BERRYMAN'S *THE DREAM SONGS**

By LARRY P. VONALT

To terrify and comfort is the object of John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*. Henry Pussy-Cat, the persona of the poem, and John Berryman, its poet—in this case one and not quite the same person—are masters of grace and fear. Henry, like the poet in Berryman's earlier long poem, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,* is "a man of griefs & fits/trying to be [his own] friend". One of the brilliant innovations of that poem which Berryman has extended and carried to greater brilliance in *The Dream Songs* is the use of what Berryman calls "the ambiguous pronoun". Through the use of the pronoun Berryman believes that "a commitment to identity can be 'reserved,' " and, as a result, the "poet himself is both left out and put in" the poem. Thus the reader can expect to find much of John Berryman in *The Dream Songs*. "There is a fiendish resemblance," Berryman has said, "between Henry and me." Like Berryman, Henry is a poet, teacher, heavy drinker, and incessant needer whose father shot himself when his son was twelve years old. But the Henry at the beginning of the poem is not the same as the Henry at the end of the poem. What happens to his identity is very much like what Berryman has argued happens to the persona in Ezra Pound's long work. "The *Cantos* have always been personal," Berryman writes; "only the persona increasingly adopted, as the poet's fate clarifies, is Pound himself."

Complicating and enriching the ambiguity of the pronoun and person in the poem is the presence of still another voice, that of Henry's friend who addresses him as Mr. Bones, and who acts generally throughout the poem as a foil to Henry. The friend, who is never named, may be in black face or a black man—one is never certain. Much of the dialogue between Henry and his friend, especially in the early parts of the poem, is reminiscent of the exchange between the interlocutor and the end men, Bones and Tambo, of the minstrel show. In these dialogues Henry's exaggerated self-pity and exaggerated fears are undercut by the friend's practical response to suffering. "Mr. Bones," he says in (98), "stop that damn dismal"; in (62) he tells him, "Mr. Bones, we all brutes & fools." In (199), after Henry has gone

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on about his sorrow, his friend says matter-of-factly, "Mr. Bones, you a clown." Through the additional perspective of the friend, the reader is able to judge more precisely the nature of Henry's griefs and fits, and so also is Henry better able to understand and to help himself. Henry's rôle in these dialogues as the end man, Mr. Bones, is highly appropriate to the thematic concerns of the poem. The end man, Bones, was so named because he played upon bones, and Henry, haunted by the dead and fearing death, plays upon bones and dreads his end. Henry is, in the jargon of the minstrel show, a knight of the burnt cork, and the ashes he wears on his face are the sign of his sorrow and his mortality.

The reason for Henry's sorrow and fear is indicated in the poem's first song:

> All the world like a woolen lover
> once did seem on Henry's side.
> Then came a departure.
> Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.

All of us have undergone a similar experience when we lost the security and order of childhood, but Henry's losses and his responses to them are more severe than are those of most of us. The terror of *The Dream Songs* is the fear of total separation, of never being able to be oneself, for one can only know oneself, be oneself, in relation to another. In the beginning Henry is "too alone", "scared a lonely". What he experiences is "the horror of unlove" (74), that arises from his inability to love. His condition is that of the damned. "Hell is empty," Henry tells us in (56), and in (353), he acknowledges himself to be "a man [who] spent years in Hell". Once the departure, the dissolution of Paradise, occurs, Henry becomes a fallen man, who fears utter extinction.

This fear of extinction is expressed on one level by Henry's urgent pursuit after fame. For a poet fame is one way of knowing that he exists: "we were almost anonymous/waiting for fame to descend/with a scarlet mantle & tell us who we were." (152) The need for fame is more pressing for Henry because, after a few early moments of glory, he died and went underground:

> —Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime
>
> besides a sense of others, my God, my God,
> and a jealousy for the honour (alive) of his country,

what can get more odd?
and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.
—What happen then, Mr. Bones?
—I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.
(26)

The irony of the last line is that absence from public scrutiny benefits the poet in that it allows him the freedom to find his own art, but while he is underground, out of the public eye, he suffers increasing fears that he will never be discovered again, or resurrected, by the public.

Book IV of *The Dream Songs* contains fourteen songs entitled *Op. posth.* and numbered 1 through 14. Books I-III were originally published in 1964 as *77 Dream Songs* and for them Berryman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, certainly an indication that he was "dug up". Berryman's concern with fame and with death and poetry reverberates throughout the poem. Fame is not merely a matter of public recognition; Henry-Berryman also needs the recognition of those who have been in the race for fame with him and before him. The early 1960's saw the death of those who had won the race, Faulkner, Hemingway, Frost, Eliot—"The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there?" (36) At the same time, however, Theodore Roethke, R. P. Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath, contemporaries and friends racing with and against Berryman, also died. Berryman has written in *The Dream Songs* some beautiful tributes to all of them, especially "Three Around the Old Gentleman" in memory of Robert Frost and songs (146-157)—"one solid block of agony"—in memory of Delmore Schwartz. The deaths of "the high ones" frighten Henry because they increase the pressure upon him to succeed, the pressure to cease being Henry Pussy-Cat and to become like his master, William Butler Yeats, the King of the Cats. The deaths of his friends and contemporaries increase his sense of loss and his loneliness, but they also provide a means, through his acknowledgment of his losses and his love, of growing less afraid.

Henry's fear of extinction and the collapse of his world rise out of his father's suicide. What his father killed that morning outside his son's bedroom window was not only himself but also his son. Confused, feeling betrayed by his father's act, Henry decides to join him in "a

modesty of death". "I saw nobody coming," he says in "Henry's Confession" (76), "so I went instead." He doesn't literally kill himself; he just kills off his power to trust others, to love: "bitter Henry, full of the death of love". (48)

The Dream Songs is a long, agonizing record of Henry's spiritual death and rebirth. It is also one of the most significant religious poems of the twentieth century. With brilliant skill it depicts the emptiness and confusion of our world, a world in which it seems that God has died or, at the very least, deserted us. God, the Christian God who is Love, is really as important to the poem as is Henry's father, for, at one level of meaning, his father's death is also God's. In a world in which "man has undertaken the top job of all" (46), any sign of divinity, even a painful, punishing one, will renew Henry. Needing a testament of God's care for this world, Henry calls out, in "The Secret of Wisdom" (20), "Hurl, God who found/us in this, down/something." "If all must hurt at once," Henry says in (194), "let yet more hurt now,/so I'll be ready, Dr. God. Push on me./Give it to Henry harder." The culmination of Henry's fears and doubts concerning God come in dream song 266:

> Dinch me, dark God, having smoked me out.
> Let Henry's ails fail, pennies on his eyes
> never to open more,
> the shires are voting him out of time & place,
> they'll drop his bundle, drunkard & Boy Scout,
> where he was once before:
>
> nowhere, nowhere. Was then the thing all planned?
> I mention what I do not understand.
> I mention for instance Love:
> God loves his creatures when he treats them so?
> Surely one grand *exception* here below
> his presidency of
>
> the widespread galaxies might once be made
> for perishing Henry, whom let not then die.
> He can advance no claim,
> save that he studied thy Word & grew afraid,
> work & fear be the basis for his terrible cry
> not to forget his name.

Henry comes to understand that immortality is more than fame. Certainly his work matters, but there is much more to everlasting life.

"Working & children & pals are the point of the thing," Henry concludes in "Three in Heaven I hope" (303). He recognizes that when he is haunted by the dead and by death he must face both ways—he can go forward by going backward. In relation to his work, he must go to Ireland to "have it out" with his master in poetry. The last book of the poem, the longest, recounts Henry's stay in Ireland and his confrontation with his literary past and his acceptance of his future as a man. Significantly the last two songs of the poem show Henry adjusting to his father's death and his daughter's life. Henry's resurrection is the result of his learning to love his child and her mother, his gaining a perspective upon the real meaning of his work, his controlling of his grief and compassion for his friends, and his accepting the way of death, the knowledge that "fall comes to us as a prize/to rouse us toward our fate." (385)

The Dream Songs is a poem about falling and the Fall. From the first song where "nothing fell out as it ought" to the last in which the poet acknowledges that "fall is grievy, brisk. Tears behind the eyes/ almost fall. Fall comes to us as a prize/to rouse us toward our fate," Berryman explores the significance of the fallen. "All we fall down & die" (190) and "Ashes, ashes. All fall down" (253) provide the sense of loss and mortality with which Henry struggles to find something or someone that stays, and what he find in his love of work, his children, his friends is a ripeness of spirit, a compassion, a love for which, in the season that announces a death, the poets have found an appropriate metaphor.

Being a poem about the fallen, *The Dream Songs* is also a book of lamentations. This is important because it deepens the texture of religious significance. Henry's condition resembles that of Jeremiah, the poet of the Old Testament book of *Lamentations*. In that book misery and desolation have fallen about the holy city, as if God had departed, and Jeremiah is haunted by the utter solitude in which he finds himself. He suffers imprisonment, a type of death-in-life, from which he is rescued by his friendship with a black man, the Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-Melech. The *Lamentations* of Jeremiah are very carefully structured. There are five elegies, each divided into twenty-two stanzas, with each beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. *The Dream Songs* are also carefully structured. Each song is eighteen lines long and the total number of lines as well as the total number of songs is divisible by seventy-seven, the number of songs Berryman

first published in 1964. Such structuring may have some significance, but the real importance of Berryman's poem is that it is a complex and meaningful investigation of love and death that is both terrifying and comforting.

By any criteria *The Dream Songs* is a major poem. It speaks to fundamental problems of man, and, for the most part, it speaks brilliantly and honestly. It is not, of course, a perfect poem. Most readers will find it difficult, filled with allusions to historical and contemporary events that are sometimes little known or too private. Sometimes the syntax is bewildering, and sometimes Henry seems to be just a little too coy and sentimental. But, finally, it is a poem that rightly demands much of the reader, and I think it rewards him amply.

TWO REGIONAL NOVELS*

By WARREN EYSTER

James Dickey made certain that the reader would not elevate his characters to pedestals. Choosing three ho-hum city dwellers with ho-hum daily lives, he placed them under the sway of Lewis Medlock, a physical-conditioning perfectionist with misplaced survival-of-the-fittest instincts and cave-man yearnings. These four men tried to break the ho-hum-ness of their suburbanite weekends by taking a canoe trip down a dangerous river.

Knowing little of boating and less about the river, they nevertheless launched their canoes, took up their paddles, and headed downstream into the gorge. Such an outing might reasonably be expected to end in disaster. Fiction has been saturated with such adventures. Magazines devoted to sports and to the great outdoors print with monthly regularity true accounts of peril in Yellowstone, peril in the Andes, and peril in the bayous. Peril in western Georgia doesn't seem to have much new to offer when placed within a tradition that has already exhausted sharks and piranha. Yet James Dickey takes these stock

*James Dickey, *Deliverance*, Boston (Houghton Mifflin), 1970, 278 pages, $5.95. Guy Owen, *Journey for Joedel*, New York (Crown Publishers, Inc.), 1970, 180 pages, $4.95.