

Some Brief Remarks on Berryman

I should not let 2014 pass without remarking on the centenary of the birth of John Berryman, one of the great American poets and critics writing between the 1940s until his death in 1972. One of the few public notices of the Berryman centennial that I have seen came in the *New York Times* over the summer. Another is a conference that was held at the University of Minnesota, but little else seems to have happened to mark the anniversary. A *Times* reviewer commented on the appearance of a new collection of Berryman poems, *The Heart is Strange*, a selection that is said to include a few minor items that had not been published before. Daniel Swift of the New College of the Humanities of London prepared the collection and has contributed an introduction of limited interest. The same reviewer noted that *Poets in Their Youth*, the memoir of Berryman's first wife, Eileen Simpson, was brought back into print as part of the centennial, about thirty years after its original publication. Eileen Simpson died in 2002, and I assume the new edition of her book includes no fresh material.

. He was born in Oklahoma, but the family moved to Tampa, Florida, with Berryman's older brother, Jefferson, where the father opened a family restaurant. This was in 1926, when the state's land boom was at its peak. But the restaurant failed when the market collapsed, and shortly afterwards the father committed suicide—a traumatic, life-altering event for the poet. His original name, John Allyn Smith, was changed by his mother to Berryman, surname of her second husband, whom she married shortly after the death of her first. Very shortly; the wedding took place within a matter of weeks of her husband's death, and students of Berryman's life have wondered if the funeral baked meats furnished the marriage table. In an essay published in 1996, Robert Giroux, Berryman's friend and publisher, presented the remarkable but plausible theory

that his mother conspired with her second husband to murder the first. Giroux appeals to Berryman's future biographers to study the facts of the father's death more closely.

Almost immediately after the wedding, a second marriage for Berryman's step-father as well, the family moved to New York. Berryman attended public schools in New York for two years, and then was enrolled in the South Kent School in Connecticut, a private prep school. After acquiring his diploma, he enrolled in Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1936; it was during his college years that he and Giroux met and became life-long friends. After completing the program, he earned a fellowship that granted him two years of further study at Cambridge University; during his stay in the U.K. he once took afternoon tea in London with W. B. Yeats. On returning to the U.S., he began his teaching career, first at Wayne State University in Detroit and then at Harvard, Princeton, the University of Iowa and finally at the University of Minnesota, where he spent the rest of his career, from 1956 to 1971.

A greatly disturbed or troubled man who, like his father, ended his life in suicide, Berryman struggled with alcoholism, depression, anxiety and guilt for most of his adult life. Extensive use of prescription drugs was also part of his clinical picture. Alcohol was the bane of many American writers in the last century, and Berryman's name is high up on the list. An heir to Rimbaud's appeal for *le dereglement de tous les sense*, Berryman claimed for years that alcohol and smoking were essential to the composition of poetry, a notion he rejected after discovering that he could write perfectly well when sober. During his years of fame in the 1960s, he was repeatedly hospitalized for alcoholism. Here is a partial inventory of his experiences that Berryman recorded in 1970, describing (in group therapy) how his drinking had gotten out of control:

Wife [Eileen Simpson] left me after 11 yrs of marriage bec. of drinking. Despair, heaving drinking alone, jobless, penniless, in N.Y. Lost when black-out the most important professional letter I have ever received. Made homosexual advances when drunk, four or five times. . . Quarrel w/ landlord drunk at midnight over the key to my apartment, he called the police, spent the night in jail. . . My chairman told me I had called up a student drink at midnight & threatened to kill her. Wife left me bec. of drinking. Gave a public lecture drunk. Drunk in Calcutta, wandered streets lost all night, unable to remember my address. Married present wife 8 yrs ago. Many hospitalizations. Many barbiturates and tranquilizers off & on over last 10 yrs. Many alibis for drinking, lying abt. it. Severe memory-loss, memory distortions. DT's once in Abbott [Hospital] lasted for hours. Quart a whisky a day for months in Dublin working hard on a long poem.

His best biographer, John Haffenden, writes that with the help of a rehabilitation clinic and Alcoholics Anonymous, he regained his sobriety near the end of his life. But recovery came to him after twenty years of drinking had badly corroded his health. By 1964 at the latest, Haffenden says, his health had been irreparably damaged. "Recognizing at last that his body was too impaired by long illness to give means to his mind," writes Haffenden, "he found his literary plans guttering by the end of the summer [of 1971]." Those ambitions including completing his novel *Recovery*, a new collection of poems, a poetry anthology, and books on Shakespeare and Christ. Anxious that he lacked the stamina to finish these projects, despairing that the years he put into them might have been wasted, Berryman's chronic depression worsened, at a moment when he needed attainable projects that would offer him reasons to live. He ended up a suicide, jumping off a bridge over the Mississippi River.

Berryman belongs to the post-war generation of writers and painters that gained celebrity in the 1960s. Mailer attracted great attention with his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, and became a public figure in the sixties, when he mounted a quixotic political campaign in the New York mayoralty of 1968. John Cheever was put on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1964. Robert Lowell and Mailer both were celebrities at the march on the Pentagon in October 1967, which

Mailer describes in *The Armies of the Night*. Bellow attracted enormous attention, perhaps more than he wanted, after *Herzog* was published in 1964.

Berryman acquired a public reputation at about the same time. Some scholars assert that his best work is *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, the long poem that was published in the fall of 1953 by *Partisan Review* and in book form three years later by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. A meditation on Anne Bradstreet, an English colonist and one of America's first poets, the poem is 57 stanzas long and includes a set of notes to help readers unfamiliar with colonial history and with some of the obscure references in the text. The piece was recognized as one of the great poetic achievements of post-war American writing—Edmund Wilson called it "the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Wasteland*"—but inevitably found a limited reading public. But eight years later, in 1964, Berryman published *77 Dream Songs*, which brought him new readers and a Pulitzer Prize; volume two, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, earned him a National Book Award in 1969. *77 Dream Songs* also consolidated his status as perhaps the country's finest poet, rivaled only by Robert Lowell, and helped him obtain a Guggenheim fellowship for the 1966-67 school year. He chose to spend it in Dublin, and the stay was documented by a photo spread and interview in *Life* magazine. But publicity isn't the same as an attentive, understanding public, of course, and Berryman knew that perfectly well.

Here is a comment he prepared for the National Book Committee, which administered the National Book Awards for several years in the 1950s and 1960s.

I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on *The Wasteland*: personality, and plot—no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner. I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in American and English poetry—in so far as the English have any poetry nowadays. The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or the motions of a human personality, free and determined, in one case feminine, the other masculine. Critics are divided as to the degree of my success in both cases. Long may they rave!

I draw somewhat at random from *The Dream Songs* number 29, one of the better-known among the collection:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart,
so heavy, that 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
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: too late. This is not for tears;
thinking.

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

In his slender but excellent volume on Berryman, Joel Connaroe contends that a poem like this unites the author with Plath, Roethke, and Lowell, the "extremist writers" of the post-war years, as he calls them. Connaroe sees in these lines "the sense of guilt that pervades their work, guilt based on the fear that one is somehow personally responsible for the destruction of others, and at times. . .for a holocaust—that one is a victim and at times one's own victim. The lines above describe the morning horrors of an alcoholic who has no memory at all of what he may have done during a blacked-out period the night before, and who automatically fears the worst." Berryman himself said that the *Dream Songs* "concern the turbulence of the modern world, and memory, and wants." In the same essay—"One Answer to a Question: Changes"—he cites number 29 specifically, offering this remark: "Whether the diction of that is consistent with blackface talk, hell-spinning puns, coarse jokes, whether the ending is funny, or frightening, or both, I put up to the listener. Neither of the American poets who as reviewers have quoted it admiringly has committed himself; so I won't."

Berryman is often tagged as a confessional poet, in the school initiated by Robert Lowell, and it seems true that the speaker of *Dream Songs*, Henry House, is a version of Berryman himself. By the time his final two collections came out, *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*, the second not long after Berryman's death in 1972, the style of covert autobiography had been dropped altogether. *Love & Fame* simply recreates the author's life in chronological order, including the anguish of poetic creation: "Hours of acedia, pencil on the desk/Coffee in a cup, ashtray flowing/the window closed, the universe unforthcoming." The collection concludes with "eleven addresses to the Lord," and *Delusions, Etc.*, published some months after his death, resumes the style of religious poetry, with a lengthy poem on Beethoven and shorter ones on George Washington and Emily Dickinson.

A year after Berryman died, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux published *Recovery*, the novel he was composing near the end of his life. The book is an odd production and captures the experience of an alcoholic in the recovery ward of a hospital, participating in group therapy and holding private conversations with other patients. Written in third-person omniscient, this absorbing story recounts the experience of Alan Severence, nominally a professor of molecular biology but a fairly obvious stand-in for the author himself. Everything Berryman wrote commands interest, but *Recovery* is an extremely fragmentary text and would have required a great deal of work to finish and shape into a coherent story. Despite this, the book went through two printings, testimony to the public's interest in Berryman's work. (And what a different public that would have been too, back in the early seventies, when people took an interest in poets and scientists rather than financiers and software engineers. *Recovery* was republished in 1993 by Thunder's Mouth, a small press in the Bay Area which apparently believed demand was still sufficient to justify the expense.) The publisher included a set of notes Berryman prepared, suggesting the direction the manuscript might have taken had the author lived to complete it. Because the notes include a reference to Berryman's best-known short story, "The Imaginary Jew," Farrar, Strauss & Giroux tacked that piece on to the end of the book as well. The fragmentary condition of the unfinished novel, the inclusion of the notes and the short story make *Recovery* an odd production indeed.

My own favorite Berryman might be *Love & Fame* and *Delusions Etc.*, prose poems that chronicle the writer's life and his attempt to recover his faith in Christianity. The poems concentrate on arranging syntax and diction as effectively as possible. "These poems aim at nothing short of *perfection* of tone," Berryman wrote to a friend. "Writing," he told the journalist who interviewed him during his stay in Dublin, "is just a man sitting alone in a room with the

English language trying to make it come out right. The important thing is that your work is something no one else could do." *The Dream Songs* are undoubtedly a greater composition than the later volumes and, like most modern poetry, are "difficult." But the more I read my edition, the more at home I am with the work, which is often the case when readers try to interpret modern literature. In 1989, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux published an edition of collected poems, omitting *The Dream Songs*, which includes an excellent introduction by Charles Thornbury. From Berryman's correspondence Thornbury culls the following observation: "The sound of things is important to the soul—no reason, but they are; or the reason just in the movement of the blood, or the recurrent flash of the lids that interrupt the world, the rhythms of destruction and rebuilding in the body minute by minute." From Berryman's essay "From the Senior and Middle Generations," published in 1959, comes the central statement that "Poetry is a terminal activity, taking place out near the end of things, where the poet's soul addresses one other soul only, never mind when. And it aims—never mind either communication or expression, at the reformation of the poet, as prayer does. In the grand cases. . . it enables the poet gradually, again and again, to become almost another man. . ."

That essay appeared in the posthumous *The Freedom of the Poet*, which Farrar, Strauss & Giroux brought out in 1976. Almost 400 pages long, it includes essays and reviews that Berryman wrote between 1940 and 1966, along with five short stories. One is "The Imaginary Jew," perhaps his best-known story, and another is "Wash Far Away," originally published I believe in 1975 but written in the 1950s. "The Imaginary Jew," composed in 1945, recounts an encounter Berryman had when he was taken for a Jew by an anti-Semitic stranger in Union Square in New York in 1941. "Wash Far Away," which I like even more, draws on the author's years of experience as a college instructor. Set in an unspecified men's college, the piece

describes the day he devoted a class to *Lycidas*; the title of the story is drawn from a line of the poem. The tale recounts the efforts of a young instructor struggling with the indifference, boredom, and occasional interest of his students; the story opens with this arresting statement: "Long after the professor had come to doubt whether lives held crucial turning points as often as the man conducting or undergoing them imagined, he still considered that one day in early spring had made a difference for him." The instructor's wife and closest friend had died prematurely young, but he recovers a sense of aliveness teaching Milton in the dullness of the Eisenhower years.

The essays in *The Freedom of the Poet* are remarkably good, and demonstrate Berryman's range. The subjects run from Marlowe and Shakespeare and up to Berryman's contemporaries, and include some of the most important literature of the U.S. and England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Berryman writes with equal ease on Elizabeth England; the important English-language poetry of the nineteenth century; Eliot and Pound, Robert Lowell and Dylan Thomas; the various editions of the stories and novels of Henry James; and figures from the twenties, such as Dreiser, Fitzgerald and Lardner--pieces that have stayed fresh, readable and stimulating several decades after being published. For acuity and stylistic freshness, they are nearly matchless, and give the reader the impression of a master critic who has read an enormous amount of literature and thought deeply about it. As Thornbury writes, Berryman "devours the work of major and minor writers, theologians, philosophers, archaeologists, and psychologists." Some of the essays are justly famous, such as the explication of Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," a piece so penetrating that Lowell himself wrote Berryman after reading it, declaring that he "hit the bulls eye" with his analysis. At the age of 25, Berryman confidently upbraids Julian Symons, at the time a well-known English critic, who had

written what Berryman felt was an ignorantly hostile review of Dylan Thomas's poems.

"Evidently," he writes, a page into the piece, "it is necessary to point out to Symons what is elementary: that a poem means more than the abstract, banal statement of its theme. It means its imagery, the disparate parts and relations of it, its ambiguities, by extension the techniques which produced it and the emotions it legitimately produces. A poem is an accretion of knowledge, of which only the flimsiest portion can be translated into bromide."

Berryman belonged to a generation for whom nothing could match literature in importance. I think of Delmore Schwartz, who, according to his biographer, had "mastered English prosody" by the time he was twenty and spent most of the summer of 1935 copying out by hand the most famous poems in the history of the English language. He considered this part of his apprenticeship as a poet. In the entire summer, again according to his biographer, virtually the only person Schwartz saw was his friend William Barrett; the rest of his time was given over to poetry. Or consider the example of Alfred Kazin, consuming a mountain of books in the reading room of the New York Public Library during the late 1930s in order to write *On Native Grounds*, a volume he published in his twenties and which is still worth reading today. These men wrote about authors with the enthusiasm and acuity that inspire a reader to read the texts themselves.

"What he mainly thought about was literature," writes Bellow, in his introduction to *Recovery*. He and Berryman were both teaching at Princeton in the early 1950s and producing major works: *Bradstreet* for the poet, *Augie March* for the novelist. "When he saw me coming, he often said 'Ah' meaning that a literary discussion was about to begin. It might be *The Tempest* that he had on his mind that day, or *Don Quixote*; it might be Graham Greene or John O'Hara; or Goguel on Jesus, or Freud on dreams. There was little personal conversation."

John Haffenden attributes especial importance to the attention Berryman gave to Emily Dickinson near the end of his life, and this may explain the room he makes for her in one of the longer passages of *Delusions, Etc.* "A failure in her personal relationships, she became more and more a seeker after the knowledge of death, and spent her days winking cryptic wisdom and irony out of her seclusion. To all of these searches—for God, love, fame, and death—Berryman was very much attuned."

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