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Berryman's Voice

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Acknowledgements

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I. Introduction

The poetry of John Berryman was brought to my attention during the first quarter I attended the University of Washington. The class was American literature, and the instructor, Cody Walker, introduced his notion of difficult laughter through the two characters of *The Dream Songs*, Henry and his unnamed friend. He described this kind of laughter as unsettling, a place where both comedy and tragedy are never very far apart; a place where the two coexist and reinforce each other. Despite the fact that the quarter system, and a survey course like American literature, is often too short to go in depth on a single subject such as this, I nevertheless developed an affinity for characters that would produce this effect. Characters like Goethe's Mephistopheles, Shakespeare's clowns, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and Aristophanes' Dionysus all seemed to contain traces of both comedy and tragedy. In any event, Berryman stuck with me and, since I had to write a five credit senior thesis, I decided to reduce the scope of my project by focusing only on Berryman.

About a year after being exposed to Berryman's poetry, I found myself exploring his old teaching grounds at the University of Minnesota. After a while, I came upon the Washington Avenue Bridge, located between the east and west campuses, and a quarter of the way across I stopped to look over the rail at the Mississippi. To my right, about one hundred feet down, there was a small boat puttering along the dirty water, and to my left was a rigid looking embankment. It had been 30 years ago that John Berryman decided one January morning to climb the rail, give a rumored final wave, and come crashing down upon that embankment. I remained there for a while contemplating the

plummet while fragments of his Dream Songs¹ bounced around in my head: “Westward, hit a low note, for a roarer lost / across the Sound but north from Bremerton, / hit a way down note.” Then I thought about that rumored final wave and caught myself cracking a smile, even laughing a little: “Hit a high long note, for a lover found / needing a lower into friendlier ground / to bug among worms no more.” These fragments are from Dream Song 18 titled “A Strut for Roethke,” which, like so many other dream songs, produces this kind of situation where a reader finds himself caught in-between ‘high notes’ and ‘low notes.’

Now, the primary question that lands me into my first section is: what generates this oscillating effect? A clue to solving this is contained, I think, in these high and low notes, or rather in tones. Tone is just as much a property of a written text as syntax or grammar, though it is far more difficult to formalize, and it is through tone that we can situate a speaker or voice within comic and tragic economies or poles. I use the terms economy and pole somewhat interchangeably, though I think there is a subtle distinction. When I refer to a comic or tragic economy, I mean an index of tones which can be described as an expression of either one, and when I refer to a comic or tragic pole I am placing a single tone within a particular conceptual region conventionally understood as comic or tragic. Once we can determine which pole a voice is located within, the goal becomes to consider how it negotiates with the other pole; how it manages to interact, coexist, and finally reinforce the other pole. In the end, my reading of John Berryman’s poetry will be a dialectical one. I intend to map the tensions between comedy and tragedy and also, though very briefly, poetic dictions. I will ask: what strategies does the poet employ to contain both the comic and the tragic modes within his poems? Through

¹ Berryman’s calls his 6 line 3 stanza poems Dream Songs.

this question I hope to get inside the tonal negotiations that occur throughout *The Dream Songs*.

After this has been explored, the next section of my essay will consider how the comic and tragic tonal interactions present themselves in the performative Dream Songs. This section focuses on the context of *The Dream Songs* and the relationship between the two characters, Henry and his unnamed friend. I call this section “Misdirection & Excess” in reference to two writing strategies which Berryman grafts onto these characters; writing strategies which I think demonstrate a degree of continuity in terms of the dialectical structures of the first section. The question I ask in this section is: how do Henry and his friend manage to balance each other? This question opens up the interesting and complex relationship between the protagonist, Henry, and the unnamed friend. Essentially, this essay offers a schematically driven explanation of how tones function within the performative and non-performative Dream Songs.

II. Tonal Dialectics: ‘Doubly I Sing’

When asked in an interview if *The Dream Songs* had a plot Berryman quickly shot back: “those are fighting words. It has a plot. Its plot is the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world.”² The general question that leads me into this section is how that personality was created, and I am adopting a strategy that seeks to engage with moments of the text when certain transitions in style or inflections of tone occur. From there, the goal is to map these moments as they emerge out of tonal economies which negotiate between comic and tragic modes of speaking, and also between two kinds of poetic diction. This economy can be read dialectically in the sense that the tensions between modes of speaking and dictions in the text operate within binary poles. These poles come to hold the voice together. In many ways, I find that the dialectic is predicated by a sense of loss, and by loss I am generally referring to the deprivation of former libidinal investments, and the negotiations, in turn, become responses to such loss. I am less concerned about this predication than I am with the subsequent negotiations, but the inter-relationship will sometimes preoccupy my analysis. Essentially, my aim is to make the “plot,” or rather the personality of Henry, more accessible by approaching the dialectical structures within the text.

To begin with, let’s explore the negotiations between tragic and comic modes of speaking. One of the first things that should be mentioned is that many of the dream songs, perhaps the work as a whole, carry an elegiac disposition. Berryman himself refers to the work as a “complex investigation of death” (DS, 335). Often dream songs are dedicated to Berryman’s close personal friends and fellow poets who have passed

1. Interview: Harvard Advocate. “An Interview with John Berryman.” Thomas, Harry. Berryman’s Understanding. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 1988. Page 7.

away. Berryman himself includes a list of who certain Dream Songs are dedicated to in his prefatory note. In some ways, then, the dialectic in the *Dream Songs* emerges out of confrontations with loss. The experience of loss summons a tragic mode of speaking and in order for the voice to “economize” itself, in the sense of avoiding a kind of purely tragic outpouring, comedy is needed. And so begins the negotiation. For example, Dream song 149, an elegy for Delmore Schwartz who was both a poet and a friend of Berryman’s, can serve to introduce the dialectic which I will examine at length in other poems:

This world is gradually becoming a place
where I do not care to be any more. Can Delmore die?
I don’t suppose
in all them years a day went ever by
without a loving thought for him. Welladay.

This is just the first stanza, but notice that there are two comic interruptions that keep Henry “economized”, or the tragic outpouring in check. First, the death of Delmore clearly leaves Henry with a kind of resentment towards mortality which is explicit in the first two lines; we find him thinking about renouncing the world. Yet who do we find Henry asking if Delmore can die? Is it some transcendent power, himself, or possibly the reader? Regardless of whom the question itself is absurd, of course Delmore can die, and this becomes the very moment at which the comic mode enters the poem. In other words, this form of resentment is hopeless; a vain raging against time and to ask such a question creates a funny effect within the otherwise somber process of mourning. Ultimately, readers of Berryman can expect these tonal pivots from tragedy to comedy, and can begin to understand how these tones interact and finally *reinforce* each other. The second comic interruption is not quite as subtle. The all-too generous appraisal of the

relationship provides space for the comic mode to enter in the form of a playful ‘welladay’ modification.

The way in which I am presenting these parts of Berryman’s voice might seem misleading. It is as though I am analyzing the agency of voice like it were some kind of bifurcation, but yet I speak of Berryman’s voice in the singular because I do not consider the comic mode or the tragic mode to be an assemblage of voices, instead I consider them both to be inflections of the same voice. The subtitle of this section reads “Double *I* Sing” not “Double *we* Sing.” This is perhaps easiest to conceptualize empirically because one can distinctly hear both parts issue from the same mouth. In the end, my point here in this example of Dream Song 149 is not to show how the two modes of speaking are autonomous constructions moving freely within a poem; rather when one emerges the other is never too far out of sight, and the effect produced in a poem is largely determined by how these distinct parts find moments of reconciliation.

The second comic interruption also contains two interesting linguistic characteristics that Berryman repeatedly employs throughout *The Dream Songs*. The first has to do with syntax and the second with morphology. In *Berryman’s Sonnets*, a work composed before but published after *The Dream Songs*, there is a powerful moment in which the poet works up to the statement “Double I sing, I must... Crumpling of a syntax at a sudden need.”³ We have already been considering the first half of this statement, but the second remains a mystery. For Berryman, and other poets for that matter, the invention of private forms of creative representation is a primary goal that his voice continually strives for, and one of the ways he achieves this goal is through syntax. This

³ Berryman, John. *John Berryman: Selected Poems*. Ed. Kevin Young. New York: American Poets Project The Library of America. 2004.

is not to say that playing with syntax is unique to Berryman, but it is a very distinguishing feature of his poetry, one that often plays a vital role in the two modes of speaking. In many of the Dream Songs a reader can discover enormous forces of life push their way through the syntax. It is interesting that Berryman calls this a need, as if it were a creative impulse seeking formal reification. Dream Song 149 is not the most pronounced case of this, but we can identify a ‘crumpling of the syntax’ in the fourth line. In it Berryman decides to replace the word “those” with “them” and reverses the expected order of the words “went” and “ever.” Had Berryman not made these decisions the sentence would have read: ‘I don’t suppose in all those years a day ever went by without a loving thought for him.’ This would have effectively weakened the comic mode of speaking; the playfulness and sardonic nature of the original expression are removed and it reads as being altogether serious. Yet, the line is not entirely funny either. Standing in the shadow of what I have just described as being funny is a very sincere grief that can be interpreted through the speed of the line. By tweaking the syntax here Berryman has slowed down the delivery; we are forced to pause both on the words that deviate from the expected order and on the death of his friend. Also, and perhaps most importantly, the syntactical aberrations are an effort by Berryman to admit a more elevated or Romantic language which the line seems to produce.⁴

The next linguistic feature occurs in the word “welladay.” At the inaugural reading of *The Dream Songs* in New York, Berryman stopped in the middle of Dream Song 5 to explain to the audience how particularly ‘fond he is of the word Orright,’

⁴ For a great book on this see Robert Pinsky’s *The Situation of Poetry*. Princeton University Press. 1976. Pages 23-29. In it Pinsky argues that Berryman’s syntax and use of irony help to generate a language that many poets within a modern tradition reacted against. He finds that Berryman’s ability to negotiate between two kinds of tone are what make these Dream Songs so successful.

actually spelling it out for them. This gives us a sense of the significance the poet attaches to the more subtle properties of his poems. In Dream Song 149 notice that the expression does not read as ‘well a day,’ this would slow down the delivery. Berryman wants to increase the speed of the poem by compounding all three words: “Welladay.” The increased speed gives the stanza its comic edge through a more forceful delivery, and a reader can almost imagine this being chuckled out of the poet’s mouth. Not to mention how it also helps to excuse the elevated language Berryman admitted earlier in the stanza by adjusting his syntax.

Another poem in which these tonal pivots can be heard is in Dream Song #1:

Huffy Henry hid the day,
unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point, -a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry’s side
Then came a departure.
Thereafter noting fell out as it might or ought.
I don’t see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long
wonder the world can bear & be.
Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed.

The tones of the first half of this poem are very different from the second half. The transition occurs in the ninth line of the second stanza, “Then came a departure.” We can read this line as being a hinge which swings the comic self-effacing or self-deprecating tones of the first half into the more serious tones of the second half. The first stanza can

be situated into the economy of the comic pole because it is clear that Henry is making fun of his own excessive sulking. The alliteration in the first line is comic in the sense that it registers as a kind of babytalk, which helps us to imagine the speaker as a sulking child. How seriously are we to take the “unappeasable” sulking of a child? Not very, but this babytalk helps the poem to develop contrasts between the more somber tones of the second half. In other words, we can begin to see a contrast between the babytalk and the more elevated language in the final stanza.

Also, the poem has a very prevailing sense of ambiguity. Does Berryman intentionally put the gap between the words “hid” and “the day” to make it seem as if Henry is not exactly sure of what he is hiding, as if he must pause and reflect before deciding that it is “the day” he is in fact hiding? Or, is Henry just searching for another word that begins with “H” in order to take his alliterations further? If we read it in the latter way, then it becomes funny, mostly because he could not find another “H” word. But if we read it in the former way, it ceases to be funny because we can infer that Henry is struggling to realize the cause of his internal sufferings. This would generate a more serious reading of the first line. Such ambiguity often produces the uncomfortable effect of not being sure if a poem should be read as funny or serious. In other words, we can now see the two readings, the funny or the serious, as occupying the same space.

To run with the more serious track, Henry’s uncertainty is continued in the fourth and fifth lines as he tries to explain what made him “wicked & away.” Yet the explanation remains unintelligible; he never fully articulates what is meant by “the thought that they thought they could *do*.” What thought? Do what? Furthermore, Henry seems to be confused about his own reasoning in the first stanza. In it we find him

counter-arguing the passive logic of “a-trying to put things over,” with the more active approach of, “But he should have come out and talked.” I think one of the reasons that Berryman decides to make this first stanza so ambiguous is because he wants to show the inner conflicts of his protagonist, but also because the ambiguity helps him to contrast the feelings we draw from the second half of the poem, which are a yearning for some lost Edenic state of being: “Once in a sycamore I was glad.” Like the Blakean contrary states of innocence and experience, Henry seems to move away from the babytalk language and childlike perception of a world which is ‘a woolen lover’ to the more elevated language and cynical perception of a world full of ‘empty beds.’ This notion of Henry’s internal conflicts sets up a very central theme of *The Dream Songs*, namely, the internal conflicts involved in the process of mourning something which has been lost; this ‘departure’ we hear about in the ninth line.

As I briefly mentioned above, readers of Berryman have often described his poetry as producing an ambiguous effect, wherein a person is not quite certain if a poem is meant to be funny or frightening. Paul Mariani, a well known Berryman biographer, dramatizes this effect by attributing it to “a distinct and unstopped human voice filled with laughter *and* sorrow in the same shuddering breath.”⁵ I think the added emphasis on the word “and” can be discovered in Dream Song 29:

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.
Starts again always in Henry’s ears
the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

And there is another thing he has in mind

⁵ Mariani, Paul. *Dream Songs: The Life of John Berryman*. New York: Paragon House. 1992. Page 382.

like a grave Sieneese face a thousand years
would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of. Ghastly,
with open eyes, he attends, blind.
All the bells say: to late. This is not for tears;
thinking.

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.

This poem is perhaps one of the bleakest songs in the entire collection because Henry's tone is so gloomy that the modicum of humor can easily go undetected. Henry desperately longs for a reason that will justify his sense of guilt, "but all the bells say too late." Despite, any such bells, Berryman puts emphasis on "thinking," by giving it a line of it's own, and in the final stanza emerges the subtle comic relief in the form of Henry attempting to think or "reckon" his way out of despair through a kind of imaginary "hacking" in the dawn. The idea that Henry's 'heavy heart' would become lighter had he actually killed someone is where the poem draws its humor. However, Henry is left only to imagine a reason, since he cannot actually find one ("nobody is ever missing"), which supplies the poem with this double edged effect. This is the point at which many readers come to our interpretive fork in the road. Is it funny or frightening? Yet, at the same time, it is fair to say that the poem does not necessarily become ambiguous at all here, rather it becomes larger; it is no longer confined to the either funny *or* frightening interpretation. Instead it becomes, like Mariani's dramatization of Berryman's voice, both funny *and* frightening. We can read this as a moment of reconciliation in the dialectic between the comic and tragic poles because the tensions seem to struggle with each other, but then go on to produce this holistic effect. The tension between a real or

an imaginary justification for Henry's guilt sends this poem into a new valence where it can contain the tragedy of 'nobody missing' and the comedy of 'reckoning them up.'

In his book *God Be with the Clown*, Ronald Wallace takes an interesting approach to this poem that I think deserves some attention. He argues the final stanza extends the notion that Henry's suffering is the result of "objectless existential guilt," and that such guilt is ultimately "motiveless."⁶ But the phrase "motiveless guilt" seems to me slightly misleading for it implies a resolution to the poem, namely, that there is no reason for Henry's guilt. However, if Berryman wants the reader to go into *The Dream Songs* knowing that Henry has "suffered an irreversible loss,"⁷ then Wallace's claim becomes undermined; loss would function as a motive.⁸ This might register as a trivial objection, but what Wallace has effectively accomplished here with the phrase "motiveless guilt" is displace the notion of loss from any axis of interpretation. Wallace's reading of Henry's sense of guilt is right on target only if we neglect to consider how loss motivates the tragic voice, and how that tragic voice pushes down on Henry to the point at which comedy is required to stabilize the tensions engaged in the justification of such guilt, and excite what can now be described as largeness of effect.

⁶ Wallace, Ronald. *God Be With the Clown*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 1984. Pg 181.

⁷ Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York. 1969. Prefatory note.

⁸ Wallace himself contradicts the notion of "motiveless guilt" by parenthetically mentioning a causal relationship between the depression and the suicide of Berryman's father, which would bring into the equation both an object (Berryman's father) and the idea of loss as a motivating force.

III. Misdirection & Excess:

There ought to be a law against Henry.

-Mr. Bones there is.

The dialectical structures that I have been speaking about in terms of comic and tragic poles can also be read into the context of *The Dream Songs*. In a *Harvard Advocate* interview Berryman is asked why Henry is called Mr. Bones, to which he responds, “There’s a minstrel show thing of Mr. Bones and the interlocutor...I wanted someone for Henry to talk to, so I took up another minstrel, the interlocutor, and made him a friend of my friend Henry.”⁹ The context for this work, then, is a minstrel show, in which the protagonist, Henry, assumes the role of the end man, and the unnamed friend takes on the role of the interlocutor. The dialectical structures carry over into the relationship between Henry and the interlocutor. One of the reasons that Berryman modeled the structure of *The Dream Songs* after these 19th century performances was because of an attraction to the effects they produced, namely, the combination of both humor and sorrow which we have been considering. In fact, just prior to giving a reading at Harvard, Berryman warns his audience, “Prepare to weep, ladies and gentlemen. Saul Bellow and I almost kill ourselves laughing about *The Dream Songs*...but other people feel bad. Are you all ready to feel bad?”¹⁰ We have already seen in Dream Song 29 how these two effects interact in a non-performative setting, and now we can consider how they function for the two characters.

⁹ Interview: *Harvard Advocate*. “An Interview with John Berryman.” Thomas, Harry. Berryman’s Understanding. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 1988. Page 8.

¹⁰ Taken from a passage in Wallace, Ronald. God Be With the Clown. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 1984. Page 173.

The end man character can most generally be described as excessive; he drinks too much, loves too much, and despairs too much. In short, he becomes excessively foolish or pretentious in his performance and never seems to be fully aware of it. From this, we can start to imagine him as moving towards the extremities of either the comic or tragic poles, yet all the time being responsible for keeping the audience laughing. The end man's language provides evidence of this through an eccentric vocabulary involving babytalk, blackface, and bad grammar.

On the other hand, the interlocutor foils the end man; he is essentially responsible for running the show. His job is mediator; he deflates the end man whenever he becomes too elevated or pretentious, and inflates him whenever he sinks too low in despair. Out of this we can begin to see the interlocutor as a negotiator of the two poles in the dialectic; a figure who brings Henry, as well as the audience, closer to a center of gravity. By this I mean that a poem never becomes unchecked in terms of its comic or tragic dispositions; we are never left to drift too far towards either pole.

Emerging out of this relational bond between Henry and the interlocutor are two techniques or writing strategies that can be referred to as misdirection and excess. Berryman pulls us toward one polar extreme through the excessive nature of Henry, but then will take us in another direction through the interlocutor. It is essentially from the interplay between the strategies of misdirection and excess, in the performative Dream Songs, that Berryman can achieve the kind of comic *and* tragic effects he is after.

Berryman is fully aware of the fact that this structural tradition of combining comedy and tragedy upon a stage reaches further back in literary history than the American minstrel show. The Greek comic stage also consisted of two figures, *alazon*

and *eiron*, that personify misdirection and excess. In Wallace's book *God be with the Clown*, he adopts Northrop Frye's take on the two characters which is that the *eiron* 'is the witty self-deprecator and artist who pretends to be less than he is, while the *alazon* is the fool and impostor who pretends to be more than he is.'¹¹ This definition brings with it correspondences between the *eiron* figure and the interlocutor, who both employ a more ironic style of humor, and the *alazon* figure and the end man, who both generate the slap-stick humor.

Dream Song # 4 is a great poem from which to consider how these two strategies function for Henry and the interlocutor. I should mention that in these performative Dream Songs Berryman uses a dash to indicate a new speaker. So, for instance, at the end of the middle stanza the dash means that Henry is no longer speaking but rather the interlocutor is:

Filling her compact & delicious body
with chicken páprika, 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.' I advanced upon
(despairing) my spumoni. –Sir Bones is stuffed,
de world wif feeding girls.

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

¹¹ Wallace, Ronald. God Be With the Clown. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 1984. Page13.

First, notice how Henry plays the *alazon* role in this Dream Song. He grounds his entire line of reasoning on the fact that a black haired woman sitting in a restaurant looked at him twice. Henry has slipped into the role of the fool, and the poet puts emphasis on this by giving the word 'twice' an entire line unto itself; clearly being looked at twice by a woman while dining in a restaurant does not seem like cause enough for Henry's erotic despair. From this clue we can interpret Henry as pretending to associate himself within a tragic economy, but yet it seems impossible to take his anguish seriously. It is not until the middle stanza that we find the two strategies confront each other. In it we can sense how the interlocutor puts on the *eirone* mask through his sardonic response to Henry's excessive sexual longings; he gives Henry that ironic jab by saying in blackface, "Sir Bones is stuffed de world wif feeding girls." Not only does the interlocutor mock the language of the end man here, but he also mocks Henry's megalomania. The interlocutor knows that Henry's pretentious tones of erotic despair are nothing more than the product of his own delusional fantasies, that this is an imagined world void of practical implications, and he responds with an irony that deflates Henry's tones. Moreover, it is his role to create such a tension between himself and Henry; he contrasts the erotic excess of Henry through ironic misdirection.

It is interesting how Berryman invokes the image of ingestion throughout this poem to approach Henry's sexually repressed desire. Henry describes the woman as a compact and delicious person, as if she were something he could potentially eat. She appears to be consuming chicken paprika and the slob beside her, presumably the husband, is also feasting, while Henry is left only to 'hunger back.' Henry's question, "where did it all go wrong?" marks a kind of desperate nostalgia for a lost animal past in

which sexuality is imagined as unrestrained. This contrast between a world that Henry perceives as one composed of sexually liberated individuals, a world of feasting men and women, versus Henry's world, a world in which he remains sexually deprived within it, sets up a tonal economy for the interlocutor to negotiate within. Furthermore, Henry's erotic outpouring is rendered absurd through his own contradiction of the world he has just imagined. The logic of "there ought to be a law against Henry" throws the former nostalgia of "where did it all go wrong" into confusion. Henry's tones are obviously within comic registers, his delusional erotic fantasies and absurd foolishness have reached a climax at this point, and the interlocutor's stultifying response, "Mr. Bones there is," demonstrates the strategy of misdirection. He deflates Henry by reminding him that there are indeed laws in place which keep his animal instincts from becoming completely unshackled. Had Berryman not decided to leave the poem on the interlocutor's ironic note, then we would have left it feeling like Henry's excessively pretentious banter gets the final word in a situation where it does not deserve to.

Often the interlocutor negotiates his responses based on the sincerity of Henry's tone. As I already mentioned, Henry's tone in Dream Song #4 pretends to be sincerely pained, yet the interlocutor does not fall for the *alazon* impostor and he recognizes that such despair deserves no credibility. This is crucial in terms of how the interlocutor's negotiations are determined, because in other Dream Songs, such as #76, we discover a sincerely pained Henry. Unlike the pretentious tones of Dream song #4, the melancholic tones of this Dream Song are spoken with excessive candor and urgency which cause the interlocutor to pull Henry in a more humorous direction. In this poem we discover how the interlocutor's negotiations are far different than those we saw in Dream Song #4.

Here the interlocutor desperately tries to inflate Henry, who confesses that he has sunken so low in despair that he is tottering on the idea of suicide. Dream Song #76, titled “Henry’s Confession,” is also in conversation with Dream Song 29 in terms of their subjects, which again are Henry’s violently tormenting sense of guilt:

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

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

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

The subtle humor here should recall Dream Song 29, in the sense that Henry expects something bad must actually happen in order to justify his own feelings of wretchedness. This is also where the poem draws much of its humor; it is funny to imagine that Henry might have been better off if something bad did actually happen to him. Here, Henry’s pretentious tones move toward excessive grief; he appears to be afflicted by a sense of loss that he feels will only be overcome through death.

Again, if we listen to his tone it should eventually register as sincere. Henry begins by posing a question to the interlocutor, “Nothin very bad happen to me lately. How you explain that?” There is some bad grammar here which might indicate

insincerity, so the interlocutor initially takes Henry's grief in jest; he responds by blithely associating Henry's anguish to a lack of indulging in alcohol, girls, and telephones. In this opening stanza we cannot yet determine that something is truly wrong with Henry; he unsuccessfully tries to recall anything that might make his anguished state of mind intelligible. Finding nothing, Henry turns it over to the interlocutor who immediately attempts to inflate him. In his response, we see the blackfaced interlocutor reach for laughter as a means to lift Henry out of despair, claiming that Henry cannot expect anything bad to happen if he is to remain sober. However, as we approach the suicidal tones of the middle stanza it becomes apparent that Henry's previous statements were not supposed to be taken as insincere. Once the severity of Henry's state of mind comes into focus and we push passed the middle stanza, we find the interlocutor renegotiate his strategy by strengthening it, ultimately taking on a much more proactive role. This time the interlocutor's response is not as jocular; he drops the blackface, gives him a handkerchief, and physically tries to dance Henry back into a healthier state of mind. From here we can infer that the interlocutor's response aims not to stultify Henry this time; instead he attempts to comfort Henry. The two characters balance each other, and Berryman will often put them in these two situations that we have seen in Dream Songs #4 and #76. Much like we saw in the first section of this essay in which the comic and the tragic tonal interactions reinforce each other, so do the interactions of Henry and the interlocutor.

IV. Concluding Remarks

In a more or less straight forward literary analysis such as this, I always find endpoints to be the most challenging part. This is especially the case considering the nature of this particular assignment, which is modeled after a dissertation and is supposed to expose students to what this experience might be like. Yet unlike a dissertation, a CHID senior thesis invites peers and faculty members to review a writers work even though they might not necessarily be invested in that writer's field or area of focus. Resulting from this is the possibility for those paralyzing questions like: what is the point of this? Or, so what? Often writers can get so deeply ensconced in their own fields that such questions are difficult to answer. However, these questions, though they can be paralyzing, are actually very helpful in getting a writer to think more critically about the set of assumptions in which their work is grounded. In terms of a literary work, my favorite response to these sorts of questions comes from William Carlos Williams *Paterson*, in which he says something to the effect of 'this is fiction, pay attention.' Williams is saying pay attention because this is important, and I find Berryman's work to be an important work of fiction.

Berryman's *Dream Songs* are important because we can begin to read into them larger social paradigms. These paradigms teach us how to be interlocutors who keep each other from going too far towards comedy or tragedy; they teach us how take internal conflicts in both jocular and serious ways. Imagine how difficult it would be to live in a world only full of endmen, or how boring it would be to live in a world only full of interlocutors. This kind of reasoning is affiliated with a major stronghold held within aesthetic theory, namely, that it is a function of literature to develop in one the capacity to

sympathetically imagine the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, while at the same time exposing the possibility of sharing similar problems with those same people. Reading Berryman in this way can encourage one to think that he discovered something in these two archetypal characters that might help us to approach problems like how to negotiate comedy and tragedy in the midst of suffering “an irreversible loss.”¹²

I think that the tonal approach to Berryman articulated in this essay provides a great way in which to conceptualize not only his poetry, but other works as well. I find tone to be a very hermeneutically engaging point from which to push on a text because such an approach is rich with possibilities. We saw some of the tonal decisions that Berryman put into the construction of his Dream Songs, like, for instance, #4 where he puts emphasis on the word “twice” in order to drive home the point that Henry’s pretentious tones are not to be taken too sincerely. In a similar vein, consider the excerpt in Act 5 scene 1 from *The Tempest* where Prospero responds to Miranda’s newly discovered knowledge of a world that is full of Ferdinand’s:

Miranda:

How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in’t

Prospero:

‘Tis new to thee.

How should we read Prospero’s line? Where do we imagine the emphasis to lie? If we imagine the emphasis to be on “thee,” then this would generate a more pessimistic reading of Prospero’s response; he would almost become like the interlocutor, giving a comic jab by imposing on his daughter a cynical perception of these creatures that are not

¹² Again, this is the understanding that Berryman wants his readers to take into *The Dream Songs* by mentioning this in his prefatory note.

“goodly”, but immoral opportunists like his brother Antonio. Yet, if we imagine the emphasis to be on the word “new,” we would find a more optimistic Prospero; a Prospero who provides his daughter with a sense of hope as she enters into this “brave new world,” and embarks on relationships with the creatures she that sees before her. Of course, we would have to take into consideration those parts of the play that we find predicate either response, but the point is to show that tones are an important feature of a text, and can be a very useful property from which to interpret a text; a property that engages not only our eyes, but also our ears.

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