



Tom Rogers

GOD OF RESCUE

John Berryman and Christianity

PETER LANG

John Berryman (1914–1972) was one of the most important American poets and men of letters of the twentieth century. A major preoccupation of his work was his life-long quest for religious truth, in particular, his critical investigations into the claims of his lost Christian faith – a faith he portrays as being extinguished at the age of twelve by his father's suicide, but dramatically reawakened four decades later by his encounter in the alcoholics' ward with the 'God of Rescue'.

This book constitutes the first full-length study to be published on this important, yet often neglected, aspect of Berryman's writings. The author establishes a narrative of conflict and conversion in Berryman's poetry, which explores the mysterious relationship between grace and free will, and the limits both of the will and of belief that the poet encounters in the face of human suffering and the existence of evil. The closely researched commentary takes the reader from Berryman's largely uncharted early verse through to *The Dream Songs* and his final 'post-conversion' poetry. Drawing on many previously unpublished writings by Berryman, the author demonstrates how the poet's religious experiences and research are crucial for an informed interpretation of this often challenging body of work.

Tom Rogers was awarded his PhD by the University of Sheffield for a thesis on John Berryman. He has lectured in English literature at the Universities of Sheffield, Derby and Sheffield Hallam, and is currently Head of English at University Centre Peterborough.



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Notes and Abbreviations

Unless stated otherwise, all quotations from John Berryman's published poetry are taken from *Collected Poems 1937–1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989; London: Faber, 1990), referenced with the abbreviation *CP* and page number(s); and from *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969; repr. London: Faber, 1990), with individual Songs referenced according to their numbering in this collection.

All references to Berryman's unpublished writings, unless otherwise stated, refer to their catalogue location within the archive of the John Berryman Papers, housed within The Literary Manuscripts Collections at the University of Minnesota Libraries (abbreviated 'U Minn, JBP'). Using a hierarchical referencing system, material is arranged firstly according to broad categories of Berryman's work under which it falls (eg. Prose, Miscellaneous Prose (Unpublished), which are abbreviated accordingly (eg. 'Misc. Prose. Unpubl.'), and/or, if appropriate, further identified according to a larger work to which it might relate (eg. Dream Songs, St Pancras Braser). The material is further arranged into numbered boxes (Box #), containing folders (F #), which then contain either handwritten/manuscript (MS) or typescript (TS) sheets and items, which are mostly, though not in every case, individually numbered. Where a particular sheet or item is unnumbered I normally identify it according to its heading, first line of text, or any other distinguishing features which may prove helpful in locating the exact source amongst what, in some cases, can be a loose collection of unnumbered papers in a folder. An overview of the catalogue, outlining the general contents of the archive, can be viewed online at <<http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/mss043.xml>>.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible, except, where indicated, from the Authorized King James Version (AV). The following editions have been used:

The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, ed. Dom Bernard Orchard O.S.B. and Rev. R.C. Fuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966)

The Bible: Authorized King James Version, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Please note, however, that the Septuagint and Vulgate system for the numbering of the Psalms is used throughout (that is, Psalm 9 corresponds to Psalms 9 and 10 of the Jewish and Protestant Psalters (used for the main numbering in the above editions), after which the LXX/Vulgate Psalm numbers continue to be one lower, until Psalms 146–7 which correspond to Psalm 147 in the Jewish/Protestant Psalters).

The following abbreviations are used to refer to these frequented cited reference works:

OED *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (1989); *OED Online* (OUP), <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>, accessed 20 June 2010

NSOED *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Lesley Brown, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

Introduction

In October 1970 Peter Stitt conducted one of the few extended interviews with John Berryman ever to be published, which would appear nearly a year after the poet's death in the winter 1972 edition of *The Paris Review*. It took place during one of Berryman's by now frequent readmissions into hospital for treatment relating to the alcoholism which had dogged him for much of his adult life. He was at the time a patient in the Intensive Alcohol Treatment Centre at Saint Mary's Hospital, Minneapolis – the same place where, five months earlier, he had undergone a life-changing religious conversion experience. He was brought back to his long-lost Catholic faith, as he put it, 'by force, by necessity, because of a rescue action – into the notion of a God who, at certain moments, definitely and personally intervenes in individual lives, one of which is mine.'¹

He believed that God, through the actions of one of his counsellors, had helped him out of a hopeless situation which had brought him close to despair. This very tangible experience of a 'God of Rescue' affirmed for him what for many years had been one of his 'favourite conceptions' – one which he had got from his readings of 'Augustine and Pascal'. He had found the experience to be so compelling a demonstration of God's goodness and mercy that he could not help but choose for God and shortly afterwards began attending Mass again for the first time in forty-four years. The God of Rescue encounter had also inspired in Berryman's poetry a new direction: the 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord' sequence which closed *Love & Fame* (1970) was followed by numerous other poems in a similar witty, soul-searchingly devotional style that became characteristic of his

1 Peter Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry: An Interview with John Berryman', in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 18–44 at 39 (first publ. in *Paris Review*, 53 (1972), 177–207).

late verse, and would form a large part of what was to be his final collection, *Delusions, etc of John Berryman* (1972). As Stitt points out, however, although Berryman had recently turned much more directly to a Christian subject matter, there had ‘always been a religious element in [his] poems’, and when he asked Berryman about its role generally in his verse, the poet responded:

It’s awfully hard for me to judge ... Now the point is, I have been interested not only in religion but in theology all my life. I don’t know how much these personal beliefs, together with the interest in theology and the history of the church, enter into particular works up to those addresses to the Lord in *Love & Fame*. I really think it is up to others – critics, scholars – to answer your question.²

This book takes up the challenge presented here by the poet, examining what from the beginning to end of Berryman’s career is shown to be a consistently developing thematic concern of his verse. Stitt’s question has of course been addressed before to various extents by critics in the context of broader studies, including the three monographs on Berryman’s poetry published during the 1970s, by J.M. Linebarger, Gary Q. Arpin, and Joel Conarroe respectively;³ also in a critical commentary by John Haffenden, as well as his and Paul Mariani’s biographies of Berryman;⁴ and also in a relatively small number of individual articles and essays on various of Berryman’s works from critics such as Douglas Dunn, Roger Pooley, and, more recently, Brendan Cooper.⁵ Their research and insights have often proved

2 Ibid. 39, 41–2.

3 J.M. Linebarger, *John Berryman*, Twayne’s United States Authors Series, 244 (New York: Twayne, 1974); Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978); Joel Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

4 John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980); *The Life of John Berryman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*, 2nd edn (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

5 Paul Mariani, “Lost Souls in Ill-Attended Wards”: Berryman’s “Eleven Addresses to the Lord”, in *Berryman’s Understanding*, 219–31 (first publ. in *A Book of Rereadings in Recent American Poetry: 30 Essays*, ed. Greg Kuzma (Lincoln, NB: Best Cellar Press,

useful to this present study, as have those of the numerous other scholars who have either touched upon the religious issues surrounding Berryman's work, or concerned themselves with related aspects of his poetry.

In the introduction to *After Thirty Falls* (2007) – the first new collection of essays on Berryman's work for fourteen years – Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan remark how Berryman's poetry 'has not received the same degree of critical attention that has been given to the work of some of his contemporaries, including Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath', and that 'the diminishment of his reputation in the time since his death needs to be acknowledged'.⁶ Theories as to why this situation may have arisen have not been too forthcoming either; but perhaps Christopher Beach is on to something when he observes how 'Berryman was both an exceptionally talented and an extremely ambitious poet, whose work is so idiosyncratic that it has not yet been fully understood by critics and readers'.⁷ One might have thought that large numbers of new critics would be attracted to the fertile ground provided by a 'challenging' poet such as Berryman, but it could be that the ground is too demanding for them to want to venture there without more extensive prior preparation of it by others. It would, of course, be unnecessarily reductive to claim that any poet's work could ever be 'fully understood', but one implication of Beach's comment might be that Berryman's work does not always sit well with contemporary theoretical models, trends and paradigms.

1979), 8–21); Douglas Dunn, 'Gaiety & Lamentation', in *Berryman's Understanding*, 139–51 (140–5) (first publ. in *Encounter* 43 (1974), 72–7); Roger Pooley, 'Berryman's Last Poems: Plain Style and Christian Style', *Modern Languages Review*, 76/2 (1981), 291–7; Brendan Cooper, "'One Grand Exception': *The Dream Songs* as Theodicy?", in *'After Thirty Falls': New Essays on John Berryman*, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR: Studies in Literature, 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2007), 155–71.

- 6 *After Thirty Falls*, 3. An excellent overview of the history and scope of Berryman scholarship up to the present is provided in both Richard J. Kelly's preface and Coleman and McGowan's introduction to this collection.
- 7 Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 164.

One aspect of this disconformity is undoubtedly the religious preoccupation of much of the poetry. In a secular environment increasingly hostile to Christianity, one might find it unsurprising that such a poet would struggle to find critical popularity, whose life's work not only incorporates Christianity as a frequent reference point, but also culminates in an enthusiastic return to the Catholic Church and the depiction of a re-established personal relationship with a living God. As Linebarger observes, 'the movement from existential despair to religious belief is not a direction that most men or most poets can take in our time, in spite of the examples of Eliot and Auden.'⁸ Despite something of a social boom in American (particularly evangelical) Christianity in the early Cold War period, combined as it was with a patriotic anti-Communism, Berryman did not perceive such attitudes as reflecting those of his nation's intellectual elites, of which he considered himself to be very much of a part.

Consequently, he saw himself as being a kind of counter-cultural Christian apologist, ironically even during the long period when he did not profess to be a Christian himself and was highly critical towards even the most fundamental aspects of the faith. His writings express both an implicit and explicit demand that the world should give the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the claims of the Church, due consideration. In a draft preface from 1970 for his unfinished 'Life of Christ', which by then he had worked on intermittently for eighteen years, Berryman remarks that Christ's 'is the most important human personality, and the most important career, of which we have knowledge; and it befits us to try to understand them.'⁹

Berryman's missionary attitude is demonstrated in an early essay he began drafting entitled 'Religion and the Intellectuals', in response to what was billed as a 'provocative' article by the philosopher W.T. Stace in the September 1948 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, called 'Man Against Darkness'. Stace argues that religious faith is now irrecoverable for most of mankind, which must, as he puts it, 'grow up', accept the impersonal 'irrationality'

8 Linebarger, *John Berryman*, 151.

9 U Minn, JBP, Prose, Box 6, Misc. Prose (Unpubl.), 'Life of Christ', MS, headed 'Life of X: Pref.', dated '4 January 1970'.

of the universe, and learn to live morally without the comforting prop of religion, with its 'Great Illusion' of an ultimate 'purpose' whose end is good.¹⁰ Clearly riled, Berryman's planned counter-essay, which he intended to send to the same magazine, surveys the attitude of twentieth-century intellectuals towards religious belief, and aims to challenge Stace's assertion that faith now constitutes a recourse to illusion. Dismissing Stace's 'scientific civilization' as 'pragmatic & arrogant/submissive', he argues that the religious impulse is intrinsic to man, and parades a litany of famous twentieth-century writers who have converted to Christianity: '[T.S.] Eliot, [Evelyn] Waugh, [W.H.] Auden, G[raham] Greene, [Allen] Tate, [Robert] Lowell, etc.'¹¹ Even in 1948, he appeared to identify with these well-known converts, even if he would not whole-heartedly join their ranks for another twenty-two years.

The names that Berryman cites point towards a twentieth-century movement that has been dubbed the 'Catholic Intellectual Renaissance', which, if it did not exactly transform the prevailing cultural ethos of its time, is significant precisely because it marked a rejection of that ethos by some of the most important writers and thinkers of the first half of the century. Gregory Wolfe describes the Renaissance as 'an outpouring of philosophy, theology, history, and literature which combined fidelity to the ancient teachings of the Church with considerable sophistication of mind and spirit'.¹² The Catholic historian James Hitchcock marks the beginning of the movement with the conversion to Catholicism in 1906 of French philosopher Jacques Maritain (later to be a colleague of Berryman's at Princeton), closely followed by Pope Pius X's two encyclicals the following year condemning theological modernism. The movement's dissolution came with the relativistic tendencies of Catholic higher education

10 W.T. Stace, 'Man Against Darkness', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 182 (1948), 53–9 (54–5).

11 U Minn, JBP, Prose, Box 2, Nonfiction Prose Mod-Z, incl. Misc. (Unpubl.), #94, MS, 'Religion & the Intellectuals', 2pp.

12 Gregory Wolfe, 'Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Catholic Writer in the Modern World', in *The Catholic Writer*, ed. Ralph McNerny, The Proceedings of the Wethersfield Institute, 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 13–30 at 14.

from the mid-1960s onwards, in the wake of Vatican II.¹³ Wolfe points out, however, that the term ‘movement’ for the intellectuals associated with it is misleading in the sense that even within the various ‘schools’ of thought propagated by them were ‘widely divergent views.’¹⁴ Nevertheless, aside from their general fidelity to Catholic doctrine, there were certain key things that most of these writers had in common:

The Renaissance was not an expression of anything that might be called an ‘establishment.’ The single most striking fact about the majority of its writers is that they were converts. In the earlier generation, one could point out Léon Bloy, Jacques and Raissa Maritain, Paul Claudel, Gabriel Marcel, Charles Péguy, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, G.K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, Edith Stein, and Adrienne von Speyr. The younger generation included such converts as Louis Bouyer and Walker Percy. Add to this such near-converts as Henri Bergson and Simone Weil, as well as the Anglo-Catholic converts T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, and you have a picture of a worldview that had the capacity to draw many of the leading minds of the age.

Conversion is an experience that is in some sense unique to every convert, but it inevitably involves a process of discovery – the feeling, to quote T.S. Eliot, of arriving home and knowing the place for the first time ... they were engaged in a protracted mental and spiritual struggle that ended in a willing embrace of the central mysteries of the Faith. To all of them, their faith was an asset, a key to understanding both the highest truths and the most pressing problems of the moment. ... These writers were predominantly laypeople, not clerics ... [they] moved easily and naturally in secular professional circles. This is a testament not only to the greater openness of secular intellectuals in the earlier decades of the century but also to their positive rejection of the fortress mentality on the part of the Renaissance thinkers. Their place, as they saw it, was on the front lines of culture.¹⁵

This determination to engage with secular culture often manifested itself in the work of these writers and thinkers, who, rather than rejecting altogether the various insights of modernity about the mind, society and natural

13 James Hitchcock, ‘Postmortem on a Rebirth: The Catholic Intellectual Renaissance’, in *Years of Crisis: Collected Essays, 1970–1983* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 203–16.

14 Wolfe, ‘Ever Ancient’, in *Catholic Writer*, 18.

15 Ibid. 17–18.

science, instead tended to adapt and Christianize them.¹⁶ For authors of the Catholic Renaissance this openness to modernity also manifested itself in the embrace of many of its literary techniques, often using them to portray the various tensions between the spiritual and the secular. Hitchcock finds it unsurprising that Catholicism 'should have proved fruitful in the twentieth-century literary context', given 'the fundamental dramatic tensions which it generates: sin and redemption, authority and freedom, tradition and experience'. In contrast, he notes how 'modern culture, as it grows simultaneously more open and more uniform, takes on a certain flatness which renders novelistic creation in particular quite problematical. For those who took Catholicism seriously, however, there was never any lack of enticing possibilities'.¹⁷ Wolfe similarly notes how 'the Renaissance writers retained the conviction that man's life, far from being mechanically determined, is inherently dramatic, poised between sin and grace', and points to an important observation of Flannery O'Connor:

Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not ... The novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, a total experience of human nature at any time. For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. When there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama.¹⁸

One of the features that most associates Berryman's poetry with the fiction and other writings of the Catholic Renaissance is indeed this constant dramatic tension, as he pursues the 'mystery of incompleteness' that variously manifests itself in the course of his portrayals of human experience. From the very beginning his verse persistently depicts the state of being 'poised between sin and grace', with original sin at first being conceived as an allegory, and then, as his poetry becomes more theologically aware, as

16 Ibid. 19.

17 Hitchcock, 'Postmortem', in *Years of Crisis*, 207.

18 Wolfe, 'Ever Ancient', in *Catholic Writer*, 19.

the recognized state in which the poet is destined to be saved by his God of Rescue. In portraying these states of being, his verse also assimilated many modernist and postmodernist literary techniques, developing into the highly idiosyncratic style commented upon by Beach. There are ways, however, in which one might argue that Berryman does not fit comfortably into the Renaissance schema. For instance, rather than being a fresh convert, Berryman was a cradle Catholic who 'returned home' very late in his life, and also very late in the life of the Catholic Intellectual Renaissance; for the post-conciliar Church the poet returned to in 1970, at the age of 55, was one he found radically different to that which he fondly remembered from his childhood, and he was strongly disapproving of the liturgical and other reforms which had taken place.¹⁹

The other Renaissance writers also found themselves in a Catholic intellectual milieu no longer zealous for doctrinal orthodoxy, but rather in a liberalizing one that preferred conforming to, rather than critiquing, their increasingly secular society. That being said, Berryman, even after returning to the Church, was never entirely orthodox, and he continued to affirm certain beliefs – especially, for instance, regarding his eschatology – that conflicted with Catholic teaching. However, as Wolfe pointed out, every conversion experience is unique to the individual, and Berryman portrayed a journey of discovery that was unique to him – his own 'protracted mental and spiritual struggle' that culminated in his 'arrival home', and even then he continued to depict a faith in flux. Furthermore, Berryman was never merely concerned with portraying the subjective experience of faith, but rather also his explorations of the objective evidence and justifications for faith – as, for instance, when he portrays the debates surrounding the quest for the historical Jesus in *The Dream Songs*; or when he alludes to the scientific arguments concerning miracles in 'The Search' (*CP* 199–200) and various poems in *Delusions, etc.* One of Berryman's important affinities with the Catholic Renaissance writers then is what Hitchcock describes as their attempt 'to meet the rationalists on their own ground'. He notes how 'while not insensitive to the artistic and

19 Mariani, *Dream Song*, 488.

the intuitive ... the dominant Catholic thinkers of the age were determined that the phenomenon of belief should be placed on a rigorously constructed foundation.²⁰ The spiritual and intellectual journey that Berryman portrays is largely an attempt to realize such a 'rigorously constructed foundation' before any leap of faith can be made, and then to constantly question and reinforce it once it was finally fulfilled.

Although in certain ways Berryman's distinctive poetry defies categorization, it does of course have its place in relation to other recognized literary movements – a position to varying extents influenced by this religious aspect of his work and thought. His early, formative years as a poet were situated very much within the New Critical school of poetry and criticism, whose aesthetic was theologically informed by the Agrarianism of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate (the latter, who would be a long-time friend and mentor to Berryman, himself converted to Catholicism in 1950). This proved, however, to be a worldview and aesthetic too rigid and finalized for the poet, who saw himself as engaged in a seemingly irresolvable spiritual and psychological struggle. W.B. Yeats was also an influence, especially with regard to the densely symbolic, lyrical aspects of Berryman's early verse, and it was Yeats, especially as interpreted by Berryman's favourite critic of the time, R.P. Blackmur, who pointed him towards the development of his new poetry of 'idiom' and 'personality'.

In conjunction with these new stylistic developments the poet would increasingly make a character-drama out of life experiences that were quite explicitly his own, leading him – particularly with the publication of *The Dream Songs* – to be categorized as a member of what became dubbed the 'confessional school' of American poetry. Berryman was personally hostile to the 'confessional' label, which was also applied to most other prominent 'middle-generation' American poets, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg and Elizabeth Bishop. As Lucy Collins notes in a recent overview of 'confessionalism', 'it was a term which these poets rarely used to describe themselves. Confessionalism has no leader, no manifesto, and in spite of representing an extreme

20 Hitchcock, 'Postmortem', in *Years of Crisis*, 206.

development in modern poetry, it is often difficult to pin-point exactly.²¹ Nevertheless, critics have attempted to identify certain key features: Steven Gould Axelrod, for instance, classifies the three fundamentals of confessional poetry as being 'an undisguised exposure of painful personal event', 'a dialectic of private matter with public matter' and 'an intimate, unornamented style'.²²

All of these elements could be regarded as characteristic of Berryman's mature poetry, though his style is rarely 'unornamented', if it is almost always 'intimate'. Although all of these poets labeled as 'confessional' could be said, in their various ways, to portray 'a protracted mental and spiritual struggle', only in a few cases did it focus for them around the Christian faith to the extent that it did with Berryman, and rarely did it find its resolution in Christianity. Like Berryman, Sexton, 'throughout her poetry and letters ... expresses a strong desire to embrace wholeheartedly the Christian religion in which she was raised and a persistent inability to do so'.²³ Lowell's journey in certain ways went in the opposite direction to that of Berryman: his first two collections of poetry – *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) – were heavily influenced by the Catholicism to which he had fervently converted in 1941, as well as the theological aesthetic of the New Criticism. However, by the end of the same decade he had left the Church, and, although an intermittent interest and inclination towards it always remained, his subsequent writings no longer interpret existence from the same all-illuminating, eschatological standpoint, but rather a contingent one which attempts to find certainty and coherence whilst both accepting and lamenting their loss.²⁴

21 Lucy Collins, 'Confessionalism', in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 197–208 at 197.

22 Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 98.

23 Katherine F. McSpadden, 'The Self in the Poetry of Anne Sexton: The Religious Quest', in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 403–10 at 404.

24 See Stephen Matterson, 'Robert Lowell: *Life Studies*', in Roberts, *Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 481–90 at 489–90; *Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 60–3.

Many critics view such dissolution of faith and the stable self as being characteristic of the transition to the postmodern age, which can no longer accept the grand narratives of modernism. In the American context, various cultural and socio-historical reasons have been proposed for this, aside from Christianity's declining influence itself in the latter half of the last century. Collins, for instance, notes how 'this was the first generation of poets to be widely affected by the development of psychoanalysis and many dealt with the recesses of the psychological'. Consequently, the expression of intense mental suffering and trauma became the 'hallmark of confessional poetry', and, whether exacerbated by inspirational needs or not, most of its main protagonists found a rich vein in 'severe personal difficulties: destructive family relationships; traumatic childhoods; broken marriages; recurring mental breakdowns; alcoholism or drug abuse'.²⁵ Post-war America was also a nation of increasing prosperity and consumerism (the great stimulator of desires that must never be satisfied); it had the confidence of an established superpower, together with the Cold War paranoia of communist subversion and nuclear annihilation; and, whilst still politically and socially conservative, an artistic counter-culture was emerging which would foreshadow the socio-political movements and conflicts of the 1960s.

Collins remarks that 'confessional poetry' therefore arose within a 'culture unsure of its own progress', whose 'swift technological advancement ... was a form of development which at once benefitted and victimized the individual'. This sense of victimhood, she argues, radically changed 'the status and behaviour of the literary protagonist. The fragmented individual also sought wholeness through aesthetic expression itself, so the act of writing both represented this fragmentation and attempted to reverse it'.²⁶ If there is one essential principle of what has been called 'confessional poetry', and Berryman's poetry in particular, then it is this powerful reassertion of 'the self', even if aware of and responding to its cultural fragmentation. Writing in the wake of modernism, with its numerous impersonalizing aesthetics and ideologies, Berryman, as well as other poets of his generation,

25 Collins, 'Confessionalism', in *Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 197–8.

26 Ibid. 198–9.

sought to reaffirm the humanist literary principle that a poem is actually written by a human being – a self-conscious, thinking individual who, although interacting with and often being at the mercy of deterministic social, cultural and material forces, also has the capacity to imaginatively and creatively respond to and even transcend them.

Certainly, Berryman's verse, despite its often self-consciously 'inter-textual' nature, is poetry that, in spirit at least, resists the dominant trends of contemporary critical theory – that is, Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to literature, which would rather view the poet's work, and consciousness itself, as in some way the product of impersonal materialist and linguistic systems. It is poetry which invites a critical perspective anathematic to the 'death of the author' battle-cry of Roland Barthes and his followers. Instead, human consciousness is forcefully recentred and represented by a poetic voice which, as the Judeo-Christian tradition would put it, is 'made in the image and likeness of God'. In other words, the poetic voice represents a human subject, regarded as having the capacity to exercise free will, to create, to seek a purpose to its existence, and to make necessary moral decisions. It is the intense awareness, questioning and burden of this principle in Berryman's poetry that constitutes its main inspiration and subject matter.

This humanistic conception of both poetry and the poet is one that Berryman made a point of propagating, and which, even as a critic, led him to be somewhat sceptical about the critical tendency to group poets together into collective movements and generations. In one poetry review, 'From the Middle and Senior Generations' (1959), he argues that such a tendency is particularly inappropriate in the American context 'where the attention paid to poetry is so very slight'. Instead of the 'public conception' of a 'generation' therefore, he suggests that 'one thinks instead of isolated pockets of spiritual activity', for '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.'²⁷ Even modernist

27 John Berryman, 'From the Middle and Senior Generations', in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976; London: Faber, 1977), 310–15 at 311–12 (first publ. in *American Scholar*, 28 (Summer 1959), 384–90).

verse that purports to exemplify what Eliot referred to as the ‘impersonality of the poet’, Berryman argued, ‘hides motive, which persists.’²⁸ Elsewhere he notes that ‘one thing critics not themselves writers of poetry occasionally forget is that poetry is composed by actual human beings, and tracts of it are very closely about them.’²⁹

However, as Berryman contends in an essay on Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’, the fact that poetry may well be closely related to the poet does not mean that it constitutes the simple unmediated expression of the poet’s self to the reader, for art is transformative. The problem for the critic is drawn sharply into focus when dealing with poetry in the first-person; especially with work that appears to be openly autobiographical, as is characteristic of the poems in Lowell’s *Life Studies*. How should one refer to the ‘I’ of the poem in such instances? Berryman explains his frequent use of the term ‘the poet’ when referring to the poem’s speaker:

For convenience in exposition, with a poem so personal [as ‘Skunk Hour’], I have been pretending that ‘I’ is the poet, but of course the speaker can never be the actual writer, who is a person with an address, a Social Security number, debts, tastes, memories, expectations. Shakespeare says, ‘Two loves I have’: he does not say *only* two loves, and indeed he must have loved also his children, various friends, presumably his wife, his parents. The necessity for the artist of selection opens inevitably an abyss between his person and his persona. I only said that much poetry is ‘very closely about’ the person. The persona looks across at the person and then sets about its own work.’³⁰

Similarly, when referring to the poetic voice of Berryman’s poems, there are times when using the term ‘speaker’, rather than ‘poet’, feels inappropriately distancing; when there is such a close correspondence between the persona and the documented ideas and experiences of the real man that ‘for convenience in exposition’ one ‘pretends that “I” is the poet’. Even

28 John Berryman, ‘The Poetry of Ezra Pound’, in *Freedom of the Poet*, 253–69 at 264–5 (first publ. in *Partisan Review* 16 (April 1949), 377–94).

29 John Berryman, ‘Despondency and Madness: On Lowell’s “Skunk Hour”’, in *Freedom of the Poet*, 316–22 at 316. (first publ. as part of a symposium ‘On Skunk Hour’ in *New World Writing*, 21, ed. Stewart Richardson and Corlies M. Smith (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), 155–9).

30 Ibid. 321.

with verse as apparently autobiographical as *Love & Fame*, Berryman still creates a persona; but as biographical detail is assimilated so openly one may say that he makes a character 'out of himself', or 'of himself' – that is, through the selection, exaggeration and manipulation of personal traits, experiences, intellectual opinions and ideas into the dramatic performance of each poem. In the same way Berryman also constructed a dramatic narrative out of his real life events, both personal and public, which was in turn responsive to the development of that same life. As Berryman acknowledges in his 'Skunk Hour' essay therefore, although there is a close relationship between life and art, one is not the same thing as the other, for art is the expression of an interpretation of life.

Berryman's post-conversion poetry, however, proclaims an additional perspective on this relationship between life and art: that is, that God, in some mysterious way, is the author of each individual life. In fact, this is also a notion entertained in various forms throughout Berryman's earlier work: Henry in *The Dream Songs*, for instance, often views this authorship in the negative sense of blaming a persecutive God for conspiring his suffering. A major theme of Berryman's poetry relates to the existential problem of how far the individual soul can be a creative participant in its own narrative: are we genuinely free to determine our own fate, or are we merely acting out a part that has been preordained for us? Perhaps we have to negotiate our way through life somewhere between those two poles? The philosophical debate of 'free will versus determinism' underlies his verse, as he inventively and affectingly depicts the way in which the human pursuit of happiness and fulfilment is invariably frustrated by the limits to and flaws of human freedom.

For Berryman, the problem for much of the time was also a religious one, incorporating a range of related theological debates one might broadly define as concerning the problem of evil, the existence of God, and, especially, the relationship between free will and divine grace. Consequently, what Collins identified as the sense of victimhood in the American middle-generation poets largely takes its own particular form in Berryman's verse, with his speakers' chief antagonist throughout being God – that is, if only because He does not seem to be making the resolution to these troubling questions any easier; for instance, by revealing Himself unambiguously

to the poet or his personae in some special way. Of course, that situation dramatically changed in many respects with the conversion experience Berryman described in the interview with Stitt, and which inspired the devotional poetry of his final two volumes. These poems generally portray a willing, loving submission to his re-evaluated former antagonist, and, as with the converts of the Catholic Renaissance, a progressive embracing of the central mysteries of the faith. From this perspective he then interprets his previous life as a demonstration of the course of this relationship, leading to the victory of both grace and free will – a result of the Augustinian paradox underlying the God of Rescue notion he had adopted as his ‘favourite conception’.

The story presented is of the devout, wide-eyed altar boy who dramatically loses his faith at twelve following his father’s suicide; who becomes the lost apostate who later confronts God with rebellious theological disputations in *The Dream Songs*, whilst his erratic life, disturbed by alcoholism and other sins of the flesh, becomes a vicious circle of self-affliction and despair. Finally, at his lowest point, he experiences a dramatic religious conversion, believing that the God of Rescue has directly intervened in his life; an encounter which prompts an enthusiastic return to the Catholic Church, where he is once again reunited in faith with the God whom he had separated himself from since his youth. It is a classic prodigal son narrative that he retrospectively fosters in *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc.*, and one that is not entirely unrepresentative of the life it depicts – even though a far more nuanced picture emerges from his writings as a whole, as well as the biographical facts.

Born John Allyn Smith, Jr., in Oklahoma in 1914, Berryman’s natural father, John Allyn Smith, was a Catholic, whilst his mother, Martha Little Smith, was an Episcopalian, who was also received into the Catholic Church upon their marriage.³¹ The poet would later often associate his lost faith with the comparative contentment of his childhood, before it was shattered at the age of twelve by the tragedy that over-shadowed the rest of his life. He provides a concise account of his subsequent upbringing, his faith and eventual fall away from it, in the interview with Stitt:

31 Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, 18.

I had a strict Catholic training. I went to a Catholic school and I adored my priest, Father Boniface. I began serving Mass under him at the age of five, and I used to serve six days a week. Often there would be nobody in the church except him and me. Then all that went to pieces at my father's death, when I was twelve. Later, I went to a High Church Episcopalian school in Connecticut, called South Kent, and I was very fond of the Chaplain there. His name was Father Kemmis, and, although I didn't feel about him as I had about Father Boniface as a child, I still felt very keen, and was a rapt Episcopalian for several years. Then, when I went to Columbia, all that sort of dropped out. I never lost the sense of God in the two roles of creator and sustainer – of the mind of man and all its operations, as a source of inspiration to great scientists, great artists, saints, great statesmen.³²

The image of his altar-boy days is one that recurs many times in his mature poetry, evoking the trusting faith he once had in God and the Church; together with the sense of existential harmony and childhood innocence which accompanied it, and which he yearns to recapture. The Smiths had relocated to Tampa, Florida, in order for his father, a former banker and now private businessman, to speculate on real estate during the land boom there. However, heavy losses were experienced in the subsequent crash, and with his marriage also about to end (Berryman's mother filed for divorce on grounds of adultery), John Allyn was found shot dead, the official verdict being that of suicide. At least part of the reason why his father's death caused this sense of dislocation for the poet is that he was physically removed from the practice of the Catholic faith following his mother's rapid remarriage ten weeks later. The adolescent Berryman and his brother were now both entered into the Episcopalian Church: the Church of his new stepfather, John Angus McAlpin Berryman, of which their mother had also previously been a member.³³ With a new parent, and a new denomination, he was moved to a new city, New York, and placed in a new school (South Kent, Connecticut). Consequently, although he 'still felt very keen' towards his Christian faith, his new circumstances were a radical upheaval and his entire worldview, and the place of his faith within it, would never quite return to the same sense of equilibrium that he had once enjoyed.

32 Stitt, 'Art of Poetry', 41–2.

33 Mariani, *Dream Song*, 15.

Furthermore, the Catholic Church was the church with which he always most closely identified, and he poetically celebrated his return to it in 1970 as a homecoming to what for him was *the* Faith. He would therefore always identify that time at the age of twelve as when he lost his faith, since that was when he felt both bodily and spiritually removed from the practice of Catholicism.

In *Love & Fame* he would wittily portray the subsequent years as ones of youthful abandon in pursuit of the chimerical fulfilment he believed the much yearned-for literary fame, together with the attention of women, would bring. In 'The Search', he describes how disillusionment with this life led to a sudden and disturbing spiritual awakening, prompting his 'search' for the meaning of life, which had its starting point in 'the historical study of the Gospel'. The poem is one example of the creative selection that gives the persona its own life, as it draws from biographical fact without strictly conforming to chronology. Despite identifying himself as a non-believer whilst a young man, the poet always retained a strong religious sensibility, which would forcefully assert itself at each major poetic landmark of his career.

The poems of Berryman's first proper collection, *The Dispossessed* (1948), are mainly composed from an apocalyptic Christian world-view – one that juxtaposes the spiritual estrangement of a world at war, with the lacuna of faith and emotional belonging left by his father's suicide. The poems of *The Dispossessed* are largely an indictment of the bloody period of history in which they were written (1937–48), and, above all, portray the helplessness of the individual who is at the mercy of the decisions of others. Representing his war-generation's inherent sense of victimhood, he depicts the way in which a political elite has effectively usurped the free will of millions, and which, in the new atomic age, can at a stroke fatally decide the fate of all mankind. His early poetry also makes the reader acutely aware of the deterministic effect of the past on the present, and alludes to the trauma of his father's death as being the key formative event of his own life. In a true 'dialectic of private matter with public matter' the fate of the politically dispossessed millions then is juxtaposed with the cryptically alluded-to decision of his father to commit suicide in a primordial loss of innocence, which, like the 'original sin' of Adam, has brought death

and corruption into the life of the poet. He would portray his loss of faith as resulting from this 'original sin' of the father, marking what he would later describe in 'Matins' as his forty year state of 'vincible ignorance' (*CP* 226). Such a description indicates how he also viewed his apostasy as being in some sense a matter of the will – a perception which is presented even at this early stage.

Berryman's marriage to a practicing Catholic, Eileen Mulligan, in 1942 brought into heightened focus for the poet the question of his lost faith, and the conflict of will between his desire and his reluctance to reclaim it. The experience of a divided will encouraged his development of a poetry that would more faithfully represent the often fractured, disordered and unfinalized nature of the self – an image of human experience which could no longer be contained within the formalism of the New Critical style he had adopted at the outset of his career. This theological aesthetic, based upon the Agrarian worldview, purported to a 'wholeness of knowledge' that could not convey the reality of a faith in flux.

The Dispossessed contains a number of poems illustrating Berryman's creative transition towards his new 'poetry of idiom' and 'personality', which developed most rapidly in 1947 during the composition of the sequence 'Sonnets to Chris' (published twenty years later as *Berryman's Sonnets*). The poet used his sonnet sequence to chronicle the tortuous path of a doomed love affair (his first infidelity), together with the attendant moral dilemma that brought his ongoing spiritual predicament to a head. Parodically adapting metaphors from courtly love and Renaissance tradition, he creates for the sequence an elaborate conceit involving a conflict between two different faiths, with their two different laws. The Judeo-Christian religion, with its Law of God, threatens the poet's own profane faith, of which he is a devotee of his mistress, and ruled by desire manifested as the law of love. His conscience is the battleground where this often violent confrontation between the two laws takes place.

Berryman's literary reputation was significantly advanced by his breakthrough work, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953), which he began in 1948 (the year after the events depicted in *Sonnets*), and which he completed five years later. In this pseudo-historical fifty-seven stanza poem, Berryman would further develop the theme of a divided conscience, but this time

by way of a fictional adultery, with 'the poet's' attempted seduction of the seventeenth-century Puritan, Anne Bradstreet – regarded as America's 'first poet'. Berryman's researches into Puritan life and beliefs brought into sharper focus, and theologically informed, what was essentially portrayed in *Sonnets* as a conflict between free will and grace. The dialectic between the two personae – Anne Bradstreet and 'the poet' – is representative of the two life choices of the flesh and the spirit. *Homage* would express the hope of unifying the will with that of God – of actively seeking salvation and avoiding damnation through a will both desirous and able to obey the commandments. The mystery of how and whether the human will is able to choose between good and evil, and to what extent this choice requires the intervention of God, is what underlies much of this poem's drama of seduction and resistance. The historical Anne Bradstreet, with her enthusiasm for the Calvinist doctrine of grace, is subsumed into the dramatized persona, which tends overall to convey the poet's more Catholic belief in the necessary and interactive role of the will in determining one's spiritual fate.

However, any optimism on the part of the poet about the efficacy of the will, and its co-operation in some great divine plan, would be severely put to the test by events during the course of his life over the next seventeen years. Indeed, the resulting disillusionment would provide much of the drama for the persona of his next major work. One real-life legacy for Berryman of the extra-marital affair that became the subject of *Sonnets* was that it marked the beginning of what would subsequently develop into a debilitating and life-threatening drink problem. Alcoholism and chemical dependency would play an increasingly influential role in the poet's work, as well as his life, from now on, and would represent another deterministic impediment to free will in the great mystery of its relationship with grace. Since graduating in 1938, and after an initial struggle to find work, Berryman had enjoyed a busy, but erratic and insecure, academic career. He held various short-term teaching positions in English and Creative Writing at the Universities of Wayne (Detroit), Harvard, Princeton, Washington (Seattle), Cincinnati and Iowa. It was whilst lecturing in poetry at the Writers' Workshop in 1954 at this last university that the effects of his drinking finally caught up with him, and he found

himself unceremoniously dismissed when news of a drunken breach of the peace became public. Following the incident his old mentor Allen Tate helped him obtain a lectureship where he himself had also recently been appointed, at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

As well as being only thirty miles from South Stillwater, the birthplace of his father (who would, from now on, also be a much more vivid presence in his poetry), the new position was significant for Berryman in other respects – particularly for the way that it facilitated his ‘search’. Whereas his career up to this point had centered around English and creative writing departments, he was on this occasion appointed as a professor on the Humanities Program in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies – a position which involved teaching a range of subject areas which were relatively new to him, mostly concerning the history of western civilization. Working in an ‘isolated pocket of spiritual activity’, to use Berryman’s phrase, is a useful way of seeing the poet in relation to his literary contemporaries during the long and creatively successful Minneapolis phase of his career. That is not to say that he did not engage with, or was not influenced by, fellow writers and intellectuals of his generation, numerous of whom he personally knew and corresponded with; and he remained to the end a well-informed reader and critic of contemporary literature. However, Berryman, like all highly original poets, also pursued a personal, creative and intellectual course that was uniquely his; and in Berryman’s case, this was encouraged by his detachment from the world of writing workshops and literature departments, and a necessary immersion in the eclectic reading required for the teaching of his new humanities courses.

Amongst these new courses was one on ‘Christian Origins’, in preparation for which he would earnestly take up New Testament scholarship, and which even inspired him to attempt his own critical commentary on the ‘Life of Christ’ in the late 1950s. These studies allowed him a greater opportunity to pursue the religious quest outlined in ‘The Search’, of which, as that poem makes clear, uncovering the truth about the historical Jesus and the early church was from the outset a major component. He came to rely on a small but eclectic range of New Testament critics from across the political spectrum of life of Christ scholarship. Most of his favourites are cited in ‘The Search’, from whose insights he would selectively derive a typically idiosyncratic interpretation of Christian origins. Although his own

'Life of Christ' progressed poorly in quickly abandoned fits and starts over the next fifteen years, an alternative vent for his historical and theological disputations with Christianity was to be found in the new long poem he started in 1955 – the work that would become *The Dream Songs* (1969).

The composition of Berryman's most famous collection would cover a period of thirteen years, during which time the poet – who, despite numerous excursions, remained based in Minneapolis – divorced his first wife, Eileen, and remarried (to Anne Levine in 1956, with whom he had his first child, Paul, in 1957); divorced, and remarried for a third and last time (to Kate Donahue in 1961, with whom he had two children, Martha, born in 1962, and Sarah Rebecca, born 1971); continued to teach, research and publish; and gradually grew in fame as a man of letters, whilst at the same time succumbing to an increasingly self-destructive alcoholism – altogether, becoming what Haffenden describes as 'the sick and brilliant public man.'³⁴ These and many other life experiences are assimilated into *The Dream Songs*, together with the poet's intellectual, political and religious preoccupations, to form the chaotic, largely open-ended narrative that is the evolving personality of Berryman's new persona, 'Henry'.

Portrayed with great wit, humour and pathos, Henry is in many ways the archetypal twentieth-century western man, whose comparatively comfortable existence cannot shield him from disillusionment, and the inevitable suffering that results from being a fallible human being who must interact with fallible others. All of this prompts him to ask the big questions, especially concerning God's existence and His attributes; about whether or not He really cares about Man, and whether He really has revealed Himself to him through the Scriptures and as Christ. For Henry these questions are particularly emotive because his outlook is still deeply affected by the father 'who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn' (Song 384). His frustrated efforts at forgiveness towards the man who abandoned him in death are both analogous to and interconnected with his attempts to recover his faith in God the Father, for the loss of both are portrayed in his poetry as emanating from the same tragic historical moment.

34 Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, 340.

Further developing the original sin of the father motif from *The Dispossessed*, Henry is portrayed as being trapped, like all humanity, in his fallen state, from within which he struggles to work out his life's purpose. Henry possesses neither the will nor the inclination to choose for the God whom he believes is victimizing him, and with his arsenal of scholarly evidence he rebelliously attacks the notion that Jesus Christ – the 'great man' whom Henry admires – is one and the same being as God. Henry therefore takes an almost avowedly sceptical position on the quest for the historical Jesus – one which is based largely on Berryman's readings of the early twentieth-century French scholars, Charles Guignebert and Maurice Goguel. Rejecting therefore any belief in a reconciling Son of God, self-sacrificed to free man from the damning grip of original sin, Henry finds himself trapped in a kind of arrested Oedipal development stage, being without the grace finally to forgive the father whose fatal act initially robbed him of that faith.

After publishing the final installment of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman turned his attention to a series of poems written in a new style, which developed into the poetic Bildungsroman called *Love & Fame* (1970). It features a first-person account of the poet's life in two halves: the first portraying his student years, during which he is largely obsessed with pursuing the dual goal indicated by the book's title; contrasted in the second half with the disillusioned, spiritually bankrupt but searching middle-aged poet, hospitalized by the alcoholism over which, with spiritual help, he attains what would be a short-lived victory. By this stage alcohol had become for his poetry another symbol of the apparent powerlessness of the will – a will that is incapable of remaining committed to choosing good over evil, and that, in its fallen state, has a tendency to opt for short-term sensory gratification, even when it knows it is against its own long-term best interests. The human predicament of supposedly having free will, but finding that will determined by one's own fallen nature, as well as what is external, had been a prevailing theme in Berryman's work, where it is shown to be at the heart of the poet's uncertain and troubled relationship with his Creator.

As 'The Search', which opens the second half of *Love & Fame*, illustrates, the scepticism of Henry in *The Dream Songs* reflects what was only one side of Berryman's thinking on the subject of Christian origins. 'The Search' constitutes an ironical academic mock-pilgrimage, chronicling the

intellectual journey within books that the poet made in his attempt to establish the religious truth to which he would commit himself. As well as historians and theologians who adopt liberal or sceptical positions towards Christianity, he also cites as influences a number of more conservative scholars and Christian believers, not only from the field of life of Christ scholarship, but from a wide range of other disciplines, including philosophy, natural science, psychology and fine art. 'The Search' illustrates what was a developing interest on Berryman's part in Christian apologetics and representations of the Christ of faith. In consequence, even from early on in his biblical studies, some highly orthodox beliefs inconsistently begin to find their way into Berryman's otherwise liberal framework, particularly concerning the 'supernatural' aspects of the faith, such as a belief in the miracles of Jesus.

Although the work of many of these 'unloseable friends', as he calls them in 'The Search', influenced his developing views on Christianity, Berryman notes that his eventual 'conversion experience' in May 1970 affirmed for him the God of Rescue concept which had so appealed from his readings of Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal. He is alluding particularly to Pascal's use of Augustine to defend the Jansenist cause during a seventeenth-century dispute within the Church concerning the true relationship between grace and free will. It was argued that the commandments cannot be obeyed, or salvation attained, without the aid of God's efficacious grace, and, furthermore, that only a predestined number of elect souls (known only to the Creator) have been given the effective graces of perseverance to achieve this. The Pascal-Augustinian mechanism of divine grace, however, is one that paradoxically also recognizes the necessary role and co-operation of free will, whilst, at the same time, acknowledging its fallibility. The poet therefore found this conception so appealing because it retains the free will he had always prized so greatly, whilst encouraging trust in a merciful God of Rescue who will not allow an elected soul to flounder, but will intervene and save him from his own deficient will. For the time being at least it would provide a resolution to the predicament of the unwilling-will that had been such a creative source of drama in his verse.

In his post-conversion poetry, Berryman interprets the course of his life – past, present and envisioned future – from this new Pascal-Augustinian

perspective. On the one hand, God is celebrated as the merciful and beneficent 'author' of this life; whilst, on the other hand, and with the aid of a continually developing, experimental form of dialogic verse, Berryman sought to portray a conscience that could not lie still – a mind that was still working out the implications, and apparent contradictions, of this newly re-acquired faith. Whereas 'Eleven Addresses' portrays the enthusiastic zeal of a new convert, the poems of *Delusions, etc.*, especially the 'Opus Dei' sequence, depict also the subsequent scruples. They chronicle the poet's continuing pilgrimage in his new faith, especially his often troubled, sometimes euphoric, evolution towards a more faithful embracing of the God of Rescue concept – as understood by its chief inspirators, Pascal and Augustine, for whom the role of Jesus Christ is absolutely integral, as is that of the Catholic Church. Berryman portrays his attempts to work through certain problems that this new outlook brings: as well as the regular Christian struggle with personal sin, the poet has the ever-present reality of his alcoholism to fight against, and so anxiously questions whether he will receive the grace of perseverance to continue to seek his salvation until the end. Consequently, he also searches for spiritual loopholes and doctrines that offer a more palatable eschatology, including those of his favourite heretics, such as Origen of Alexandria.

Generally, however, the poems of *Delusions, etc.* portray an ongoing return to the fold of the Catholic faith and the Church; and although the temptations and trials do not cease, the poet confronts them from his evolving new perspective – one which also finally leads him to a reconciliation of sorts with the memory of his father. Berryman's unfinished novel *Recovery* (1973) – a thinly veiled autobiographical account of his battle to overcome alcoholism – features the character Alan Severance attempting to overcome his addictive personality, in part by uncovering what he believes to be its root-cause: that is, the trauma of his father's death, together with the debilitating mystery of what really happened and why. As he comes to believe in the will of God as being not only all-conquering but benevolent, he is able to trust the enigma of his father's fate to God's ultimate justice. This reconciliation is also reflected in Berryman's late poetry, where freed from the 'original sin' committed by his father, he is able to enter more fully into his new personal relationship with God the Father, embracing what

Erich Wellisch, in reference to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, termed the 'covenant of love'. It is a state of affairs celebrated within *Delusions, etc.*, especially the book's conclusion – his new covenant with God standing as the final poetic statement of his last intended collection.

Delusions, etc. was published posthumously in the wake of Berryman's suicide on 7 January 1972, and it is as difficult for critics to ignore this biographical event as it is for them to determine the most appropriate response to it – not only for understandable reasons of propriety, but also because of the problem of critically negotiating the right relationship between life and art. Attempts to theorize Berryman's death as if it was a kind of artistic statement in itself certainly run the risk of appearing morally dubious or pretentious, threatening to trivialize life as much as they overvalue art; but, nevertheless, suicide is often portrayed in Berryman's poetry as an ultimate statement of despair, if only at least as an expression of the poetic language of extreme emotion.³⁵ Furthermore, given the Christian themes of his verse under consideration here, it is important to address the issue of the poet's death, since it may be countered that the fact of his suicide, or at least any represented anticipation of it in his poetry, in some way challenges the general narrative of conversion which is otherwise presented.

Berryman's poetry does not, however, present us with a manifesto for life, or a consistent theology, but rather it offers an artistic representation of ideas about existence and experience, both personal and universal. Even if the main point of reference has become a spiritual one, the poetry depicts

35 Michael Heffernan worryingly depicts the poet's suicide as an act of poetic martyrdom, in which 'Berryman leapt upon his own wild lion and drew his life and his poem together into a triumph of self over circumstance'. McGowan is more explorative in his treatment of such bio-artistic connections, and in an ambitious and darkly meditative essay he theorizes the relationship between poetic expression and suicide. Both, he argues, though they may be considered opposites, are performed 'on the threshold' (of life/creativity and death/silence respectively), and he associates suicide with the failure of language to grasp 'the Absolute', remarking that it 'comes as the ultimate realization of the geography of grief in Berryman's poetry'. Michael Heffernan, 'John Berryman: The Poetics of Martyrdom', in *Berryman's Understanding*, 232–48 at 247–8 (first publ. in *American Poetry Review* (March/April 1984), 7–13); Philip McGowan, 'John Berryman & the Writing of Silence', in *After Thirty Falls*, 241–55.

an inner-debate that still continued after the poet's conversion, with his views and attitudes responding dynamically to new lines of reasoning and to life's circumstance. Pooley, for instance, has commented on Berryman's tendency towards certain heretical theological positions (namely Origen's *apocatastasis* and Pelagianism), which he claims give 'disastrous substance' to the notion that suicide can be a 'Christian act'. However, Berryman's late poetry at other times makes declarations of great hope and faith, affirming completely orthodox positions, and so a case can be made, as Pooley acknowledges, for charting a variety of outcomes. It could even be argued, for example, that Augustinian predestination and the subsequent acceptance of the mystery of his father's suicide provided similarly 'disastrous substance'. More obviously there is the frequently portrayed obsession throughout his verse with suicide (both that of the poet's father, and the poet's own suicidal impulse) – variously tempered in part by the wavering eschatological beliefs which accompany it. However, reflecting on such lines of enquiry Pooley notes how 'it is odd to validate a reading of the poems with the biographical outcome, however closely the poet invites the connexion'.³⁶

Whilst acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between life and art in Berryman's work, it is also important to recognize that life, like art, has a life of its own, and there are times when one cannot be expected to account for the other. As the poet noted, 'the persona looks across at the person and then sets about its own work', and that work, as well as criticism concerning it, need not necessarily seek to justify the life it represents. As the persona 'sets about its own work', so too does the human personality, and there are places where the persona cannot follow. Some might claim that the whole creative approach of the poetry dubbed 'confessionalism' feeds on and exacerbates intensity of emotion and self-analysis to the point where it becomes destructive rather than cathartic. Arpin, however, warns against the 'post hoc fallacy' that a writer's suicide necessarily points to the 'ultimate failure of their art', noting that 'the relation between life and art – or at least Berryman's life and Berryman's art – is too complex to fit

36 Pooley, 'Berryman's Last Poems', 292–3.

such a matrix.³⁷ That complexity too is equally applicable to explanations that point to ‘failures’ of the poet’s life and faith, even as depicted in the poetry.

Berryman underlined a passage in his copy of the *Catholic Catechism* stating that ‘as regards suicide, this is sometimes the result of hypertension or depression, and we cannot pass judgement’.³⁸ As well as the warning that one is not in a position to pass spiritual judgement, it serves in this context as a reminder that there is sometimes an intensity of personal reality for which literary criticism and theory cannot render an adequate account, and with which even poetry cannot fully connect. It was, however, part of the unique talent of Berryman that he could render a powerful approximate image of such extremes, even if poetry could only follow him so far. The two major biographies of the poet both portray someone who at the end of his life had been left physically and mentally damaged by his years of alcoholism, chain smoking and prescription drug dependency and was no longer able to deal with the demoralization that comes with periods of creative drought, or to handle other professional or family obligations.

Berryman’s last known composition – retrieved from his waste-paper bin after his death – certainly portrays the mind of a man in a chronic state of anxiety and paranoid hypertension, unable in those last few days to cope with or see beyond his immediate circumstance: ‘I didn’t. And I didn’t’, the poem begins, describing a previous abandoned suicide attempt, several days before the final fatal one, at the same Washington Avenue Bridge on his

37 Arpin, *Poetry of John Berryman*, 99.

38 Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman’s Personal Library: A Catalogue*, American University Studies, 24 (vol. LXX of *American Literature*) (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 254. The passage is found in *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). Whilst emphasizing the sinfulness of the act of suicide itself, the *Catechism* adds that ‘grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives’. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised Edition* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 491–2 (paras 2280–3).

university's campus. He expresses relief that the police had not noticed and 'clappt me in for observation, costing my job', but is still acutely conscious of 'the terror of tomorrow's lectures | bad in themselves, the students dropping the course, | the Administration hearing'. Realizing, however, that at least his job was tenured, he defiantly declared his final written words: 'Kitticat, they can't fire me.'³⁹ The very fact though that, grasping short of a final line, Berryman had discarded the poem – unlifted by the jazzy wit with which he could even then still express himself – demonstrates that there is indeed a point where the relationship between life and art breaks down and they go their separate ways.

There is too another sense in which the study of his poetry must go beyond the poet and his life. Although Berryman certainly portrays the personal experience of faith, doubt and conscience, his work is never simply concerned with these as a wholly 'personal' matter. Rather, his poetry engages – and always in ways inventively emotive, dramatic, humorous or satirical – in what should be very public debates of crucial importance to human society. As well as numerous contemporary and historical political and cultural concerns, there is the primary underlying question of whether there is such a thing as 'Truth' by which we should live our lives for the good of ourselves and others – the search for an answer to which takes him through multitudinous realms of scholarly enquiry and human experience. What he leaves in his poetry therefore are the discoveries, frustrations and certain resolutions of his own particular search. They are integral to the lasting legacy of his poetry, which continues to invite the engagement and response of readers in their own strivings for answers to the fundamental questions of existence.

39 The untitled poem, dated 5 January 1972, was first published in *Henry's Fate & Other Poems, 1967–1972*, ed. John Haffenden (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977; London: Faber, 1978), 93. It is also reproduced in Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, 419 and Mariani, *Dream Song*, 499–500.

The Early Poetry (1937–1948)

When an acclaimed poet's truly distinctive work comes, as it often does, at an advanced stage in his or her career, the poet's early output naturally becomes somewhat over-looked, or, at best, treated as a sign-post on the road of development to greater things. This is certainly the case with John Berryman, whose 'early work' – best defined as that written and published prior to his breakthrough poem, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953) – is rarely regarded as significant in its own right.¹ Several critics, not unjustifiably, have remarked that had Berryman, for whatever reason, stopped writing, or at least not gone on to produce the works that later made his name, his early published verse would now largely be forgotten; and as a poet he would represent only a minor example of his generation's talent. Conarroe has observed how 'most of the earlier poetry ... has been relegated to a kind of limbo by the prominence of the sequences', especially *The Dream Songs*.² Certainly what critical focus has been given to this poetry tends inevitably to concentrate on the way it constitutes a stylistic counterpoint to his subsequent, 'more successful', verse; and which highlights the innovations which were later to occur, or which are evident at this stage in embryonic form.

1 I am excluding *Berryman's Sonnets* (covered in the subsequent chapter) from this general definition of 'early work', even though the sequence 'Sonnets for Chris' was written in 1947, prior to the publication of *The Dispossessed* (1948). Rather, it is best defined, as Linebarger also describes it, as being part of the poet's 'transitional period', together with *Homage*, during which time he had largely wrestled off the early formative influences that initially overwhelmed his style. Linebarger, *John Berryman*, 'Preface'.

2 Conarroe, *John Berryman*, 23–4. See also Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell*, 15.

Consequently, Berryman's poetry leading up to and including *The Dispossessed* (1948) is generally regarded as the product of a kind of indistinct primordial state in which he was 'yet to find his own voice', though flickerings of his later brilliance are here and there to be found. Critics have also sought to identify the early surfacing of certain themes that are important to his major poetry. Conarroe and Arpin, for instance, have both remarked, in various ways, upon the prevalence of 'loss' as a theme, particularly loss of childhood and innocence; and they note the frequent expressions of spiritual desolation and guilt, both personal and collective. Berryman obliquely associates this with the loss of his father – a link which at this stage is hinted, but would not be made biographically explicit, with reference to John Allyn Smith's suicide, until *The Dream Songs*.³ Linebarger also notes the 'veiled allusions' to this formative event in Berryman's early work, and Thornbury examines in greater detail the way in which he negotiated the entrance of his father's memory into his poetry.⁴ Linebarger, as well as pointing out the all-encompassing 'sense of loss', catalogues a series of additional concerns, including those of a socio-political nature, and, most notably, describes how the 'conflict between faith and doubt' becomes a consistent theme.⁵

The interrelated themes that would later develop into the poet's narrative of faith are beginning, even at this early stage, to be weaved together – although the individual strands appear to be struggling for expression. They are in part inhibited and obscured by the straitjacket of what Berryman later referred to as his use of 'period style'; that is, 'the Anglo-American style of the 1930s, with no voice of my own'.⁶ The poet cites 'middle and later Yeats' and Auden as his main influences of the time, and their imprint is certainly to be found; but his published poetry of the thirties and forties

3 Conarroe 24–33; Arpin, *Poetry of Berryman*, 12–29.

4 Linebarger, *John Berryman*, 20–1; Charles Thornbury, 'A Reckoning with Ghostly Voices (1935–36)', in Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (eds), *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 77–111.

5 Linebarger, *John Berryman*, 38.

6 Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', in *Freedom of the Poet*, 323–31 at 323–4 (first publ. in *Shenandoah*, 17 (1965) 67–76).