhymes, so that it reverberates throughout the body of the lyric, finding partners in "me," "see," and "we" of the second stanza and sounding into the third, where it finds a more gentle resonance in "feet" and "meet."[33] As Taft writes, "the constraint of rhyme in the blues is one of the fundamental facts of the lyric form" (*The Blues Lyric Formula*, 74), and sonic repetition is well-used throughout this song to build upon the narrator's sense of haunted loneliness while representing, at the same time, the repetitious nature of their daily experience.

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[31] Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1 (Folders 7-10), Folder 7, JBP.

[32] For further discussion of structural "worrying" see Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Taft refers to this technique as "staggering" (*Talkin' to Myself,* xvi).

[33] This kind of variation within a pre-established blues order is also observed in the use of triadic formulas and occasional variations of the AAB formula in its traditionally thematic sense. Such patterning is at work at the end of the first stanza: "Got a little poison, got a little gun, / I'm scared a lonely," where Berryman offers two almost repeated statements and a related answer in its third part. This formula is used again in the second stanza where the narrator resolves, "this is where I livin, where I rake / my leaves and cop my promise, this is where we / cry ourselves awake."

While Berryman uses repetition to present the persistence of his subject's grief, he also upholds blues song, as he did in Dream Song 68, as a means of artistic sublimation.[34] The final stanza reaches into new rhyming patterns as the narrator attempts to move beyond their enveloping sense of isolation and into productive sociality:

> Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
> it all the way to that bed on these feet
> where people said to meet.
> Maybe even if I see my son
> forever never, get back on the take,
> free, black and forty-one.

Such "I cant go on, I'll go on" attitudes are standard fare in the blues, as evidenced by such Spivey songs as 'Lonesome With the Blues,' where the speaker "regrets the day I'se born," as well as 'Haunted by the Blues,' in which the singer perseveres with the blues but makes sure to remind us of her hellish situation: "you know I'd rather be dead." This sentiment also makes its way into Hughes' poem, where the overheard musician "aint happy no mo'" and "wish[es] [they] had died." Thus, Berryman's world-weary singer of Dream Song 40, though they can think of no fate worse than their own, acknowledges that they may, if fortunate, reencounter their son in dream, and turns reluctantly back to their affairs. And likewise, for Berryman, the blues becomes an important part of living and moving on.

Music and the world of "anti-matter"

Berryman's second instalment of Dream Songs, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, published in 1968, is more interested in moving backward than moving on. The book takes its title from *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, an important source of keyboard music from the Elizabethan period whose second volume contains the three consecutive songs [CXCIII.] 'A Toy' (Anon), [CXCIV.], 'Giles Farnaby's Dreame'

[34] In his essay 'Colossal Departures: Figuring the Lost Father in Berryman and Plath's Poetry,' Ernest Smith also writes of the poet's attempt to "forge a reconciliation with, and finally overcome what Berryman at one point in his unpublished papers called 'the blue father'" (147).

[CXCV.], and 'His Rest' (also by Giles Farnaby) (260-261). Berryman's gesture to the English virginalist, Giles Farnaby, takes the body of work in a new direction, and signals a return to older musical forms. While dialect content is still a feature in this final chapter of Dream Songs, the musical reference becomes overwhelmingly classical, and decidedly Eurocentric. *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, which contains 298 individual pieces (one blank) by a variety of composers –including William Byrd and Thomas Tallis – was bequeathed to the University of Cambridge by Viscount Fitzwilliam in 1816. A number of theories exist surrounding the identity of the work's collector. However, the one that Berryman most likely adhered to, and which speaks most powerfully to the lyrics within, was the legend of the younger Francis Tregian, an amateur musician who copied up the collection while in prison, and during the period leading up to his death (1618). In taking his title from the virginal book Berryman was not only casting a glance back to Cambridge, where his musical interest was first properly ignited, but also making a gesture to the book's salient themes of commemoration and belatedness. The three titular virginals stand in for various significant stages in the poet's career, their triadic structure encompassing the songs' three-part formula, and their collective (sphinxlike) riddle pertaining to the tripartite structure of human progress. In *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, Berryman walks on three legs at evening as he navigates what one early reviewer of the book described as the "eternal themes of love and death."[35]

These ideas are borne out further in the *Op. posth*. sequence that opens the book, making use of a stamp that had been applied to the posthumous work of classical composers such as Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven, all of whom make an appearance across this remainder of songs. These lyrics, or compositions, as Berryman styles them, contain no musical reference themselves but are self-reflexive about the stylistic changes that begin to take hold in this later work:

> Darkened his eye, his wild smile disappeared,
> inapprehensible his studies grew,
> nourished he less & less
> his subject body with good food & rest,
> something bizarre about Henry, slowly sheared
> off, unlike you & you

[35] Damien Grant, '"Late Excellence": a review of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*.' *The Tablet*, 16 August 1969. Review clipping, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 2, Folder 16 (Reviews), JBP.

smaller & smaller, till in question stood
his eyeteeth and one block of memories
these were enough for him
implying commands from upstairs & from down,
Walt's 'orbic flex,' triads of Hegel would
incorporate, if you please,

into the know-how of the American bard
embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being,
and the younger Stephen Crane
of a powerful memory, of pain,
these stood the ancestors, relaxed & hard,
whilst Henry's parts were fleeing. (*Op. posth*. no. 1, DS 78)

In these "posthumous" lyrics, Henry stands in the presence of his personal history and poetic influences. Hegel's dialectics are suggestively musical here, gesturing to the influence of the philosopher's triadic thinking on Berryman's musical schema, while "Walt's 'orbic flex'" pertains to the fluidity of his musical cadence. The poet holds fast to these principles, while his focus becomes increasingly the frailty of the body and the nearness of death. Berryman uses these musically titled poems to imagine his life from some vantage point beyond it, and the sequence as a whole calls out, once again, to Rilke, whose *Duino Elegies* (1923) reach into the unknown and represent a similar exercise in self-estrangement. "How strange . . . no longer to live upon Earth!" writes Rilke, in the first of his elegies, ". . . . Strange":

no more to depend upon practices only just learned
nor to expect from roses – nor to expect
from any thing of exceptional wonder – interpretation
of Mankind's future. No longer to live
as we used to, our hands ever frightened. To throw
away the names we were given: toys that have broken.
Strangely – to lose our desire for things we desire.
To see all those things which once stood related
freed of connection – fluttering in space! (25)

Rilke's emphasis on the rejection of broken toys chimes with Berryman's larger principles in the latter half of the poem – such a letting go is a "[weaning] from things of our World" (25) and will move him toward the rest (indicated in the book's title) as he loses "desire for things we desire" (25). The peculiar and terminal freedom imagined in the Rilke extract is mirrored in the excitement and horror of Henry's

fleeing parts, while the "strangeness" upon which the elegy turns becomes a quality that enters increasingly into Berryman's poetry. Even if Henry is "dug up" in *Op. posth. no. 14* his language remains touched by the posthumous.

Dream Song 103 likewise muses on the type of song that Henry seeks to produce in this final chapter:

> I consider a song will be as humming-bird
> swift, down-light, missile-metal-hard, & strange
> as the world of anti-matter
> where they are wondering: does time run backward—
> which the poet thought was true; Scarlatti-supple;
> but can Henry write it?
>
> Wreckt, in deep danger, he shook once his head,
> returning to meditation. And word had sped
> all from the farthest West
> that Henry was desired: can he get free
> of the hanging menace, & all this, and go?
> He doesn't think so.
>
> Therefore he shakes and will sing no more,
> much less a song as fast as he said, as light,
> so deep, so flexing. He broods.
> He *may*, rehearsing, here of this bad year
> at the very end, in squalor, ill, outside.
> —Happy New Year, Mr Bones.

The poet's introduction of a classical figure such as Scarlatti clearly represents a new phase in Berryman's musical thinking as he begins to consider the terminus of his own poetic project. The song that Henry considers at the opening of the lyric – "swift, down-light, missile-metal-hard, & strange" – is, of course, one that characterises the style of his best verse, yet it presses further into a suggested beyond, into the world of "anti-matter." Though brooding Henry fears that he will fall short, he hopes that he "*may*, rehearsing" achieve such a style with one final push "at the very end, in squalor, ill, outside" – and perhaps even on account of his abject condition. The poem itself rehearses a variety of images that appear across Berryman's works more generally. Stanza one sounds with a clear echo of Sonnet 95 in which "the *true* lover / Soft as a flower, hummingbird-piercing, is" (*CP*, 118), though the image has been altered, and is no longer touched by love, but death. The image of "the hanging menace" is also a symbol dense with meaning in the context of Berryman's poetic

project, encompassing Henry's generalised sense of guilt, the spectre of the father and the lynched persona that appears in a number of the poet's blues and minstrel poems. In seeding these later songs with images from across the span of his work, Berryman does cause the reader to wonder whether time can run backward. Time becomes a medium for the poet to manipulate, and its malleability is epitomised by Scarlatti's musical runs. Berryman's sense that he can no longer sustain this "humming-bird pace" is expressed more assuredly in Dream Song 305, where he writes:

> I sing with infinite slowness finite pain
> I have reached into the corner of my brain
> to have it out.
> I sat by fires when I was young, & now
> I'm not I sit by fires again, although
> I do it more slowly.

As indicated in the repeated assertion of the poetic "I," the voice is unapologetically personal. "It is my impression," writes Denis Donoghue, "that in the later Songs attention to other voices has receded. Increasingly, there is one voice, doctrinaire, edgy, magisterial . . . it may mean that, as the poem progressed, Mr. Berryman found the sole indelible interest was his own emotion" ('Berryman's Long Dream,' 62-63). While Berryman's own emotions are certainly closer to the surface in these later lyrics, his use of voices does not so much tail off as find itself recalibrated. The voices that emerge in this last instalment are increasingly the poet's early models, yet even more subsumed into his own style. Here Yeats in particular is invoked as Berryman explains the direction that he intends to go, and the Irish master's late fieriness becomes a renewed model for Berryman, who is possessed of new vigor, but executes it "more slowly."

Dream Song 256 presents an instance of musical listening that is accompanied by musings on the afterlife and the character of God, a figure who appears more consistently in these later Dream Songs, and often in connection with music.

> Henry rested, possessed of many pills
> & gin & whiskey. He put up his feet
> & switched on Schubert.
> His tranquillity lasted five minutes
> for (1) all that undone all the heavy weeks
> and (2) images shook him alert.

A rainy Sunday morning, on vacation
as well as Fellowship, he could not rest:
bitterly he shook his head.
—Mr Bones, the Lord will bring us to a nation
where everybody only rest.—I confess
that notion bores me dead,

for there's no occupation there, save God,
if that and long experience of His works
has not taught me his love.
His love must be a strange thing indeed,
considering its products. No, I want rest here,
neither below nor above.

Schubert first appears here amidst Henry's arsenal of relaxation aids, but if anything, only serves to stir the poet into vivid reflection. As in Dream Song 103, the language of the blues finds its way into a poem that pertains to be of classical interest. Firstly, the friend's vision of "a nation / where everybody only rest" is reminiscent of the field hollers that formed the basis of the blues, and speaks to his friend's hopes for the afterlife. Yet Henry is not satisfied with this offer, he wants his "rest here, / neither below not above." His confession that this notion "bores" him together with his beleaguering concern over "all that undone all the heavy weeks" forms a riff on his blues-like gripes in Dream Song 14 – a lyric that also fuses the language of popular and classical culture. As such, while the music of Schubert may have stimulated such imaginings, the language of the blues continues to underlie Berryman's musical thinking. Dream Song 153 likewise expresses contempt for a God who "has wrecked this generation," and stresses a musical analogy:

A friend of Henry's contrasted God's career
with Mozart's, leaving Henry with nothing to say
but praise for a word so apt.
We suffer on, a day, a day, a day.
And never again can come, like a man slapped
news like this

It is clear that Henry will not find the "rest" he had hoped for in Dream Song 256, since his friends – "Ted, then Richard, Randall, and now Delmore" – are picked off one day at a time. In fact Mozart figures as the antithesis of God, as a man who knows his calling and executes it properly – in spite of the bumbling nature that Berryman had earlier ascribed to him in 'A Professor's Song' (*The Dispossessed*). In one of his

numerous elegies for Delmore Schwartz, Berryman asserts the dignity of his friend in connection with Mozart by including them in a lineup together:

> His sad ghost must aspire
> free of my love to its own post, that ghost,
> among its fellows, Mozart's Bach's Delmore's
> free of its careful body (DS 157)

In these later lyrics it is the artists that are set against God and they who bear the brunt of God's ineptitude. Dream Song 174, which takes the title *Kyrie Eleison* (a typically mournful section in any musical mass) ventures further into an exploration of the poet's solitude:

> [. . .] In the garden I am alone
> among the animals. There is a shrill music
> of which the less said the better.
> Cold dough: is that not the one thing that might matter?
> That, and the frightful fact that I am alone
> while he sorts out the bloody saints.

Into the poet's isolated landscape swarms a torturous music (or white noise) that he cannot help but associate with the absence of God and others. Though the *Kyrie* presents itself as an item of worship, the tone of the work is casually defiant, and becomes, in these final passages, reminiscent of the poet's blues idiom.

As is the case in the blues lyrics, musician and poet can be seen to share many of the same struggles and objectives, yet these classically-oriented poems are differently inflected, as becomes clear in Dream Song 258:

> Scarlatti spurts his wit across my brain,
> so too does *Figaro*: so much for art
> after the centuries yes
> who had for all their pains above all pain
> & who brought to their work a broken heart
> but not as bad as Schubert's:
>
> that went beyond the possible: that was like a man
> dragged by his balls, singing aloud 'O yes'
> while to his anguisht glance
> the architecture differs: he's getting on,
> the tops of buildings change, like a mad dance,
> the Piazza Navona

recovers its calm after he went through,
the fountain went on splashing, all was the same
after his agony,
abandoned cats had what to say to you,
lovers performed their glory & its shame:
Henry put his foot down: free.

The "wit" or affinity that Berryman feels as he listens to Scarlatti, Mozart, and Schubert is closely aligned with the ways in which their art represents human suffering, and in the case of Schubert with the kind of brokenness that is perspective-altering. The lyric moves swiftly from exploration of musical composition to exploration of musical persona and his manic dance towards death. Berryman's depiction is fantastical but serves to highlight the intensity of Schubert's terminal experience – "to his anguisht glance / the architecture differs" – and the indifference of the surrounding geography to his grief. Berryman's fixation here is with artists at the end of their career and the ways that they respond to their own physical limitations and proximity to death. In putting "his foot down" at the end of the lyric Henry is not only identifying with the composer (who might put his foot down on the pedal), but making an imagined final stand against earthly indignities. On one draft of the poem Berryman marked it out as "a terrible one," drawing particular attention to the gravity of the content within.[36]

Dream Song 204 examines further the pitch and tempo of some prototypical late compositions:

Henry, weak at keyboard music, leanèd on
the slow movement of Schubert's Sonata in A
& the mysterious final soundings
of Beethoven's 109-10-11 & the Diabelli Variations
You go by the rules but there the rules don't matter
is what I've been trying to say.

Huddled, from their recesses, the goblins spring
(I'm playing it as softly as I can)
while the sound goes roaring.
If I scream, who would hear me? Rilke, come on strong
& forget our rôles, we'll play the Housman man
unless, of course, all this is boring.

Tides bring the bodies back sometimes, & not.

[36] His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 2, Folder 15, JBP.

> The bodies of the self-drowned out there wait,
> wait, & the widows wait,
> my gramophone is the most powerful in the country,
> I am trying, trying, to solve the andante
> but the ghost is off before me.

The musical works that appear here do so as an example of what the protagonist hopes to achieve. Weak at keyboard music, Henry has only poetic language at his disposal, yet he demonstrates the flexibility of the medium by adding accents that give his words appropriate force. Berryman's recourse to both Rilke and Housman, and his insistence on the forgetting of "rôles" – another meaningfully accented word – has similarly to do with his musical aspirations, both of these poetic models helping guide the poet into a realm in which words might take on a more musical meaning. Housman, whose "double genius" is the subject of the next two songs (DS 205 and DS 206), was also a writer of cycles and the folk-like simplicity of his work, particularly in *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) inspired a number of composers such as Vaughn Williams and Ivor Gurney to set his lyrics to music. Rilke's presence has already been seen to have musical currency in the 'The Nervous Songs' and continues as an archetype for Berryman's mournful Dream Songs, as he makes clear in Dream Song 3: "Rilke was a *jerk* / I admit his griefs & music" (DS 3). Berryman may have considered Rilke a dishonorable character, but he provided the impetus to launch Berryman into his most musically engaged project. Berryman's decision to give the word "rôle" in French calls to mind another significant source for his musical poetry: the project of the symbolists. The mystifying language of writers such as Mallarmé and Baudelaire becomes evermore pertinent as the poet strains towards a linguistic expression of artistic lateness – or what he describes, in an elegy for William Carlos Williams, as "the mysterious late excellence which is the crown / of our trials & our last bride" (DS 324).

Berryman's insistence that he's playing it as softly as he can, "while the sound goes roaring" not only suggests the power of his gramophone but the fact that the music may have more emotional volume than decibels. In the second stanza the music ushers hidden goblins from the eaves, and in the final it brings back bodies. These bodies, of course, have voluble association with the poet's father, who not for the first time has emerged in connection with the image of the drowned man. There is an implicit connection made here between the waves of sound emanating from the

"powerful" gramophone and the waves that bring back lost ones. Taking all of this into account, the poet's attempt to solve the andante at the close of the poem is obviously more than literal. If this musical "andante" – the present participle of the Latin verb *andare*, to go or go about – suggests the poet's efforts to maintain a steady daily rhythm, it is implied that this project is ultimately doomed to failure by Henry's familiars.

Berryman's later Dream Songs are haunted, as he writes in Dream Song 269, by "Acres of spirits every single day / [which] shook headed Henry toward his friendly grave." This Dream Song similarly explores the tide theme, which now works to efface manically productive Henry:

> But after one square mile
> less he shook, more he labored, with each Wave
> further he vanished, while the great sky grew grey

In Dream Song 260 Henry is similarly rocked by "Tides of dreadful creation" in the sight of his lucid project "beyond." He is buoyed "loose to the world, taught with his vision as it has to be." There is a sublime quality to these lyrics that is musically conceived. The close of Dream Song 260 sees Henry's "Flags lift" as "strange chords lift to a climax" – the same language used in connection with the imagined Bessie Smith concert of Dream Song 68, which responded to the singer's death. Likewise, in Dream Song 269, returning to the theme of strangeness, the poet asserts:

> High weird the hymns now in his final days,
> items he sought of what was once called praise
> which now spits & shrieks,
> they say Henry's love is well beyond Henry
> & advise the poor man back into the tree
> giving up spirits & steaks.

Henry's musical return to the tree returns the cycle to its very beginning in which the poet was found on the hard land. Such a return would be a transcendent one, to "an area," as he phrases it in Dream Song 352, "where the soul not talks but sings." In spite of the presence of death however, Henry sings "on like a harmful bird."

During his time in Ireland (1966-67) Berryman entered a phase of immense productivity, writing multiple songs a day as he tried to find a way to close the poem that seemed interminable. Many of the lyrics from this period are marked with

comments such as "The last One (for the multi-100th time)"[37] and suggest that the terminus of the project was in many ways imagined as the terminus for the poet himself. Dream Song 331, written in Ballsbridge, receives the note: "majestic," the "last one of Sunday."[38]

> This is the third. What have I more to say
> except that I hope that in my dying hour
> nobody will be ashamed of me:
> may I not be scared then of that final void
> into which I lapse, leaving all my power
> & memory behind me.
>
> There's a lot of hair in Ireland, much of it red.
> An ultimate segment of Irishmen are dead.
> Climb over the tombs
> to find the gay living at your feet, the intellectual girl
> with good legs & fingers at her brow, listening to a whirl
> of talk from her companions:
>
> Yeats listened once, he found it did him good,
> he died in full stride, a good way to go,
> making them wonder what's missing,
> a strangeness in the final notes, never to be resolved,
> Beethoven's, Goya's: you had better go to the Prado
> downstairs, to see on what I am insisting.

As is made clear on the manuscript, the poet had completed a number of poems on this particular Sunday, and the suggestion that "This is the third" could easily be an expression of his exhausted productivity. Yet the enigmatic statement possesses a grandeur, or majesty, that gestures beyond the possible trio of songs that may have been completed that day. The third announced by this Dream Song is the final phase of the poet's creative life. Of course, the number three has undoubted significance for Berryman, whose songs are structured in line with this triadic formula. What's more, returning to Berryman's consideration of late works in Dream Song 204, particularly Schubert's Sonata in A, it becomes clear that "the third" that figures here is also significant of "the third" and final stage of the sonata form. This is a phase of "recapitulation," of productive negativity – "What have I more to say" – that follows the "exposition" and "development." It is this final phase in which so many of the

[37] Note on Dream Song 341, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 5, JBP.
[38] His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 5, JBP.

poet's major themes and influences are present, though differently organised. The movement of Dream Song 331 is itself loosely emblematic of the sonata form in its movement from the exposition of the first stanza, where the themes are established, to the unusual development of the second, where the poet views his being within a mythic Irish context, and finally into the third, where he turns back to a more focused contemplation of his original idea: lateness. In this final third, the poet returns to his original premise, finding examples of artists and composers who "died in full stride." Once again it is "strangeness" that emerges as the most enduring quality. This is a quality that pervades Berryman's poem, particularly in its final third, and it intensifies further in the works that follow *The Dream Songs*. The figure of Beethoven, in particular, is one that recurs as Berryman moves into a deeper sense of alienation and lateness in his final two collections.

On 29 February 1968 Berryman composed Dream Song 382, with the appended note: "I hope this <u>really</u> is the last one."[39] The lyric imagines Henry's own funeral as the work draws to a close:

> At Henry's bier let some thing fall out well:
> enter there none who somewhat has to sell,
> the music ancient & gradual,
> the voices solemn but the grief subdued,
> no hairy jokes but everybody's mood
> subdued, subdued,
>
> until the Dancer comes, in a short short dress
> Hair black & long & loose, dark dark glasses,
> uptilted face,
> pallor & strangeness, the music changes
> to 'Give!' & 'Ow!' and how! the music changes,
> she kicks a backward limb
>
> on tiptoe, pirouettes, & she is free
> to the knocking music, sails, dips, & suddenly
> returns to the terrible gay
> occasion hopeless & mad, she weaves, it's hell,
> she flings to her head a leg, bobs, all is well,
> she dances Henry away.

The music of the first stanza, "ancient & gradual" is the traditional kind, and forms a fitting backdrop to the "voices solemn" with their "mood / subdued." Yet there is

[39] His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 2, JBP.

another kind of music, or even method, that emerges here in connection with Henry's send-off. With the arrival of the Dancer, unconventionally clad in "a short short dress," the language becomes liquid and sensual. Henry imagines her "hair black & long & loose," her "dark dark glasses" and "uptilted face." Yet while the Dancer herself might possess a certain solemnity, her understanding of the appropriate funeral rites differs drastically from those established in the first stanza. Still, her announcement is not altogether a surprise. Henry's article is a giveaway; this is not "a dancer" but "the Dancer," a presence that must be familiar, if not to the collective, then at least to Henry. It soon becomes clear that the whole structure of the poem, a breathless run-on sentence, is purpose-built for the Dancer's performance. She needs no permission to hijack Henry's funeral, since she has already been given a stage. The internal rhyme between "strangeness" and "changes," meanwhile, suggests the type of change that is underway regarding Henry himself. Here it is music and dance that become the agents of change. The Dancer's specially choreographed performance is ecstatic and at times violent. Her "'Give!' & 'Ow!'" sound as extemporised blues shouts, while Henry's own (rhymed) exclamation of "how! the music changes" suggests his total surprise yet willing participation in the act. The whole performance stands somewhere between Noh theatre and Jazz dance, and the closing stanza is full of joy and anguish as the Dancer becomes the midwife to Henry's exit; then "all is well, / she dances Henry away."

Although *The Dream Songs* persists three songs further, Dream Song 382, which the poet had hoped would be the last one, meaningfully demonstrates the significance and variety of music within the larger work. In this long poem Henry's entrance and exit are both musically conceived, the hope that something will "fall out well" at Henry's bier acting as a counterstatement to his complaint, at the beginning of the work, that after the first departure "nothing fell out as it might or ought" (DS 1). At Henry's imagined funeral events unfold just as they ought to – in the presence of music.

Chapter 4. Musical Memory in *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*

After Berryman had published the final and fullest incarnation of his long poem, *The Dream Songs* in 1969 there must have seemed almost nowhere to go. His next two volumes, *Love & Fame*, published in 1970, and the posthumous *Delusions, Etc.*, which went to print in 1972, reveal a number of developments in form and theme, but also represent, in various ways, a preoccupation with memory. In *Love & Fame* this takes the form of earlier experiences returned to the poet "down deep age" ('Cadenza on Garnette', *CP*, 169) and his efforts to make his peace with these memories, while in *Delusions, Etc*. these memories are also shaped by the experience of other artists (Emily Dickinson, Beethoven, and Dylan Thomas to name a few) as Berryman moves to a deeper consideration of his own legacy, and the memories that he'll leave behind.

In both works, music becomes central to the poet's explorations of memory, and they reflect and double back on styles and forms that were operative within his earlier work. Yet Berryman's last two collections also share a number of structural similarities that set them apart from his other major projects. When Berryman composed 'Her & It,' on 4 February 1970, he was composing his "first lyric, almost, in over 20 years,"[1] and the unrhymed quatrains were to become a comfortable standard for the poet as he progressed through the ideas that lay ahead of him; both collections rely heavily on this form. These books also drop the mask of Henry that had been used so artfully throughout the main body of Berryman's poetry for the last twenty or so years. Though it is important to note that the poet did not see himself as "writing an autobiography in verse," as he is careful to remind us in 'Message' (*Love & Fame, CP,* 200). Experience is always mediated by the partial story of the text; "It's not my life," urged Berryman, "That's occluded and lost" (qtd. in Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, 67).

While Berryman often made bold (and even posturing) claims pertaining to the novelty of these two works – in one letter to Robert Giroux he claimed that *Love & Fame* was "one of the most beautiful, original & powerful works for the age" – he

[1] 'Some Readings of "Her & It,"' 19 Nov 1970, Love & Fame, Box 4, Folder 1, JBP.

was often perplexed by the value of these poems in the light of his earlier projects.[2] Indeed, critical opinions of the work tend to support the poet's fears. "What we do know, of course, is that his final books, whatever their virtues (and these, particularly in the case of *Love & Fame,* are considerable), represent a falling off from his strongest work," writes Conarroe, who urges us, at the same time, not to "regret their existence, however disappointed as we may be that they are not more consistently fine" (5). Conarroe is right to suggest that these works are not Berryman's finest, yet they contain much more of merit than is commonly expressed, and the poems in which Berryman writes about music are certainly some of the strongest.

This chapter begins by assessing the way in which music directs the course of *Love & Fame* – as Berryman reaches back into his past and considers its value and resonance in the present space-time – before moving into a close reading of 'Beethoven Triumphant,' a work that brings to light some of the most prescient (and unifying) concerns of *Delusions, Etc.* regarding the themes of legacy and belatedness.

Love & Fame: a life in music

Love & Fame takes place across a wide span of time and in various locations. Parts One and Two recount "the six-year span from the ages of eighteen to twenty-four," writes Haffenden, "covering the period of his education at Columbia College, New York, and Clare College, Cambridge" (*Critical Commentary,* 67). In the final two, Berryman returns to the contemporary moment, in which he finds himself in and out of hospital where he was undergoing treatment for alcoholism. Commenting on the book's structure in an Afterword (to the 1971 Faber edition),[3] Berryman made the comment that the four sections of the poem criticise "backward the preceding, until Part IV wipes out altogether all earlier presentations of 'love' and 'fame' of the ironic title" (*Love & Fame,* 95). There is some disagreement regarding the degree to which this self-effacing organisation was actually Berryman's intention from the outset. In his *Critical Commentary,* John Haffenden has suggested that critics of the work often adhere too slavishly to Berryman's retroactive reading, in which he "tries to persuade both himself and his audience that the teleological development of the plot was

[2] John Berryman to Robert Giroux, 25 March 1970, Love & Fame, Folder 4, Box 1, JBP.
[3] or "Scholia" to the Second Edition.

predetermined, and not a matter of hindsight" (76).[4] However, the musical references that appear throughout the book do generally support Berryman's self-imposed reading (whether it was an afterthought or not), moving from the limerick-like opening – "I fell in love with a girl. / O and a Gash" – into the more socially engaged ballads of Part Three, before ending with the moving hymnal of *Eleven Addresses to the Lord*.[5] It is in these final two sections, as Philip Coleman writes, that Berryman "concentrates" or begins to concentrate "his energies on providing the basis for a more balanced and ethically responsible paradigm for human existence" ('*Love & Fame* and the Self in Society,' 235). Here music becomes a tool for evaluating how the poet might exist in the presence of traumatic memory and ultimately find his purpose in God.

Reflecting on *Love & Fame* as he sat in hospital in November 1970, Berryman made a note on his (earlier) intentions for the collection: "Memory failing, clutching at frantic data of life-achievement, obsessed with a vanishing past of happiness in his present loneliness and age, he moves us after all. Maybe we too, in the end . . ."[6] Though this analysis has been read backwards onto the collection, it aptly summarises Berryman's musical engagement throughout the book, speaking to music's special powers of evocation, and of its capacity to touch the reader and the poet.

Love & Fame represents Berryman's journey into music (both blues and classical), and contains an amalgam of musical recollections and analogies as eclectic and colourful as the poet's personal experience. The opening sections recall a number of concerts that Berryman attended as an undergraduate at Columbia and suggest how these encounters with music came to shape his thinking as a poet. 'Cadenza on Garnett' (*CP*, 169), the second poem in the collection, recalls, for example, a musical

[4] Of course the "Afterword" existed as early as November 1970, though in its earliest phase it was simply a list of "Some Readings of 'Her & It,'" which the poet made while in hospital, and still lacked this crucial statement of structural intention. "Some Readings of 'Her & It,'" 19 Nov 1970, Love & Fame, Box 4, Folder 1, JBP.
The note also exists in type under the later title "~~Forword to second printing~~" on which it receives the date, 25 January 1971. These notes appear as "Afterword" in the FF edition and as "Scholia to Second Edition" in the FSG edition published over a year later.
It is important to note that "[a]lthough the FSG edition, revised, of *L & F* was published a year after the FF edition, Berryman actually made his last revisions for FF. He revised the FSG edition in January 1971 and the FF edition in March and June of 1971. The FF page proofs are at the Columbia University Libraries" (Thornbury, Appendices to *John Berryman Collected Poems: 1937-1971*, 315).
[5] These were also added after the completion of the first type script in March 1970.
[6] Ibid.

experience that the poet shared with a young paramour. "Took Garnette to the cathedral," he writes in his diary entry for 20 January 1934, "listened to the wonderful organ in a little chapel + loved each other hugely."[7] It is these kinds of memories to which Berryman clings in the dark night of his soul. The cadenza of the title suggests a meeting of passions (musical and sexual) such as that seen in *Berryman's Sonnets*, but also represents a flourishing of memory "down deep age" – the cadenza itself traditionally occurring at the close of a concerto. Indeed, musical allusion across the first two Parts of *Love & Fame*, which both deal with the poet's youth, operate in this bifurcated way, possessing one meaning for the developing poet of the 1930s and another superimposed meaning for the aging Berryman.

The poet takes great pains to retrace his early musical interests and engagements in *Love & Fame*, and at least in the first part of the collection these interests are felt to mark him as distinct from his fellow students. 'In & Out' recalls the "Niceties of symbolism & identification. The verve I flooded toward in *Don Giovanni*" while relating how the poet "gave up crew and track of Freshman Spring" for the sake of music and poetry – "I was watching Corbière doomed," recalls Berryman (*CP*, 182). Corbière, of course, also features in the opening epigraph for the book, which is dedicated "To the memory of the suffering lover & young Breton master who called himself 'Tristan Corbière' (I wish I versed with his bite)." This dedication itself draws attention to the central notion of identity and stylisation that preoccupies Berryman in 'In & Out' and so persistently through the first two parts of the book. Music and symbolism, then, are what the poet recalls himself as having chosen in the place of normal college activities, two fundamental points of departure in his development as a poet.

Like 'In & Out,' 'Nowhere' uses music to represent the poet's sense of discomfort amongst his perceived group of peers, this time in terms of his blues interest.

> More comfortable at the Apollo among blacks
> than in Hartley Hall where I hung out.
> A one named Brooks Johnson, with it in for Negroes,
> I told one noon I'd some coon blood myself
>
> and he spread the word wide while the campus laughed.
> Magical mourning blues,

[7] Diaries 1931-1957 (Incomplete), Diary I, Old boxes I-III, JBP.

> Victoria, Bessie, Teagarden. Pine-top Smith
> the sightless passionate constructor. (*CP*, 180-181)

If *Love & Fame* retraces the development of Berryman's musical interests and ideas, then it is hardly a surprise that the blues returns as a significant feature, even if the language is untouched by the dialect that earlier pervades it. In *John Berryman and the Thirties: A Memoir*, Ernest Halliday recalls attending musical concerts with Berryman during his time at Columbia, though he remembers the Apollo as a place for burlesque and the Savoy – at Lenox Avenue and 140th Street – as the kind of venue described in 'Nowhere.' "Though its clientele was predominantly black," writes Halliday, The Savoy, a

> grand emporium of jazz and dance did not discourage visitors from the paler world below 125th street, and we found it a lively and exciting place to go. The big bands that habitually played there were always top notch – Chick Webb, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Jimmy Lunceford – and some of the vocalists had names that would soon become famous, like Ella Fitzerald and Billie Holiday. At our college dances, not yet transformed by what white band leaders such as Benny Goodman would learn while playing with black musicians, the prevalent mode was still that of Guy Lombardo and his imitators: smooth saccharine, dum-de-dum music to which we danced cheek-to-cheek, an occasional dip or twirl supplying most of the meager variety at our command. At the Savoy it was another story: the sheer musical impact of the swinging antiphonal arrangements just about knocked us out. We listened with joyful astonishment, and we watched the same way as handsome black couples danced in a syncopated choreography no less inventive than the music itself. (19)

Like Berryman, Halliday remembers their time at Columbia as something of a musical education, yet the type of music that they experienced at the Savoy was not the same as that enjoyed by many of their scoffing, imbecile classmates. It seems worth pointing out that the blues figures mentioned in Halliday's account are not the same as those that appear in Berryman's poem. In fact, the musical personalities named in 'Nowhere' are those that Berryman listened to on record – he never saw them perform. It was not until the 1940s, when Berryman began a correspondence with B. H. Haggin, that the poet, according to Eileen Simpson, actually began listening to artists such as Smith and Spivey in any concentrated way. As such, their appearance in the poem testifies to the overlaying of later memories, while operating, at the same time, as a nod toward *The Dream Songs*, in which these characters are protagonists. With this embellished memory, then, Berryman was responding directly

to anyone who would detract from *The Dream Songs* on account of their handling of race relations. If the Songs were less than entirely clear on this subject, Berryman's later voice is to the point, and makes his willed identification explicit. The poem likewise suggests how the young poet learned to define himself through music as one of the oppressed, a tactic, as we have seen, that he would deploy again and again from 'The Nervous Songs' onwards.

As the poet moves across the water in Part Two of *Love & Fame* he begins to find a larger number of companions sympathetic to his musical and artistic tastes, and the musical experiences detailed are more often of excited identification than dispossession. 'First Night at Sea' recalls the poet's fortuitous encounter with Pierre Donga, a half-Basque half-Spanish political journalist, onboard the ocean liner *Britannic* bound for England. The poet was on his way to Cambridge where he would take up a Kellett Fellowship. For Berryman, Donga was a rare hero possessed of skills in almost all of the areas that most interested the poet. In 'First Night at Sea' Berryman is particularly overawed by Donga's proficiency in poetic translation – "He translates Villon. Villon!" – as well as his beautiful singing voice: "He sings me a Basque folk-song, his father was Basque" (*CP*, 190). Berryman also remarks on Donga's stint as a singer for "a night-club in Berlin" where he got "50 sexual offers a week" and his work with "Memel, the Belgian composer" whom he accompanied "to the Congo to collect tribal tunes" (*CP*, 190). Donga, with his diverse set of skills and experiences, was clearly an aspirational figure for the poet, who inadvertently associates his sex appeal with a musical prowess. As Berryman looks back at a time in which he was first beginning to understand himself as an artist, Donga stands as a perfect model for the type of Renaissance man the poet hoped he would become. Part of his admiration surely lay in what he had in common with the journalist, with whom he could "trade quotations of Lorca's ballads," and partly his seniority – "I listened with three ears," recalls Berryman, who was happy to be the student in the relationship (*CP*, 190). Donga is one of the first figures that Berryman idolised on account of their musical aptitude, though certainly not the last. During the period that these early sections recall, Berryman was open to receiving an education. As he acknowledges in 'Away,' the previous poem (and the first of Part Two), the poet knew that he had not quite "got the hang of the stuff yet" but was convinced that he "swamp[ed] with possibility" (*CP*, 189). As he moved across the water he recalls

setting a pure intention for his writing: "to do it with simple work & with my ear" (*CP*, 189).

Still, at the age of twenty-three the poet was by no means a musical expert; "I continue to shy away from music," he wrote in an unpublished letter to his mother, dated 27 February 1937, "since years are short enough for one art, I think it better to keep clear."[8] When he arrived at Cambridge, his plan had been to spend the year delving deeper into the works of Shakespeare and Yeats, though soon he found himself mixed up almost equally in musical matters. "[P]ractice interferes with theory," confessed Berryman, "Brian Boydell I have seen often, which of course operates to interest me in music."[9] Brian Boydell was an Irish student of Natural Science and a composer in the making. Berryman's Cambridge diaries suggest regular meetings between the two young scholars, and the poem 'Friendless,' which appears later on in Part Two of *Love & Fame*, presents in miniature some of the poet's most meaningful intellectual exchanges at the University, and lessons to which music was central. In 'Friendless,' music takes on a new symbolic valency for the poet, while also lifting him out of isolation.

> Friendless in Clare, except Brian Boydell
> a Dubliner with no hair
> an expressive speaking voice
> who introduced me to the music of Peter Warlock
>
> who had just knocked himself off, fearing the return
> of his other personality, Philip Heseltine.
> Brian used to play *The Curlew* with the lights out,
> voice of a lost soul moving.
>
> These men don't know our poets.
> I'm asked to read; I read Wallace Stevens & Hart Crane
> In Sidney Sussex & Cat's.
> The worthy young gentlemen are baffled. I explain,
>
> but the idiom is too much for them.
> The Dilettante Society here in Clare
> asked me to lecture to them on Yeats
> & misspelt his name on the invitations.
>
> Black hours over an unclean line.

[8] John Berryman to Mrs. J A Berryman, 23 February 1937, Correspondence, 1937, Folder 1, 1937–2, 1937, JBP.
[9] Ibid.

Fear. Of failure, or, worse, *insignificance.*
Solitudes, sometimes, of an alien country
no book after all will ever read me into.

I gorge on Peek Freans & brood.
I don't do a damned thing but read & write.
I wish I were back in New York!
I feel old, yet I don't understand. (*CP*, 193-194)

Friendship is found in creative exchange; and influence is seen to flow in a number of directions. The mention of the Dilettante Society bolsters a sense of the inter-disciplinary mingling that went on in Cambridge at this time, and the poem returns to a particularly potent event that occurred on 22 February 1937. Boydell's schedule for the month marks that evening as the night of "The Curlew Party."[10] Berryman's notes provide a fuller version of events:

> Monday evening we discussed physiological and spiritual theories of life and of death [. . .] Then [Brian] played and sang 'Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland,' which he has set, superbly I think. His voice is very fine; he reads poetry, too; better than anyone I have ever heard. He did also several songs from the dance plays to Dulac's music. Then, all lights out (absolutely, I am certain, the only way to hear music) he played the five records of Peter Warlock's 'The Curlew,' a melancholy most strange series of settings for four of Yeats' early poems, 'O curlew, cry no more in the air,' 'Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,' 'The Withering of the Boughs' and last that remarkable 'I wander by the edge of this desolate lake.'[11]

At the end of the evening, Boydell suggested that he and Berryman collaborate on a Cradle Song, Berryman agreeing "Without any thought of doing so."[12] However, when he returned home, still under Warlock's influence, Berryman found himself composing one, almost automatically.

Let you now sleep, my dear.
After the time of play
Your head is drowsy and far away
And all is darkness here.
Let you now sleep.

[10] Ms 11128/3/85 (1), Brian Boydell Papers, Manuscripts & Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin.
[11] John Berryman to Mrs. J A Berryman, 23 February 1937, Correspondence, 1937, Folder 1, 1937–2, 1937, JBP.
[12] Ibid.

> Let you now sleep, and where
> Your cradle is let white
> Fabulous angles watch tonight
> Until the dawn come clear.
> Let you now sleep.[13]

Berryman's lyrics bear close resemblance to John Philip's 'Cradle Song,' set to music by Peter Warlock in 1927. "It has slight literary merit," wrote Berryman, "though I think the refrain has some distinction […] Brian was delighted, says it will set perfectly. I am, obviously, very pleased with myself and very anxious to hear the setting."[14] The lyric was set within a few weeks and with a style that echoed Warlock's lilt and chromaticism.

"The Curlew Party" was a celebration of poetry and music, then, at which Boydell had offered up Warlock's mystical work at the intersection of their creative interests. And when Berryman did in fact meet Yeats at the Athenaeum a few months later (in April 1937), their talk was of the Irish poet's quarrelsome collaboration with Warlock, and his more fruitful one with dancer and choreographer, Ninette de Valois (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 91). Yet it was more than simply the connection with Yeats that gave rise to Berryman's enthusiasm; the music and personality of the composer struck an intimate psychic chord. "Warlock was an unusual man," wrote Berryman,

> his history sounds very like Hart Crane's; his real name was Philip Hazeltine [sic], a mild conscientious, sad man; but in adopting 'Peter Warlock' he assumed a distinct personality, that of a blustering, mad, amorous Elizabethan. His two musical styles are dissimilar, that of Warlock is accomplished, easy, brilliantly forceful, that of Hazeltine labored, difficult, infinitely sad (The Curlew is by Hazeltine). His dramatic suicide several years ago at about thirty was caused [. . .] by his realisation that Hazeltine would return and take possession from time to time throughout his lifetime. 'The Curlew' is beautiful and utterly despairing, the most desolate art I know.[15]

There is an evocation of the Yeatsian mask here; and it is hardly surprising that Berryman felt some personal affinity with the amorous and despairing figure(s) of Heseltine/Warlock. As Kevin Barry points out in an article for the *Cambridge Review*,

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

"the life of that double personality, Peter Warlock/Philip Heseltine, has numerous features in common with Berryman's own life – both held two surnames, Berryman's dead father's name being Smith; both projected alter-personalities to do battle with the world; accredited their beards with a quiet inscrutable power; both drank heavily [. . .]; both committed suicide" (148). "The Curlew Party," which was prefaced by a conversation on death and the beyond, and profiled the occult figures of Yeats and Warlock, was filled with such an atmosphere of mysterious influence, replete with Doppelgänger and doublings.

Returning, in 1970, to the music of Warlock, Berryman was clearly in search of a parallel for his contemporary sense of alienation, and re-inhabiting his twenty-three-year-old self, Berryman found himself accessing, once again, "Solitudes, sometimes, of an alien country, / no book after all will ever read me into." There is a strong suggestion of time travel here, the "alien country" that the poet muses on being significant of the place of death. Indeed, returning to Dream Song 79, one of Berryman's *Op. posth.* lyrics, the personality of "warlock" is imagined as a constituent part of Henry as he flares "out of history" in an occult-like spectacle.

> Whence flew the litter whereon he was laid?
> Of what heroic stuff was warlock Henry made?
> and questions of that sort
> perplexed the bulging cosmos,
> O in short was sandalwood in good supply when he
> flared out of history

It was "From Warlock and from Boydell at Clare College," suggests Kevin Barry, that "Berryman derived his interest in Elizabethan music. The interest was to continue, and provides an eloquent connection of cradle song with dream song. For from three pieces, in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, by the Elizabethan composer Giles Farnaby – *His Toye, His Dreame, His Reste* – Berryman took the title for the greatest of his works."[16] It is clear that the memory of 'The Curlew Party' hovered unshakably over Berryman, and in 'Friendless' the "voice of a lost soul moving" (*CP*, 194) reaches through time to touch the aging Berryman. In fact, Berryman's suggestion, in the final quatrain, that the young poet was subject to undue feelings of senility – "I feel old, yet I don't understand" (*CP*, 194) – suggests that the experience of the aging poet may

[16] Ibid.

have been somehow proleptically available to the young man in the poem. Thus music has the function not only of anchoring the poet in the past, but of projecting him forward – Warlock, in particular, providing him a lens through which to consider the possibility of movement between different states and dimensions.

When Berryman finally returns, in Part Three of *Love & Fame,* to the contemporary moment, memory continues to encroach upon the present in musical and macabre ways, particularly in the early poems of the section. 'Despair' looks at the ways in which the traumatic past can reverberate or become amplified in the present and uses echoes from *The Dream Songs* in support of this idea. Like Dream Song 28, in which the poet appears the victim of extreme sensory and physical deprivation – "There seems to be to eat / nothing. I am unusually tired. / I'm alone too." – 'Despair' occupies a bleak and compromised psychic landscape:

> It seems to be DARK all the time.
> I have difficulty walking.
> I can remember what to say to my seminar
> but I don't know I want to.
>
> I said in a Song once: I am unusually tired.
> I repeat that & increase it.
> I'm vomiting.
> I broke down today in the slow movement of K. 365.
>
> I certainly don't think I'll last much longer.
> I wrote: 'there may be horribles.'
> I increase that.
> (I think she took her little breasts away.) (*CP*, 207-208)

While Dream Song 28 closes with a defiant retort – "If I had to do the whole thing over again / I wouldn't" – 'Despair' replays, like a broken record, the earlier trauma, and increases it. Berryman's instruction of "I increase it" functions much like a musical direction, and through its repetitions the poem enacts a dialogue with the past, drawing upon Dream Song 28 by way of comparison and out of pure fatigue. The epanaphora across these opening passages suggests the poet's consciousness as a kind of echo chamber in which the present is haunted by the refrains of the past. It is only music that is able to penetrate and call out to the poet's despair. Berryman's breakdown during the slow movement of Mozart's K. 365. enhances the sense of temporal simultaneity already suggested by the lyric's engagement with Dream Song

28. In this particular work, a Concerto for two pianos in E-flat major, the two grand instruments are placed across from each other in the orchestra, creating an unlikely doubling effect, and bringing the two usually singular orchestral protagonists into conversation. The "slow movement" that Berryman refers to is the middle movement, in which, as Alfred Einstein writes in *Mozart, His Character, His Work* (a book that was actually among Berryman's personal collection), there is a "brilliant contest between the two players" (295). Thus, while K. 365, with its major key and lively rhythm, may seem an unlikely emotional trigger for the poet in 'Despair,' it is the uncanny doubling of pianos particular to this concerto that moves the poet most powerfully and reflects his sense of disjunction in time.

This sense of conflict – in which two temporalities operate simultaneously – is borne out further as Berryman strives to entertain positive thoughts to drive out his haunted reflections – "I am in love with my excellent baby" – yet his glimmer of "HOPE" "Crackles! In darkness" and disappears as the poet is once again sucked back into the vacuum of the past: "Lost arts. / Vanishings" (*CP*, 208). These historical losses are given shape in the final movement of the poem as Berryman seeks to encounter his spectres:

> Walt! We're downstairs,
> even you don't comfort me
> but I join your risk my dear friend & go with you.
> There are no matches
>
> Utter, His Father, one word (*CP*, 208)

Whitman appears here as a poetic father figure and musical coconspirator with whom there is no musical contest. Yet Berryman is also in the presence of another, less benign paternal ghost. The broken-off utterance of "the Father," which appears as an afterthought, and hardly provides a satisfactory conclusion to the poem, could more easily be attributed to John Allyn Smith, who now appears in painful dialogue with his despairing son. Mozart himself was thought to have had an unhappy relationship with his father, who was a forceful influence, and whose marks are said to appear on the autograph score of this concerto. In 'Despair' Berryman makes the contesting pianos of K. 365 speak powerfully to all of these father-son relationships.

Within a few months of having composed 'Despair,' Berryman became so agitated that he had to be admitted to Abbott hospital on 17 March 1970 – he stayed

there for three days. "It was Dr Mayberg's opinion," notes Haffenden, "that separations from loved objects were the key to his constant and chronic depression" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 364). It is in the poems relating to Abbott that the poet begins to redirect his attention toward the suffering of others, finding a way out of the crippling interiority witnessed in 'Despair' and into what Coleman describes as an "acute awareness [. . .] of the difficulties and responsibilities faced by the self in society" ('*Love & Fame* and the Self in Society,' 228). Such cognisance, though not ever-present in *Love & Fame*, certainly comes to the fore in the latter half of Part Two, and particularly in Berryman's exploitation of the ballad form. During this period of personal and formal rediscovery, the poet took a particular interest in this traditional and musical form, composing two individual ballads – 'Death Ballad' and 'The Home Ballad' – within a short space of time. 'Death Ballad,' writes Haffenden, "expresses painful witness to the spectacle of Tyson and Jo, who were 'United in their feel of worthlessness / & rage,' and ends with the sympathetic consideration that one way to save oneself is to care for others, as Berryman himself was doing" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 363). Berryman was particularly pleased with this development, as he highlights in an interview with Martin Berg that was later published in the University magazine, *The Minnesota Daily*.[17] The third section of *Love & Fame* was "extremely various," suggested Berryman, who considered it to be stronger than the first: "The 3rd poem is pretty good. Then there's hardly anything of interest for a long while. Several of the political poems are ghastly. There's a thing called 'Death Ballad.' Which is good."[18] In drawing upon the ballad form the poet was once again moving into the domain of the folk song, grounding his verse in a more collective sense of struggle than had been available in parts One and Two of *Love & Fame*. Moving away from the metaphor of music to connote an endless cycle of returns, Berryman began to look once again at the song as a socially-motivated act while continuing with his eternal themes, the "interplay of the concepts of Love and Death [that] give ballads their peculiar strength and attraction as a popular art form" (Andersen, 33).

[17] 'A Truly Gentle Man Tightens and Paces: An Interview with John Berryman,' manuscript of interview with Martin Berg, Love & Fame, Box 4, Folder 10, Reviews, JBP. This is an annotated version of the review published in *Minnesota Daily*, 20 January 1970, p. 9.
[18] Ibid.

In ‘Death Ballad’ the sense of social erasure experienced by both Tyson and Jo, who feel they “don’t exist,” is similar to that explored in Berryman’s earlier Nervous Songs, and the response of the ballad is telling of his continued belief in the act of song as one of the most basic responses to such distress. While the song poses no easy solutions it does prescribe some lines of wisdom that are directed as much to the poet himself as his companions on the ward. “[T]ake up, outside your blocked selves, some small thing,” urges Berryman, “that is moving / & wants to keep on moving / & needs therefore, Tyson, Jo, your loving” (*CP*, 210) ‘Death Ballad’ upholds the pursuit of love (and life) as a counterweight to death, and finds in the song an act of personal resistance. The spirited form of the ballad itself emphasises the poet’s imperative, modeling the kind of motion, within strictures, that is required to move the self beyond its “blocked” interiority. As Linebarger writes, both ‘Death Ballad’ and ‘The Home Ballad’ “are based on the ballad stanza; but Berryman has seemingly chosen elsewhere in these poems to forget his experiments with standard metrical practice and to follow his impulses. The rhythms of the poems are irregular, sometimes returning to a familiar pentameter line but usually free and loose” (127). Linebarger reads these lyrics as signs of Berryman’s “innovation” in form. Meanwhile, Berryman himself marked these two poems as distinct from the others in the collection on account of their particular orality. “The only two rhymed poems in the book are ‘Death Ballad’ and ‘Home Ballad,’ they’re very different, one from another. I’m using rhyme now again. There’s almost no rhyme in *Love & Fame*.”[19]

Though ‘The Home Ballad,’ as Berryman himself points out, is quite distinct from its formal partner, this lyric also uses the vocally-oriented ballad form to navigate personal setbacks and struggles, and to offer some relief. Like its companion, ‘The Home Ballad’ considers the oppositional forces of love and death, and offers a folksy summation of the experience of the average American citizen:

> We must work & play and John Jacob Niles
> will sing our souls to rest
> (in his earlier-78 recordings).
> Tomorrow we’ll do our best, our best,
> tomorrow we’ll do our best. (*CP*, 213)

[19] Ibid.

While the lyric turns gradually toward a focus on the author himself, its beginning is rooted in a collective daily struggle; invoking John Jacob Niles, the poet puts his life and memory in the hands of the American singer, composer and collector of ballads. His recourse to Niles in particular is a firm reminder of the fact that for Berryman the ballad form was quintessentially musical. Yet it is also an everyday form, allowing him to incorporate and take stock of all the tasks that must be dealt with on his return from Abbott.

> The income tax is done, is done
> and three full weeks before
> & it's going to be O very bad
> but the medical expenses are more, are more,
> the medical & support are more. (*CP*, 213-214)

As with all ballads, the poem is being used to tell a story in the most basic sense, while the tone and diction tell the additional story of the poet's emotional state. Berryman's jarring rhythm and repetition create a sense of euphoria that verges on mania as he makes his way home "lurching on my left toe."

> It hurt like hell, but never mind—
> I hobbled on to free
> swinging my typescript book like a bee
> with honey back to the comb, the comb,
> bringing my lovelies home. (*CP*, 214)

His manic tone is barely contained within the form itself, which possesses a number of verbal tics, particularly in stanza eight, where the poet comments awkwardly on the book's publication prospects:

> *Now* my book will go to friends—
> women and men of wit—
> Xerox'd before we publish it, it,
> the limited edition & and the public it,
> before we publish it. (*CP*, 214)

Yet these poems are not only for the public, Berryman returns these "lovelies" to his family as a personal offering:

> It's *Love & Fame* called, honey Kate,

you read it from the start
and sometimes I reel when you praise my art
my honey almost hopeless angry art,
which was both our Fate— (*CP*, 215)

In 'The Home Ballad,' Berryman rediscovers a sense of social and personal responsibility to his family – and it is the concept of song that once again helps him toward this more socially engaged outlook. The mood of the poem is mixed, but the value of the ballad lies in the way it allows Berryman to navigate his contemporary experience and narrate his story in a simple, musical style. What's more, the return to rhyme allows these ballads a more buoyant and uplifted tonality in spite of their often-heavy subject matter. As in 'Death Ballad' there is no immediate remedy to such personal struggles, but understanding that he cannot change the past, the poet moves toward a greater acceptance of his art and environment. In such a way, 'The Home Ballad' achieves a kind of rest and respite from mental strain. And as Berryman moves toward the end of the section, the book generally suggests a happier relationship to the past. While the first two parts examine music as an anchor into history, the third begins to ask how musical forms might help the poet to sit more comfortably with the present, and enables him to imagine a better future for himself and others. Freedom is a salient theme in the lyrics that follow 'Death Ballad,' as the collection moves into the closing hymnal of *Eleven Addresses to the Lord*. All of the musical allusions that appear in the latter half of Part Three reflect these attitudinal changes.

'Heaven,' a lyric that according to a draft of the poem concerns a woman "killed in a car incident soon after she married" (qtd. in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 365), considers song as a redemptive art and represents a poet chastened, free of the lust and bile that predominated in the book's first part.

Free! While in the cathedral at Seville
a Cardinal is singing. I bowed my face
& licked the monument. Aged women
waited behind me. Free! to lick & believe,

Free free! on an Easter afternoon
I almost said I loved her, we held hands
in the cemetery. Choirs came down on us,
St Anselm bothered his ecstatic repose to chide.

Ambrose interpreted: I was in love with her,
she was half with me. Among the tombs.
She married before she died,
a lissom light-haired alluring phantastic young lady. (*CP*, 212-213)

Once again, music gives the poet access to a potent memory, yet unlike 'Despair,' the memory is a numinous one in which Berryman extolls the couple's collective sense of care; among the symbolic tombs they experience a spell of transcendence. As Berryman recalls this joyful occasion (from his current place of depression) he finds himself uplifted, imagining a place for his companion amidst the host of singing spirits:

Allow her exalted kind forbidding voice
A place in the *Lachrymosa.*
Let her sing on.
O lucky spirits to sing on with her. (*CP*, 213)

The "*Lachrymosa*" (or Lacrimosa, as it is commonly spelled) to which Berryman refers forms part of the traditional Roman Catholic Requiem Mass and is derived from the closing sections of the *Dies Irae*, a Latin hymn that describes the Day of Judgment:

18. Lacrimosa dies illa,
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus:
Huic ergo parce, Deus.

19. Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem.
Amen.

Ah! that day of tears and mourning!
From the dust of earth returning
Man for judgment must prepare him.
Spare, O God, in mercy spare him.
Lord all pitying, Jesu blest,
Grant them Thine eternal rest.
Amen. (qtd. in Wolf, 68)

Berryman, of course, was thinking of Mozart's bittersweet 'Lacrimosa' from his posthumous Requiem Mass in D Minor, and here it becomes not only the collective activity of spirits but an intercessory prayer for the poet himself. Moving from the

memory of the music in the cathedral to the imagined heavenly choir, Berryman ushers these voices into the present:

> Then *a capella*: mourning, barely heard,
> across the Venetian waters: louder, dear,
> I have a 15% hearing loss from a childhood illness,
> louder, my darling, over at San Giorgio. (*CP*, 213)

This lyric in particular sets the tone for the hymns that closely follow it. And, though not strictly conventional hymnody, Berryman's *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* seek, as they ought, a place with God in Heaven:

> Make too me acceptable at the end of time
> in my degree, which then Thou wilt award.
> Cancer, senility, mania,
> I pray I may be ready with my witness.
>
> (*Eleven Addresses to the Lord*, '11,' *CP*, 221)

The poet's witness in these psalms is both musical and poetic, coloured, no doubt, by his love of the musical Mass, not to mention his translation of Paul Claudel's 'Le Chemin de la croix,' in 1956, for composer Antal Dorati.[20]

Throughout *Love & Fame* musical allusion and musical forms perform a diverse set of operations, being used primarily to tell the tale of Berryman's personal and poetic development, and latterly to portray his journey from distress into comfort. In a letter to Robert Giroux, composed on 25 March 1970, Berryman commented on the continuing significance of music within his daily affairs (amidst illness, senility and mania) as he began to search for a way beyond the collection.

> Since I got out of hospital day before yesterday, I listen to music all the time, mostly Mozart, Mostly quartets & piano concerti. But I have a new Beethoven poem going, called Beethoven Triumphant, which is promising. I have also written two excellent new Lyrics since I came home, but they do not go in the book. The book is FINISHED.[21]

[20] Performed by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra on 6 February 1959.
[21] John Berryman to Robert Giroux, 25 March 1970, Love & Fame, Box 1, Folder 4, JBP.

The book might have been finished, but music, and particularly the music of Beethoven, was to provide a bridge for the poet into some final reflections on music and memory in his terminal collection.

Musical monuments: Berryman's Beethoven

In many ways, *Delusions, Etc.* picks up where *Love & Fame* left off: with a series of religious homages and hymns. The *'Opus Dei'* sequence that opens the work itself possesses a suggestively musical title, and casts a glance back to Berryman's earlier *Op posth*. songs (*The Dream Songs*), in which the poet is similarly preoccupied with questions of memory and mortality. In its prayer-like form, the *'Opus Dei'* suggests a possible connection with music, and *Delusions, Etc*. is certainly by turns a devotional book. Commenting on the loose structure, or lack of "coherent pattern," in the posthumous collection, Linebarger suggests that there is a certain unity achieved across the book in the sense that both the first and last sections are "devoted largely to prayers" (140). Yet as Berryman points out in one of his epigraphs for the collection, the devotional theme was all-encompassing – "*On parle toujours de l'art réligieux. L'art est réligieux."*[22] There are many devotional and intercessory lyrics scattered throughout, and not all of them to the Christian God. In fact, Berryman's experience of Beethoven in the musical homage that closely follows these opening prayers is of clear religious import, and it is the person of Beethoven that speaks most powerfully to the poet's questions surrounding his own creative afterlife. 'Beethoven Triumphant' is just one among a flush of portraits that make up the second section of *Delusions, Etc.*, the others paying homage to George Washington, Emily Dickinson, George Trakl and Dylan Thomas. Yet the poem for the composer, which comprises twenty-seven numbered sections, is certainly the most far-reaching. 'Beethoven Triumphant' asserts itself as a kind of poetic biography, paying homage to the

[22] The quotation has been mistakenly attributed to Claudel by Peter Stitt (when according to Catherine Fitzpatrick it is actually Cocteau), though it is easy to see why Berryman might have drawn on Claudel (who is named in 'Prime' of the '*Opus Dei*' sequence) as an appropriate epigraphic voice considering the poet's experience in translating Claudel for Dorati and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1959.
"'The intent of the book is indicated in one of its five epigraphs, a quotation from the French critic Claudel'" (Peter Stitt, 'Berryman's Last Poems,' qtd. in Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, 124).

musical master as it moves, in a mood of supplication, through Beethoven's life and career.

"The life is large which can receive a Beethoven," wrote Margaret Fuller in 1841, after hearing a rendition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (*The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, Vol. 2, 206). It was at Clare College Cambridge that Berryman first "received" his Beethoven; his diaries of the period are swollen with musical commentary, and notes pertaining to this particular musical hero. In one, dated 3 November 1937, the poet records himself as having attended a reading of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* after which he "Listened to the Fifth Symphony," claiming that "the crescendo in the last movement records [his] aimless agitation of spirit."[23] It was also during his time at Clare that Berryman saw Abel Gance's classic film, *Un Grand Amour de Beethoven* (1936). "Superb," he concluded, in an entry for 15 October 1937.[24]

Berryman's admiration for the composer finds expression across the full span of his work. Beethoven emerges as early as *Berryman's Sonnets,* which the poet claimed were to be like the composer's "onslaughts on the very materials of music" (1947).[25] He is invoked in 'Boston Common' (*The Dispossessed*, 1948) where his variations soar, and continues to assert his presence though *The Dream Songs* – most notably 204 and 331 in which he is a tragic and, indeed, majestic shade (as Berryman describes Yeats in Dream Song 312). He also makes a prose appearance in the short story 'Wash Far Away,' where the Fourth Piano Concerto is used to elucidate Milton's *Lycidas* for a class of undergraduates.[26] While these mentions gesture to the significance that Beethoven held for the poet, it is not until his final collection that this majestic figure comes into full relief.

Berryman's engagement with the poem in its making was also a deep and continuous one. On what must have been one of the earliest plans for the book (dated "4 Aug 1970"), the poem's title appears under the macabre heading "Last Poems."[27] Thus, while the work was there at the genesis of *Delusions, Etc.*, it appears to have

[23] Diaries 1931-1957 (Incomplete) Old Boxes I – III. Journal 1937; 1938-9; 1940, JBP.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets. Sonnet Notebook, JBP.
[26] The story was begun in 1947 under the working title of 'The Group' and was revised, in 1952, under the title 'The Lesson and the Light.' It first appeared in print as 'Wash Far Away' in the *American Review* in 1975 and was finally collected in Berryman's *The Freedom of the Poet* (1976).
[27] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets. Box 1, Folder 3, JBP.

been one of the last that Berryman significantly operated on. The poet continued to redraft this work through various proof copies of the book, even while the rest of the contents remained largely untouched. Indeed Berryman, in the final phase of his creative life, appears to have had a vested interest in the character of Beethoven, and the poem itself maps out an imagined connection between the two artistic lives.

In her memoir, *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson singles out Beethoven as a composer whom Berryman listened to with special attention. Recalling the poet's response to one of the composer's string quartets, *Opus 59* (no. 3), she writes:

> Whenever I hear it, I see us wedged together, knee to knee, in the tiny oven of a booth at the Record Collector's Exchange where we first heard it. John's upper lip, shaved of its mustache, is beaded with perspiration. He bends over, his right ear inclined toward the turnable, listening with his whole brain. From time to time, looking as though he might levitate, he grabs hold of my hand and with an ecstatic expression on his face says, 'You hear?' as the cello pizzicato plucked at our hearts. (17-18)

While 'Beethoven Triumphant' shows the marks of the poet's study it is also keen to impress us with a sense of Berryman's unique relationship to Beethoven, and exhibits an embodied response to the music that the he listened to with his whole brain. "Dooms menace from tumults," declares Berryman, as the composer enters clamorously onto the scene, "who's immune among our mightier of headed men? Chary with his loins / womanward, he begot us an enigma" (*CP*, 236). An imagined connection grows through the body of the work, which acts out, in the style of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956), an erotic encounter between the poem's subject and its writer. While he begins in the first stanza by addressing the composer in the third person, as a historical figure, Berryman has fallen, by stanza ten, into the more direct and personal "you" form of address. This Beethoven is erotically charged. He becomes imbued, in stanza 15, with the ability to "make throats swallow" and to "shiver the backs of necks" – to make "quiver with glee, at will" (*CP*, 239). Berryman was known to make similar claims about the sensory potential of his own art: "I have been writing brilliantly," he boasted in a letter to his mother, dated April 1958, "I have a style now pared straight to the bone and can make the reader's nerves jump by moving my little finger" (*We Dream of Honour*, 319). Both claims contain striking innuendo and a noticeable show of maleness, and Berryman rounds off the stanza with the unusually macho dictum: "This world is of male energy male pain" (*CP*, 239), yoking the two artists into one conglomerate masculine entity.

The composer's desire to rouse an atmosphere of intense feeling and to create an embodied response in the listener is presented here as a power hunger that verges on sadism. Beethoven's art is in the first instance violent; he is described, in stanza 14, to have "Tortured [his] surly star to sing impossibly / against the whole (small) thwarting orchestra." His language is forcibly penetrating: "One chord thrusts, as it must // find allies, foes, resolve, in subdued crescendo" (*CP*, 239). Yet if the composer has shown himself to be the dominant figure in this encounter, stanza 16 shows a slight re-adjustment in terms of the creative power play. His music is now tender: "Softnesses, also, yours, which become us," admits the poet, who acknowledges his complicity as he is caught up in the listening experience (*CP*, 239). In stanza 17 Berryman loses his projected direction as he remembers Beethoven's unique power over his body and emotions. The section swells to unprecedented capacity, asserting its status as a kind of love Sonnet as it reaches into the next stanza.

17

I'm hard to you, odd nights. I bulge my brain,
my shut chest already suffers,—so I play blues
and Haydn whom you—both the which touch but they don't ache me.
I'm less inured in your disaster corner,
Master. You interfere.
O yes we interfere
or we're mere sweetening: what? the alkali lives
around and after ours. Sleeking down nerves
Passing time dreaming. And you did do that too.
  There hover Things cannot be banned by you;
damned few.
  If we take our head in our ears and listen
Ears! Ears! the Devil paddled in you

18

heard not a hill flute or a shepherd sing! (*CP*, 239-240)

The writing becomes spontaneous and sensual as the poet discovers surprise in the language that his listening has begun to engender. The act of generation is implied within the text itself, the ejaculate "what?" – which arrives promptly after the suggestion of interference – leaving an "alkali" deposit that "lives" on in embryo.

Such a sexualised response to Beethoven's music was not without American precedent. In her famous exposé, 'The Lives of the Great Composers,'

transcendendentalist Margaret Fuller exhibits a similarly charged response to a Beethoven whom she also names "Master" (148-203), and Berryman's devotional poem appears to borrow directly from Fuller's accounts of her imagined love-affair. On 25 November 1843, Fuller had famously written a striking letter to the spirit of the dead composer in which she praised him as her *raison d'être*:

> but thou, oh blessed Master, dost answer all my questions, and make it my privilege to be. Like a humble wife to the sage or poet, it is my triumph that I can understand, can receive thee wholly, like a mistress I arm thee for the fight, like a young daughter I tenderly bind thy wounds. Thou are to me beyond compare, for thou art all I want. (qtd. in Gale Chevigny, 61-62)

The poem's sudden recourse to the Sonnet form is also telling of Berryman's debt, since Fuller too had selected such a form with which to honour her beloved. The poem was printed in *The Dial* (October 1941, 173) and similarly aims to capture the composer's *sui generis* appeal and power over the emotions:

> Beethoven
>
> Most intellectual master of the art,
> Which, best of all, teaches the mind of man
> The universe in all its varied plan, –
> What strangely mingled thoughts thy strains impart!
> Here the faint tenor thrills the inmost heart,
> There the rich bass the Reason's balance shows;
> Here breathes the softest sigh that Love e'er knows;
> There sudden fancies, seeming without chart,
> Float into wildest breezy interludes;
> The past is all forgot, – hopes sweetly breathe,
> And our whole being glows, – when lo! beneath
> The flowery brink, Despair's deep sob concludes!
> Startled, we strive to free us from the chain, –
> Notes of high triumph swell, and we are thine again!

Like Fuller, Berryman finds himself given over to these notes of high triumph and deep despair, and by the time we reach section 18 the poet has so entered into the music that he wonders: "Who was I? / Am I these tutti, am I this rallentando? / This entrance of the oboe?" (*CP*, 240). The listener's identity is soluble in Beethoven's music; and it is in the composer's disaster corner that the poem sets up camp, with the rather ominous (and Whitmanesque) conclusion: "I am all these / the sane man makes reply on the locked ward" (*CP*, 240).

Indeed, if Berryman imagines some affinity with Beethoven, then this closeness is experienced, in a large part, through the notion of shared artistic struggle – and creative interference appears, once again, to work both ways. A particular moment of pathos occurs in stanza 8 as Berryman reaches backwards through time in an attempt to identify with and reassure the composer from his point of historical advantage.

> O did he sleep sound? Heavy, heavy that.
> Waked at 3:30 not by some sonata
> but by a botched rehearsal of the Eighth
> where all thing has to go right
> (Koussevitzky will make it, Master; lie back down) (*CP*, 238)

Berryman's choice of the resonant word "Heavy" augments the sense of shared suffering, since it links the scene back into a number of episodes depicting his own heavy wakefulness, as described in Dream Song 29, where he writes:

> there sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
> só heavy, if he had a hundred years
> & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
> Henry could not make good.

The looming and resonant presence of *The Dream Songs* is backed-up by an earlier draft of the poem in which insomniac Berryman writes:

> I puzzle – it's quarter to five a.m. – were you ever satisfied.
> Ah, I think, often.
> Getting things right [28]

This version gestures at what Berryman describes in Dream Song 1 as "a putting things over," or the impulse to "*do* it" – the very struggle that causes Henry to be "wicked & away" (DS 1). In the case of Beethoven, Berryman surmises, personal contentment must have been contingent on artistic production.

The theme of creative struggle is borne out further in stanzas 9 and 10:

> Fact is, he stumbled at the start
> and in the sequence, stumbled in the middle,

[28] Delusions, Etc., Berryman's Sonnets, Box 1, Folder 4, JBP.

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> often unsure at the end—shown by his wilderness
> on-sketchings encrusted like Tolstoy (not Mozart:
> who'd, ripping napkins, the whole strict in mind
> before notes serried; limitationless, unlike you.

Ever aware of his own creative limitations, the poet feels more affinity with Beethoven here than with Mozart who, he suggests, experienced no barrier to the expression of his musical ideas. Berryman was no doubt thinking of his own difficulty to see order in his poetic projects – particularly *The Dream Songs*, which, as Haffenden notes, "seemed resistant to any possible shape or scheme. Late in August he set down one attempt at a conspectus; but then, starting a fresh page, 'ugh,' he wrote, 'so many schema: + minstrelsy.' His misgivings about the Songs were many" (*The Life of John Berryman*, 309).

It is true that both Berryman and Beethoven sketched out their ideas with unusual dynamism. In trying to perceive a connection between their creative processes, however, Berryman somewhat misrepresents the composer, whose sketchbooks critics instance to suggest the spontaneity with which he expressed himself. Berryman uses these "wilderness / on-sketchings" to emphasise the composer's increasing sense of isolation while upholding him, at the same time, as a kind of musical prophet. He returns to these drafts in stanza 20, drawing on them to demonstrate the inscrutability of late Beethoven: "Straightforward staves, dark bars, / late motions toward the illegible. Musical thighs" (*CP*, 240). Berryman's preference in the poem is clearly for these later and often baffling works, and the concept of deafness, as an embodied alienation, becomes bound up with artistic late style.

While 'Beethoven Triumphant' gives an overview of the composer's life, all of the compositions mentioned – with the exception of the Fourth Piano Concerto – were composed after the famous *Heiligenstadt Testament* of 1802 in which he expresses a sense of isolation brought on by his worsening condition. "I must live like an exile," wrote Beethoven,

> if I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, a fear that I may be subjected to the danger of letting my condition be observed [. . .] What humiliation for me when someone standing near me heard a flute in the distance and I heard <u>nothing,</u> or someone heard the shepherd singing and again

> I heard nothing. Such incidents brought me near to despair; a little more and I would have ended my life [. . .] Only art held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I produced all that I felt was within me; and so I spared this wretched life. (qtd. in Cooper, 59)

This statement clearly resonated with Berryman on a number of levels; in fact, he draws upon it as he remarks upon the ingenuity of Beethoven's late work, which acts out in defiance against the estranged and ailing body:

> If we take our head in our ears and listen
> Ears! Ears! the Devil paddled in you
>
> 18
>
> heard not a hill flute or a shepherd sing!
> tensing your vision onto an alarm
> of gravid measures, sequent to demure,
> all we fall, absently foreknowing . . (*CP*, 240)

Berryman picks up here on the anti-pastoral, even anti-traditional aspects of Beethoven's mission statement and aesthetic, suggesting that the composer's "exile" in later life brought about a kind of fall – another resonant word in Berryman – into new musical terrain. And like a number of theorists of late style – notably Theodor Adorno and Edward Said – Berryman is interested in a type of late work that is characterised by its difficulty and resistance.

"Each of us can readily supply evidence of how it is that late works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor," writes Said in *Late Style*:

> Rembrandt and Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? [. . .] It is this second type of lateness as a factor of style that I find deeply interesting. I'd like to explore the experience of late style that involves a non-harmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*. (7)

Such an aesthetic is clearly inborn in the roughly hewn 'Beethoven Triumphant.' Uneven and obscure, the work's numbered sections appear often as shards broken off from a larger monument. These fragments shift fluidly between historical and subjective experience, between the poet and the composer, and spill the bounds of the

units implied. While the poem strives to achieve a semblance of order, 'Beethoven Triumphant' suggests a poet more comfortable than ever with breaking the rules.

Berryman had more than once drawn upon Beethoven as a model for this brand of artistic lateness. In Dream Song 204 he invokes "Beethoven's 109-10-11 & the Diabelli Variations," remarking, "You go by the rules but there the rules don't matter / is what I've been trying to say." The composer appears a similarly dissenting figure in Dream Song 331, which brings him into connection with the deaf and alienated Goya:

> a strangeness in the final notes, never to be resolved
> Beethoven's, Goya's: you had better go to the Prado
> Downstairs, to see on what I am insisting.

Here Berryman was referring particularly to Goya's Black Paintings, murals composed on the walls of the painter's house – the *Quinta del Sordo* or *Deaf Man's Villa*, just outside of Madrid – in the final years of his life. These paintings are famously enigmatic, full of menace and doom.

As a poem that deals with the work of the aging and alienated composer, as well as the ailing Berryman, 'Beethoven Triumphant' is itself replete with such painterly strangeness – and the central enigma is surely that of the "musical thighs," which return three times throughout the poem. These pose a deliberate challenge to interpretation but have their origin in Yeats, reminding us not only of Leda's "thighs caressed" and that "shudder in the loins," but also the "slow moving" thighs in 'The Second Coming.' Yeats, assuming once again the role of the "majestic shade," comes to Berryman's aid here in articulating the sublimity (even terrible beauty) of late Beethoven, who, as Berryman affirms at the outset, "begot us an enigma." Beethoven's last works take "precedence," writes Adorno, "by virtue of their enigma" (124).

Yet more than Yeats is in the background here. If the Irish poet hovers as one of the major presences behind the poem in connection with this enigma, Shakespeare takes centre stage. Beethoven himself was known to have professed an interest in the works of Shakespeare, as recorded in Schindler's biography, and the poet's burgeoning influence on Beethoven has long been the subject of engrossed critical debate. The composer's Shakespearean predilections could only have magnified his appeal for Berryman, now seemingly more eager than ever to constellate his interests.

And unsurprisingly, it is the late works that emerge. In Stanza 6 the Fourth Piano Concerto is said to be "Miser & Timon-giving, by queer turns" (*CP*, 237), while stanza 12 significantly recounts an incident where Beethoven used Shakespeare as a key to interpreting his unconventional ideas: "when Schindler was an arse to ask / your drift in Opus 31 and the Appassionata / you uttered at him, cheerful, 'Just read *The Tempest*'" (*CP*, 238). Like Beethoven, Berryman refuses to make the connection between these two works explicit, but was no doubt aware of the fact that *Opus 31* no. 1 was finished just after the completion of the *Tempest Sonata* (*Opus 31* no. 2) and points to a definite sea change in terms of his musical style.

In an essay that sets out to recover Beethoven's literary interests, Thomas Sipe suggests that "after the onset of deafness Beethoven's experience of literature in general (and Shakespeare in particular) stimulated his inner world of ideas"; Sipe goes on to underline the way in which this ailment caused him to "'turn inward' for his creative inspiration" (87). Such a movement inward had been Berryman's tactic since the naissance of *The Dream Songs*, whose minstrel epigraph ushers: "GO IN, BRACK MAN, DE DAY'S YO' OWN." Thus, just as Beethoven had looked to Shakespeare to provide a parallel for his own late experience, so Berryman now looked to Beethoven as he made his final turn inward. In his last book, Berryman was retreating deeper into the inner world of fantasy and remembrance – expressing all the hallmarks of the terminal imagination.

In stanza 24 of 'Beethoven Triumphant,' *The Tempest* makes yet another appearance when Beethoven's music conjures "an island of suffering & disenchantment & enchantment" (*CP*, 241). "This is the prerogative of late style," writes Said:

> it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile. (148)

Delusions, Etc. finds the poet marooned on such an island; the collection contains within its very title a hint at the kind of distorted psychic experiences that might come to be expected here.

The island, moreover, was a trope that Berryman used repeatedly in connection with terminal (and musical) activity. In Dream Song 25, for example, Henry, who claims to be "going away," recalls, as he does so:

> something in my dream about a Cat
> Which fought and sang.
> Something about a lyre an island. Unstrung.
> Linked to the land at low tide

"Thank you for everything" the Dream Song concludes, in seeming supplication, as Henry moves into a space beyond the poem. Similarly, in 'Henry's Understanding,' in section IV of *Delusions, Etc.*, Berryman receives a vision of his journey "out toward the island," an epiphany that occurs to him "Suddenly, unlike Bach, // & horribly, unlike Bach" (*CP*, 256). The abysmal break between stanzas becomes a space in which the voice reverberates. The emotional memory recounted in this late (and displaced Dream Song) was one that had stayed with Berryman for an extraordinary length of time – and the mention of Bach seems almost a trigger for the poet's memory store. The lyric itself describes how Berryman had been "reading late, at Richard's, down in Maine / aged 32?" (*CP*, 255) when he suddenly received a vision of his own death. This was a memory to which Berryman returned repeatedly in expressing his sense of terminality. In 'A Year on The East Coast: John Berryman 1962-63,' Haffenden notes that Joy Roulston, a student of Berryman's at Bread Loaf College in 1962, remembers hearing a version of this nighttime terror:

> 'he said when he was younger and spending the summer at a place in Maine, he came to the insight about death that someday he would just have to walk out into the water.' The insight had lingered sixteen years already and remained a further six years before it was given permanent form in the poem. (131)

'Henry's Understanding' sits appropriately within section IV of *Delusions, Etc.*, which has been given the additional title of "*Scherzo*," a movement which developed from the minuet and often replaces the third (though sometimes second) movement of the sonata. Such an analogy had already been deployed in Berryman's "majestic" Dream Song 331:

> This is the third. What have I more to say

except that I hope that in my dying hour
nobody will be ashamed of me:
may I not be scared then of that final void
into which I lapse, leaving all my power
& memory behind me.

In the case of *Delusions, Etc*., the "*Scherzo*" would certainly be the third movement of the sonata, since it signifies a "recapitulation" in its return not only to an earlier memory, but to the earlier Dream Song form. 'Henry's Understanding' is accompanied, in section IV, by another terrorised Dream Song, 'Henry By Night,' in which the poet jokingly declaims: "I won't mention the dreams I won't repeat." Of course, the Italian term *scherzo*, which can be translated to mean "a joke," also typically connotes a fast section of the sonata, mirroring the tempo of these night terrors.

Both *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.* are generally preoccupied with the idea of recapitulation, with "leaving all my power / & memory behind me," yet as has been seen, the notion of lateness and terminality was with Berryman long before he began his final two works, and even before *The Dream Songs*. As early as May 1947, in fact, the poet had "pondered writing [. . .] an article equating *The Tempest* and *The Magic Flute*, to be called 'Shakespeare and Mozart: The End,' as well as another grand Shakespearean project" (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 190). In line with this, the poet described how he considered the figure of the artist to be one "moving towards annihilation – towards becoming a *voice*: first a voice for the *object*, later (very rare, this) a voice for powers and passions and acceptances buried somewhere in men for good – *Tempest, Magic Flute*, Schubert C Major Quintet, last works usually'" (qtd. in Introduction to *Collected Poems 1937-197*, lvii). It was finally though the figure of Beethoven that the poet actualised his treatise on the creative terminus.[29]

[29] Likewise, in an undated diary entry, likely composed around his forth-third birthday, Berryman made the following comment:
"Here it is again.
What is forty-two or forty-three
Certainly many things are over.
Everything is the same.
I find myself as ignorant or
crazy as ever,
but old? middle-aged? 'young'?
I seem to have been alive

Much remains to be done on Berryman's late work in general, and the fact that his last two books are often thought so resistant to criticism is itself testament to their bristling difficulty. His "last two books [. . .] move," writes Lowell, "they may be slighter than the chronicle of dream songs, but they fill out the frame, alter their speech with age, and prepare for his death" ("For John Berryman," 72). These books, we might say, suffer a sea change. "Lateness," suggests Said, "is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present" (14). This holds true for Berryman, whose exploration of Beethoven's music and character gives him full access to the sensual present while calling to shore many drifting relics of his own poetic career. The poem bears witness to his own historicity as much as to the composer's. Though the re-visions of the teetering artist, suggests Berryman, the great artwork is reborn – its futurity secured in a cycle of *et ceteras*.

The poem's final mention of Shakespeare renders just such an exchange. Berryman's Beethoven, at the end, is pictured "gasping of Shakespeare," while simultaneously "knocking over the picture of Haydn's birthplace" (*CP*, 241). Austria, the birthplace of his mentor, was also, notably, the scene of Beethoven's death. And Berryman, rooted firmly in his terminal present finds himself similarly fortified by a great crowd of witnesses. His appeal to Beethoven has all the pathos and religious fervour of Fuller's in her 1843 letter, "To Beethoven [. . .] My only friend":

> Oh, if thou wouldst take me wholly to thyself. I am lost in this world where I sometimes meet angels but of a different star from mine [. . .] Even so does thy spirit call upon, plead with all spirits. But thou dost triumph and bring them all in. My triumphs are but for the moment, thine eternal. (qtd. in Gale Chevigny, 61-62)

For Fuller, and Berryman, Beethoven becomes a kind of "Over-Soul," as Emerson formulated the term, under and into which is gathered our collective artistic endeavours – "within which every man's particular being is contained and made one

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a thousand years,
two thousand, and I still
can't see the end.
I don't know what to do or be
or what will happen to ~~me.~~ Henry."
JB Diary, Notes 3 Booklet, Diaries 1958-1964, JBP.

with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship" (Emerson, 206).

In collating and connecting the late and enigmatic works of some of his earliest paramours, the poet was working suggestively towards the construction of a kind of self-elegy. Moreover, the poem's place in Berryman's final collection speaks to his own hopes of a creative afterlife. 'Beethoven Triumphant,' in short, leads out in triumphal procession:

> They said you died. '20,000 persons of every class'
> clashed at the gates of the house of mourning, till they locked them.
> Franz Schubert stalked the five hundred feet to the church.
> It's a lie! You're all over my wall!
>
> You march and chant around here! I hear your thighs. (*CP*, 242)

The composer's triumph is that of the creative spirit acting out in self-expression against and in spite of the aging body. It is the mysterious final soundings that emerge out of this conflict, which is his creative legacy. The elegy first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* on 6 April 1972, nearly three months after the poet's death. It is not entirely clear whether Berryman submitted the poem for publication himself or if it was entered on his behalf, perhaps by Robert Lowell, who has a memoir for Berryman in the same volume. "John himself lived to the age of Beethoven," comments Lowell, "though he died with fewer infirmities than Beethoven. The consolation somehow doesn't wash" ('For John Berryman,' 70). Lowell cites 'Beethoven Triumphant' as "the most ambitious and perhaps finest of [Berryman's] late poems" ('For John Berryman,' 70). The poem serves as a monument, not only to the triumphs of the composer but those of the late Berryman.

Coda

Returning to Berryman's early poetic "Maxim" of 'Selbst,' in which the poet asserts that the "soul has ears,"[1] it is now possible to understand his musical engagement as part of a process of *Selbstbesinnung*, or self-contemplation, in which music becomes an agent of discovery and transformation. From the early songs of *The Dispossessed* to the musical elegies of *Delusions, Etc*., music is a constant in Berryman's poetry, entering the work both thematically and structurally, and touching on almost all of his central concerns. Berryman's sense of poetic "voice" cannot be disentangled from his obsession with hearing and with musical performance as an embodied act. As was described in the first two chapters, the (amorous) body is essentially musical, and in both 'Canto Amor' and *Berryman's Sonnets* sensual experience is musically conceived. Meanwhile, the stigmatised or marginal body is also musical, and in 'The Nervous Songs' Berryman takes on Rilke's charge to become one of the "maimed ones" who has no choice but to sing (*The Book of Images*, 185). He follows this into *The Dream Songs* and the later ballads, in which music and listening are acts that offer respite in an ongoing struggle, be it personal or political. From the beginning, the poet's sense of direction in these songs emerges in connection with musical poets such as Yeats and Rilke, yet it is also mediated through composers like Beethoven, Schubert and Bach.

As unpublished schema pages show, some of the most notable developments in Berryman's poetry can be understood as having a basis in his musical thinking, which allowed the poet to step outside his own discipline and enter into a broader creative continuum. Thinking of his own art in relation to musical personalities made available new emotional, perceptual, and dramatic pathways to the poet. Finally, throughout Berryman's poetry, though particularly in the later books, music also offers a way of returning to often painful memories, and in doing so a means of transcendence. Berryman's sense of memory, terminality and creative legacy emerges consistently in connection with music across his final two collections. Throughout this thesis, the curious chronology, even simultaneity, of many of Berryman's projects

[1] Miscellaneous Poetry (Unpublished), Folder 4, Verse Fragments, JBP. The note suggests a date of "8 Aug 1948."

has been explored, and music offered as a way of understanding some of the poet's advances and returns.

Following Berryman's musical interest through his published and unpublished works, a new picture of the poet emerges, with idiosyncratic force. As Kate (Berryman) Donahue advised me at the beginning of this project, Berryman "definitely had his favorites," and this is reflected in the work itself. In terms of classical music, Berryman's poetry tends to show a preference for the "greats" – Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven – and of these, his greatest love was reserved for the Romantics. Yet as has been seen, the poet's musical sensibilities were broader than many of his peers, and he listened to Bessie Smith and J. S. Bach with the same devoted attention. Ultimately, though, Berryman was most interested in artists whose ideas and experience he felt aligned most with his own. The way in which these artists enter and converge within the poet's work, particularly in *The Dream Songs*, is a quality unique to Berryman's poetry during his generation, and perhaps to any generation.

While showing some of Berryman's central concerns in a new light, a reading of the poet's musical interest also indicates some neglected aspects of his poetry. Firstly, Berryman emerges as a poet of international scope, a quality often ignored in critical responses to his work. This can be seen in 'The Nervous Songs,' which begin to explore the theme of travel, as well as in the picaresque of *The Dream Songs*, in which the protagonist moves, not only between different voices and personas, but through different geographies and space-times. Likewise, Berryman's poetry draws upon a wide range of models that have yet to be explored, much more than the handful of British and American poets often considered the mainstay of his work. Particularly in connection with *Berryman's Sonnets*, a significant interest in French symbolism emerges, one that is central to the poet's sense of language, and which melds peculiarly, in his later poems, with an American idiom. This remains an area ripe for study. Similarly, Berryman's fascination with a poet such as Rilke, which ripples through his entire poetics, has yet to be properly understood.

This discussion also paves the way for further research on Berryman's engagement with the arts more broadly. As has been discussed, the poet repeatedly reaches into other creative disciplines in search of a correlative for his own artistic struggle and experience. "The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him," claimed the poet. "At that

point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing" (Interview with Peter Stitt, 1972). Though Berryman's love of visual art does not touch his poetry on the same level as his musical enthusiasm, his response to artists such as Francisco Goya, Van Gogh and Rembrandt Van Rijn (whose biographies he studied and who feature often in the diaries) also says something important about the poet's sense of the creative enterprise.[2] All of these sources and connections, European and otherwise, point to the need for a reevaluation of Berryman as a poet of wider horizons than he is often granted.

Indeed, Berryman's poetry is of enormous scope, and even necessitates its own particular kind of reading. In its approach to reading Berryman through his musical preoccupations, this study has attempted to put into practice some of the interpretive methods approved by the poet himself. When Berryman sent a copy of *The Dispossessed* to Wallace Stevens in 1948, the elder poet responded that he "would take them slowly," since Berryman's poems seemed to be "packed full so that the very edges of the syllables matter[ed]." Berryman valued this assessment. "If only a few readers *would hear* them slowly, I think the poems might hope for something," responded Berryman on the back of the letter (qtd. in Thornbury, xxxiv). Hearing Berryman's poems slowly brings out the multiple sonic qualities in his verse, but also allows his images to express themselves in unexpected and challenging ways – this is a poet whose key ideas echo across the full span on his work, and it is only through immersing ourselves in his word-world that we learn the poet's language. In a draft of an early essay on 'The Relationship Between Prose and Poetry,' the poet appended a quote (on a small piece of paper) from Joseph Conrad, which further highlights some tendencies in his approach:

> A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character . . . All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and in that way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty.
>
> --- Conrad, letter of 4 May 1918 [3]

[2] Berryman also collaborated with the painter and photographer Ben Shahn, whom he met at Princeton, and who eventually illustrated the poet's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. The book was published on "1 October 1956, to what seemed a sparse but intense critical acclaim" (Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, 255). Philip Coleman has discussed this collaboration at some length in *John Berryman's Public Vision* (2014).

[3] 'The Relationship Between Prose and Poetry,' Prose Works (Unpublished), Mod-Z Box 2, JBP.

The essay was envisioned as part of a volume of prose works relating to the theme of "Sacrifice," later published as *The Freedom of the Poet* (1976), though this particular item was not, in the end, collected.[4] Such powers and complexities are at the centre of Berryman's musical poems, and his poetry demands a reading that can attend to its multiple inflections, to its generative network of his signs and symbols. "[O]pen & closed sings on his mystery / furled & unfurled," writes the poet in Dream Song 260, as he imagines himself "loose to the world." To trace Berryman's musical interest, then, is to trace not only a lifelong passion, or an important shaping force for the poetry, but the sense of an idea or project that was always on the cusp of poetic expression. Berryman's poetry is deliberately, and always playfully, evasive, but it is these unorthodox methods that allow his verse to attain maximum semantic and dramatic potential. Of course, if music enhances the sense of mystery, the poet also charges us with a responsibility to hear; and in listening, a kind of continuity, even intimacy, might still be achieved.

[4] This page of notes also features the names of El Greco and Beethoven.
"El Greco's 'St Louis' in the Louvre / { Beeth's <u>forced</u> sacrifice / Milton's " — "

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