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“Life Is, All, Transformation”:
Desire and Lightness in John Berryman’s Poetry

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2013 B

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“Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:
No god, no demon of severe response,
Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.
Then to my human heart I turn at once—
Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;
Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!
O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,
To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!”
—John Keats, “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell”

Introduction: Sex and Style in Berryman's Time

One major issue a writer encounters in attempting to introduce a study of John Berryman is that, as Charles Thornbury wrote in the introduction to Berryman's collected poems, "There are many John Berrymans."¹ Born John Allyn Smith, Jr., on October 25, 1914, in McAlester, Oklahoma, Berryman was endlessly in motion throughout his life, picked up and relocated variously in Oklahoma, and finally landing in Clearwater, Florida. Berryman's father, following a falling out with Berryman's mother and bankruptcy, his father, as Berryman wrote, "very early in the morning,/rose with his gun and went outdoors by my window,/and did what was needed,"² allegedly committing suicide.

Among the many burdens Berryman hoisted in his life, the loss of his father was only one. This essay examines, with some depth, a different burden—Berryman's attitude towards the philosophical problem of desire. Berryman became an adult and a poet in what Alan Petigny refers to as a "Permissive Society," America between the forties and seventies. Situated within a culture in transition, Berryman was located in the midst of a society pushing against the moral constraints of the past. Part of a concerted effort being made within popular media and literature, Berryman tried to find a language for speaking openly about sex.

Petigny argues that the divide in the popular imagination between "the nominally conservative fifties and the socially liberal sixties" is false, "bad fiction, not fact and certainly not history"³. Rather, in his study, he makes "the case for the dramatic liberalization of values during the Truman and Eisenhower years," marking "the emergence of a Permissive

¹ Thornbury, Charles. Introduction. *Collected Poems 1937-1971*. By John Berryman. 1989. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. xvii-lix. Print. Hereafter, Thornbury.

² Berryman, John. "145." *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969. 162, Print. Hereafter, DS.

³ Petigny, Alan Cecil. *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 2. Print. Hereafter, Petigny.

Turn,” which “constituted an unprecedented challenge to moral constraints” (Petigny 3).

Berryman’s poetry would take part in this challenge to the inherited cultural morality—not by uttering vulgarities for shock-value, but using his subjective experiences of desire as a source for his poetic-philosophical meditations upon the morality, pleasure, suffering, and humor revolving around sex.

Berryman’s intense play with language and style were integral to the process of finding a voice for his poetic representations of desire. The layers of opacity under which Berryman buried vulgarity in his writing are partly the product of a time defined by a tension between “exploding levels of premarital sex” and the overpowering “public inhibitions... that helped obscure” (Petigny 121) that sexual explosion:

As informal codes that are enforced by ‘fear of external nonlegal sanctions,’ social norms tend to be durable. In other words, unlike the products of the popular culture, social norms do not bend easily to transient tastes or the latest fads. (Petigny 122)

The problem was a silence on the matter of sex. Petigny quotes Lynn Ferrin, who commented that in the sixties, “people were not open about their sex lives... Nobody was a virgin but nobody admitted it” (Petigny 122). The lack of any idiom for the easy expression of issues of sex and desire seems to have been a major cultural constraint in what was nonetheless an era of exploding sexual activity. What this dilemma amounts to, then, is an issue of language as much as an issue of morality—a question of how, using what words and tone, sex and desire can take on poetic representation.

Berryman was no exception to this problem. A passage in E.M. Halliday’s memoir, *John Berryman and The Thirties*⁴, gives a glimpse into Berryman’s own struggles with

⁴ Halliday, E.M. *John Berryman and the Thirties: A Memoir*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987. Print. Hereafter, Halliday.

discussing sex, though a decade prior to the Permissive Era Petigny isolates. Berryman's adolescence, Halliday confirms, unfolded in an even more inhibited era:

John and I confided almost everything to each other, but we were reticent on the subject of just how far we had progressed in our efforts to become sexual veterans. We resisted the male tendency to hyperbolize, feeling that to lie to your best friend was on a level with kicking your mother downstairs. The alternative was a vague suggestiveness that allowed us each to suppose the other was doing pretty well (Halliday 20).

Not only was sex a matter of great interest to the undergraduate Berryman, it was also a difficult subject about which to speak, even with his closest friend. As significant is the fact that the two friends were incapable of discussing their sexual shortcomings. Sex and sexual desire, then, posed an obstacle to language and expression, making it a ripe topic for a budding poet.

Along with the cultural constraints under which Berryman explored issues of sex and vice, Berryman found himself also within a particularly stifling poetic climate. In an article Berryman wrote for *The Partisan Review*, entitled "Waiting For The End, Boys,"⁵ Berryman described the climate in which poetry found itself around 1935, "the Auden climate." About this era, Berryman claims, "Poetry became ominous, flat, and social; elliptical and indistinctly allusive; casual in tone and form, frightening in import" (Berryman 254). What Berryman lamented was, primarily, Auden's overwhelming and oppressive influence, referring to it as "Auden Ltd. (Inc. I should perhaps say)" (Berryman 255).

As disturbing as Auden's presence was the lack of any alternative influences. Berryman disparaged the absence of any presences that veered away from this influence. "The young poets lately, in short," Berryman argued, "have had not fathers but grandfathers"—or, in other words, following Auden, nothing new emerged in poetry to open up "fresh avenues"

⁵ Berryman, John. "Waiting For The End, Boys." *The Partisan Review*. February, 1948: Volume XV, Number 2: 254-267. Hereafter, Berryman.

for young poet. What he longs for is something equivalent to the “revolutions by which a poetry is diverted from its course to a new course” (Berryman 262), a way “out of the Climate,” which is what the title of the article implies.

Berryman was a poet developing, with great self-awareness, within this very Auden climate. This essay attempts to track, in some respect, Berryman’s experimentations with poetic language, which were perhaps part of a process—Berryman breaking away from the climate that produced him. Through risks taken within his language and his life, Berryman found a distinct voice for representations of his own experience, becoming, in a sense, his own poetic “father.” Having only grandfathers, it was necessary for Berryman to take on the issue of his voice headfirst, and based on the general surprise of critics and scholars, there seems to have been very little precedent for what Berryman achieved.

Even now, Berryman seems to stand as an anomaly, a figure of interest in my eyes because of his incongruity with contemporary literary theory—particularly, Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” in which Barthes argues that, through writing, the author enters into his own “death,” and his text becomes a composite of various cultural and political forces. The relation between the two is not directly either a conflict or harmony; it is, in a way, both. This essay approaches Berryman’s writing as a site in which the poet transformed his own experiences through the mechanisms of poetry into something entirely different, lighter, less painful, less essentially real. To the extent that “John Berryman,” an actual person, wrote the texts examined in this essay, Berryman himself would agree that the personality in the poems is not precisely the actual individual that architected the texts.

The poetically constructed myth of John Berryman is not the equivalent of the man that wrote the poems. Neither is the myth of John Berryman as interpreted in this essay. The John

Berryman that this essay constructs based on the readings of the few poems analyzed is precisely not the author—but rather, a personality, a literary construction, artfully created and maintained, bearing some relation to Berryman’s experience but not the man himself. In that sense, despite the fact that this essay does attempt to re-create John Berryman—his attitudes towards desire and poetry—it is also aware, as Berryman was, that the personality through which the poems emerged was not an essential authorial identity, but rather a figure assembled within the text. Berryman embodies an ambivalent space, a poet who actively sought to create a life for himself in his art, yet also to dissociate that life from any living individual named John Berryman—the prime example of which is the semi-pseudonym of Henry in *The Dream Songs*.

With that in mind, the essay draws on the facets of Berryman’s poetry—syntax, for example—in order to demonstrate that, throughout his life, Berryman’s writing was a site in which the poet attempted to attain what Italo Calvino has referred to as lightness⁶. Weighed down both by cultural constraints on sex and the oppressive weight of Auden Inc., Berryman was forced to find a poetic voice through which both language and sex could shed weight. In doing so, Berryman not only challenged cultural norms, but also found a voice in which these difficult topics could be expressed with humor and pleasure. Calvino’s conception of lightness, which provides a framework for considering a relationship between style and existential conditions, argues for the use of literature to escape the “slow petrification” of the world. Two paths are available to the writer seeking lightness. First, it can be achieved through language itself by creating a lightness of style, and, second, it can be created through the writer’s way of seeing, i.e. using literature to “look at the world from a different

⁶ Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. New York: Vintage Books. 1993. Print. Hereafter, Calvino.

perspective, with a different logic” (Calvino 14). Berryman, whose understanding of the poem, this essay will demonstrate, bears some similarity to Calvino’s existential view of literature.

The essay is divided into four chapters, which examine Berryman’s output in a linear trajectory, selectively analyzing poems with relevance to issues pertaining to desire and style. Chapter One focuses on Berryman’s first book, *The Dispossessed*, in particular a poem entitled “The Statue,” establishing Berryman’s understanding of desire. Chapter Two shifts to *Sonnets To Chris*, a poem-diary Berryman wrote about his first extramarital affair, examining the way in which Berryman’s personal experience with desire resulted in a stylistic evolution, an injection of passion and intensity into his language. Chapter Three moves on to *The Dream Songs*, particularly Songs 1 and 4, paying particular attention to the role of humor in revealing the function of desire.

I: Seeing Berryman in “The Statue”

The statue, tolerant through years of weather,
Spares the untidy Sunday throng its look,
Spares shopgirls knowledge of the fatal pallor
Under their evening color,
Spares homosexuals, the crippled, the alone,
Extravagant perception of their failure;
Looks only, cynical, across them all
To the delightful Avenue and its lights.⁷

John Berryman’s early poetry, though lacking in the bizarre sounds of his puzzling long poem *The Dream Songs*, sets the stage for the explorations he was to undertake in most of his literary output. “The Statue,” the second poem in his first book, *The Dispossessed*, introduces the theme, a major Berryman concern, into which I will be conducting my own journey. In this essay, the particular concern of Berryman’s is referred to as “the problem of desire.” Desire, based on Berryman’s own depiction of it in “The Statue,” is a nebulous term, referring to the overarching metaphysical concept—i.e. the fact that humans are creatures of appetite, existing in a condition of desire, the object of which varies.

The reading of “The Statue” given in this chapter is presented as opposed to a trend in Berryman scholarship to portray the early Berryman as a mindless disciple of Auden and Yeats, epitomized by Adam Kirsch’s chapter on Berryman in *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*⁸. This chapter demonstrates that, as early as *The Dispossessed*, Berryman had a vision for the aim of his poetic output, appearing quite clearly in “The Statue.” Berryman, in “The Statue,” committed himself to being a poet

⁷ Berryman, John. “The Statue.” *Collected Poems 1937-1971*. Ed. Charles Thornbury. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989. 4. Print. Hereafter, CP.

⁸ Kirsch, Adam. *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2005. Print. Hereafter, Kirsch.

whose artwork would treat human imperfection⁹ as its main subject, in a mindful rejection of art's tendency to immortalize that which is considered great and virtuous. Like the critics alongside whom this essay analyzes "The Statue," Berryman is treated as a presence within the poem; the text stands in as Berryman, as a constructed literary myth.

A desire for eminence was certainly part of Berryman's poetic inspiration. The error in Kirsch's logic is to translate this desire into a defining quality of the early period's poetic output. In Kirsch's analysis, Berryman's desire "'to be' Yeats" (Kirsch 103) was the sole purpose for "The Statue." To impose this reading onto the poem is equivalent to transforming Berryman's poetry into the kind of meaningless statue Berryman himself attempts to reject through the poem. Kirsch proposed that Berryman "raises himself up to a Yeatsian height, and then finds himself with nothing to say"; the statue in the poem of Alexander Van Humboldt, which stands in Central Park, supposedly serves as "an emblem of his aspiration" (106). Kirsch's Berryman believed himself to be a man worthy of statuesque immortality, arrogant enough to believe that fame eludes him only because of "the brute ignorance of the average man" (107). Essentially, Kirsch posited that Berryman was using the poem as a means of constructing a false image himself as an eminent, heroic poet, one who attributed his lack of fame to the apish intelligence of society at large.

J.M. Linebarger, in his book-length study of Berryman, suggested as well that Berryman identifies with the statue. Linebarger's understanding of Berryman is that, for the poet, the statue symbolizes "not only a cynical awareness and resignation but also a kind of aristocratic pride that the poet shares"¹⁰ (Linebarger 31)¹¹. Kirsch implies that *The*

⁹ Berryman's notion of human imperfection is also nebulous, but desire proves itself to be central. Perfection, it seems, meant for Berryman a state of absolute satisfaction and possession, in opposition to which desire becomes a mark of *imperfection*—dissatisfaction, dispossession.

¹⁰ Linebarger, J.M. *John Berryman*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1974. Print. Hereafter, Linebarger

Dispossessed is “apprentice work” (Kirsch 106), and negligible in that regard, because nothing of import is communicated. But, though Berryman’s tone, in some respect, manages to “maintain an attitude of proud superiority” (Kirsch 108) towards the human figures in his poems, I will argue in this section that Berryman was, in fact, setting the stage for the major works that would follow. Beginning with “The Statue,” Berryman positioned himself as an artist whose poetry would grapple with that which, in his mind, had been traditionally “dispossessed,” abandoned by art—human imperfection, part of which is the problem of desire.

Berryman thought of himself, it seems, as more of an “insignificant dreamer” than a great poet. The clearest articulation of Berryman’s artistic intent lies in the final stanza, which Kirsch ignores. Linebarger’s analysis puts forth that, in that last stanza, Berryman imagined himself as the “insignificant dreamer” in a dark apartment, who “will close his eyes/Mercifully on the expensive drama/Wherein he wasted so much skill, such faith,/And salvaged less than the intolerable statue” (CP 4). These four lines reveal a posture of artistic insecurity, refuting directly the argument that Berryman at the time was an obviously disdainful and arrogant figure.

The myth of himself that Berryman created in “The Statue” was that of a poet sacrificing his skill for the hopeful attempt at immortalizing and elevating humanity’s flaws. Berryman’s artistic insecurity, present in “The Statue,” rested in the anxious depiction of the dreamer, whose commitment to creating the poetry of human imperfection is depicted as a potential waste of his craftsmanship. By focusing on the “dispossessed,” Berryman “salvaged” the discarded refuse of society, figures of minimal importance in relation to the

¹¹ It is telling that this essay has to refer to an analysis of Berryman’s poetry from 1974 in order to find any scholarship on an early poem by Berryman.

venerated men idolized in statues. Berryman understood that, in doing so, he was taking the risk of spoiling his “skill” and “faith,” of misdirecting his poetic attention. But, noting specifically that Berryman considered the dreamer’s poetic focus as a means of salvaging the socially discarded, he seems also to have believed that his sacrifice, so to speak, was a form of salvation, a way of immortalizing and redeeming the flawed presences.

Furthermore, the statue is far from an object with which Berryman identifies. As a symbol for the work of art, Berryman argues for the insignificance of its content—the “great man” whose relevance has faded—but also confirms the enduring physical form of the work of art as its undeniable virtue. In light of this, Berryman’s own poem veers away from this irrelevant concern with figures of great achievement, focused instead upon the very disfigurement ignored by the statue. Berryman constructs his poem in his vision of what might constitute the new, immortal statue—a statue whose product is a rigid, heavy elevation of the culturally and socially dispossessed into figures of immense importance. In uniting the living presences with the statue, through a common ground of “ruin” and “disfigurement,” Berryman proposes imperfection as the immortal topic that transcends life’s transience, art’s immortality, and time’s nullification of achievement.

Kirsch is right to suggest, though, that Berryman ultimately fails in making the figures of life seem like objects of any importance; Berryman suffered from an inability, in the poem, to differentiate between disdain for, and critique of, the living. However, the poem did foreground the problem of desire. It is through this particular philosophical meditation on desire that Berryman manages to elevate the figures of the homeless into symbols within a complicated discussion of a metaphysical issue. Through the symbol of the homeless, Berryman raises the desire issue, transforming the dispossessed into a metaphor for human

imperfection—the suffering engendered by need. Berryman’s tone, however, is the reason for the poem’s stylistic failure, as he adopts an excessive formal rigidity in an attempt to provide the symbolic homeless with the kind of importance that the statue’s stony pride provides Humboldt. Kirsch mistakes Berryman’s “tone of greatness”—dubbed “Yeatsian grandiloquence” by Randall Jarell—as an implicit identification with the indifferent, haughty statue.¹² But the tone is more of a stylistic matter, an attempt at recreating the physical contours of the statue, whose endurance and immortality Berryman upholds, not the insignificance of its subject matter.

“The Statue” puts forth the problem of desire by transforming the human presences into metaphors, each one representing a particular facet integral to the problem. Berryman ultimately does not distance himself entirely from the human, but attempts to place himself in close proximity. By positioning the “I” amongst the homeless awakening in the park, Berryman positions himself within the human, a symbolic statement of investment in the very human reality that the statue scorns:

Where I sit, near the entrance to the Park,
The charming dangerous entrance to their need,
Dozens, a hundred men have lain till morning
And the preservative darkness waning,
Waking to want, to the day before, desire
For the ultimate good, Respect, to hunger waking;
Like the statue ruined but without its eyes;
Turned vaguely out at dawn for a new day.

After positioning himself within the human, Berryman uses the problem of desire to bring the three different symbols of the poem into a philosophical dynamic. Embodying the problem of desire, the homeless find themselves “waking to want”; Desire is, in this case, the driving life

¹² Berryman indeed hungered for poetic eminence, declaring as early as 1938, “Given life and tenacity in discipline, I shall be a great poet” (Kirsch 106). Harboring an ambition, however, is not the same as “posturing” as a great poet, though Kirsch suggests the contrary.

force, the condition that animates humanity towards satisfaction in various forms. It is, on the one hand, a state of physical need—“hunger” and sexual “desire”; on the other hand, through a clever line break, Berryman also posits that desire can be satisfied through the achievement of “the ultimate good, Respect.”

The homeless are not only embodiments of the ambivalent possibilities through which desire can be satisfied. The coexistence of physical hunger and desire for respect is accompanied by the fact that, because of their constitutional hunger, the homeless are blind and “ruined.” The immediate awakening into desire places the homeless in an existential condition of mindless need, which is a cause of suffering. In other words, the problem of desire is its enigmatic contradiction. Identified in the poem as the driving life-force that leads to either pleasure or achievement, the homeless are examples of the way in which this same life-force can, when unquenched, result in a condition of suffering—of rejection, of isolation, all of which follows from an inability to receive respect.

Next, Berryman introduces the symbolic “lovers,” who act as a paradigm of a particular means of desire-satisfaction. In their presence as being within a love-relationship, the lovers are emblematic of desire satisfied through physical means—specifically, affection and sexuality. The purpose of the symbolic lovers within the poem is to express that this particular form of satisfying desire is inadequate due to its transience. Berryman directly points out that the lovers’ walks are “shortly to be over.” The inadequacy of pleasure runs through the stanza:

The sound of water cannot startle them
Although their happiness runs out like water,
Of too much sweetness the expected drain.
They trust their Spring; they have not seen the statue.

Berryman's gaze upon the lovers is concerned with a knowledge of their transience, to which they themselves seem unaware. The lovers' mistake is to trust the blooming life of "their Spring," ignoring the fact that this is a temporary state from which life necessarily fades.

This dismissal of physical satisfaction is further evident from Berryman's description of the lovers in stanza six. Unlike the eyes of the statue, which distinguish it and endow it with "pride," the lovers' "glancing" is as thoughtless as their physical gratification. "If they glance up, they glance in passing,/An idle outcome of that pacing/That never stops, and proves them animal." Berryman reduces the lovers to a subhuman bestiality. The body, the site of physical-sexual pleasure, Berryman describes in similarly mindless terms, conveying embodiment as a burden: "These thighs breasts pointed eyes are not their choosing,/But blind insignia by which are known/Season, excitement, loosed upon this city." The body is not only transient, but uncontrollable and "blind," and its mode of satisfying desire through pleasure is the result of a thoughtless instinct, rather than a more focused and thoughtful form of satisfaction.

In the world of "The Statue," "disfigurement is general." The homeless, the lovers, and even the statue are "ruined," each carrying time's blemish. The statue, symbolic of desire satisfied through "the ultimate good, Respect," this chapter has already established as being flawed. "Since graduating from its years of flesh," Berryman says, "The name has faded in the public mind." The key, however, is that it has transcended the transient satisfaction of the flesh, but only by virtue of its entry into the shell of formal art, not necessarily because achievement is a more valid means of satisfying desire. Nonetheless, Berryman does uphold "the ultimate good, Respect," above physical-sexual pleasure, but the statue's cultural irrelevance is understood as a problem in the poem. Ultimately pessimistic, "The Statue"

fails to finally find a serviceable escape from the contradiction of desire. Only the prideful shell of the work of art, its formal manifestation, is “tolerant” to the destructive motions of time.

The problem of desire, then, that Berryman has put forth in “The Statue” is that desire is a necessary condition of suffering. Necessary, that is, because desire is the life-force that drives human activity, a suffering that leads to pleasure. That pleasure, moreover, can take on a variety of forms—a transient, physical, sexual pleasure, which “The Statue” dismisses, and the immortality found within the shell of a work of art, which can only fade in meaning though not in appearance. The desire problem is to remain a constant throughout this essay, but Berryman’s attitude would undergo significant changes.

Having placed himself within a meditation upon human imperfection, and having made it the subject of his artistic focus, Berryman, in “The Statue,” began what was to be his long-term poetic enterprise. While Berryman positioned himself as a poet of human imperfection, he also failed to evoke any sign of life within the poem. “The Statue” is, ultimately, a poem that reads like, fittingly, a statue—with sonic weight, grandiloquence, and rigidity. His attempt to create poetry that “immortalizes” that which is human cannot be sustained solely through a posture, a statement of intent, or a convincing philosophical position. Were it sufficiently evocative to balance various concepts through argument—if only poems could be essays—then Berryman would have had a fantastic piece on his hands. In part, the absence of vigor in the poem is a result of the style, but it also relates to Berryman’s misuse of perspective; the poem uses both first- and third-person, but neither is made to function to its fullest potential. The first person only vaguely speaks for Berryman’s experience, and even then it maintains a distance, remains, as Linebarger correctly claims, “impersonal and aloof”

(31). Berryman's third-person voice does not radically shape the perspective in any significant way either, often relying on meditation and reflection to articulate its interpretations of a symbol.

The style, though, is also part of the poem's failure to make life felt. "The Statue" demonstrates the shortcomings of Berryman's early adherence to monotonous syntax. I isolate this as a trait of much of Berryman's early poems, but certainly not all of them, and also in a relative sense; even Berryman's most experimental early poetry pales in comparison to the wild modulations of his sonnets and songs. The first stanza of "The Statue," for example, is characterized by the clarity of its expression. At no point does Berryman "crumple" the syntax, as he would begin to do in the *Sonnets*. In terms of craftsmanship, then, Berryman resembles a sculptor; his understanding of the poem seems to have been that the aim of the poet was to "immortalize" its subject in a language as rigid, as heavy, as marble and stone. As a result, there is a slowness to the pace at which the stanza can be read, as though the language itself were a weight. This effect is achieved not only by its monotony, but also by the very structure of the sentence, which overuses of the interrupting modifying phrase:

The statue, tolerant through years of weather,
Spares the untidy Sunday throng its look,
Spares shopgirls knowledge of the fatal pallor
Under their evening colour,
Spares homosexuals, the crippled, the alone,
Extravagant perception of their failure;
Looks only, cynical, across them all
To the delightful Avenue and its lights.

The most musical moment, the last two lines, despite the use of a syntactical quirk to isolate the word "cynical," is not a radical enough variation to create any dynamic tension with the unbearably uninflected droning that anticipates it.

Before being able to fully convey the intensity of human experience, while also refracting it through transformative masks, Berryman would have to be immersed more fully in life experiences that called into question his philosophical stance on desire. It was to be his intense experience with passion's dual-edged sword—pleasure and suffering—that would force him to find a language for the expression of exuberance and desperation. And it would require a major personal and poetic failure for Berryman to understand that, though poetry can place a reassuring mask on painful experiences, it cannot fully transform one's existential conditions.

This chapter ends now by proposing a refutation to the argument established, which has been that, based on "The Statue," the early Berryman had no stylistic means of accessing the intensity he would later cultivate in his language. This is untrue, in some respect. The reality of the situation is that Berryman was unable to bring to bear any sign of vigor in poems that openly incorporated his own personal presence. "The Statue," a poem that meditates on Berryman's own conception of himself as a poet, lacks the intensity that would later characterize Berryman's voice. There is, however, a powerful sequence of poems in *The Dispossessed* that, in contrast, shows signs of the intensity that was to infect the musical songs and sonnets to follow—*The Nervous Songs*. One of these Songs in particular brings together well both the theme of desire and Berryman's already-dormant experimental impulse—"Young Woman's Song". The awkwardly crumpled syntax is a "nervous" language, conveying an intense anxiety. While his later experimentations, though sonically similar, were more invested in the passionate and the comic, the fact that these early instances of altered syntax are intended to be "nervous" implies that Berryman's anxiety about desire was itself a source of intensity early on.

The poem itself is about a young woman in a bath, reflecting on desire and lust, plagued by the anxiety of indecision and self-reproach. “The round and smooth, my body in my bath,/If someone else would like to too” (CP 49). Desire for the desire of the other animates the woman’s thought, and drives her towards longing for some form of human relationship. However, she expresses a hatred for her body as well, in part because she is deprived of the intimacy it demands. “I hate this something like a bobbing cork/Not going. I want something to hang to.” The attitude towards desire conveyed in the voice is conflicting, emblematic of the ambivalent state of tension that defines the experience of desire for the early Berryman.

The woman is symbolic, like the homeless from “The Statue,” of the problematic nature of desire—that it is both the animating force in human social life, but also a source of anxious suffering. This contradiction reemerges later in the poem, when the woman observes, “I suppose it was lust/But it was holy and awful.” The paradox of desire, Berryman claims at this point in his poetry, is not only that it is contradictory; he also has an intimation of the discovery he was to make in *Sonnets to Chris*, which is that, though lust is immoral, it is “holy,” a transcendently intense experience essential to life. In this poem, too, Berryman seems to understand a notion that would animate his problematic search for an as-yet-undiscovered justification for immorality—that, “What I am looking for (*I am*) may be/Happening in the gaps of what I know.” While this statement is opaque enough to be impossible to fully parse, that seems to be the point. The object of desire—satisfaction—is unsayable, only available in transient, imperfect manifestations.

Ultimately, though “The Statue” shows Berryman’s inability to find a language for the intensity of his own experience, his knack for constructing dramatic voices, from his very

first book, betrayed a latent experimental urge. It would not be until *The Dream Songs* that he would provide his own subjective experience of the world with a voice. And it was the voice—the mask—that would give him the liberty to express the full intensity of his consciousness, subverting the challenges of conveying experience in its fullness in the form of a poem.

II: “Crumpling a syntax at a sudden need”: *Sonnets to Chris* (1948)

“...I am this strange thing I despised; you are.

To become ourselves we are these wayward things.”

This chapter extends the analysis of Berryman’s understanding of the problem of desire and its relation to his transforming style. In Chapter One, I demonstrated how Berryman, in “The Statue,” identified desire as a conceptual quagmire. As articulated through the symbolic homeless, Berryman demonstrated the way in which desire is at once a source of suffering and pleasure. Within that duality, too, Berryman’s early understanding of pleasure was that there exist two forms of satisfaction. First, in the symbol of the lovers, Berryman conveyed the transient bliss of physical satisfaction, whose mode of resolving desire was quickly and summarily dismissed. More nuanced, however, was Berryman’s interpretation of the symbolic statue. As a commentary on the immortal work of art, the statue was both enduring and transient. Symbolically, the statue stood for the satisfaction of desire through the achievement of eminence—i.e, what Berryman claims is “the ultimate good, Respect.” Problematically, however, Berryman understood that even respect is transient, making it an equally invalid option as pleasure. Berryman dismisses both solutions, opting instead to idealize the position of the artist, whose work remains “tolerant,” transcends mortality, regardless of the subject of creation.

Stylistically, “The Statue” emulates the stiff weight of its central image, enacting a formal recreation of the poet-as-sculptor. Berryman, during the extramarital affair documented in *Sonnets to Chris*, experienced a discovery of the intensity and passion of desire, complicating his earlier understanding of pleasure as a form of satisfaction to be

philosophically dismissed. Desire remained problematic, but the experience of passion influenced his style, resulting in a chaotic and exuberant mode of expression.

Philosophically, Berryman revised his earlier philosophical attitude towards pleasure, embracing its capacity to infuse life with significance, while also acknowledging the guilt and suffering intrinsic to desire. While not central to my analysis, Sonnet 30 illustrates pleasure's capacity to infuse reality with meaning. It narrates a "weeks-long day," which Berryman struggles to call back into his poem. Berryman recounts the day as a laundry list of transient moments,

If I will I can—rain thrice, sheets, a torrent
Spaced by the dry sun, Sunday thirst that went
Sharp-set from town to town, down cul-de-sac
To smoke a blind pig for a liquid snack... (CP 85)

The poem ends by admitting that Berryman recalls only one moment in its entirety. The implication is that his desire somehow infused an otherwise insignificant moment with profound meaning. He says, "of that day I have wholly/One moment (weeks I played the friendly joker)/Your eyes married to mine in the car mirror." The insignificant moment—a passing glance—stands out, immortalized in Berryman's memory, because of the transformational effect that desire has on human experience. Desire, for Berryman, was the force that introduced into his own gaze the "extravagant perception" he understood as integral to the work of art. Desire, while still a contradictory source of both suffering and pleasure, has its own way of solidifying what seems transient. Unlike the art of "The Statue," which uses pride and gravity to elevate that which is imperfect, the sonnets tap into the energy of desire to give weight to Berryman's transient and flawed being.

With the distinction between “The Statue” and Berryman’s sonnets in mind, it will become clear that this chapter tracks the relationship between Berryman’s understanding of pleasure and the stylistic risks he began to take in the *Sonnets to Chris*. Looking, in particular, at Sonnet 58, the chapter notes the stylistic difference between Berryman’s description of the moral Good Samaritan figure and its description of pleasure. Experiencing and articulating in a distinctly intense language the exuberant thrill of pleasure, for Berryman, was a way of giving a fitting form to the burden of desire he had put forth in “The Statue.” While desire gave, for Berryman, a great deal of weight to human existence, finding the appropriate stylistic-formal shell through which desire could take on its appropriate intensity demanded a perspective on language that acknowledged the lightness of words within syntax. The more musical, rhythmic syntax, echoing the exhilaration of pleasure, conveyed the intensity of pleasure; and in finding a form, embracing the intensity of pleasure, Berryman made poetic use of an integral facet of desire—its intensity. Despite the fact that pleasure is transient as it is for the symbolic, it is a source of exuberance and energy that, in a way, nullifies the weight the contradiction he articulated in “The Statue.”

By “the lightness of words,” the argument of this essay in other words is that Berryman’s experience with desire—the intensity of pleasure and suffering—necessitated a style that reflected an experience characterized by energy. The way in which Berryman’s syntax mirrors energy is its modulations, its variations in speed. By varying between extremely fluid, mellifluous phrasing, and the weight of stark, direct statements, Berryman created a style in which high and low points were struck variously within each poem. In order to do so, Berryman appears to have had to become aware of the fact that words are weightless, entirely mobile within the syntax of a sentence. In the alterations Berryman made

to the syntactical structures within the *Sonnets*—and, even earlier, in “The Nervous Songs”—Berryman, through lightness, produced a style brimming with the energy and intensity of the conflicting elements of the problem of desire, i.e. the excruciating pain of deprivation and the exuberant thrill of pleasure. What heightened the intensity of emotion, too, was the overbearing weight of Berryman’s guilt.

Sonnet 58 contemplates directly the thrill of intense pleasure and the precarious chaos of deception. In order to do so, the description of the Good Samaritan exhibits a dull slowness of style, which is counteracted by the quick lift of energy in the description of the immoral life of pleasure. This particular sonnet is highly conventional, presenting the inability to exist morally as Berryman’s problem, a theme throughout the sonnets—that Berryman felt he was damned to be a passionate lover, incapable of being morally upright, because the moral lifestyle was, though satisfying in its particular way, lacking in the kind of vigor to which he was drawn in both life and art. First, Berryman invokes a Good Samaritan figure to symbolize the moral lifestyle of which society at large approves, and the merit of which Berryman recognizes,

Sensible, coarse, and moral; in decent brown;
Its money doling to an orphanage;
Sober... well-spirited but sober; sage
Plain nourishing life nor you nor I could down (CP 99)

While the Samaritan is “sensible,” “decent,” “sober,” “well-spirited,” and while he donates money to charity, he resembles the statue of Humboldt in the icy lifelessness of his “coarse” sobriety.

In what follows Berryman’s description of the Good Samaritan, Berryman sets up the contrast to his own immoral life of pleasure, which takes on an intensity and quickness in the rapid, mellifluous musicality. In other words, Berryman, the driver of the poem, hits the gas

pedal and heightens the intensity of the moment to reflect the energy of a life lived through deceptive pleasure:

Plain nourishing life nor you nor I could down
I doubt, our blinkers lost, blood like a clown
Dancing upon a one-night hot-foot stage,
Brains in a high wind, high brains, the next page
Trembling,—the water's fine, come in and drown.

The metaphor of the clown's dance on a stage reveals an underlying anxiety about Berryman being exposed in his moralistic performance, the sham he felt he was living as a deceptive husband. Anxiety—as much as pleasure and deprivation—adds another layer of intensity to the emotional chaos into which Berryman immersed himself, and out of which he pulled the vehemence of his language.

Berryman's experience with the intense existence he conducted in his extramarital affair was conflicting; even the profound thrill he enjoyed was an occasion for anxiety and chaos. Sonnet 39 laments the condition, Berryman asking himself if it is necessary for him to be immersed in the delirium of passion, wonder if he must,

Writhe in silly ecstasy? Banal
Greetings rehearse till a quotidian drawl
Carols a promise? Stoop an acolyte
Who stood my master? Must my blood flow bright,
Childish, I chilled and darkened? Strong pulse crawl? (CP 90)

Though daily life was made to seem dull by the intensity of his passion, Berryman's metaphor in the sonnet implies that the thrill of intensity was that it allowed him to revert into an infant state, his very blood becoming "Childish." The realization that he was more consumed by the desire to revert into a state of pure intensity of emotion—associated here with infancy—will reemerge in the discussion of *The Dream Songs*, but here it is seen as a curse, as an obstacle to leading the moral existence Berryman clearly felt obligated to conduct.

Berryman, questioning whether or not his passion is necessary, whether or not he can live morally like the Good Samaritan “in decent brown,” realizes that he is doomed to remain enthralled by pleasure. “I see I do, it must, trembling I see,” he says. Fastened in “smiling pain,” there is clearly the sense that Berryman is unable to fully accept the life-giving bliss of pleasure, too weighed down by moral considerations. Oddly, Berryman introduces pride into the sonnet, explaining that “neither pride don nor the fever shed/More, till the *furor* when we slide to bed,/Enter calature for the boiling brain.” It seems that pleasure is not just thrilling, but Berryman’s source of “pride,” a word that echoes back to “The Statue.” The statue’s distinguishing characteristic was his pride, and Berryman here conflates the two forms of satisfying desire, perhaps in one of his attempts to “justify” his immorality. Finding, through passionate pleasure, his own version of both the lovers’ “happiness” and the statue’s “pride” seems to be a kind of full transcendence, or erasure, of the suffering caused by deprivation. The thrill of pleasure negates the immorality, and the necessary pain of desire—all of which is extinguished in the fire of “sliding to bed.”

Berryman’s investment in passion is as artistic as it is personal. In the very next sonnet, in fact, Berryman introduces an image of a statue, echoing the early meditation upon weight and the shell of style in which content appears. He claims that his poetry no longer addresses or recreates the stiff, fixed, lifelessness of the statuesque. This provides another way of understanding the transition Berryman was undergoing—changing from a poet concerned with finding topics worthy of eminence, into a poet of movement and life:

Marble nor monuments whereof then we spoke
We speak of no more; spasmodic as the wasp
About my windowpane, our short songs rasp—
Not those alone before their singers choke—Our sweetest. (CP 90)

Comparing his songs to the wasp flitting about the windowpane, Berryman shares a poetic insight: “none hopes now with one smart stroke/Or whittling years to crack away the hasp/Across the ticking future.” Berryman seems to be saying that he no longer, as a poet, seeks to unlock the “hasp” or latch that fastens the future, i.e. no more does his verse seek to immortalize anything at all, but instead to focus on the transient lightness of the energetic and ever-moving wasp.

Berryman, in this sonnet, expresses the conviction that, “all our grasp/Cannot beyond the butt secure its smoke.” Berryman decides that poetry can only make use of what is available—that is, human experience. His entire vision of what function his poetry must serve has transformed after his experience with the passionate intensity of pleasure and need. The sextet that follows recapitulates Berryman’s insight, saying that the previous understanding of poetry’s function was, “A Renaissance fashion, not to be recalled.” Trying to discover the immortal subject, he claims, is not worthy of emulating in poetry. “We dinch ‘eternal numbers’ and go out./We understand exactly what we are.” In doing so, Berryman accepts the transience of human existence, the brief lightness of human life, without needing to immortalize, using instead that passionate brevity as the source of the new style in which he examines human imperfection. The thrilling intensity of passion, Berryman is saying, is more important than discovering any eternal truth. “Argent I craft you as the star/Of flower-shut evening: who stays on to doubt/I sang true?” It is almost as if transience is reason enough to be fantastical and passionate in the crafting of poetry. No one survives, “stays on,” to doubt the poetry’s truth, so the poetry might as well be as vivid and engaging, as “argent” and metallically bright, as possible.

Returning to Sonnet 58, which is stylistically an example of Berryman's "argent" crafting, the two descriptions, executed so distinctly, serve as evidence that Berryman understood the intensity of his newly passionate existence as an occasion for syntactical experimentation. Berryman infused his language with the energy of passion, which speaks to the function of craftsmanship—a reality of its own can be created in the language of poetry, whether true to life or not. The description of the Good Samaritan is written in curt phrases separated by semi-colons, its motion unfolding in a stilted uniformity: "Sensible, coarse, moral; in decent brown." The modifying words take on weight because of the emphasis placed on each through this attenuated sentence structure; each word, in these shrunken fields of language, stands out as a massive skyscraper. The syntax itself is monotonous, list-like, each word carrying the weight of emphasis.

The sonic effect of the description of morality is similar to that of "The Statue," which used an analogous structure of stacked phrases to create its tone of grandiloquence. Describing again an image of moral perfection, Berryman reverts to the tone of the earlier poem, but with greater awareness of its relation to his content. The monotony exists in tension with the music of exuberance that follows. As he slides, in the sonnet, into the description of his own immorality, the syntax grows more disorganized, heightens into the speed and fluidity of the passionate intensity being described. Reconstructing the sentence in the interest of heightened euphony, the poem is released into a lightness that reads with more fluidity, "nor you nor I could down/I doubt," for example, pairing sounds through alliteration. Though it makes for a more musical verse, it welcomes a reading speed that feels more dangerous, more haphazard, like the one-foot dance of immorality described in the

song. That is, the syntactically produced intensity resonates with the thrilling quality of passion.

At this point, having considered the important role that Berryman's experience with the intensity of passion played in the transformation of his style, the chapter will transition to focusing on the attempted idealization of immorality and the poem that inspired Berryman to create the sonnets. This is the more problematic element of *Sonnets to Chris*—that it was an attempt at making “wickedness soluble in art” (CP 70), as Berryman himself clarified in the collection's preface, a hopeful use of poetry's transformative capability in the interest of creating the ideal world through which he could escape the deception and suffering caused by his affair. Both the poem and the intensity of passion are caught in a naive idealization, which overestimates the capacity of both to have an effect on one's lived experience.

By making wickedness “soluble,” Berryman meant that he sought a justification for immorality through poetry. Again, Berryman's understanding of poetry is that it has a transformational effect. Not only were his experiments with language a means of more accurately conveying the lightness and thrill of pleasure, the stylistic risks were an adventure in the hidden possibilities of the language. Berryman hoped that if he could experiment enough with the language, he might find a phrase that might justify the immorality that haunted him:

I prod our English: cough me up a word,
Slip me an epithet will justify
My daring fondle, fumble of far fire
Crackling nearby, unreasonable as a surd,
A flash of light, an insight (CP 103)

Berryman would later understand that this attempt to moralize immorality was the Sonnets' “original fault.” Ultimately, his experiment failed. The reason why the endeavor was problematic in the first place, though, is that its attempted idealization of reality resulted in

implicating Berryman in a solipsistic naivete; such an idealization assumes that certain facets of being can be erased, such as shame, guilt, and social-moral conventions. Or rather, such a hopeful attitude overestimates the influence of poetry on reality, idealizing language to the extent that it can alter historico-cultural constructions that have developed over centuries, in this case morality. In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman would have to de-idealize the world of his poetry again in order to re-examine the mechanisms of desire.

Since the poems are intensely bound up with Berryman's personal experience, Paul Mariani's reading of Berryman's journals show that Berryman was struggling with more emotional chaos than the sonnets let on in their attempted justification of immorality:

What, he wondered, was holding his marriage together? He even fantasized Eileen and Chris' husband pairing off like atoms into new constellations, the four making two new, happy couples. Then he discovered he was enjoying himself once more in Eileen's company, and his guilt came crashing down on him with renewed force. But he was also angry and confused, and hated playing the devoted husband when he was obsessed with this other woman. He wanted no more of 'this pretence-of-relation-we-don't-have-and-can't-have-again and this kindness more cruel than torture.' Better perhaps to leave Eileen than continue this charade of a marriage. Then, one night, doing the dishes together, Eileen herself asked him why they kept up the marriage at all. Come fall, he promised her, if things didn't improve, he would move out. Then he stormed out of the apartment and wandered up to the lake, shaking at what he'd said.¹³
(Mariani 195)

Clearly, then, the effort to make immorality "soluble" in the sonnets was an attempt at using poetry as therapy, but also as a intervention on cultural ills such as morality; the notion that poetry can alter a person's psychology is far less far-fetched than the notion of a poem transforming a cultural climate, though neither is wholly inconceivable. Nonetheless, Berryman's attempt at easing his own guilt was mistaken, in his mind, as an attempt at "justifying immorality" in a more philosophical sense. Berryman's marital turmoil, his

¹³ Mariani, Paul. *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1990. Print.

deceptive behavior, and his emotional instability were all perhaps insupportable; Berryman's immense personal investment in poetry's potential arose out of his life's excruciating circumstances, the only positive of which was the pleasure he found in the wild joy of his affair.

Though Berryman failed in his transformation of immorality, the sonnet sequence was an excellent format for the undertaking, since the sonnet formally develops an argument, and the sequence's length allows for a sustained analysis. As a result, the sequence as a whole is a far more nuanced examination of desire than a single poem like "The Statue." Because it is sequential, it is a sustained analysis, giving more time for thematic development. The sonnet, moreover, lends itself to intellectual argument; typically, Italian sonnets created a compact argument, presenting a problem in the octave, and then a resolution in the sestet. Berryman's cerebral analyses, which seemed out of place in "The Statue," have a home in the sonnet. At the same time, a sonnet is a "little song," rhymed and rhythmic, conventionally using intellectual argument to meditate musically on the passionate realm of emotions. The sonnet made for the ideal form in which to conduct his personal-poetic experiment, yet its necessary musicality demanded of Berryman a stylistic risk-taking that would push the boundaries of his use of syntax and language.

Sonnets is a philosophical and poetic paradigm shift for Berryman. While the discoveries he made about the function and language of poetry seem, based on the continued formal experimentation, to have remained vital to him as a poet, the ideal world without morality was clearly a misguided attempt at idealizing the function of a poem. The numerous justifications he wrangles up are extremely unconvincing. In Sonnet 58, the solution he proposes is historical, citing the "corruption of the working classes" in eighteenth century

England as the point at which attitudes towards eroticism shifted. It is unclear if Berryman is being completely forthright, and on whose understanding of the eighteenth century Berryman is basing his opinion. At that time, Berryman argues, “kisses” began “opening on betrothals,” that is to say, pleasure somehow became attached to social structures such as marriage. This, he claims, occurred as a result of a general cultural fear of publicly enjoyed pleasure and mirth. Society, Berryman argues, “writhes” in discomfort whenever music is gleefully released, when “shawm and flute flutter the twilight,” and when pleasure is public, i.e. “Conjugal, toothless, has a booth at the fair.” Berryman’s historical justification, while convincing in its historical way, contradicts the more powerful sense that, throughout *Sonnets to Chris*, he discovered the more powerful truth of passionate intensity. History is not what justifies pleasure. Rather, pleasure justifies itself, since it infuses life with meaning and intensity.

But Berryman, for whatever reason, could not be satisfied with this, and remained adamant on somehow framing the issue within moral conventions. The attempt at making immorality “soluble” was a failed experiment, the sonnets’ “original fault,” a form of wickedness in the poetry’s own right. The way in which intensity influenced the subject and language of Berryman’s work—the poetic, rather than moral, justification of pleasure—seems, though, like a valid outcome—a solution in its own way. Berryman’s commitment to making artistic use of the intensity he found so engrossing is a testament to his being a student of life, a quality without which his poetry would have remained mired in the monotonous grandiloquence of “The Statue.” The poetry should not suffer from the same moral judgments as Berryman himself deserves. In fact, the poetic discoveries, in a rather meaningful way, do indeed make “wickedness soluble in art.” While “soluble” can mean

“capable of being solved,” it can also mean, “capable of being *dissolved*.” When a substance dissolves, it transforms from a solid into a liquid, becoming perhaps lighter, but certainly more malleable and fluid. In the most objective sense of the word, Berryman discovered that, as soon as intensity found its way into his poetry, both language and style took on greater fluidity in his hands, a malleable lightness. Berryman exerted more control over the language with a greater degree of ease, becoming a significantly more interesting poet in the process of his descent into an unfortunate, destructive affair.

III: Humor and *The Dream Songs*

Published in two volumes—*77 Dream Songs* (1964) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968)—*The Dream Songs* is a long poem organized into seven books containing three-hundred and eighty-five individual songs. This chapter examines the use of humor in the portrayal of the pain of desire in Song 4. What takes place in *The Dream Songs*, which is absent from any of Berryman's prior poems, is Berryman's use of the poetic mask, Henry, allowed him the liberty to convey shameful experience of suffering through humor, and, in doing so, finding a way of putting artifice to use. Drawing on Berryman's conception of the poem as a transformational art form, this chapter considers the use of humor as a way of reframing the suffering engendered by desire. In this reframing of suffering, Berryman transforms pain into humor, the effect of which is ambiguous.

In one sense, the transformation of pain into humor is a way of transcending the suffering evoked. This is a conception of humor drawn from Sigmund Freud, who argues that the humorous attitude "refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure."¹⁴ This would be an argument for Berryman's use of humor as a way of coping with the suffering being represented in the Song. Certainly, Berryman's humor is, in fact, amusing, and through the particular lens, the suffering portrayed seems to be diminished in importance—lightened, so to speak. This chapter, though, will argue for an additional understanding of Berryman's humor—as an ironic humor, one through which Berryman unsettles the reader's comfort and, in doing so, draws

¹⁴ Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. John Morreall. Albany: University of New York Press, 1987. 111-116. Print. Hereafter, Morreall

one even closer to the fact of human suffering, questioning the way in which one is to respond.

Most scholarship on *The Dream Songs* is of an overarching nature, struggling with the general themes, structures, ideas, and concerns of the entire work. Critics have tried to decipher the long poem's overall structure, which is nonexistent. To the extent that scholars are expected to trust Berryman himself on the matter, the poet has stated that there is no discernable architecture to the poem. In a 1968 interview with the *Harvard Advocate*, Berryman was asked, "Is there any ulterior structure to *The Dream Songs*?" He answered in the negative:

Ah—you mean, somebody can get to be an associate professor or an assistant professor by finding it out? Mr. Plotz, there is none. *Il n'y en a pas!* There's not a trace of it. Some of the Songs are in alphabetical order; but, mostly, they just belong to areas of hope and fear that Henry is going through at a given time. That's how I worked them out.¹⁵

My intent is not to address these questions that treat *The Dream Songs* as a structural entity. Attempting to address these mysteries is the equivalent of a dog chasing its own tail. Though they are fascinating mysteries to explore, the use of syntax and humor in the Songs is more relevant to this essay's interest in Berryman's understanding of the function of poetry.

The Dream Songs, though, is an anomaly—a maze of unanswered questions, which Berryman seems to have purposely created in order to puzzle readers. In the "Young Woman's Song," from *The Dispossessed*, this notion of mystery arose as a driving force behind desire. "What I am looking for (*I am*) may be," Berryman said, "Happening in the gaps of what I know." That which appears to be mysterious infuses one with a drive to fully understand, a desire for a complete knowledge of the mysterious object. Considering the fact that the theme of desire is central not only to *The Dream Songs*, but also his entire body of

¹⁵ Plotz, John. "An Interview with John Berryman." *Harvard Advocate* 103, no. 1 (spring 1969): 4-9. Print.

work, Berryman seems to have made use of his understanding of desire in the creation of a work of literature.

In terms of a dynamic of desire between the reader and Berryman's work, the effect is a simple matter of creating intrigue, of using the poem as a site in which the readers' boundaries of understanding, of belief, of comfort, and of confidence all can be challenged and expanded. In response to the mystery, part of which is the figure of Henry, I have tried to come to my own personal understanding of *The Dream Songs*, and to remain true to it in this essay. The fact is that, due to Berryman's use of language, there can only be a personal reading of his poetry. The personal understanding of the poetry I have come to is based on the idea of a mask—a tool through which experience can be transformed, made more tolerable for the conscious mind. The question of Berryman's use of minstrel blackface, for example, can be understood as another way of suggesting that even the most horrendous atrocity, such as slavery, can be made funny and entertaining—if *only one wears a mask*. That, in a nutshell, also explains the function of the mysterious "Henry," who both "is and is not" John Berryman. That he "is and is not" the poet may seem like a trick or a paradox, but it is in fact Berryman's honest admission that Henry is a mask, and that the mask changes the way in which reality is read.

In a more abstract sense, Berryman's understanding of the mask as a tool for transforming reality also serves as a useful metaphor for his understanding of the function of a poem. I take this from a passage in Berryman's critical biography of Stephen Crane. Discussing Crane's poetry, Berryman makes an interesting point, one that has a way of telling us as much about his own work as it does Crane's. The poems Berryman analyzes, he says, "have in in common also cruelty and pity, their nakedness, a kind of awful bluntness;

and contemptuous indifference to everything that makes up ‘poetry’ for other people. What shall we do with them?” If I did not know any better, I would think Berryman is narrating my own thoughts about *The Dream Songs*. But, of course, that would be ludicrous.

Nonetheless, Berryman goes on to describe Crane’s poems in medical terms, coming to the understanding that poetry can be used to alleviate suffering:

[Crane’s poems] are not like literary compositions. They are like things just seen and said, *said for use*. The handwriting of doctors is not beautiful; the point of their prescriptions is just to be made out. (It is remarkable, I have noticed since the present chapter was written, that Crane used the peculiar word “pills” for his poems...) Robert Graves, one of the shrewdest, craziest, and most neglected students of poetry living, laid out a theory of the origin of poetry once. A savage dreams, is frightened by the dream, and goes to the medicine man to have it explained. The medicine man can make up anything, anything will reassure the savage, so long as the manner of its delivery is impressive; so he chants, perhaps he stamps his foot, people like rhythm, what he says becomes rhythmical, people like to hear things *again*, and what he says begins to rhyme. Poetry begins—as a practical matter, for *use*. It reassures the savage. Perhaps he only hears back again, chanted, the dream he just told the medicine man, but he is reassured; it is like a spell... Now Crane’s poetry is like a series of primitive anti-spells... He has truths to tell... So Crane just says, like a medicine man *before* chanting or poetry began. And what he says is savage: unprotected, forestlike.... Part of the irony in Crane’s poetry results from the imposition of his complex modern doubt upon a much stronger primeval set of his mind.¹⁶

For an amateur student of poetry like myself, this understanding of the poem is both oddly basic, and also profoundly meaningful. Of course, representation is always also a transformation of reality—this doesn’t seem like much of a revelation. But what Berryman means is that art actually alters human well-being, and changes one’s orientation towards the self. As such, the case is not simply that psychology influences representation; Berryman holds that the inverse is also true—that art is a sort of spell, that it infects one’s mind, almost invasively. The work of art transforms a subject’s perception of the world, thus altering the

¹⁶ Berryman, John. *Stephen Crane: a critical biography*. New York: Cooper Square Press. 2001. 273. Print. Hereafter, Crane.

subject's psychology, their entire orientation towards themselves and the world. Poetry is a way of re-understanding what can be mortifying and excruciating to the human mind—can lighten that which weighs on one's thoughts.

What Berryman's poetry reveals is that accessing the poem's potential for lightening is extremely complex. Neither is entirely a positive, reassuring, helpful transformation; more often than not, in the songs, Berryman's attempts at lightening a situation may only be a way of making that situation more unsettling. In this essay, I have demonstrated how the problem of desire weighed heavily on Berryman's mind; thus far, my analysis has shown that neither "The Statue" or *Sonnets to Chris* were able to lighten the problem of desire whatsoever. "The Statue" sought to elevate and immortalize the problem into a subject of statue-esque significance, while the *Sonnets*' portrayal of pleasure is haunted by Berryman's inability to fully accept and embrace desire.

In *The Dream Songs*, desire remained a major source of pain and anxiety. Dream Song 25, for example, expresses through Henry a desire for return to infancy, the time in which his "need" did not torture him. "Hand me back my crawl, condign Heaven," Henry says, begging for the infant's form of movement, a metaphor for a more innocent and asexual physical existence. "Condign" means "well-deserved, fitting," and the phrasing seems to suggest that Henry is either directing his request towards Heaven, or that "condign Heaven" modifies "crawl."¹⁷ That infant state, Henry claims, is well-deserved. "Tighten into a ball/elongate & valved Henry. Tuck him peace." Reading the lines of Song 25 with Berryman's conception of poetry as a reassuring "spell" in mind draws my attention towards the verbs, "tighten" and

¹⁷ Both are meaningful. The question of religion in Berryman's poetry is extremely interesting, since he was for quite a long time a learned atheist. He conducted scholarly research into the question of God, immersing himself in theology, but never fully committing to an acceptance of God. Nonetheless, *The Dream Songs* constantly expresses two conflicting emotions: the desire/need for God, and an active rebellion against God.

“tuck,” particularly the deeply simple three-word sentence, “Tuck him peace.” Berryman expresses, with great clarity, an extremely basic human desire for comfort and peace, and through verbs that evoke the actions that would engender a calm state of body and mind.

The verbs in the poem, because they imply the presence of an external force acting upon Henry, reveal Berryman’s hope for salvation from desire. Henry asks to be tucked and tightened, to be altered by an external presence. Henry then asks, more directly, for the end to his desire. “Render him sightless,” he says, “or ruin at high rate his crampon focus,/wipe out his need.” Again, the verbs in these lines are vital to the effect of the poem. Henry longs to be rendered sightless, for an external presence to cause him to be unable to construct desires based on his perceptions, for his need to be wiped by another like a blemish. If the poem was indeed a spell, with the goal of assuaging the suffering Berryman felt because of desire, the verbs’ effect goes beyond expressing the yearning for redemption from desire. The verbs, all of which imply that Henry is in need of an external presence’s intervention, express Henry’s sense of impotence. But more importantly, the verbs express a longing for more than salvation from lust—they provide a language for Berryman to express desire for passivity. In doing so, Berryman subverts the assumed function of a verb. Rather than using the verb to convey action, Berryman conveys Henry’s desire for transformation-in-passivity.

The usage of verbs in Song 25 serves as a useful example of my understanding of Berryman’s re-presentation of the problem of desire through humor, in that it is a subversion of a traditional usage. Though desire for Berryman remained a source of both pleasure and suffering, the depiction of this duality in Dream Song 4 dislocates desire from Berryman’s subjective experience of pain/desire, repositioning desire as a source of humor. The humor, however, is not a means through which Berryman escapes the suffering depicted, or not

entirely; through lifting suffering into humor, Berryman asserts a more troubling possibility, i.e. the notion that experiences of suffering have the potential for humor. Rather than being an escape, humor forces Berryman's reader to look closely at suffering, and to dismiss another person's pain, testing the extent to which a reader is willing to put aside pity in favor of pleasure. Berryman uses humor, among other things, to make use of his readers' selfishness.

De-idealizing Henry's World

In the poetic experiment Berryman conducted with *Sonnets to Chris*, Berryman sought to justify immorality, an undertaking that amounts to an idealization of pleasure. To understand the difference between *Sonnets to Chris* and *The Dream Songs*, it is first important to keep in mind the ideal world Berryman attempted to construct in the *Sonnets*—a reality in which immorality could be dismissed, a hedonism in which pleasure could be upheld as its own virtue. Berryman's strong commitment to morality, ultimately, resulted in the *Sonnets*' failure to fulfill the construction of that ideal reality. The last sonnet provides an image of Berryman's understanding of the naivete of his idealization: "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" (CP 129). Pleasure, though a source of newfound ecstasy in Berryman's life and poetry, was also a tool for repressing the injustice of his actions.

From the very beginning of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman de-idealizes the world of the poem, citing the first experience of loss as the moment in which Henry's reality takes its unimpressive, painful form¹⁸:

¹⁸ As *The Dream Songs* deals with a particular individual's fictional subjectivity, the poem will be referred to as its own world, meaning more that *The Dream Songs* is an interpretation of life rather than an attempt at faithfully recreating it. In that way, though Henry is a fictional character, it is through Henry that Berryman interprets life.

All the world like a woolen lover
Once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
Open for all the world to see, survived. (DS 3)

A stanza from Dream Song 101 defines what Berryman means by loss:

...a sense of total LOSS
afflicted me thereof:
an absolute disappearance of continuity & love
and children away at school, the weight of the cross,
and everything is what it seems. (DS 118)

Berryman uses Song 1 to ensure that the world in which he portrays Henry's existence is always haunted by an undercurrent of loss. Henry has learned that "everything is what it seems." Reality, in that first song, is de-idealized, not a fantasy of "continuity & love" but rather a burden, "the weight of the cross." Quite significantly, loss is also the moment at which Henry feels the inverse need for "continuity & love." That is, loss is not only the experience that de-idealizes existence; it also is the moment in which desire makes itself felt.

The way in which Berryman establishes Henry's de-idealized world is through a de-idealization of the enigmatic "loss" Henry suffers. This reversal occurs through Berryman's irony, which conveys the most devastating of traumatic experiences with directness, simplicity and brevity. The effect of the irony is to drain the entire trauma of Henry's initial loss of its emotional content. In this case, Berryman's ironic dearth of sentimentality serves as an inverse example of the analysis this essay makes of Dream Song 4 below. Song 1 empties Henry's trauma of all emotion, conveying it with the utmost gravity, not allowing the reader any amount of ambiguity with regards to whether or not the instance is traumatic. With brevity and directness, Berryman's voice treats Henry's trauma with indifference, a flatness of tone that unsettles its reader; whereas one might expect a lyrical outpour of

emotion, Berryman's tone expresses Henry's loss with a stark, factual, plain-spoken mask. As with the way in which humor might call into question a reader's understanding of suffering, flatness in Song 1 calls into question one's attitude towards trauma. In a world where "everything is what it seems," trauma no longer is reason for mourning or grief, but rather a weight to be accepted without question or regret.

Without attempting to overreach into Berryman's biography, Henry's loss, as articulated in Song 1, is presented to the reader as a moment in which a transformation occurs—and Henry, all of a sudden, is haunted by the sense that there is something amiss, that there is a need within himself that goes forever unfulfilled. "All the world like a woolen lover/once did seem on Henry's side," begins the stanza; basically, Berryman sets up the loss as the moment in which Henry formulates an understanding of his own constitutional desire. Whereas, at some point, Henry believed everything necessary was available to him, the "departure" lead to the loss of that ideal of completeness. The first loss also creates Henry's first intimation of desire. Berryman creates, in other words, a character whose subjective experience of reality is not only de-idealized, but also defined by a permanent state of desire. The desire, ironically, is for an idealized reality, the reality of infancy, of a state in which desire is irrelevant. What Henry longs for is the end of longing. Again, this is what Berryman's text expresses in begging, "hand me back my crawl." Henry is defined by an impossible desire.

Having tangled this essay into a knot, the following section seeks to interpret the comic in Song 4, an analysis that required the establishment of Henry's de-idealized reality, however unmanageable such a hypothesis may have been. While it is impossible to explain, objectively, the mechanisms of humor, Soren Kierkegaard's conception of the comic serves

as a fitting framework in which Berryman's own humor might be understood. The reason being, in this case, that Kierkegaard's definition takes into account several mutually central considerations—the role played by pain, and the humor of a contradiction. If nothing else, Henry's reality is itself a contradiction, in which the pain of desire plays a major role.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard defines the comic as being “present wherever there is a contradiction, and wherever one is ignoring the pain, because it is non-essential.”¹⁹ Several examples are given, and the work of one who seeks to explain the comic is in locating the contradiction, as it must be identified and teased out. What requires clarification, however, is Kierkegaard's notion of “non-essential” pain, and on that matter Kierkegaard expanded, “The comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is painless.” That is to say, if pain is central to the comic contradiction, the humor cannot rely upon a condition of absolute pain; there must be a “way out,” a pain that is not absolute and lasting, suffering from which there can be a release.

In the Songs' text as interpreted within this essay, Henry's world is defined, from the very outset, by the fact that it has been emptied of idealizations. Yet, in contradiction, this loss of idealizations results in a consequent desire for an ideal state—the asexual, innocent infancy. The world built upon within Berryman's text operates within this contradiction ceaselessly, and in doing so locates itself directly in the thick wood of the absurd humor of an existential contradiction. The overarching comedy of Berryman's text is that Henry's experience of loss de-idealized reality for him, yet it also resulted in the emergence of desire, and desire functions by constructing idealizations. This contradiction could be tragic, but Berryman is shrewd enough to comprehend that the humor of desire is not in its tragically

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Morrell. 83-89.

mistaken re-idealization of the world, but in the fact that desire—specifically, now, I mean sexual desire—inflates and idealizes the most mundane and insignificant aspects of reality. This is the contradiction, in truth—not the fact that desire re-idealizes the de-idealized world that engendered said desire, but that desire idealizes the least significant, least mysterious elements of reality.

With this conception of the humor of desire in mind, Dream Song 4 is the example this essay uses in order to demonstrate an example of Berryman's comedy. By virtue of a creative use of enjambment and syntax, Berryman amplifies the weight of extremely mundane and insignificant elements of the experience being represented. Desire transforms the figure of the woman into an object of Henry's desire, whose fleeting eye contact becomes the springboard for a burst of repressed energy,

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

or falling at her little feet and crying
'You are the hottest one for years of night
Henry's dazed eyes
have enjoyed, Brilliance.' (DS 6)

The organization of the first sentence, which snakes across three lines of verse, places "twice" at its end, isolating the word on its own line. While two glances have absolutely no concrete significance, Henry's lust gives them an enormous amount of weight. The humorous contradiction, here, is in the fact that, simply because the woman has glanced "twice," Henry is suddenly ablaze with an inhuman charge of exuberant energy. His mind has jumped to the utmost extreme idealization of those two glances, and even so, all it takes is five people to prevent the release of that energy.

The triumph over suffering through humor rests in the fact that Berryman's particular brand of humor refuses to downplay the absurdity of desire. Henry's desire is portrayed as overpowering, functioning on an almost unimaginably intense scale. Where Berryman could have been reserved, in order to minimize the significance of the moment, his portrayal of the mechanism of lust contains the kind of exuberance and intensity that desire can infuse into an experience. Rather than use the poem as a space in which to "solve" the immorality of lust, as he did in *The Sonnets*, the Song plays with the fact that lust is transformative. As I showed above, the syntax has a function similar to desire, placing gravity on the glances upon which Henry fixates. But Berryman's attention to description is such that he transforms every object of Henry's desire into "delicious" food, heightening rather than diminishing the magnitude of desire.

As amusing as the contradictory nature of Henry's desire is, there is a contradiction between the experience represented and Berryman's poetic representation. While, within, Henry is brimming with both sexual and poetic fervor, the five-person presence of social policing functions so effectively that it forces Henry to contain himself. Henry's desire is, in part, a desire to express himself both physically and poetically, and the presence of Henry's lyrical verse demonstrates that, in the same way that physical pleasure can offer a release from desire, so too can poetry. Berryman's poem is the release from the pain in the contradiction. By putting Henry's absurdly intense suffering into verse, already, Berryman has created the release that Henry needs—yet, Henry remains unaware. The irony of the situation—Henry longing to break out in verse in Berryman's poetic representation of that longing—is the most amusing contradiction in the entire poem, and the only one from which the way out has been provided.

Berryman's use of humor in *The Dream Songs* encourages its reader to take pleasure in Henry's suffering. In doing so, Berryman calls into question the morality of readership. But, more importantly, Berryman's humor locates the poem itself not simply as a source of a humor, but as a site of pleasure in its own right. By finding the freedom, however indirect, to articulate his experiences of sexual failure, Berryman is able to articulate the repressed urge for poetry that Henry cannot express.

Conclusion: No Longer “Waiting For The End”

Within the context of a cultural shift towards more open attitudes towards sex, Berryman marks a literary output that took seriously the notion that poetry's function was not merely to shock its reader with vulgarities, but to use the poetic medium's mechanisms to lighten the psychological and cultural burdens. Berryman did so by openly treating his life as a source for his poems, and attempting to represent the intensity of pleasure through a distinct, lyrical mode. More significantly, however, Berryman finally found humor as a way to articulate the burdensome topics with lightness. The humor, however, was not merely entertaining or pleasing, but also discomforting in a way that forces its reader to reexamine both the content and the act of reading.

Reading Berryman has been unimaginably meaningful for me because it has, in a way, reconnected me with an earlier state of innocence. Once, like most children and adolescents, my own experience seemed to be the most important reality. I dwelled upon my life with an intensity that seems to have found itself translated into Berryman's poetry, reconnecting me to that sense of dramatic self-indulgence. Berryman's poetry, thankfully, has not inspired me to be absolutely self-important again. Rather, it has served as a reminder to live with intensity—to feel the world, and to articulate my experience, with passion. In a world of digital and ironic detachment, Berryman is a valuable (grand)father to adopt, because of his commitment to living and writing with an absolutely sincere vigor.

It is inevitable, from this point on—Berryman will remain an influence in my own poetry. How could it be otherwise? Berryman sought to lighten the weight of his own burdens, and in doing so he managed to create moving, emotional, thrilling poems. This study has shown me that, first and foremost, the poem is a site that welcomes risk. Rather

than attempt to create “poetry,” or to be a “poet,” my hope now is to fail productively. To understand the poem in this way is to make it an extremely exciting literary form.

Beyond that, this study has shown that style can be more than just an opportunity for experimentation. Paying close attention to the sound and movement of language can transform a poem into something more akin to a composition—a musical, emotional, and conceptual complex. Language has repercussions far beyond the poetic, extending into a possible effect upon the world outside of the poem as well. To be sure, this makes for another exciting possibility, heightening the stakes and promising the potential for a truly rewarding outcome.

But more than anything else, I find myself without a satisfactory academic conclusion, perhaps because the experience of writing this thesis has been far more emotional and personal than scholarly. With that in mind, rather than summing up this experience with a neatly knotted ending, my hope is that a poem will suffice:

John Berryman

Sip on a cig and call
home. Why, I oughta. Why, flowers,
are you blooming
in complaint, sticking out
your necks in thirst, sickly?
My own neck is sore
from the bowing,
and the curtain's closing on.
Well! Things end.
No spilt milk.
It was not
fun while it lasted.
Thanks a million
for all the mosaics
of shattered thought.
Leave me alone, for now,
but not forever, Songs that
battered all night
my head: Songs,
made once and forgotten
but by me.

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