Survival through Self-Criticism in Selected Poems by John Berryman

النجاة من خلال الانتقاد الذاتي في قصائد مختارة لجون بيريمان

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the theme of self-criticism in selected poems by the American poet, John Berryman. In both "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" and "Dream Song", Berryman uses Bradstreet and Henry as a personae to construct an image of himself and his society in modern times. The purpose of Berryman's self-criticism is to expose what is wrong in himself, his faults and mistakes. What unifies these two characters and their creator is that all of them suffer a deep sense of alienation in the social and political environments they lived in. The feelings of frustration, anger, disappointment are not being properly appreciated, and the desire for change are typical of persons expressing self-criticism and using it as a tool to overcome the traumas of the past.

Keywords: Berryman, Bradstreet, Henry, self-criticism, survival.

المستخلص

ترمي هذه الورقة إلى مناقشة قيمة النقد الذاتي في قصائد مختارة للشاعر الأمريكي جون بيرمان. في قصيدتيه 'تقدير وإجلال للسيدة برادستريت' و'أغنية حلم'،وظف بيرمان 'برادستريت' و'هنري' بوصفهما قناعاً لبناء صورةٍ عن نفسه ومجتمعه في الأزمان الحديثة. إن الغاية من النقد الذاتي الذي يمارسه بيرمان هي الكشف عن الأخطاء والمساوئ المتصلة بشخصه. وما يوحد هاتين الشخصيتين مع

خالقهم أنهم جميعاً يعانون من الإحساس العميق بالاغتراب في البيئات الاجتماعية والسياسية التي يعيشون فيها. إن شعور الفرد بالاحباط والغضب وخيبة الأمل بسبب عدم نيله ما يستحق من تقدير وأيضاً الرغبة في التغيير تُعدان من أهم الصفات المُميزة للأفراد الذين يبدون اهتماماً بالنقد الذاتي ويستخدمونه وسيلةً للتغلب على صدمات الماضي.

الكلمات المفاتيحية: بيريمان، برادستريت، هنري، النقد الذاتي، النجاة

Berryman was a major figure in American poetry in the second half of the 20th century and was considered a key figure in the Confessional school of poetry. He began to write poetry in Columbia College in 1932, where he flourished under the mentor, poet and academic Mark Van Doren (1894-1972). Berryman's early poetry demonstrates a great influence of many poets from both sides of the Atlantic including Gerard Manly Hopkins, Ezra Pound, and many others (Mariani,1996, 360).

Berryman's first published books are *Poems* (1942) and *The Dispossessed* (1948). Martz (1969) divides Berryman's poetic output into what might conveniently, and after the familiar pattern be called the early Berryman and the later Berryman (11). The early poetry of Berryman includes all his output before publishing his masterpiece long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in the *Partisan Review*. The contrast between the early and later period is that of style and subject matter. As far as the subject matter of most of his so-called early poetry, he wrote in a more objective detached manner than in his later poems. It seems that Berryman has arrived at maturation with *Homage* (1956) with which he proved he can be a poet worth serious consideration. Berryman regarded *Homage* as his true breakthrough. Praising *Homage*, Robert Lowell called it "the most resourceful historical poem in our language"(1987, 107).

The poem was written during the period (1948–53) and initially published in the *Partisan Review* in 1953, and then as a book in 1956. The fifty-seven eight line stanzas poem is not simply a record of the life of the Puritan colonial poetess Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), as the title might indicate. Bradstreet was married Simon Bradstreet- a colonial magistrate, businessman and diplomat- at sixteen. They crossed the Atlantic in the *Arbella* in 1630, and had the first of their eight children in 1633, became the first woman in America to devote herself to writing poetry, and died in 1672. Anne's husband became colonial governor of Massachusetts in 1679 (Martz, 26).

Sticking to historical honesty was Berryman's last concern in the poem. Anne Bradstreet of the poem is hardly the historical figure whose poetry and letters to her husband and family members show a dutiful daughter and a devoted wife and mother. Bradstreet in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is a passionate rebel who resists the conventions of youth and age, the restrictions of her environment and culture, the limitations of her body and the apparent will of God:

My breath is scented, and I throw

hostile glances towards God.

('Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' in Collected Poem, pp. 133-47, 36. 2-3)

Explaining this manipulation of history for his own sake, Holder (1980) thinks that "Berryman is trying to construct an image of the person behind the text."(207)

Berryman superimposes himself on Bradstreet forming a complete transhistorical relationship between the two. Bradstreet is not Berryman's direct ancestor, but, apart from being both American and poets, they have in common a time of hardship and difficulty. In the case of Bradstreet, she suffered the ordeal of arriving in New England in the first days of the colony with all the accompanying

scarcity of food, exposure to cold weather and hard work. Justifying his choice of Bradstreet, Berryman says in interview that:

> she was the first poet of this country who has made a great efforts [*sic*] to create and to exercise her intellect to be greatly admired. She lived in a society which frowned on a woman's interest going beyond the home, where harsh circumstances made survival of prime importance. (Quoted in Alan Golding, 1995,pp. 60-61)

Berryman on the other hand, had to suffer his own way from his early boyhood trauma of losing his father and living in a difficult time as far as the American social and political environments of his time are concerned. The time he wrote the poem was an exceptionally hard time for Berryman, financially and domestically. He was having real difficulty in balancing his own life as a person and the 'burden of trying to be a scholar, teacher, and poet'. (Haffenden, 1982, 67)

The poem should not be mistaken as an objective poem of historical or literary value. Berryman is not making 'homage' to Bradstreet as an American poetess *per se* nor is he interested in her as a historical figure. In fact, Berryman is completely dismissing the value of Bradstreet's poetry. He describes Bradstreet's poetry as inferior and her as "*mistress neither of fiery nor velvet verse*"(ll. 12.8). The poetry she has written, as far as Berryman is concerned, was not more than a "*bald / abstract didactic rime*" and "*proportioned, spiritless poems*" (12.5-6; 42.6). He publically rejects any interest in her as a poet. For Berryman, she is interesting as "a woman not much as a poetess"(Quoted in Schweitzer, 1991, 126).

But we as readers can assume that the choice is not a random one. Morgan (1994) believes that Berryman seems to express "certain things in a woman's voice that seemed forbidden to [him] as [a man]" (133). Self-criticism is among the things which Berryman wanted to express in the voice of Bradstreet. He created

this woman-poet from the early days of America to expose what is wrong in himself. The Bradstreet of the poem, with her very high sense of independence, can never be the historical Puritan poetess but a poetic persona adjusted to suit Berryman's end. She is frustrated, angry, disappointed and has deep feelings of guilt and desire for change. These feeling are typical for a person expressing his self-criticism. The reader notices the many times in which Berryman vocalizes his disappointment with the *status quo* around him. Of course, this voice is Berryman's who speaks through her\ his anguish and concern.

The poem extends from the very first times of American history until the present time. With its overemphasis on everything that is American, the poem can justly be called the chronicle of America. Schweitzer (1991) notes that: "*Homage* is the most American poem of all the poetry that Berryman has written. It has deep roots in American history, self and present times. This is another reason why Berryman [in his choice of Anne Bradstreet] declares himself as an 'American' (126).

The voice in the poem has special significance. The poem has two narrative voices: that of the Puritan poetess and that of Berryman himself. Imagining Bradstreet in her grave, Berryman begins the poem in the second person 'you' and the possessive 'your:

> The Governor your husband lived so long
> moved you not, restless, waiting for him? Still,
> **you** were a patient woman.—
> I seem to see you pause here still:
> Sylvester, Quarles, in moments odd you pored
> before a fire at, bright eyes on the Lord,
> all the children still.
> 'Simon ...' Simon will listen while **you** read a Song. (L1.1-8)

Here, Berryman speaks in the first person addressing Bradstreet. Then, the two voices blend, modulate from one to the other, and, though often distinct, are finally one voice, a voice of passion and caring. The poet's voice modulates into the Bradstreet's through a repetition of first-person pronoun 'I'. He makes a kind of a dialogue across the centuries with Bradstreet. Their dialogue is marked by the intense desire to understand the American present time of confusion. The time is intense; '*foxholes hold men\ reactor....rime*.' (55.7-8). He tries to summon the poet physically; "*Out of maize & air \your body's made, and moves*'(3.), and he did succeed in doing that. The critic Elizabeth White states that the "strangely wenched [sic] syntax, psychological method, and historical setting of the poem seem to bring the woman [Bradstreet] and her environment eloquently to life" (Quoted in Schweitzer, 132)

The repetition of the 'you' and 'your' is to stress the Berryman-Bradstreet intimacy and closeness: '*I find you, young. I come to check, \I come to stay with you, ...*' (4.7). Comparison and identification begin right in the second stanza:

> I doubt if Simon than this blast, that sea,
> spares from his rigour for your poetry
> more. We are on each other's hands
> who care. Both of our worlds unhanded us. Lie stark. (2.7)

Berryman and Bradstreet are in a milieu which, at best, barely appreciate their intellectuality and is hostile to them and their talent. The plight of a female-poet living in a Puritan community in very hard times is much like that of a modern poet, underestimated and looked down upon. After this identification, Berryman is free to criticize himself hiding behind the words of Bradstreet. He seems to express certain things in a woman's voice that seemed forbidden to [him] as [a man]" (Morgan, 1994: p.133).

Bradstreet is introduced in the first stanza to the fourth for the purpose of establishing identification between the colonial poet and Berryman against their respective prevalent cultures. Their suffering as far as doubt, alienation, and hardship are concerned has become one and the same.

Projecting himself upon the deck of the *Arbella* in that windy day in 1630 as it landed in Boston harbor, the poet modulates his voice into the Bradstreet's in stanza 4 line 8 by imposing himself upon her as yet another dominating, restraining male presence in her life: "I come to check, / I come to stay with you, / and the Governor, & Father, & Simon, & the huddled men" (4.6-8). Yet, Berryman is not another domineering male imposing himself upon Bradstreet caring for her. He is a man who is totally compassionate with the poetess and identifies with her.

Failure is what she encounters in her life as a wife and a poet in the New World. That failure is what Berryman has met and is criticizing in the poem. Bradstreet fails to bear children after years of her marriage; '*The winters close,\ Springs open, no child stirs\under my withering heart*" (17. 1-2). Childbirth is a very significant motif in the poem. In more than one place throughout the poem, it indicates poetic creativity. Just like women's selfhood is declared by birth-giving, Berryman's self as a poet is declared by creating poetry. He takes the opportunity to narrate childbirth in the first person:

> So squeezed, wince you I scream? I love you & hate
> off with you. Ages! Useless. Below my waist
> he has me in Hell's vise .
>
> (19. 1-3)

The process of poem creation is compared to hard labor:

> everything down
> hardens I press with horrible joy down
> my back cracks like a wrist

shame I am voiding oh behind it is too late.
(19. 5-8)

This hard labor is cumulated when the baby\poem is finally born "*Is that thing alive?*" (21.8). Bradstreet's giving birth to her child and then rejoicing is here comparable to Berryman who, according to Morgan (1994) stayed "barren' for five years to produce the very poem" (131).

The analogy of childbirth to poetic creativity gives the poet the chance to explain how a poem is produced and created. The feminist critic Schweitzer (1991) thinks that "Berryman recreates Bradstreet….as a wishful recreation of himself, empowered by the physical exertion of birth, which he can only experience vicariously, as the 'couvade' of poetic creation" (139-40).

What is important about the poem is Berryman's ability to express his concerns through the criticism of himself and his poetry in the person of Bradstreet. It is:

> Through her Berryman seems to be expressing by implication his own fear of not succeeding as a poet. What it means to be a poet is obviously an important theme of the poem, not, however, in the contemporary mode of self-conscious artiness but rather as an aspect and epitome of what it means to be a person. (Martz, 28)

Like Bradstreet's attempts at rebellion against her social milieu, which is doomed to fail: '*My heart rose*,' as she puts it, '*but I did submit*.'(7. 3,8), Berryman's rebellious attitude against contemporary society and endeavor for change are doomed. Failure is confessed in another way. Bradstreet refers to a figure from the colonial Puritan history of America, namely, Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643), who was considered by many orthodox to be heretic. This American religious leader preached salvation by individual intuition of God's grace and love without regard for obedience to the specific laws of church and state; tried for

"traducing the ministers and their ministry"; was convicted (1637) and banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony (*Merriam-Webster Biographical Reference*, 1996, n.p.).

Once something is known about the circumstances in which the poem was written, it will be not surprising to realize the importance of this poem as far as self-criticism is concerned. Berryman has been in an extramarital liaison with a woman called 'Lise.' He resorted to heavy drinking and went to many psychiatric (Parini,1993, 172). Perhaps one of the reasons why he has chosen Bradstreet is to contrast the latter's fidelity to her spouse and respect of her marital oath with his own abuse of his marriage vows.

The reason why *Homage* is studied in this paper is to provide an example of Berryman's early attempts to move to the personal and the autobiographical. The importance of this poem is so crucial as far as tracing the developmental progress of Berryman into a responsible self-criticism is concerned. He shows a poet who can courageously renounce his negativity and works as correcting himself. It prepares us to Berryman's next poems in which the poet speaks more explicitly about his problems and weakness. His next persona is Henry who bears more resemblance to Berryman and is always associated with the poet. Berryman's resort to self-criticism is evident in Henry's exposure of his faults and mistakes.

Berryman's major breakthrough, however, was not *Homage*, but the long series of poem called *Dream Songs*. Harold Bloom (2005) believes that Berryman "will be judged at last only by *The Dream Songs*" (352). The Songs are regarded as the most confessional of his poetry and equal to Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). *The Dream Songs* is the name by which the collection of poems in *77 Dream Songs* in 1964 and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968) is known. In total, the work consists of 385 individual poems.

Tackling first the title words 'dream' and 'song,' Berryman already had shown an interest in dream analysis (interpretation) and the Freudian psychoanalysis in his early works (Cooper,2009, 166). By calling the poems 'dreams', Berryman wanted to create a sense of illusion or what Lowell (1987)calls a "waking hallucination"(107). The dreams are not real dreams but a waking hallucination in which anything that might have happened to the author or what he has seen, overheard, or imagined can be recalled.

The poems are narrated in the technique of dramatic monologue and stream of conscious giving the sense that the speaker, Henry, is in a state between sleeping and waking (or he is dreaming). The reason of using the dramatic monologue is to provide the reader with the possibility of reading the psychology of the speaker. Henry, the center of the poem, is a middle-aged white male and an intellectual of sorts. He is the voice heard in most of the poem. The songs establish Henry as an alienated, self-loathing, and self-conscious character. The other character in *Dream Songs* is unnamed. Dodson (2006) sees that in the other speaker with Henry lies the genius of Berryman, who is "both a guide to Henry and inside of Henry"(146).

The importance of Mr. Bones cannot be denied. He simply interacts with Henry in various stages of the development of Henry in the Songs. The other character's presence is essential as far as the development of the songs' theme of Henry's attempt to survive is concerned. Triggs (1988) affirms that (what he calls "The Bones") is " voice fades in and out in dialogue with Henry's, a sort of earthy conscience commenting on and exposing Henry's world-weariness"(3).

Although Berryman denies the identification with Henry and insisted on that, but this denial soon proves null and void when the reader goes through the Songs one by one to discover that Henry is only Berryman in disguise and the latter's

denial is only a failure attempt at escaping. Henry's experiences, sorrows, and travels are very similar to Berryman's own and much of Henry's thoughts, and fantasies clearly come from Berryman's own life and views.

Commenting on Berryman's denial, Martz (1969) notes that "Henry is an imaginary character simply in the sense of serving as an alter ego, a device whereby the poet may look at himself, talk about himself, talk to himself, and be a multifarious personality"(39). Therefore, it is not possible to read the Songs without identifying Henry with Berryman. The two are inseparable and, like in Whitman's *Songs*, they speak about Berryman's self through Henry's and through Henry he speaks about all the men of modern America. Hence, Martz's claim that "Henry is John Berryman saying, Here I am as a man, as the particular implies the universal" (ibid, 40) it justified.

Henry is not depicted as a hero or a victim of his society, but is an antihero, feckless, vulnerable, guilt-ridden, and absurd. Berryman brings into the scene a man whose weakness is part of the general decay of culture. In this sense, his poetry had much in common with the poetry of his friend, Robert Lowell, whose criticism to himself is part of his big project of criticizing the American society.

Besides, loss appears as the motif that is reiterated through most of the Songs contributing more to solidifying them in one unit. Suffering from an 'irreversible loss,' Henry tries throughout the Songs to come to terms with his grieve and how he should accommodate himself to this loss and moderate the pain caused by it. Berryman's first words describing Henry are that he "has suffered an irreversible loss."("Note",1) Trying to discern what is this loss, Dodson (2006) thinks that "for Henry this loss starts with his father's suicide and continues to permeate his relationships throughout his life" (27).

It is inevitable to read the Songs as an autobiographical poem of sorts because of the many similarities found in both Henry's and Berryman's life. Jepson (1998) asserts that "…it is clear that elements of [Berryman's] biography have contributed influentially to his methodology in the writing of *The Dream Songs'* (7). The biographers of John Berryman narrate his obsession with this particular incident and show its great impact on the poet's adult life. For example, Berryman's biographer, Haffenden in *The Life of John Berryman* (1982) mentions that the poet was haunted by the memory of his deceased father, who has committed suicide next to Berryman's window.

Henry's grief over this 'loss', which constitutes most part of the Songs, is not what Berryman wanted his readers to know. Instead, he created a fictional persona, Henry, who has been through similar loss and is trying hard to survive first and to overcome his grief in order to find the best way to ease the pain caused by this memory.

Berryman's words describing Henry as a lost soul encourage the reader to think that Henry's loss is really 'irreversible':

> Henry has a hard time. People don't like him, and he doesn't like himself. In fact, he doesn't even know what his name is. His name at one point seems to be Henry House, and at another point it seems to be Henry Pussycat. . .He [also] has a 'friend' who calls him Mr. Bones, and I use friend in quotation marks because this is one of the most hostile friends who ever lived (quoted in Wikipedia.org).

The grief of Henry for his loss is both deep and uncontrollable. Henry, according to Dodson (2006) "is not a character who grieves but is the very notion of grief" (17).

Many critics view *The Dream Songs* as an elegy *per se*, some as Ramazani (1994) calls them anti-elegy, while Smith (1993) refers to the Songs as self-elegy in which Berryman elegizes himself in addition to his dead father. Dodson (1998), thinks that the Songs are united as one long poem in the theme of parental elegy (2-3). It seems to the reader that the whole Dream Songs are about the event of the father's death. Even though Berryman sometimes deviates or goes astray from this main theme of loss, he returns and is reminded of it. Smith (2005) argues that *The Dream Songs* "… mythologize both the loss and the figure of the father in larger-than-life terms...."(145)

This is important insofar as it exposes the central figure in his struggle to survive and to win over his pain and weakness. His weapon in this war, so to speak, is bravery and his unusual ability to see deep into himself. Self-criticism, it is worth mentioning, is not the same self-reproach and the feeling of guilt which is described as a natural outcome of mourning the dead. Psychologist, notably Freud, spoke about this accompanying feeling;

> Where there is a disposition to obsessional neurosis the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved one, i. e. that he has willed it (Quoted in Dodson, 2006; 135).

Henry's\Berryman's self-criticism, as is evident in Henry's monologues, is not meant to be a way of self-torment. It is more a self-disclosure and recognition of his faults and mistakes so that he could ultimately overcome them. Done mostly behind the persona of Henry, Berryman's self-criticism is an attempt to probe the self so that he can find answers to the situation he was going through. Breslin

(1987) affirms that "With Berryman, the adoption of "Henry" as a persona mitigates the bluntness of self-disclosure (3).

Berryman's self-criticism begins in the very first poem of the collection. Dream Song No. 1 can be taken as the opening of a one long series of poems because it is the exposition of the protagonist character, Henry. Plurality of voices spoken in the poem is the first think one can notice. There are as many as three voices; each voice speaks two lines in the first stanza. The first one is an objective voice of the poet in which he introducing his character as well as giving the gist of his theme.

From the very beginning the reader is put vis-à-vis an unheroic 'Huffy' and 'unappeasable' character(*DS* 1; L.) an indication of misery and unhappiness. However, this was not the case from the beginning. In the second stanza, the reader finds out the reason behind Henry's unhappiness. For Henry life was much better before : *'All the world like a woolen lover/ once did seem on Henry's side*' (*DS* 1, Ll. 6-7). But then *'come a departure*,(L.8)' that changes Henry's life forever. This departure is clearly the "irreversible loss" Berryman refers to in his "Notes", namely, the suicide of his father.

Now that Berryman gives his reader an idea about Henry and his loss whose nature is never stated explicitly throughout the *Dream Songs*, he explains an important point of Henry's life, that is, survival. Survival has become a miracle for Henry and Berryman wonders how it is incredible that Henry even survived after this loss, taking the great effect it had on him: "*I don't see how Henry, pried / open for all the world to see, survived*" (*DS* 1, Ll. 10-11). But, ironically enough, Henry's survival is only physical and partial as he will suffer all his life from guilt and the fear of inheriting the father's suicidal tendencies.

In the last stanza, the second voice in the poem shows up. Dodson (2006) thinks that the second voice is "Henry stepping out to look at himself" (41). From now on, Henry is not described by the poet, but is given the chance to speak directly to the audience. The second voice may be received as Henry's nostalgic voice, recalling the good times when *'Once in a sycamore I was glad/ all at the top, and I sang sycamores and songs'*(DS, 15-16). But Donoghue (qtd. in Coleman, 2007) observes a third voice in the poem. He thinks that "…the third voice is different from [the two voices]; it is generic, representative, apocalyptic, Mankind rather than any particular man …"(23).

Now that Henry is introduced, it is evident that he suffers from a deep tragic experience and is striving for survival in a world that he does not like. This is a preparation for the readers to explore Henry's inner struggle with himself to overcome this calamity in the other poems of the Songs. Berryman, through his persona Henry, was gradually looking for an answer for his anguished self, seeking consolation and meaning in life. Consolation, however, is never achieved. This is the beginning of a series of many poems in which Henry tries to discern the reason behind his inability to overcome his grief practicing self-criticism. Berryman's self-criticism is different compared to that of Robert Lowell. Whereas Lowell's self-criticism is directed to his failure to assume his position in the society as a poet and mentor, and accepting (or even taking part) in the *status quo*, Berryman's self-criticism is directed towards his anguished self that refuses to let go of the past and to tolerate pain caused by the loss of his father.

In Song No. 5, Berryman criticizes himself though criticizing Henry's strategy to cope with the loss by resorting to alcohol. Berryman, known for the habit of heavy drinking, examines Henry's choice to flee the world through drunkenness. The poem is set in three places in a bar, and an airplane and in a hospital. This

technique, according to Vendler (1995) "gives the sort of emotional access to Berryman's extreme mood-swings that the gloomy psychiatric diagnoses" (42).

The first location is a bar in which Henry is sitting "*at odds wif de world & its god*,"(*DS* 5, L.5). He is isolated, and estranged from the world, God and above all from God. His isolation is self-imposed since he makes the whole world (and God) hold the responsibility of his loss.

The Song No. 5 is called "the most original poem among *The Dream Songs*" (Vendler, 1995; 40), because here we trace sincerity and honesty in narrating his (Henry's) weakness. This honesty is the only way Henry could overcome his 'loss' about which every other concern is related in the Songs. Vendler also claims that Song No. 5 helps a reader understand "the frenzied and sporadic nature of the rest of the Dream Songs."(ibid)

Berryman makes a reference to three figures from the past for the sake of contrast and self-criticism. The first of these characters is St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. St. Stephen was stoned to death by the Jews because he challenged their beliefs and professed his conviction in Jesus Christ. Henry sees himself as "*getting even*" for his own martyrdom by being at odds with God, and by "*getting stoned*" in the bar.

Next, Henry is found on a plane sitting and was 'gay,' clearly drunk, happy, and carefree. But, he envisions the Virgin Mary *"out of cloud /to her Mountain dropt in light"* (*DS* 5, Ll. 9-10) and accidently greets her. The Virgin's appearance is significant as far as Henry's self-criticism is concerned. Henry could not communicate with the Virgin, and the moment he was about to experience an epiphany, the Virgin is gone. This reflects Henry's materialist thinking and his lack

of spirituality. Henry's loss of religious faith is another aspect that is reiterated through the Songs.

Lastly, Henry appears in the hospital *'lay in de netting'* (*DS* 5,L.13). In this stanza, Berryman makes references to another historical figure, the French émigré J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813), ("Mr. Heartbreak," as John Berryman Anglicizes the name), to make a contrast to Henry who is striving for his survival and is unable to go in his life and dwelling on the incident from the past. Berryman mentions Crèvecœur who has "*come to farm a crazy land*;" making it flourish again despite the " … *image of the dead on the fingernail /of a new born child*." (*DS* 5, Ll. 17-18). For Berryman, Crèvecœur is a very good example of survival in an unwelcomed land. Berryman criticizes Henry's inability to face real hardship (like the one faced by Crevecoeur) and his relative easy surrender.

It is not only Berryman's poetic creation that being self-criticized here in the poem but his own personal life is put for discussion. Mentioning the Virgin marks Berryman's feeling of being suspended between heaven and hell and his fear of punishment for mortal wickedness and his lost war with temptation (alcohol, marital infidelity, etc.).

Berryman\Henry has been introspectively examining himself and his own actions, thoughts and feelings since the very opening line of Song No. 1. In the next poem, Dream Song No. 7, he continues this self-examination but this time with mockery, insincerity, and honesty. His aim is to know or be open to his true self and his life. This is the only way Henry can know how to combat his failings, and thus, overcome them. Berryman states, "*Henry is old, old ... / Now Henry is unmistakably a Big One. /Fúnnee; he don't féel so. / He just stuck around*."(*DS* 7; Ll. 1, 6-7).

In the same milieu, Berryman makes in Song No. 9 references to the film *High Sierra* (1941) starring Humphrey Bogart (playing Roy). Bogart died in 1957 but was still very popular during the time the poem was written. The film centers on the theme of a hero who struggles for survival. Berryman's allusion to the film is along the lines of that he has made earlier comparing his failing attitude to his 'irreversible loss' with that of other character who have survived (or tried to do so) in spite of all the hardship they faced. The character Roy in the film is a criminal who wants to make his last stand in the world of crime before retiring. Roy's robbery was thwarted by the security men and he lost everything including his sweetheart, Marie. Nevertheless, Roy never gives us and fought for his survival until the last moment. Simons (1977)notes that "Roy protagonist continues to battle against impossible odds. In the end, he may lose the girl he loves, or his life, or both, his is an ideal toward which Henry aspires"(269-70).

Self-criticism in Dream Song 14 takes a new turn. The criticism in this poem is about the poet's failure to find joy in life, in art and in people. The speaker is bored with everything, including literature, society, and himself. This is partially due to his failure to overcome his loss. In Song 14 Henry tells of boredom or the ennui from which Charles Baudelaire suffered before him: *"Life, friends, is boring*"— that has helped to make him "*a child to Angst*."(DS 14, Ll. 1).

But for Henry's mother (representing the rest of the world around him) *"Ever to confess you're bored/means you have no / Inner Resources*"(*DS* 14, Ll.5-6). Nevertheless, the speaker who does not respond to all this 'flashing' and 'yearning' must alienate himself from the mainstream of society and conclude that he has "*no inner resources*."(L.7). All this can affect his chance for survival in a world which Henry thinks is rejecting him. But with the advantage of criticizing the self, Henry thinks, he can bring himself to a balanced state, and thus, to survive.

Not caring for showing his weakness and limitations, Henry simply states: *".....I am heavy bored/ Peoples bore me,/literature bores me, especially great literature,…'*(*DS* 14, Ll.8-10) Above all these things, Henry is bored of himself, "*Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes*"(Dream Song14, L.11). The lines above may be the typical feelings for someone who has lost a loved one, but what is not normal is the speaker's easy surrender and defeat in his battle with pain. He is left dull and numb to the outside world. Henry does accept this as a fact, yet he never does anything to change it.

He feels totally dull and bored with the beauty of nature around him and " *the tranquil hills,…*". For the Romantic poet, Nature is the cure and the soothe remedy from the stress of life. Henry here is an anti-romantic man who can no longer see the aesthetic in nature and scenery. Even drinking ("gin") the thing he resorts to for the supposed transient relieve from pain bores him. Alcohol, which plays a central role in *the Dream Songs* as a way of mollifying the heavy weight of Henry's 'loss' has becomes, is, ironically, another source of boredom in Dream Song 14.

However, nowhere Henry does practice self-criticism more than in Dream Song 20, called “The Secret of Wisdom.” The Song consists of series of questions which Henry is asking himself. In his Hamlet-like soliloquy, the self is being questioned, and furthermore, his whole being (like Hamlet's) is a matter of speculations. Written in syntactical inconsistency ('*When worst got things, how was you?*' (*DS* 20, L.1), the poem reflects Henry troubles, though highly determined, self. Dodson (2006) notes this that "By changing “When things got worse,” to “When worst got things,” Berryman has forced the reader to see not a tired phrase, but rather a fresh emphasis on Henry’s struggle" (40).

This struggle goes on until the very last line of the poem. Henry begins by asking:

When worst got things, how was you? Steady on?
Wheedling, or shockt her &
you have been bad to your friend,
whom not you writing to …(*DS* 20, Ll. 1-4).

These questions are meant to show Henry's awareness of his situation. Clearly, he has a failing relationship to his wife, his friends and above all himself. Henry finds it unjustified to leave everything and dwell on his loss however grave it is.

The loss that Henry feels is expressed as an inner loss (Berryman puns on the phrase "you're lost" with "*you loosed*"). This explanation can be reasonable when we notice the question "*where are you?*". Henry asks himself a question that is not simply rhetorical, he is literally lost in the world and is looking for a way for survival in it. He is in this vacuum because he allowed his loss to overcome him and he is unable to surmount his pain. His inability to enjoy life as in Song 14 is just one episode of a long series of failures and defeats.

Dream Song 20 goes on to demonstrate the interrogation of Henry's self when he asks it: "*you did somebody: others you hurt short: / anyone ever did you do good*?"(*DS* 20, Ll. 9-10). The feeling of guilt is part of his total bewilderment and his not really knowing what is what and who is who. Dodson (2006) notes that "[Henry] as a psychological locus, a figure that represents both the guilt engendered by family history and a concomitant ambivalence towards death (131)". In a self-examining manner, Henry asks himself in the last line: "*did you ever do any good for anyone else?*"(L.18). He is not sure of his place in the society, nor whether he should go on living in it. Henry, however, is not simply

angry with himself, because he wants to find anyone to blame. Self-torturing or self-accusation is not what he seeks; it is change and reform he is searching behind these questions both within himself, and in his own world.

The most important question in Song 20 comes when Henry asks himself "*You licking your own old hurt/what?"*(L.12). The reference here is to Henry's boyhood trauma of losing his father. Licking the wound is a typical animal instinctive survival strategy for a response to pain and to promote healing. But, this is applicable only if the injury is fresh and curable. Henry's 'hurt' is not fresh ('old') and licking is of no use. Henry urges himself to stop licking the old injury and start looking for the present day life and the future.

It is clearly that Henry's determination for survival (as exposed in the *Songs)* is strong. The above self-interrogation is meant to present an evidence for the process of examination and criticism of his self. Henry is aware that all the escaping strategies he is following are failure, including the fleeing gratification of his sexual desire. Seeking transitory, short-lived means of pleasure is the defining mark of the 'unappeased Henry.'

In Song 26, the closing Song of Book I, Henry's loss causes him to deny the existence of real love as he claims no more to be struck by the glories of the old. Explaining to his unnamed friend ('pal'), Henry says:

> —Henry. Henry became interested in women's bodies,
> his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement.
> Stupor. Knees, dear. Pray (DS 26; Ll. 3-6).

For Henry love is merely an act of gratification of his sexual desire. In lieu of love, 'stupor' is all what he is left with. Berryman is always described as a reckless man who is living a life outside or against society. Triggs (1988) explains that "it is

more easily accommodated by the *poete maudit* in [Berryman]"(6). But like any transient pleasure, the gratification of sexual desire does not relieve his loss. The more he goes to women the more he wants. Henry's loss is not soothed or reduced by that. Instead, he has to one loss after another due to his self-betrayal explaining his both moral and spiritual impotence.

Berryman explains that "*Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime*"(L.12). It may simply be explained that Henry is resorting to poetry writing 'art, rime' as a means for survival and to compensate for his loss. But the statement that Henry fell back "into the original crime" has also sexual connotations. Wittmeier (1999) explains that " … although he falls into art and rhyme, the terms "falling" and "original crime" are suggestive of the sexual abuse of love and art. Henry is self-critical and self-conscious of this abuse."(108)

Berryman's agony about his loss continues in the next Book of the *Dream Songs*. In Song 28, "Snow Line," for example, Berryman assumes here the position of a lost sheep, referring to the Biblical parable of the New Testament of God as a divine shepherd. In spite of its heavy religious and spiritual connotation, Dream Song 28 can be interpreted as a statement of longing for the kind of life the sheep had before becoming lost, a life of simplicity, contentment, and community. Also, it can be taken to mean that he has been far away from way living a normal mundane life dwelling on his loss. He has been going astray from the right path into a place where there is no nourishment or rest or faith, a place from which there is no escape . At the end of the Song he confesses:

I'm too alone. I see no end. If we could all
run, even that would be better.
……
It's not a good position I am in.
If I had to do the whole thing over again
I wouldn't.

(DS 28; Ll. 14-18)

His loneliness is inevitable and his road is too long to hope an immediate cure. Yet, he insists on surviving by finding a way to reduce the distance and eliminate his loss. He is aware that there is something that needs to be reconsidered in the life he is living, and if he is given the chance, he wouldn't do the whole thing over again.

The "*grave Sienese face*" in the next stanza is reference to a sad religious portrait, may be the Madonna or St. John the Evangelist, Berryman has seen in the Italian city, Siena with a pun on the word 'grave' (serious looking). Sadness and despair inside him is like this immortal piece of art in which the face is looking for thousand years. Henry feels that the face is judging, reproaching him for whatever the negative thing he has done. What has he done is not stated exactly here in the Song, but it can be inferred easily to be his weakness and acceptance of the pain caused by his loss.

The excessive intensification of conscience and the assumption of shame, Henry thinks, though tormenting, is necessary to get out of this long year of pain. But this feeling of guilt and shame took another turn in the last stanza of the poem. Vendler (1995) states that "The poem begins with the stifling and perpetual weight that torments Henry's guilty conscience, and ends with a baffled sense of its erroneousness: . . ."(49).

In the last stanza, Berryman takes his readers from the boyhood memory of Henry's father funeral to his hallucinations about killing others. In a dreamlike account of the incident, Henry believes that he " *end anyone and hacks her body up* "(L.14). But, he turns up to be mistaken because he never did "*end anyone*" or cut her body up and hide it, even though he imagines he has done this and has hidden the pieces of the dismembered body where they would be found. One of

Henry's main problems is found in this statement. He must live with the guilt for he is part of the murdering world yet he knows that he has killed no one after checking that all the people he know are not missing.

Guilt is normal and typical for people who have lost a loved one, especially in suicide. In her study of feeling of guilt, Cleiren (1992) concludes that "guilt plays an more important role in bereavement after suicide than after other modes of death"(189). But, this is not the case with Henry as he is not feeling responsible for his father's suicide (at least not in this poem). He feels guilty, however, for killing other people. But killing in the poem is a metaphor for the gravest guilt ,irreversible loss like Henry's, which a man may commit against others.

Even though critics have discarded any significance behind the last stanza seeing it as the product of a drunken mind, these lines are meant to express Henry's readiness and ability to feel Henry is has an anguished pride in his ability to count his (our) sins and virtues: "*Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up/Nobody is ever missing*" (Ll.17-18).

Henry 's desire to get out of the situation of bereavement in which he has been living since boyhood is strong and real. His awareness of the whole thing is only one proof of this. He is seeking self-exploration to arrive at maturity, something he needs bad to surmount his hardships and to survive. In fact, Berryman employs Henry as the self he wants to question, explore and dig deep into. Questioning Henry's actions and criticizing his mistakes is necessarily questioning Berryman's self and conscience.

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