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Live with John Berryman. Live with John and Henry and Mr. Bones. Live with the Dream Songs, now grown to a robust three hundred ninety-five. The shock will be quite immediate, but the full effect does not begin to lull and startle and move to madness without those testy squabbles and hardships incurred in living with another being. What does this being, this Berryman being, consist of? The answer is to be found by examining thematic elements in the body of this being, this sometime beast.

A question was once posed to Berryman by the poet Howard Nemerov: Had Berryman's work essentially changed in character or style since he began writing? Berryman replied, with emphasis, "Of course!" As far as his readers are concerned, he need not have replied. From his pre-World War II poems through the 1948 Dispossessed through his highly successful long poem "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" through the Pulitzer Prize winning 77 Dream Songs up to his newly released His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Berryman's poetry has evolved, changed and continued to move on in character and style. Thematically, however, this change is not so obvious. The tension between form and theme being what it is -- a fragile yet substantial *sine qua non* -- this basic dynamism of formal elements with a steadiness of content presents a significant topic to be analysed before the actual themes.

The first topic, then, is form. The clearest explanation of this change in form is a shift from simplicity to complexity, though it should not be assumed that early Berryman, Yeats disciple that he was, used a simple technical method. The terms are relative. Here is an example from an early poem, "The Traveller," that is characteristic:

They pointed me out on the highway, and they said
'That man has a curious way of holding his head.'
They pointed me out on the beach; they said 'That man
Will never become as we are, try as he can.'
They pointed me out at the station, and the guard
Looked at me twice, thrice, thoughtfully & hard.

The contrast between this and the later poetry is made apparent by quoting six lines from one of the 77 Dream Songs:

Ha ha, fifth column, quisling, genocide,
he held his hands & laught from side to side
a loverly time.
The berries & the rods left him alone less.
Thro' a race of water once I went: happiness.

I'll walk into the sky. (44)

Here there is something happening, boiling, in the language itself. The form has become highly organic -- springing from the poetic substance -- and has become hyper-conscious of language. Language becomes an end in this poetry.

This formal quality is significant to the themes for two reasons: it is the most obvious feature of the poetry; and the lush mesh of language can leave an impression of vagueness. The Massachusetts Review bluntly stated the 77 Dream Songs are "titillating examples of 7000 types of ambiguity." Now if you like your whose-woods-these-ares and do-I-dare-to-eat-a-peaches this ambiguity can be a problem. However, the obscurity and confusion are quite conscious. Berryman writes of our time, our dishevelled, ripped, torn world. He uses "patterns of irrational imagery to display the frightening dream of the public world." It is a public world, composed of private lives; lives whose very privacy becomes a mockery to themselves.

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. (1)

This public world is a modern smooth speedy technopolis. Yet it is riddled with confusions. Says Peter Davison, Berryman "deals with insanity, hospitals, injections, and ravings as though they were ordinary facts of life; perhaps they are."

But the particular presence found in Berryman's description of this world is that of man. Though he uses less visual imagery than most are accustomed to, some human form is invariably seen in the mess.

I am, outside. Incredible panic rules.
People are blowing and beating each other without mercy.
Drinks are boiling. Iced
drinks are boiling. The worse anyone feels, the worse
treated he is. Fools elect fools.
A harmless man at an intersection said, under his breath:
"Christ!" (46)

These people, these harmless men at intersections, they are the problem. But ultimately this drifts from a problem of people to a problem of self. As Mr. Bones states in Dream Song 40:

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

Linked thematically with death is its close relation time. Berryman's earlier work shows a marked introspection on the nature of time, on the fading ephemeral quality of all things. In the "Spinning Heart" the pace of time is breathed and felt:

No time for shame,
Whippoorwill calling, excrement falling, time
Rushes like a madman forward.

This is the youthful violence of the discovery that all is flux, everything passes. But he is not without a lyrical feeling of finesse and wisdom-like distance. In perhaps his most anthologized poem, "Winter Landscape," Berryman has three men on top of a hill, returning from hunting,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach. . .

These playing skating children

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow
Of that same hill: when all their company,
Will have been irrecoverably lost. . .

The 77 Dream Songs have a sense of time sneaking from them, sneaking because it emanates from the middle aged near-resignation of Henry and Mr. Bones, and of course Mr. Berryman. But resignation, it must be remembered, does not imply lack of vitality. And his vitality is as intense as a gleaming steel dagger. This is perhaps the greatest strength of Berryman writing of that thing that all poets must write of.

To write of time and to write of death is to at some time write also of War. War. That phenomenon of human folly, of human nature, that has conceived and given birth to so much poetic effort is to be found scattered in the poetry of John Berryman. Berryman was one of a handful of poets who felt, perceived and gave voice to the imminent lumbering presence of a dreadful giant--World War II. Much of it is typical. "The animals ran, the Eagle soared and dropt." And some of it has the unique stamp in tone and thought of the Berryman to be.

On Outer Drive there was an accident:
a stupid well-intentioned man turned sharp
Right and abruptly he became an angel
Fingering an unfamiliar harp,
Or screamed in hell, or was nothing at all.
Do not imagine this is unimportant.

The near tragic, somewhat cynical sense of wit has begun to take

form. Berryman writes of war in the Dream Songs also, but it is not with the sense of immediacy he felt in 1938 and 1939. Rather, he will use war imagery to talk of this life that is often an undeclared war, its fights and fears equal to that of any far east battles. War is present, but is in much broader perspective and outlook. "Unfortunate but inescapable." And softly yet sometimes madly we cross the "bivouacs of fear," knowing nobody's innocent, knowing "it's late for gratitude."

And love. How can love be omitted as a theme? Berryman does not omit it; he merely gives it varied treatment. It is not without accident that the word "wives" appears in and out of the Dream Songs. First, and simply, there is lust and there is love. Lust is that high wild jump you feel when you see her, sitting with her husband and four others eating chicken paprika, and you want to fall at her little feet and say:

You are the hottest one for years of night
Henry's dazed eyes
have enjoyed, Brilliance. (4)

But you can't fall at her feet, can't say those words. Lust is, but in the end it always becomes an isn't. Lust isn't. Love is, or at least was. Wives past and present, children haunting as only children and children's love can, and a given society, or world, that is inept and confused, all this is the reason love simply is, or maybe was.

Bitter Henry, full of the death of love,
Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning
the whole implausible necessary thing.
He dropped his voice & sybilled of
the death of the death of love.
I ought to get going. (48)

Love.

James Dickey has called John Berryman "very nearly a great poet." And he just may be. This brief sketch of thematic elements recurring in Berryman's poetry perhaps is misleading; ultimately, his richly combined organic form will be the test of both his themes and greatness. Quite simply, if increasing luxury of intensity with each reading is any criterion, Berryman is well on the road to that town of a select few who qualify as American poets. John and Henry, that is.

these fierce & airy occupations, and love,
raved away so many of Henry's years
it is a wonder that, with in each hand
one of his own mad books and all,
ancient fires for eyes, his head full
& his heart full, he's making ready to move on. (77)

Simple as this may sound, the reader of the Dream Songs may wonder at Mr. Bones' pretentiousness. Who is this "me" he speaks of? The Dream Songs have at least three basic personae: an unnamed man, presumably The Poet; Henry; and Mr. Bones. Yet these characters are constantly shifting into one another, merging, disappearing and emerging again only to begin the cycle anew. Henry alone changes from just plain Henry into gentle friendly Henry Pussy-cat, Henry Hankovitch, and Ethan Allen. This is the problem of self, of identity, in full-blown terms. One of the songs gives a confession:

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on myself. (67)

The quest is desperate. One of Berryman's fellow poets states that "order, decision, wisdom, beauty are not often to be found, for the search here is for the self and for the selves within the self."

Berryman's search for this self or selves is complicated (and his poetry thus enriched) by the dimension of not only who am I but also how can I live, knowing what I am, that is, a very sensitive man, how can I in this condition live in this public absurd world? It is indeed a miserable condition to be in, when, unsure of your who, but at least somewhat certain of your what, the world won't allow that kind of what.

One law which is a strongly recurring theme in Berryman is that unalterable law of nature: death. One critic has commented: Berryman "approaches death, in rhetoric and idea, with the unflinching courage of one who can imagine worse things." Death is present, but often is spoken of in soft submissive terms. There is something of a wisdom in this method.

Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed. (1)

Yet it is not without a fight one goes down, or at least not without the desire for a fight. Berryman exhibits the other side of the death question, or more accurately, of the death fact. There is the dignified soft and submissive, but there is also the "roiling & babbling & braining."

Berryman cannot really be said to have a single view or consideration about "our 'pointed task.'" Rather, he is like an explorer facing an impassable huge object. He is fascinated and defeated but always looking and examining every aspect of the object, screaming at its immobility, always hungering for that new twist of its perversity, always ready to lunge through it.