

WE ARE IMAGINARY JEWS:  
JOHN BERRYMAN AND JEWISH IDENTITY

by

DANIEL ROSENBERG

(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

This essay explores themes related to my creative work by analyzing John Berryman's relationship to and appropriation of a specific kind of Jewish identity for his own aesthetic ends. Berryman's claim to being an "Imaginary Jew" in his work, and the complicated position he creates for his autobiographical identity in the face of this explicitly constructed one, is problematic because of the obvious cultural appropriation of public Jewish suffering as a metaphor for Berryman's private, emotional difficulties. I argue, however, that Berryman's imaginative identification with the figure of the Jew is redeemed by its partiality; the failure to fully wear the mask of the Jew in his poems renders them less problematic precisely because it calls attention to the mask *qua* mask.

INDEX WORDS: John Berryman, Jewishness, Persona, Mask, Holocaust Poetry, Cultural Appropriation

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## CHAPTER 1

### We Are Imaginary Jews:

#### John Berryman and Jewish Identity

When asked in an interview how he reacts to being labeled a “confessional poet,” John Berryman replied, “With rage and contempt! Next question” (Stitt 21). Part of his complaint was rooted in what he saw as the fundamental meaninglessness of the term—does it just mean a poet whose life is partially perceptible through his poems?—but part of it was also his ongoing struggle to navigate the space between himself and Henry, the protagonist of *The Dream Songs*. Berryman complains in the same interview, “Henry is accused of being me and I am accused of being Henry and I deny it and nobody believes me” (29). Perhaps nobody believes him because a mere two pages later he says, “Henry both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points. But I am an actual human being; he is nothing but a series of conceptions—my conceptions” (31). This distinction could easily collapse into a straw man; it seems like Berryman is insisting that because Henry is not made of flesh and blood, not as completely realized a human being as Berryman himself, he is not in some meaningful sense Berryman’s avatar in the text. Andrew Gross locates Berryman’s poetics between Eliotic impersonality and the cultivated, stable personality ascribed to confessional poets: “Berryman, opposing both tradition and the younger talents, is neither impersonal nor personal but *impersonating*” (3). Berryman struggles to fit the masks (personae) of high modernism onto the public suffering that would come to define his poetic cohort (over his protestations about the label “confessional”), and his literary legacy is in part the glorious mess that his efforts made. But I empathize with the

difficult position Berryman has written himself into. Though he protests a bit too much about the distinction between himself and Henry—“an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)” according to his introductory note to *The Dream Songs*—his use of Henry as a half-mask strikes me as brave precisely because it troubles that distinction. It invites us to interrogate and think about the relationship between Berryman and his speaker. Roland Barthes notes that it is actually “intermittence,” the “appearance-as-disappearance” of “skin flashing between two articles of clothing” that is erotic (10), which is true in part because it invites the withheld body into the active engagement of the viewer’s imagination. The partiality of the Henry mask, its intermittence, the sense that we can glimpse Berryman around Henry’s corners, proves thus to be erotic in the sense that it engages the reader by revealing while hiding, hiding while revealing.<sup>1</sup> For the same reasons that a dress that offers a flash of flesh underneath is more exciting than both a business suit and complete nudity, then, a half-masked identity may capture the reader’s attention and imagination with far greater potency than both straightforward persona poetry and straightforward confessionalism.

Much has been made of Berryman’s appropriation for Henry, via blackface, of African American identity and status (however problematically). Choosing to have a character who “both is and is not” the author appear in blackface is obviously a loaded decision. But Berryman himself understands this move as a subordinate one, a political position that can best be articulated in terms of not blackness, but Jewishness. When asked, “Why did you choose to employ the Negro dialect in *The Dream Songs*?” Berryman replies:

Well, that’s a tough question. I’ll tell you. I wrote a story once called “The Imaginary

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<sup>1</sup> Freud’s notion of the uncanny as what was “intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (132), and as simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, may also be at play in the appeal of what is only partially or intermittently revealed. Though Freud emphasizes the fear response to the uncanny, its attractive and fascinating nature is implicit throughout his essay.

Jew.” I was in Union Square in New York, waiting to see my girl, and I was taken for a Jew (I had a beard at the time). There was a tough Irishman who wanted to beat me up, and I got into the conversation, and I couldn’t convince them that I wasn’t a Jew. Well, the Negro business—the blackface—is related to that. That is, I feel extremely lucky to be white, let me put it that way, so that I don’t have that problem. Friends of mine—Ralph Ellison, for example, in my opinion one of the best writers in the country—he has the problem. He’s black, and he and Fanny, wherever they go, they are black. (Harvard 9)

It is worth noting that, in this response, Berryman conflates himself with the protagonist of “The Imaginary Jew,” either because he based the story on a real event that happened to him or because he was speaking in the voice of his protagonist.<sup>2</sup> Either way, the slipperiness of his *I* here perpetuates the function of his fictionalized narrators as half-masks. However, what is most interesting for this study is that Berryman identifies the African American position with the Jewish position, suggesting that the salient feature for both is that of being a suspect minority, an outsider susceptible to bigotry and ridicule even in one’s own country.

It makes sense for Berryman to point back to this early short story, his first major publication, when trying to explain his use of “Negro dialect” in *The Dream Songs* because “The Imaginary Jew” is his most sustained examination of the issues that Henry’s blackface raises: privilege, ethnicity, and the tension between self-created and externally-imposed identity. The story, which won the *Kenyon Review*’s short story contest in 1945, is set in 1941, effectively framing America’s involvement in World War II. Contemporary readers who encountered this

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<sup>2</sup> The protagonist of “The Imaginary Jew” remembers from his childhood a “Father Boniface” (366) who was Berryman’s childhood priest. This and other biographical details like his Irish heritage, his occupation as a writer, and his Southern background suggest that the protagonist is, if not a straightforward representative of Berryman, at least closely aligned with him. Like Henry, this protagonist touches Berryman “at certain points” at least.



meditation on the meaning of Jewishness in the *Kenyon Review* would have been keenly aware of the dramatic irony of the piece, since the narrator would not have known in 1941 what was becoming more and more clear every day in autumn of 1945: that the Jews of Europe at that time were entering the darkest chapter of their history, and that Jewish identity was about to be irrevocably tied to mass horror and tragedy. In fact, by writing the story in the past tense and saying explicitly that he “can’t remember” specific details of this moment in his life (359), Berryman invites us to understand even his narrator as, like him and like us, aware of this particularly dark, historical irony.

Berryman’s narrator is a Southern writer who had inherited from the zeitgeist, without any actual encounters with Jewish people, “a gently negative attitude toward Jews” that survived uninterrogated until he went to college (360). There, he discovers his first taste of the problems that will drive the rest of the story:

Asking careful questions during the next week, I learned that about a third of the men I spent time with in college were Jewish; that they knew it, and the others knew it; that some of the others disliked them for it, and they knew this also; that certain Houses existed *only* for Jews, who were excluded from the rest; and that what in short I took to be an idiotic state was deeply established, familiar, and acceptable to everyone. This discovery was the beginning of my instruction in social life proper—construing social life as that from which political life issues like a somatic dream. (361)

His reaction to this discovery is telling. He rejects the prejudice for being idiotic while simultaneously understanding it as foundational to both social and political life. The ethical stance here is willfully naïve; Berryman’s protagonist is positioned as if he were outside of his own society, learning about it like an anthropologist, trying to understand the system without

sharing the values inherent in it. Even after having had this experience, he insists that he simply doesn't have the tools to be a part of this system; to this day, he says, "I am spectacularly unable to identify Jews and Jews" (361). Berryman's protagonist insists on being removed from his own dominant culture's attitude not just emotionally, but also in terms of his abilities, his fundamental wiring. This speaker seems to be going to great lengths, rather unconvincingly, to prove how removed from his own "social life" he is, how divorced he is from the world of dividing people into ingroups and outgroups.

More pointedly, Berryman completes the circle joining Jewish and African-American identities by having his protagonist describe his relationship with Jews in terms of a parallel, more comprehensible relationship with African-Americans:

Gradually, and against my sense of impartial justice, I became the anomaly which only a partial society can produce, and for which it has no name known to the lexicons. In one area, but not exclusively, "nigger-lover" is cast in a parallel way: but for a special sympathy and liking for Jews—which became my fate, so that I trembled when I heard one abused in talk—we have no term. (361)

So Berryman explains his use of "Negro dialect" in *The Dream Songs* by referring to this story about his relationship with Jewishness, and this story explains his relationship with Jewishness by turning to a relationship with African-Americanness. Only in what Berryman's protagonist calls "a partial society" can either relationship occur, because such an attitude—this imaginary identification—depends on the subjugation of a people, their marginalization by their own larger

society.<sup>3</sup> Only in a context of subjugation does having sympathy for a particular population—and there existing a derisive term for someone with that sympathy—make sense.

To add some complexity to this picture, though, Berryman's protagonist introduces the main antagonist of the story—the man who will accuse him of being Jewish and will not be convinced otherwise—as “a muscular fellow ... with heavy eyebrows, coatless, plainly Irish.” Clearly the protagonist's blindness when it comes to Jewish ethnic and cultural markers does not extend to the Irish; he is not as far above the stereotypes that drive “social life” as he seems to want to believe. And when he enters an argument with the Irishman about whether or not America should join the war, it quickly devolves into a debate about the protagonist's Jewishness that reveals the true complexity of his attitude toward Jews. After a few exchanges that grow progressively more heated, the Irishman declares, “You look like a Jew. You talk like a Jew. You *are* a Jew,”<sup>4</sup> leaving the protagonist in confusion and dismay: “‘I’m *not* a Jew,’ I told him. ‘I might be, but I’m not. You have no bloody reason to think so, and you can’t make me a Jew by simply repeating like an idiot that I am.’” (365). That final assertion, rejecting as it does the idea that someone else can impose an identity on him, proves to be the crux of his sense of the problem of Jewishness:

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<sup>3</sup> Berryman's thinking about the limits of language here is also significant, as it becomes one of the central problems of *Dream Song* 48, discussed below. We have a word for someone who hates Jews – an anti-Semite – but not for someone who loves or defends them. This observation speaks volumes about the larger cultural position of Jews in America and helps explain the appeal of Jewish identity to Berryman.

<sup>4</sup> In Sylvia Plath's “Daddy,” she says, “I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew” (223). How does Jewish language lead to Jewish identity? Neither she nor Berryman resolves this odd assertion. And in both cases, talking “like a Jew” doesn't mean talking in Hebrew; it means using English like a Jew. If talking like a Jew in English leads to being a Jew, part of what creates Jewish identity is the Diaspora. Jewish identity is that of a minority in an alien culture, markedly Other, but not Other enough to be speaking their own language. Jewish identity is thus, in moments like these, rooted in Jewish displacement – another important register for Berryman.

I felt that everything for everyone there depended on my proving him wrong. If *once* this evil for which we have not even a name could be exposed to the rest of the men as empty—if I could *prove* I was not a Jew—it would fall to the ground, neither would anyone else be a Jew to be so accused. Then it could be trampled on. Fascist America was at stake. (365)

Here it becomes clear that “Jew” for Berryman’s protagonist (and for Berryman) means something more than a practitioner of a particular religion. He identifies fascism with the evil he sees in this Irishman, this evil of Othering, of imposing an identity on another as an act of violence and degradation. And the perfect identity to be so evilly imposed, the one that best represents the victimization of this act, is that of the Jew.

When someone else in the crowd, responding to the protagonist’s confused and confusing protestations, encourages him not to deny his heritage, he explodes: “I’m *not* denying it! Or rather I am but only because I’m not a Jew! I despise renegades, I hate Jews who turn on their own people, if I were a Jew I would say so, I would be proud to be: what is the vicious opinion of a man like this to me if I were a Jew? But I’m not. Why the hell should I admit I am if I’m not?” (365). After this outburst the Irishman remarks in a deadpan, “Jesus, the Jew is excited” (365). Even here the vulnerability of the accused, his desire and failure to articulate a compelling, complex moral position, appears in stark contrast to the invulnerability, the unflappability of his accuser. Berryman’s speaker ends up losing control of his language, of his argument, even of his sense of who he is and what he stands for in the face of this alternate identity being imposed on him.

Unsurprisingly, this confrontation ends with the protagonist utterly defeated and ashamed. He regrets the Irish heritage he shares with his antagonist; he regrets his foolishness; he

even regrets the fact that he is not a Jew. All these regrets fill him with a sense of failure and guilt. Berryman ends the story, though, with a meditation on the significance of Jewishness in a “partial society” like America: “In the days following, as my resentment died, I saw that I had not been a victim altogether unjustly. My persecutors were right: I was a Jew. The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew” (366). Here Berryman’s protagonist makes an explicit distinction between imaginary and real Jews, but he suggests that this distinction is fundamentally irrelevant from the ethical position he is trying to develop. As far as their persecutors are concerned, Jews deserve persecution because of the imaginary Jews inside them, the constructs of Otherness imposed on them by the very people persecuting them. In this way, imaginary Jews are the monsters of monster theory as described by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: “The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—all of those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within” (7). This understanding of monstrosity as a projection from the Self onto an Other echoes nicely the last sentence of Berryman’s story, which confuses real and illusory, self and other, while observing that the violence enacted against imaginary Jews of any kind recoils on its perpetrators: “Every murderer strikes the mirror, the lash of the torturer falls on the mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow down together” (366). To strike at an Other in this way is to strike at something that originates Within, and the difference between reality and projection collapses in the “real image” that gets cut. The conclusion of the story, then, seems to be that someone in Berryman’s position, or his narrator’s, suffers alongside the real Jews from the evil he sees embodied in the Irishman. There seems to be no moral distinction between people who are vulnerable to the evil of Othering; to be an

imaginary Jew is, for Berryman, to be the Jew as seen by the Nazi, regardless of whether or not one is actually Jewish.

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Hilene Flanzbaum offers a thoughtful criticism of the assumptions undergirding Berryman's understanding of Jewishness, contextualizing it by noting that, after World War II, "Jews in America had lost most of their alien status" (261); American Jews were Americans first, less outsiders than an ingredient in our idealized melting pot. "That Berryman is able to claim the category of Jewishness for himself spotlights the void in the cultural American landscape that the assimilated Jew has left" (Flanzbaum 270). Only by virtue of their integration into broader American life were Jews available as a metaphor for Berryman's appropriative self-identification. Flanzbaum notes that "Berryman disputes not only the category of a Jew defined by racial criteria, but also the Jew defined by cultural criteria" (270). Instead, for Berryman, Jewishness is "a state of mind," "a club one voluntarily joins," or (in the case of the aggressive Irish interlocutor) something that someone else imposes on you (270).

This understanding of Jewishness, so central to Berryman's development of *The Dream Songs*, was not uncommon for midcentury poets. Andrew Gross notes that many of Berryman's contemporaries identified with Jews—particularly Holocaust victims—in their work, including Robert Lowell, Charles Olson, Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton, Anthony Hecht, and most infamously Sylvia Plath (2). In addition, many Jewish poets also identified with Holocaust victims in their work—including Allen Ginsberg, Charles Reznikoff, Denise Levertov, and Hilda Schiff—further reinforcing the role of "imaginary Jew" as a mask available to be worn (2). Like

these other poets, Berryman discovers in Jewishness “a handy trope for imagining the suffering and marginalization he feels in America . . . for Berryman, the Jew has become a symbol for the alienated American poet—the symbol for himself” (Flanzbaum 260). Delmore Schwartz, a Jew himself and the subject of a series of howling elegies in *The Dream Songs*, is even more explicit about this identification of the marginalized-but-surviving figure of the poet with the parallel figure of the Jew:

the Jew is at once alienated and indestructible, he is an exile from his own country and an exile even from himself, yet he survives the annihilating fury of history. In the unpredictable and fearful future that awaits civilization, the poet must be prepared to be alienated and indestructible. He must dedicate himself to poetry, although no one else seems likely to read what he writes; and he must be indestructible as a poet until he is destroyed as a human being. In the modern world, poetry is alienated; it will remain indestructible as long as the faith and love of each poet in his vocation survives. (23)

Given the atrocities revealed at the end of World War II, it is easy to understand the poets of that era imagining the Jewish position as that of survivor, of exile, of sufferer, and finding such a space to be generative. In Berryman’s case, though, the generative nature of this metaphor is problematized by the complexity of his understanding of what Jewishness means, as well as his conflicted sense of how his own personality and self fit into his writing and his understanding of Jewishness.

It would be easy to see Berryman, and the rest of the poets listed above, as appropriating Jewishness for their own aesthetic and political gain, essentially cashing in on Holocaust. Flanzbaum suggests this reading, criticizing the midcentury poet’s penchant for fetishizing his outsider status: “Berryman, like many poets of his generation, declares himself an exile from

American culture, and writes a story which features a Gentile character imagining himself the victim of anti-Semitism” (259). Jewishness is the perfect ethnic identity to appropriate for articulating this alienation, this marginalization, precisely because the Nazis turned Jews into the great sufferers of our collective imagination: “In the post-Holocaust world, where the most recognizable feature of Jewish identity became victimhood, John Berryman has no problem slipping into the role” (271). For Flanzbaum, this attitude toward Jewishness erases the important distinction between the true suffering experienced by Jews and the metaphoric connection Berryman tries to make to his own sense of victimhood. There is a morally significant difference, she insists, between Berryman’s personal, emotional, and psychological suffering and the institutional genocide enacted against the Jews.

But is Berryman actually trying to elide that difference? The conclusion of “The Imaginary Jew” does suggest so, and his repeated performance throughout his work of both Jewish and African-American subjectivities support such a reading.<sup>5</sup> But Andrew Gross notes mitigating factors in the text, reasons to think that the distinction Berryman makes between real and imaginary Jews at the end of the story is meaningful after all: “To read the story as an attempt to appropriate Jewish identity, as Flanzbaum does, is to miss the strong elements of self-accusation and self-limitation implicit in the metaphor of mirroring, and to miss the fact that mirroring is indeed a metaphor, performing not only psychological and political but also literary work” (19). This work is rooted in the notion that “prejudice turns its object into an inverted mirror, simultaneously reflecting and alienating those aspects of personality the bigot is

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<sup>5</sup> Many writers, even among his friends, objected to Berryman’s cultural appropriations because of their apparent insensitivities to these issues. Michael Harper wrote in “Tongue-Tied in Black and White,” an elegy for Berryman, “you wrote in that needful black idiom / offending me, for only your inner voices / spoke such tongues” (126). Similar concerns have been raised by many about what looks like an appropriation of the Holocaust by Berryman and others, though Plath is usually the main target of such critiques.



incapable of facing in himself” (Gross 4). Berryman’s claiming to be an imaginary Jew, then, is less about appropriating Jewish identity and suffering than it is about showing an inescapable link between creating a sense of self and creating a sense of otherness. In other words, the figure of the imaginary Jew is Berryman’s tool for grappling with and illuminating the brute human fact that identity is relational, that to create a sense of self involves not just identification with an ingroup, but rejection of an outgroup: distinguishing an Us from a Them.

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To begin to understand this complicated deployment of the figure of the imaginary Jew, we need to look closer at how exactly Berryman uses it in *The Dream Songs*. Explicit discussions of or references to Jewishness appear in at least a dozen of the Dream Songs, beginning with Dream Song 41, which appropriates one of the most famous phrases from perhaps the most famous Holocaust poem, Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge”:

If we sang in the wood (and Death is a German expert)  
while snow flies, chill, after so frequent knew  
so many all nothing,  
for lead & fire, it’s not we would assert  
particulars, but animal; cats mew,  
horses scream, men sing. (Berryman 45)

The parenthetical phrase in the first line of Berryman’s poem presents itself as a mistranslation of Celan’s famous line, “der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland,” which is more straightforwardly rendered by Michael Hamburger as “death is a master from Germany” (34). By

capitalizing Death, Berryman invites us to personify death, as Celan does, and reminds us of the German language's capitalization of all nouns, thus heightening our consciousness of the spaces between languages. By rendering "Meister" as "expert," which would be a reasonable translation if not for the context of the rest of the poem, Berryman renders this phrase a comment not on the Holocaust but on language itself: Death has mastered the German language. Though these concerns about the German language may be present in Celan's original (John Felstiner's translation of "Todesfuge" engages with them even more directly), the parenthetical insertion and oddness of phrasing suggest a surprising level of appropriative comfort. Even his cavalier tone at the end of this first stanza suggests that Berryman is manipulating one of the central works to come out of the Holocaust without an outsider's sense of reverence, without a sense that his approach might be objectionable.

However, after noting that men sing in the Holocaust for the same reasons that cats mew and horses scream, Berryman begins to wear the mask of the imaginary Jew more fully:

Or: men psalm. Man palms his ears and moans.

Death is a German expert. Scrambling, sitting,  
spattering, we hurry.

I try to. Odd & trivial, atones  
somehow for my escape a bullet splitting  
my trod-on instep, fiery. (Berryman 45)

Here we are more clearly in the voice of a Jew escaping a concentration camp, and we can understand the survivor's guilt suggested in the idea that being shot in the foot "atones" for his escape. Yet even here, even in this extreme position, Berryman's mask slips as he follows the "men sing" from the first stanza to "men psalm" and then "Man palms" in this one; the poet who

loves language pierces the drama of this scene, pulling us out of the subjectivity of a speaker in a real historical moment and reminding us of the poet, Berryman, behind that voice and playing with language from the safety of his position as a white, middle-class, Christian, American man. Though Celan's original poem also calls attention to its sonic devices (particularly repetition) and thus to the poet constructing and organizing that artifice, this attention only reinforces the artifice because we know Celan actually is a Holocaust survivor. His language points past the poem and back to the poet whose actual experiences place him in the world he is creating poetically; Celan's mask fits. Berryman's, on the other hand, slips half off. And that slippage calls our attention to the Holocaust as metaphor; the survivor's guilt experienced by this speaker becomes a figure for the generalized and unmotivated sense of guilt that pervades *The Dream Songs*.

James Young attempts to defend Berryman's imaginary Jewishness in part by differentiating him from Plath, who represented her personal suffering in the guise of a "Holocaust Jew." Instead, Young notes, Berryman "became an imaginary Jew in order to explore the idea of antisemitism" (117). This characterization of Berryman exculpates him perhaps too easily, as it limits Berryman's identification with Jewishness to "The Imaginary Jew" and ignores the polyvalent engagement with Jewishness throughout *The Dream Songs*, including the explicit "Holocaust Jew" guise in Dream Song 41. As we have seen, Berryman is not above speaking in the voice of a Holocaust victim to articulate his own personal pain. Many critics, such as Flanzbaum and Alvin Rosenfeld, would object to such appropriations of the tragedy of recent Jewish history by poets as an easy metaphor. According to Rosenfeld, to write responsibly about the Holocaust "one must be able to listen well, in ways unobstructed by self-interest of one kind or another. To do otherwise is to exploit atrocity by misappropriating it for private or

political ends. All such efforts at ‘adapting’ the Holocaust are bound to fail—artistically, for reasons of conceptual distortion, and morally, for misusing the sufferings of others” (154). The twofold problem Rosenfeld raises is important; not only does he condemn poems that appropriate the Holocaust on moral grounds, but he also makes an argument somewhat parallel to Eliot’s argument about the problem of *Hamlet*: just as Hamlet’s emotions exceed the facts of the situation that were meant to give rise to his emotions, the horrors of the Holocaust dwarf the emotional problems of poets like Berryman and Plath. This “conceptual distortion” leads to the poems’ artistic failure, according to Rosenfeld. He ultimately rejects all such efforts at imaginative identification with Jewish suffering because the “principal categories are not apposite: there is a radical imbalance between anyone’s personal horrors of divided identity and the horrors brought on by the Nazis” (178).

Young attempts to refute Rosenfeld’s criticisms by rejecting Rosenfeld’s easy distinction between the private, biographical pain experienced by Plath and Berryman and the historical suffering of the Holocaust: “as long as we incorporate the historical by sharing common pools of knowledge with history’s sufferers, a reader’s biographically and historically generated pain may never be entirely separable” (127). In defense of poets like Berryman who try to adopt the Jewish position, Young rejects the binary underpinning Rosenfeld’s argument between public, historical horrors and private, imaginative articulation of inner horrors: “In fact, we might ask here if it is ever possible to separate ‘private’ from ‘historical’ worlds, insofar as we may neither express our private lives without recourse to public (i.e., historical) language, nor know history except by ordering it privately” (121). If the migration from historical atrocity to linguistic and literary trope is indeed inevitable, even natural, Young concludes, people like Plath (and by extension Berryman) do not “exploit atrocity” but rather “draw upon a public pool of language that is

necessarily informed by atrocity” (122). Young is careful not to suggest that he is diminishing the Holocaust in his argumentation; instead he focuses on how its unprecedented horror naturally hastened its entrance into our language as a figure for extreme suffering. This is how languages evolve: “Because the suffering of the Holocaust was not like anything else, it became a referent, a standard, by which subsequent suffering would be measured” (128). Young suggests that writers who are struggling to articulate their “private pain” may reach for images of the Holocaust not to claim that their pain is comparable to that of Holocaust victims, but to refer to it as “the most extreme figures imaginatively available” (129).

Unfortunately, such a defense may not satisfy critics who argue that reaching for “the most extreme figures imaginatively available” as the metaphor for their personal suffering necessarily suggests an equation between the poet’s psychological trauma and the extremity of the Holocaust. After all, it does seem somehow disrespectful to actual concentration camp survivors for Berryman to use their experience—and even lift language and literary devices from Celan’s famous poem of witness—to articulate his own generalized sense of guilt and despair. Berryman’s problems simply are not on the same scale as Celan’s, and to reach for that extreme figure is to fail to acknowledge that difference. However, Young suggests that critics (like Rosenfeld and Flanzbaum) who object to writers who use the Holocaust as a figure in their literary imaginations may in fact be the ones doing a disservice to the memory of the Holocaust:

To remove the Holocaust from the realm of the imagination, however, to sanctify it and place it off-limits, is to risk excluding it altogether from public consciousness. And this seems to be too high a price to pay for saving it from those who would abuse its memory in inequitable metaphor. Better abused memory in this case, which might then be critically qualified, than no memory at all. (133)

Young here attempts to accommodate the ethical argument Rosenfeld presented, and I find his response compelling. After all, “Never forget” is one of the central refrains in any Jewish discussion of the Holocaust, and the “abused memory” that many readers see in Plath’s “Daddy” has certainly kept the issues and discussions alive. But Young has no real answer to the aesthetic problem, the issue akin to the missing objective correlative, that Rosenfeld raises. Perhaps the answer to this criticism is simply to look at the individual poems and note their successes. After all, to suggest that “Daddy” is an artistic failure is almost as audacious as Eliot’s criticism of *Hamlet* as one: “Daddy” is one of the most widely read and recognized midcentury American poems, a fixture in anthologies and classrooms, and its potency has survived across generations of readers.

Berryman’s Dream Song 41 is far less well known, but we can note some of its richness, some of its artistic successes, as a bulwark against Rosenfeld’s critique. The movement from “man sing” at the end of stanza 1 to “Or: men psalm. Man palms his ears and moans” in stanza 2 brilliantly articulates the degeneration of poetry—and religion—to a bare existence, yoking together quite effectively the well-known Holocaust experience of human reduction and Berryman’s poetic project in *The Dream Songs*. Similarly, the wounded foot that ends the second stanza (“my trod-in instep, fiery”) evokes not just Eve’s punishment during the fall from grace—a religious moment of particular significance given Berryman’s obsession with falling<sup>6</sup>—but also Achilles, to whom Henry compares himself in Dream Song 14’s playful celebration of ennui and

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<sup>6</sup> The obsession with fall and falling in *The Dream Songs* is one of its central motifs, starting with Dream Song 1 where “nothing fell out like it might or ought” (3) after the death of the father, recurring throughout the book, and ending in the final Dream Song, #385, with “Fall is grievy, brisk. Tears behind the eyes / almost fall. Fall comes to us as a prize / to rouse us toward our fate” (407). Even in the final, upward-looking, hopeful-seeming end of *The Dream Songs*, Henry moves toward his imposed fate as a creature of grief and fallenness and the beautiful death of autumn.

whining. In terms of complexities that ramify throughout *The Dream Songs*, though, the most resonant parallel with that wounded foot is with Oedipus, whose originating trauma, like Henry's, is due to a violent separation initiated by his father: Oedipus's name (literally "swollen foot") refers to the long-term damage his father Laius did to his ankles during Laius's futile attempts to avoid his fate. Beyond the obvious instability in Oedipus's identity as an eventual husband to his own mother, further echoes of Henry's identity issues can be found in Oedipus's exile from his original family and culture and his own fruitless efforts to escape his fate. The most significant connection with Oedipus for our purposes, though, is the fact that his identity (and narrative function) are tied up inextricably with his loss of identity: He has to misunderstand who he is for his story to happen. The results of that lost identity are not just a private tragedy of incest and despair; they ramify throughout his society and culture in the form of natural disasters and political unrest for generations. In Dream Song 41, then, Henry, in the guise of a Holocaust survivor, calls our attention to not only the inextricable connections between public and private suffering, between an exile's pain and the suffering of those left behind, but also the fractured kind of character best used to articulate those traumas.

These rewarding complexities may be useful to note in response to the claim that a poem like this will fail aesthetically, but more importantly, the third stanza of Dream Song 41 actually offers a direct engagement with the very problem Rosenfeld raises. We can see in the shifted rhyme scheme and broken repetitions of this final stanza an effort to dramatize the difficulty of writing into the Holocaust responsibly and powerfully:

The cantor bubbled, rattled. The Temple burned.

Lurch with me! phantoms of Varshava. Slop!

When I used to be,

who haunted, stumbling, sewers, my sacked shop,  
roofs, a dis-world *ai!* Death was a German  
home-country.

Unlike the a-b-c-a-b-c rhymes of the first two stanzas, this third is structured a-b-c-b-a-c, twisting the ending out of the expected pattern to call our attention to the loaded rhyme of “German” and “burned.” And the final sentence further complicates the repeated Celan phrase in the poem by changing “expert” to “home-country” and moving from the present tense to the past. Thus Berryman ends his poem with something that sounds similar to the other repetitions of the violence and horrors of the Holocaust, the expertise with which Death wields German, but is in fact far more. The lost home-country, the fact that the home-country exists only in the past, evokes the Diaspora and ties it to death—suggesting that the loss of a homeland (echoing an earlier loss of Jerusalem with “The Temple burned”) constitutes a loss of self, of identity; death comes to those on the outside, the displaced.<sup>7</sup>

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The straightforward ventriloquism of the Jewish experience in Dream Song 41 opens Berryman up to the criticisms described above, but such approaches are in fact quite rare in *The*

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<sup>7</sup> See note 4 above for a discussion of how the Diaspora, in addition to its function described here as a marker of cultural death and the loss of identity, also functions as a central part of Jewish identity. This contradictory sense of a people’s identity being predicated on a loss of identity, of being at home in homelessness, permeates Jewish thinking. Perhaps the clearest example of this aspect of Jewish identity is that the Passover Seder ends with the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem” – even when it takes place in Jerusalem. (In Jerusalem, they may add “rebuilt” at the end to signal that even being in modern-day Jerusalem isn’t the same as being home; home is in the past tense.) It is easy to see how a culture with such a perspective would appeal to Berryman in his quest to articulate a fractured, unstable, anxious self.



*Dream Songs*. Instead, Berryman's engagement with Jewishness tends to fluctuate between an outsider's admiration and explicit acts of sympathetic (or empathetic) identification. Dream Song 48 refers to "imaginary Jews // like bitter Henry" being troubled by the "Greek idea" of salvation through Holy Communion:

He yelled at me in Greek,  
my God! – It's not his language  
and I'm no good at – his is Aramaic,  
was – I am a monoglot of English  
(American version) and, say pieces from  
a baker's dozen others: where's the bread?

but rising in the Second Gospel, pal:  
The seed goes down, god dies.  
a rising happens,  
some crust, and then occurs an eating. He said so,  
a Greek idea,  
troublesome to imaginary Jews,

like bitter Henry, full of the death of love,  
Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning  
the whole implausible necessary thing.  
He dropped his voice & sybilled of

the death of the death of love.

I ought to get going. (Berryman 52)

Here it seems that imaginary Jewishness for Henry represents a discomfort with Christianity, and Jeffery Alan Triggs reads the poem reasonably as an attempt to grapple with the possibility of a Christian-style salvation. The seed in the second stanza seems to allude to the parable of the sower from Mark 4, and the pun on “rising” begins the somewhat irreverent equation of Jesus with bread in the subsequent line. Indeed, the central problems of the poem seem to shift from accessing the divine across language barriers in the first stanza to focusing on transubstantiation, on the ontological complexities of food becoming the body of God. But these problems are not specifically Jewish problems, and the God who yells in Greek and whose language is Aramaic is not the Hebrew God, so why is Henry characterized here as an imaginary Jew?

The weight of that term can be felt in the second stanza break: Berryman invites us to think of the broader population of “imaginary Jews” before focusing in on “bitter Henry” in the next stanza. In fact, “like bitter Henry” functions grammatically as a parenthetical phrase, offset by commas, which means that the descriptors that follow it apply not just to Henry but to all imaginary Jews. Everyone in this population, including Henry, is “full of the death of love, / Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning / the whole implausible necessary thing.” Brendan Cooper argues that the central problem for Henry in this poem, and thus for all imaginary Jews, is not his problems with Christian beliefs but the more universal “entrapment within the ambiguities and uncertainties of human languages” (167) visible most explicitly in the first stanza. These problems, starting with the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, are familiar to Jewish thinking and culture, despite the specific concerns with Aramaic articulated in the poem; Jews have a long tradition of understanding God as speaking a different,

incomprehensible language, and the spiritual worldview presented in this first stanza would not be out of place in Jewish biblical commentaries like the Talmud. But the reference to Aramaic as God's language is inescapably Christian, and Cooper goes on to note that Henry being "full of the death of love" makes him "a kind of walking antithesis to Christ" (168), rendering it impossible to understand this poem as engaging with any kind of Jewishness directly. Instead, in this poem Berryman invites us to understand imaginary Jewishness as contextualized within a Christian framework. That is, one can only be an imaginary Jew once there is a hegemonic Christian backdrop from which one can be excluded. Essential to Berryman's imaginary Jewishness is the Gentile oppressor, the Irish antagonist of Berryman's early fiction.

The reference to Macbeth in "Cawdor-uneasy," followed by "disambitious," reminds us that Macbeth was nudged toward his unhappy fate by forces whose ambition and potency far outstripped his own, including not just his wife but also the three witches who frame his rise and fall. Macbeth, like Berryman's Henry, is in important ways passive, receiving the battering of larger, more powerful forces than his own will, forces that know and shape his fate and character. And in the larger context of *The Dream Songs* it makes sense that "the whole implausible necessary thing" that Henry mourns would be his life, just as Macbeth mourns his by the end of the play, comparing himself to a baited bear, constrained to fight as amusement for others (Shakespeare 5.7.1-2). Such readings flesh out the character of an imaginary Jew in Berryman's world: a figure outside of the dominant culture, conscious of the expressive limits of his language(s), buffeted by fate and aware enough of his powerlessness to understand his existence as something to be mourned. Importantly, to mourn "the whole implausible necessary thing" suggests that the imaginary Jew understands his life as something both valuable and lost; he understands the miraculous nature of his life (its implausibility) and the fact that his suffering

is both worthy of mourning and ultimately inevitable. Given how closely such characterizations also match Henry throughout *The Dream Songs*, it is unsurprising that he would refer to himself as an imaginary Jew—even while struggling with Christian ideas.

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Berryman's shifting between the ventriloquism of Dream Song 41 to the more complex, self-aware identification of Dream Song 48 offers only a taste of the many forms of engagement with Jewish identity in *The Dream Songs*. This fluctuation is central to not just the aesthetics but the politics of Berryman's project. Andrew Gross grounds his defense of Berryman's imaginary Jewishness in this polyvalent engagement:

Berryman at his best is not open to the accusations of identity theft because he does not claim a stable relation to Jewishness. His dramatic verse deploys impersonation in a way that allows him to avoid turning Nazi cruelty into a symbol of the human condition or Jews into figures of alienated poets. Or rather, his poetry does turn to such universalizing metaphors but immediately evacuates them of their pathos, either in the same poem or in linked poems in the series. Berryman represents himself as a white man, in blackface, who is a Jew but also an anti-Semite. The serial nature of these impersonations, and the relations established between them, are of central importance. The Warsaw poem [Dream Song 41] impersonates Jewish identity, and the 'imaginary Jew' poem [Dream Song 48] comments on that impersonation—or establishes the conditions that make it possible—as an exercise in masking and projection. (14)

Berryman “establishes the conditions that make it possible” in various ways in other poems as well. In *Dream Song* 151, in the middle of his sequence of elegies for Delmore Schwartz, Henry cries out, “let’s all be Jews bereft, for he was one” (170). Here Henry clearly does *not* claim to speak from a Jewish subjectivity, but instead presents it as a possible perspective for him and other mourners: the ideal sympathetic position for grieving. This poem, then, dramatizes how one might be one of the “Jews bereft” processing the loss of one of their own in a “hurrah of mourning” (170)—without assuming that Henry can successfully occupy that subjectivity. The poem obsessively catalogues the particular details of Schwartz’s life and death: how he collapsed anonymously in a flophouse and was undiscovered for three days, how he had no children, his mental illnesses, and even naming a Thomas Hardy poem he liked. Intermingled with these facts are Henry’s response to Schwartz’s death, the physical, bodily exhaustion of it, and in that intermingling we can see the process by which Henry attempts to establish the conditions of his empathetic identification:

Bitter & bleary over Delmore’s dying:  
his death stopped clocks, let no activity  
mar our hurrah of mourning,  
let’s all be Jews bereft, for he was one  
He died too soon, he liked ‘an Ancient to Ancients’  
His death clouded the grove

I need to hurry this out before I forget  
which I will never    He fell on the floor  
outside a cheap hotel-room

my tearducts are worn out, the ambulance came  
and there on the way he died  
He was 'smart & kind,'

a child's epitaph. He had no children,  
nobody to stand by in the awful years  
of the failure of his administration  
He was tortured, beyond what man might be  
Sick & heartbroken Henry sank to his knees  
Delmore is dead. His good body lay unclaimed  
three days. (170)

Henry dramatizes the breakdown of his own body, with his worn-out tearducts and collapsing to his knees, as he describes the demise of Schwartz's, in a process of sympathetic (but not empathetic) identification. And importantly, his body's dissolution is not voluntary; it is the product of a grief so enormous that it "stopped clocks," halting the world's progress. Henry worries about his role as memorializer, and then he rejects that worry: "I need to hurry this out before I forget / which I will never." ("Never forget," repeat the Jews.) He is aware of the groundlessness of this anxiety, but he still acts in response to it, knowing that his response exceeds reason, Hamlet-esque. Such metacognitive elements suggest that Berryman understands the Jewish position here as one available to non-Jews, but not a willing choice, not in fact a mask to put on at all. His call for us all to "be Jews bereft" is not an invitation to adopt a position, but an invitation to understand that this shared loss has forced him and his fellow mourners into a Jewish position—that of sufferers *par excellence*. There is no choice, for Henry, *not* to be a Jew

bereft. But there is also a comfort in that community; Henry is not alone in his bereavement, and there is a long and enduring tradition of people—a people—surviving such tragedies and far worse.

The most troubling implication of Berryman's identification of the Jewish position with that of the sufferer is, of course, its reductiveness. James Young struggles with this problem in Berryman, noting that his appreciation of Jewish culture in his actual life tended to exceed the representations of it in his work: "Although Berryman the poet knew many Jews and admired what he regarded as 'Jewish traits' (e.g., storytelling, argumentation, interpretation), the 'imaginary Jew' figured only one kind of 'Jewish knowledge' for Berryman: victimization" (116). Despite this reasonable concern, Berryman's polyvalent approach to Jewishness does extend beyond deploying it solely as a figure for extreme victimization. Instead, his approach speaks to his admiration for a culture that has digested centuries of oppression, of being rendered monstrous in the dominant imagination, of homelessness and systematic violence, and turned that history into part of a stable and persistent identity, self-created instead of externally-imposed. It speaks too of his admiration for the Jewish attentiveness to the potentialities of language and interpretation as the methods to aid that digestion, to make the horrors of the world into a kind of dark nourishment that feeds Jewish identity—and that drives Berryman's poetry. Berryman finds in his imaginary Jewishness a perspective that only ever partially fits, even when it feels like the world is imposing it on him. But that partiality becomes central to his poetic project, to the character of Henry who is, Berryman is careful to point out, only "*sometimes* in blackface" (*The Dream Songs* xx, my emphasis), and who is only sometimes a Jew. Berryman's imaginary Jew is on the outside of even what he understood as the quintessential outgroups—Jews and African Americans—and this fact is his guiding problem, the fundamental situation of

the damaged and captivating self that flashes, partially revealed and engagingly concealed, again and again across the pages of *The Dream Songs*.



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