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**Babbling, Braining, and Brooding Mr. Bones: An  
Exploration of the Metapoetic in *77 Dream Songs***

Senior Paper

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The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of the “confessional poetry” movement. It is perhaps unnecessary to deconstruct the notion of “confessional” literature, as the banality of the term is readily apparent. In referring to a work in this way it appears as though we are saying practically nothing about the work itself, aside from the fact that the poet has chosen to share personal experiences with the world through their art, which of course was certainly nothing new by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the term seems to suggest that the sole *purpose* of the work in question is to reveal a set of personal occurrences that the author has hitherto refrained from exposing. Postmodern literary scholar Jonathon Holden writes, “The ‘confessional’ poem... is a poem whose form is derived by analogy from the ritual of ‘confession,’ a ritual which in its religious aspect is Roman Catholic and in its secular aspect is psychoanalytic” (26). Thus the “confession” in both its religious and secular connotations appears to imply some sort of existential guilt. In both cases, then, the artists confessing are supposedly attempting to purify themselves, to rid themselves of a grief or worry, to ensure their salvation or to remedy a psychic imbalance. This notion of a disclosure of personal woes to the contemporary reader as a purifying experience clearly romanticizes both the role of poetry and that of the audience.

The larger issue, however, is that this characterization quite often results in the linking of biographical elements from poets’ lives to the overall meanings of their work. Biographical analyses can be useful, but can just as easily be redundant; unlike the dead poet’s biography, the critical response and cultural significance of a work can, and inevitably does change over time. Indeed, if works such as Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” or John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs* are thought of as confessing an inner-turmoil on a strictly personal level, then it appears that their impact as autonomous pieces of art is diminished. Particularly for a text as nuanced as John Berryman’s *77 Dream Songs* (1964), it is troubling that critics have historically been so

preoccupied with how the poet's biography is exposed through the figure of Henry, the poem's protagonist. In what remains one of the most exhaustive analyses of *The Dream Songs* yet, authoritative Berryman scholar Joel Conarroe writes:

I say Henry and mean Berryman. I think that anyone who reads the songs carefully will reject the assertion that they are about an imaginary character – some details, of course, are invented, but the sequence adheres closely to the facts of the poet's life and mind. (95)

It is, of course, illogical to argue with Conarroe in regards to the poems containing details that were extremely personal to the poet. The true question is in what sense does knowledge of the poet's biography enhance one's critical abilities. Conarroe's analysis is perhaps the most thorough, and is extremely useful for its discussion of the formal conventions of *The Dream Songs*, but it's also rife with esoteric details concerning Berryman's life. The insistence that a biographical context is necessary for the enjoyment or understanding of a work oftentimes unwittingly trivializes the work in question.

It is important, therefore, to consider Henry's function as a character in *77 Dream Songs*, rather than as a mere analog for the poet. This is not to suggest that biographical and historical contexts will be neglected entirely, but they will be secondary to a predominantly New Critical approach to the text. In adopting this interpretive methodology, we will see how Henry's character provides an abstract metapoetic commentary through his various acts of self-expression and his seemingly tense relationship with language in general.

Indeed, Henry is a significant literary character to analyze precisely because of this conflicted relationship with language. In examining this relationship, we will see that the very communicative act is alienating for his character. Throughout *77 Dream Songs* he is conflicted

by an intellectual compulsion to express himself, and a desire to remain silent, to contemplate his experiences in a solitary, oftentimes explicitly anti-social manner. It has so far been stated that there is nothing new about the revelation of autobiographical content through abstract poetic language. What can be seen as different in regards to the “confessional” poets is perhaps the extent to which personal alienation is being expressed. In *Dream Song 74* it is quite bluntly stated, “Henry hates the world. What the world to Henry / did will not bear thought,” (74.1.1-2). What’s more important than any speculation as to what the world did to Henry is the form in which his hatred for the world is revealed. Henry’s alienation quite often takes the form of a minstrel show dialogue between himself and a nameless interlocutor, who refers to Henry as “Mr Bones”.

Minstrel shows were a form of family entertainment, generally including white actors in blackface, who would speak in an exaggerated dialect for the purpose of ridiculing African Americans.<sup>1</sup> They were comedy shows that intended to make African Americans seem naïve and boastful, and moreover, seemingly ignorant of their historical oppression. This analysis will not attempt in any way to defend John Berryman’s offensive use of black stereotypes and dialects, though some analyses have suggested that Berryman was ultimately expressing sympathy for the disenfranchised African American community.<sup>2</sup> One of the 77 *Dream Songs* is dedicated to a man named Daddy Rice, one of the original blackface minstrel show performers. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Although I do not cite them specifically, the work of Berryman scholars Kathe Davis and William Wasserstrom has been instrumental in my understanding of the history of minstrelsy, and more importantly, its function within *The Dream Songs*. Their essays are included in my works consulted page.

<sup>2</sup> I’m incredulous to any of these defenses, though, admittedly, in *Dream Song 60* Henry speaks out explicitly against the injustices faced by African Americans. The issue stems from the origin of the dialect itself, and moreover, Henry’s repetitive use of the derogatory word “coon” when referring to himself in blackface.

the minstrel show dialogue between Henry as Mr Bones and this nameless interlocutor (who Conarrore refers to as “Tambo”) is oftentimes employed in a way that is far from comical (Conarrore 125). Indeed, throughout *77 Dream Songs* this speaker commonly interrupts Henry’s various complaints and existential crises with philosophical advice. Ironically, if any didactic notions are expressed in the poems at all, they are communicated by this interlocutor speaking in the minstrel show dialect. Although this analysis does not include an in-depth discussion on the role of minstrelsy in *The Dream Songs*, it is imperative for an understanding of the poems to acknowledge Mr Bones as a pseudonym, perhaps even an alter ego of Henry.<sup>3</sup>

If we read the *Dream Songs* as a work that comments on the experience of artistic creation, it is essential to consider Henry as an artist who is frequently depicted as undergoing this experience. Berryman critic Gary Arpin writes, “When the characterization of Henry is successful, we are given a picture of a comic poet-hero, taking upon himself our suffering, and bodying it forth in song...” (62). For Henry, such self-expression is both a necessity and a source of perpetual internal conflict. Moreover, we should note that the process of writing poems or dealing with the experiences required to create them is never presented as pleasant or purifying. *Dream Song 25*, for instance, awkwardly depicts Henry undertaking an artistic endeavor, as, “Henry, edged, decidedly, made up stories / lighting the past of Henry, of his glorious / present, and his hoaries,” (25.1.1-3). Thus Henry can be seen as mythologizing himself in this passage as he is “lighting the past of Henry” with his “stories.” Additionally, the nameless character who refers to Henry as “Mr Bones” interjects in the poem’s fourth line, saying, “- Euphoria, / Mr Bones, euphoria. Fate clobber all” (25.1. 4-5). Thus this apparent dialogue implies that Mr Bones is the speaker, referring to himself, Henry, in the third person, and that the

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<sup>3</sup> This echoes a statement made by Anthony Caeshu: “Berryman dons the mask of Henry who dons the mask of Mr Bones (102).”

poem, up until the point that it is interrupted by the nameless interlocutor, is indeed a part of one of Henry's "stories."

The relentlessly manic state of this narrative act lends to the meta reading of *The Dream Songs*, as Henry somewhat ironically has the habit of treating himself as a literary character. Such a reading is of course enhanced by the minstrel show dialogue, as Anthony Caleshu notes, "Henry, then, is aware of himself as a performer, aware that the Songs he sings constitute a "show," literally a theatrical performance, as acknowledged in the vaudevillian persona of Mr Bones" (114). In the case of *Dream Song 25*, Henry is indeed discussing himself in the third person as Mr Bones, and thus we can see a discourse on his act of self-expression in the poem's second stanza:

condign Heaven. Tighten into a ball  
 elongate and valved Henry. Tuck him peace.  
 Render him sightless,  
 or ruin at high rate his crampon focus,  
 wipe out his need. Reduce him to the rest of us.  
 -But, Bones, you is that. (25.2.7-12)

We should not overlook this overwhelming "need," that makes Henry consider himself as being separate from "the rest of us." It appears as though his suffering is directly related to his attempts at framing his experiences in these "stories." If he were "tightened into a ball" or "sightless," then peace would be attainable. In other words, if Henry weren't self-reflexive, if he could refrain from fabricating his personal history or "lighting the past of Henry," then the conflict itself would presumably cease to exist. Self-expression is of course necessary for everyone, but for Henry this communicative act is inherently a source of tension.

Although Henry's suffering is immense, Arpin indicates that there is also a "comic" aspect of his character. In the previously examined passage from *Dream Song 25*, Henry desires to be "Tighten[ed] into a ball," and if this desire could be fulfilled then his "need" to articulate emotions would cease to exist. If we view Henry as a modern day bard or "poet hero" to borrow Arpin's term, then the language that he uses to convey his experiences is amusing in the same ways that it emphasizes his extreme alienation. The use of the words "elongate" and "crampon" as adjectives in the poem's second stanza, for instance, showcase the irregularity of what Joel Conarroe refers to as "Henryspeech" (116). Henry speech is defined as "that queer language... [that] derives its effects from archaic and Latinate constructions, from crumpled syntax, odd diction, idiomatic conversation, and conscious violation of grammatical rules..." (116). In Henry's act of self-expression, logic is always secondary to raw, uncensored experience. But the "Henryspeech" also accents a profound disconnection and loneliness, drawing attention to his character's tense relationship with the conventional ways of processing and communicating with the outside world.

What Henry views as making him distinct from "the rest of us," then, is perhaps his very role as the "comic poet hero." As showcased through the "Henryspeech," his character is defined by a high susceptibility to disorder. However, this disorder is not used to make us feel pity for him so much as it is used to emphasize the underlying conflict of his character, the very act of self-expression. As we can quite clearly see, the poems are consistently self-referential because of the recurring acknowledgement of Henry's status as a character. However, what is communicated through the disorder of his world is implicitly more than the plight of an individual, which is why it is necessary to consider the poems as more than autobiographical, to consider Henry as an entity altogether separate from his creator. Indeed, if we read Henry as the

“comic poet-hero” who provides a meta-commentary on the creation of poetry, then what he expresses through his perpetual internal conflict is the insufficiency of language itself. His plight dramatizes the difficulties of the poetic endeavor.

Throughout *77 Dream Songs* Henry’s character is generally conflicted by the need to communicate his inner thoughts and feelings with others and the desire to remain silent. When he makes attempts at self-expression, chaos typically ensues. An example of this perpetual discord can be seen in *Dream Song 24*:

Oh servant Henry lectured till  
the crows commenced and then  
he bulbed his voice & lectured on some more.

This happened again & again, like war- (24.1. 1-4)

The fact that Henry is depicted as a “servant” in this passage implies again that he is compelled to communicate, even if doing so is against his will. Furthermore, there is again a suggested conflict arising from his communicative act when his speech is compared to “war” in the poem’s fourth line. Thus there’s something implicitly destructive, or perhaps even aggressive, about his speech act. Additionally, his lecturing, “until the crows commenced” provides an ominous subtext to the subject matter of his “lecture.” This passage can be seen as self-referential in a way similar to the previously examined passages from *Dream Song 25*. Henry is a “servant,” in the sense that he is a character in the *Dream Songs*. He is a device employed by the poet, and thus he ultimately lacks autonomy. However, his character also lacks autonomy in the sense that he is compelled to take on the burdens of an orator. His experience as a “servant,” then, is ironically metapoetic; he persistently expresses a desire not to communicate, but as a poetic device it is his sole purpose to communicate.

A more conventional way of interpreting “servant Henry” lecturing “until the crows commenced” should perhaps be noted here. John Berryman himself was a highly active scholar and professor up until his death. Thus he was someone quite familiar with giving lectures, and if we were to read “Servant Henry” as “Servant Berryman” then the previously examined passage could be seen as communicating Berryman’s attachment to his craft, as a poet and a scholar. In other words, it can and continually has been argued that Berryman, to an extent, uses Henry to communicate his own need to express himself in verse. Of course, on a very basic level Henry as a meta-poet figure can be seen as emphasizing the need for art in the lives of individuals, particularly in the life of his creator. However, central to this analysis is the acknowledgement that overall, Henry’s attitudes towards creative self-expression are far from comforting. Indeed, when we read that “Henry stabbed his arm and wrote a letter / explaining how bad it had been / in this world” we can see that the communicative act is as equally masochistic as it is cleansing (74.1.3-6)<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the poems don’t present Henry as a character who turns to poetry to purify himself. If anything, his character expresses incredulity that he can truly be understood by the outside world. But we should not simply assume that he is alienated to the extent of being incapable of meaningful connections with others. In fact, it is perhaps the opposite; there is an excess of meaning, and thus Henry is haunted by the potential of misinterpretation.

In the *Dreams Songs* already examined, Henry is depicted as communicating with his “stories” and lectures, and although his communicative act is perhaps what renders him a “servant,” he is, for obvious reasons, forced to take part in it. In the first *Dream Song* we are shown quite a different image of Henry, one in which his character is completely isolated,

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<sup>4</sup> An additional implication might be that Henry’s artistic endeavor is similar to Dr. Faustus’ pact with Mephistopheles, written in his blood: “I cut mine arm, and with proper blood / assure my soul to be great Lucifer’s... / View here the blood that trickles from mine arm, / And let it be propitious for my wish” (Marlowe Scene 5. Lines 54-58).

contemplative, and either unable or unwilling to attempt a connection with others. The poem's first stanza introduces Henry's detachment from and even hostility towards the outside world:

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 and away.

But he should have come out and talked. (1.1.1-6)

It doesn't necessarily matter who "they" are and what they "thought they could *do*." What's important is what the first stanza reveals to us about Henry, that he is "wicked and away," and that he is not like the others. Henry's wickedness can be seen as cynicism, an incredulity and even disapproval of the others' aspirations, comforts and pleasures. However, it is unclear whether it is Henry who sees himself as "wicked," or if it is someone else who applies this label to his character. Indeed, one significant aspect of what makes *77 Dream Songs* a work of metapoetry is that it is rarely clear through whose perspective we are seeing Henry's character, though Berryman might have us believe that it is always through either Henry's perspective or his nameless friend.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the word "away" is equally significant in what it reveals about the character. Not only is Henry physically "away" from the society that he critiques, but he is also largely detached from a clear sense of self; his character is fundamentally defined by absence and ambiguity.

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<sup>5</sup> Berryman's prefatory note to *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, which contains 308 additional *Dream Songs*: The poem then, whatever it's wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second...

Berryman critic Ron Callan asserts that “an important topic for [*Dream Song I*] and, indeed, for *The Dream Songs* as a whole” is “how to act and how to express actions” (Callan 66). Callan argues that the speaker of the first stanza ethically evaluates Henry’s decision to remain isolated by saying “he should have come out and talked.” Notably, while the difference between talking and not talking is not necessarily depicted as an ethical matter, Callan’s point that the poems are about what and how one should communicate is a valid one. We find the justification for Henry’s isolation in the poem’s second stanza, which reveals that he has suffered a loss which has resulted in his detachment: “All the world like a woolen lover / once did seem on Henry’s side. / Then came a departure” (1.2.7-9). Critics have taken this to be one of many references to Berryman’s father’s suicide, which occurred when he was a young boy. While this may very well be the case, what’s more pertinent for an analysis of Henry’s character is the consideration that perhaps it’s the ultimate effect of departure, the impermanence it imposes upon one’s identity, that renders Henry “unappeasable.” In this regard, Henry’s instability is not singular to his character, but rather it is a ubiquitous characteristic of which it seems that only Henry is perpetually aware, which is presumably why he has made the cynical decision to be isolated. Callan writes that the “ethical” voice of *Dream Song I* “suggests that language, expression, words, are key factors in the good activity... to hide is represented as dangerous in that it denies expression to thought” (Callan 66). Again it is not a matter of ethics; it is perhaps even more than that. As the first of an extensive collection of poems centered around this one character, it is seemingly about realizing one’s self, and then possessing the capabilities to accurately express one’s self to the outside world, which is always problematic for Henry.

*The Dream Songs* therefore represent the gap between what is said and what is lost by the communicative act, a conflict dramatized by Henry’s reluctance to express himself. The

remainder of 77 *Dream Songs* shows Henry's reclusiveness giving way to outpourings of affliction. However, although he is able to breach his silence with the subsequent songs, the result is far from cathartic, as the beginning of the third stanza reveals, "What he has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be" (1.3.13-14). Callan suggests that the repressive act of hiding is dangerous, but it should not be overlooked that what Henry has to express is perhaps equally hazardous. It's not as simple as to say that Henry has done the right thing by coming out and talking, as the poem's final two lines make evident: "Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed" (1.3.17-18). Thus we can see that what Henry has to communicate to the outside world is this pronouncement of a ubiquitous departure.

Similarly, *Dream Song 5* effectively portrays the inherent conflict of self-expression for Henry's character. In the poem's first stanza it is revealed that Henry is "at odds wif de world & its god," (5.1.3). We should consider that "the world" for Henry is perhaps not the same world that we inhabit. Indeed, the second stanza leads us to believe that Henry's very reality is as unstable as his mind. Perhaps the world, then, is *The Dream Songs*, and the "god" that Henry is at odds with is the author himself, who forces Henry to confront the problems of language and self-expression. *Dream Song 5* constitutes one of the rare occurrences in which Henry's perpetual dissatisfaction has ceased, until this momentary emotional stasis is interrupted by a seemingly miraculous occurrence:

Henry sats in de plane and was gay.  
 Careful Henry nothing said aloud  
 but where a Virgin out of cloud  
 to her mountain dropt in light,  
 his thoughts made pockets & the plane buckt.

‘Parm me, lady.’ ‘Orright.’ (5.2.7-12)

It is significant, as well as referential to the first *Dream Song* that “Careful Henry nothing said aloud,” because the moment that he begins to correspond with the external world, his focus is disrupted, and he attempts to frame complex experiences in his fragmented language. However, apparently not even his silence can protect him from instability, as “his thoughts made pockets & the plane buckt.” His character is thus depicted as somewhat of a metaphysical problem; his very thoughts have an unintentional, perhaps even harmful impact on the external world. Furthermore he is once again brought out of his silence and urged to communicate, this time by the “Virgin out of cloud,” a numinous and an abstract force, whose appearance produces this telekinetic moment for Henry in which reality itself seemingly shifts. In the beginning of the stanza Henry is “careful” to remain silent, but the miraculous occurrence of course renders that communicative act inevitable.

In this sense, *Dream song 5* follows a progression quite similar to the first *Dream Song*. The third stanza begins with the lines, “Henry lay in de netting, wild, / while the brainfever bird did scales,” (5.3.13-14). Thus by the end of the poem Henry’s gaiety has progressed into a “wild,” perhaps even a maddening reflection, and the implied musicality of the “brainfever bird” doing “scales” reflects the initial song having been disrupted. Furthermore, the fact that Henry is lying “in de netting” suggests that he has now been detained, perhaps like cargo on the aforementioned plane, because his severe instability poses a threat to the outside world. Again, rather than viewing the self-expressive act as a cathartic experience for Henry, we should see it as something that presents his character as a danger. Much like the declaration of perpetual death and erosion at the end of *Dream Song 1*, the final lines of *Dream Song 5* show that he is both an alienated and an alienating figure:

Mr Heartbreak, the New Man  
 Come to farm a crazy land;  
 an image of the dead on the fingernail  
 of a newborn child. (5.3.15-18)

The miraculous occurrence of this “Virgin out of cloud” can be seen as the muse, which allows, or maybe even forces the poet to produce a self-contained, unified whole out of the fragments of experience. It should be acknowledged, then, that the unpredictability of Henry’s experiences results in the evasiveness of the very poetic language at play in *The Dream Songs*. Indeed, the fact that he is presented as “Mr Heartbreak, the New Man,” acknowledges that Henry cannot conform to any typical applications or conventions of poetic language.

Of course, the characterization of poetry as “confessional” suggests the poet’s revelation of personal experiences to an audience. We can see how the character of Henry goes far beyond the experiences of an individual in order to comment on the act of self-expression itself. Postmodern scholar Jonathon Holden discusses a necessary characteristic of “confessional” poetry:

The authority of the confessional voice finds its source in the authenticity of the speaker’s testimony- a testimony which must, however, transcend the narrowly personal... the persona’s story must acquire, like a saint’s life, a mythic significance. (27)

In relation to *Dream Song 5*, as in many of the poems, there is seemingly a cosmic significance to Henry’s disillusionment. His character is not simply troubled, or less fortunate than “the rest of us.” Rather, he is by definition an alienated figure; his very existence relies on a perpetual excess of emotional and intellectual compulsions. Anthony Caeshu accurately cites the source of

Henry's "mythic significance" in his ability to die and be resurrected throughout *The Dream Songs* (Caleshu 106). Of course he is permitted to do so because he is an artistic creation. But this character feature is also played with in somewhat of an ironic way. Henry quite often expresses a desire to no longer be alive, and occasionally this desire is fulfilled; in *Dream Song 26* he says to his nameless friend "-I had a most marvelous piece of luck. I died" (26.3.18). And yet despite this "most marvelous piece of luck," he continues his existence as a tormented figure. Even his death is plagued by impermanence.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted then, that Berryman does not simply mythologize himself through Henry, but that he casts a "mythic significance" upon the poetic endeavor in general. However, this is not to say that *77 Dream Songs* portrays poetic language as bearing some sort of transcendent quality. In fact, Henry's struggle to effectively express himself seems to argue against this romanticized notion of poetry as a means of salvation for tormented minds. Nevertheless, the poet can be seen as confronting the ineffable, and this is dramatized by Henry's very struggle to exist and to process the external world in a coherent way.

Supporting this "mythic significance" is Henry's complicated status as a human character. In *Dream Song 13* it is revealed that "He is a human American man," and yet, we are consistently given details that put certain limitations on our ability to identify with him as such (13.2.10). Throughout *77 Dream Songs*, there is a recurring imagery of Henry being physically mutilated. *Dream Song 1* for instance, reveals that Henry is "pried / open for all the world to see" (1.2.11-12). In what sense he is "pried open" we are not told, and yet the expression seems fitting considering that throughout the *Dream Songs* we are given insight into the inner-workings of Henry's mind, his misanthropy, his urges, and his overall confusion. The poetry is far from didactic, but instead it unapologetically portrays the aspects of the human psyche that are

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<sup>6</sup> Similar to Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"

commonly withheld from society. To an extent, then, Henry's physical mutilation can be seen as related to the content of dreams, the fragmented experiences that possess the ability to escape moral censorship and societal expectations. In terms of metapoetic commentary, the dream aspect of Henry's world as it is revealed to us is analogous to the fragmented psychic material that seemingly resists all logic.

Deborah Nelson provides an interesting commentary on physical fragmentation in "confessional" poetry at large. In the work of all of the so-called "confessional poets" Nelson locates a recurring motif of what she calls "operation poems," which are characterized as "a small but distinct subgenre in which the issues of inside and outside, surface and depth, power and coercion, are explored in relation to the confessional project" (40). Nelson specifically cites *Dream Song 67* as an example of this theme, as the poem's opening lines state, "I don't operate often, When I do / persons take note. / Nurses look amazed. They pale" (67.1.1-3). Interestingly, in the beginning of this "operation poem," the body being operated on is not that of the persona, but rather, some nameless entity. In relation to *The Dream Songs*, we might consider that it is language itself that is being cut open, dissected, rearranged, and adjusted. Consequently, the operation leaves the by-standing nurses looking "amazed" and "pale," perhaps even sickened, or at the very least disoriented by the operation taking place, most likely going terribly awry as a medical operation might in a dream.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in the poem's third stanza, it is revealed in yet another conversation with the nameless interlocutor that "I am obliged to perform in complete darkness / operations of great delicacy / on my self" (67.3. 13-15). Nelson cites these passages in her discussion of "operation poetry," correctly stating, "We are not in much doubt

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the mention of the "pale nurses" and other "persons" who "take note," is also very likely an anticipation of a confused critical reception following the initial publication of *77 Dream Songs*.

that the ‘operations of great delicacy’ are the *77 Dream Songs*,” and that the allusions to medical operations function as “metaphors for the confessional project” (40-41). However, it appears that an analysis of the “operations of great delicacy” which the speaker, most definitely Henry, performs on himself “in complete darkness” can be expanded in order to examine the very language at play in *The Dream Songs*. There is, of course, the masturbatory implication, as well as the mention of “complete darkness,” evoking sleep, unconsciousness, and dreams. And contrastingly, we should also consider the indicated violence that would result from a medical operation performed in complete darkness. As we’ve seen, the act of self-expression is consistently accompanied by imagery of self-harm. It appears, then, that while the “operation poems” are indeed a suitable metaphor for the creation of confessional poetry, the acceptance of only this symbolic function points to the problematic nature of interpretation in relation to *The Dream Songs* as a whole. The metapoetic serves a multi-faceted function; even if the operation is a metaphor for the autobiographical content of the poems, it is inevitably a metaphor for Henry’s very existence.

More common than references to medical operations are indications that Henry is “pried open” and torn apart in a manner that is anything but intending to be beneficial to his health.<sup>8</sup> *Dream Song 8*, for instance, deals almost entirely with Henry being physically dismembered, as the first stanza reveals, “They took away his teeth, / white and helpful; bothered his backhand; / halved his green hair” (8.1. 1-3). Again, we have an ambiguous “they” tormenting Henry. Of course, it is never revealed who “they” are, but it is sufficient to say that they are a malicious other who can’t stand to see Henry whole. Referring back to the “woolen lover” of the first

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, Joel Conarro also mentions *Dream Songs 67* and *8* in regards to Henry being “pried open.” While our interpretations differ greatly, Conarro should be credited with acknowledging, “The word ‘pry’ also hints at secrets, knowledge of intimate details, and as a poet Henry has been, and still is, on display... in his ‘long wonder’ subject to the world’s scrutiny” (112-113).

*Dream Song*, Joel Conarroe asserts, “The world... no longer a single lover, is now a manipulative, impersonal ‘they’” (113). This ever-present vindictive “they” of *The Dream Songs* seems to exist in order to implement the oblique “law against Henry,” mentioned at the end of *Dream Song 4*, the law perhaps being that he must always be reduced to a fragment. In this sense he is, by definition, a perpetual victim. Additionally, it is easy to see how Henry’s physical fragmentation is analogous to the perpetually disjointed “Henryspeech.” If we pause to consider this mutilation in relation to deconstructionist discourse on language, it appears that Henry’s hyper-awareness towards the instability of meaning renders him a threat to the structure of the institution. “What institution?” we might ask. The institution of poetry of course doesn’t exist. Or rather, it exists in multifarious forms. Nevertheless, while poetic conventions are completely intangible, they are incredibly effective in establishing rules and criterion; the proper grounds for canonization are presumably of very little importance to Henry as a “comic poet hero,” because conventional applications of poetic language up until the postmodern era served merely to cover up its very artificiality. This, again, is not to assume John Berryman’s perspective on the poetic tradition whatsoever. Henry as a literary figure obviously inhabits an entirely different reality. In the second stanza of *Dream Song 8* it is said that “They lifted off / his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled / to see himself less” (8.2. 7-9). It is significant that he “pled to see himself less,” as the metapoetic is portrayed as an incessant and relentless self-awareness, illuminating artificiality rather than masking it.

Furthermore, if we again take into consideration that *Dream Song 8*, and indeed the majority of *The Dream Songs* contain many of the characteristics of a bad dream, then it can and should be considered that all of this violence and disorder is merely the product of an internal conflict. To contradict my previous analysis, perhaps there is no malignant “other” whatsoever,

and the physical mutilation is necessarily the translation of thought into language, or symbolic dream image. It is stated in the third stanza “The weather fleured. They weakened all his eyes, / and burning thumbs into his ears, and shook / his hand like a notch” (8.3. 13- 15). The progression of these actions should be taken into account. First, Henry’s eyes are “weakened” and then his ears are plugged with “burning thumbs.” But then his hand is shook, albeit like an object rather than a body part, but nevertheless Henry is physically reduced until he is forced to take part in a normal and seemingly innocuous human interaction, the shaking of hands.

Interestingly, the others shaking “his hand like a notch” appears in the middle of a series of violent images, the final line being “they took away his crotch” (8.3. 18). Therefore, it appears as though for Henry’s character, the normal human interaction is portrayed as being equally threatening and destructive as castration. At the center of all this disfigurement, what truly troubles Henry is the act of being a character itself, and all of the inevitable fragmentation that his existence implies.

We can see how distancing the character of Henry from the poet John Berryman allows for a wider range of interpretive possibilities. If we read Henry as a mere filter for the poet’s thoughts and desires, or a vehicle for his so-called “confessions,” then we are likely to overlook a great deal of the metapoetic commentary revealed through Henry’s struggle to express himself, in addition to a larger discourse on the problems of language in general. The idea that Henry can and should be read as John Berryman inevitably leads to a one-dimensional reading of *The Dream Songs*. This is not to say that such a reading is inaccurate, but rather, it’s merely incomplete, and likely to result in the belittlement of Henry’s intricate function as a literary character.

In an interview filmed in 1967 John Berryman makes somewhat of an unlikely comparison between Henry and one of the most widely known characters in all of literature, Anna Karenina: “One of his [Tolstoy’s] points, was to *torture* Anna Karenina...until she couldn’t bear it anymore... So I took Henry in various directions... to take him further than anything in ordinary life really can take us” (Alvarez). It is interesting to consider the relationship between these two “tortured” literary figures. Berryman suggests that Anna Karenina’s primary function is to provide an extreme, yet ultimately realistic depiction of human suffering. What, then, is the function of Henry’s hyperbolized suffering? There is most likely no satisfactory answer to this question that can avoid being overly simplistic. Perhaps all that one can do is look to Henry, and consider what particular factors result in the perpetuation of his grief.

Adrienne Rich’s concise and beautifully written essay on *The Dream Songs* asserts that “Throughout, Henry is engaged in an act of resistance: this, finally, is the plot of the poem” (Thomas 131). I have intended with this analysis to show particularly in which ways this resistance manifests itself. It is between silence and speech that we can locate one of the fundamental conflicts faced by Henry’s character. The content of dreams begs for interpretation, much like the abstract poetic diction that, if successful, proposes more questions than answers. When Henry desires not to correspond with the outside world, he is resisting his very function within the text. In this regard, *The Dream Songs* present language itself as an alienating force, one that, however, ultimately cannot be resisted.

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