"A Long Wonder the World Can Bear & Be": Narrative Strategies in The Dream Songs

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"A Long Wonder the World Can Bear & Be":
Narrative Strategies in *The Dream Songs*

Thesis Submitted to
the Graduate College
of Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in English

by
Cooper Childers

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the narrative development of The Dream Songs while viewing Henry as the locus and the impetus of the various narrative strategies deployed therein. Through the abundance of generic and literary allusions present in The Dream Songs, Berryman’s sequence functions both to engage and to interact with the Western literary canon. The first chapter of this thesis locates The Dream Songs within Petrarchan sequences. The second chapter treats Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s local language and shows how their competing speech genres inform the sequence’s modes. The third chapter examines the role of epic codes in creating the text’s generic expectations and the generic modulations unique to the Songs. Though the narrative development of The Dream Songs functions to appropriate canonical texts of the Western literary tradition, the sequence refuses to adhere to generic expectations evoked by the texts appropriated and ultimately is revealed to be an inter-text.
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Introduction: The Field of The Dream Songs, Form, and the “Author Function”

“I will not come again
Or not come with this style.” (The Dream Songs 379.17-8)

The relatively recent publication of the collection of essays, "After Thirty Falls," indicates a renewal of critical interest in Berryman studies after a considerable lull following the poet’s death in 1972. John Berryman, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for 77 Dream Songs and the National Book Award for His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, can be seen as a continuation of the American tradition of the long poem initiated by Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and Emily Dickinson’s fascicles—a tradition which dominates twentieth-century American poetics. Pound’s Cantos, Eliot’s The Waste Land, Williams’ Paterson, H. D.’s Helen in Egypt, Hart Crane’s The Bridge, and, more contemporary to Berryman writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Lowell’s Notebook and Charles Olson’s Maximus Poems are just a few of the many sequences and long poems that characterize American Modernism. Berryman’s The Dream Songs shares much in common with these texts. The endless quality of Berryman’s sequence bears resemblances to the lack of closure found in the Cantos, in Paterson, and the Maximus cycle; his tightly controlled, eighteen-line “Songs” evoke e. e. cummings’ experiments with the sonnet in Tulips & Chimneys and Lowell’s sonnets in Notebook. And the central character of The Dream Songs, Henry, grapples with the crises of modernity in a similar fashion as does Tiresias in The Waste Land, Maximus in Olson’s sequence, the poet speaking for the city of Paterson in Williams’ text, the poet-figure of The Bridge, and the wide historical cast of the Cantos. Berryman contributes to the chorus of voices dominating American poetry for most of the last century, and the affinities his sequence shares with his immediate precursors as well as his
contemporaries highlight the common cultural concern of defining the poetic vision of America and its people.

One of the features of *The Dream Songs* that distinguishes Berryman’s text among other extended American sequences is the tight construction of the “Songs” on the local and cross-textual levels. Encompassing 385 individual “Songs” and internally divided into the three sections of *77 Dream Songs* and the four sections of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, the single-volume edition of *The Dream Songs* (1969) possesses a length comparable to Pound’s *Cantos* and Olson’s *Maximus Poems*. Though the scale of *The Dream Songs* is massive, Berryman does not choose to write in free verse and so differentiates his sequence from Pound’s and Olson’s.

With a few exceptions, each “Song” of Berryman’s sequence contains eighteen lines divided into three, six-line stanzas, and, internal to each stanza, Berryman employs a beat of 5-5-3-5-5-3. Though Berryman exercises considerable control over the metrics and, occasionally, the rhyme of each “Song,” the narrative structure of *The Dream Songs* remains organic and open-ended.

The narrative of the “Songs” can best be described as constructed through the process of accretion. Like the *Cantos, Paterson*, and the *Maximus Poems*, sequences that do not find conclusion or closure and to which their respective authors continuously returned to increase the scale, the 385 individual lyrics contained in *The Dream Songs* are the result of continuous addition over the roughly two decades of the “Songs'” composition. Part of this compositional strategy is the result of Berryman’s choice to organize his sequence around the figure of Henry with whom, as Berryman’s notes and letters indicate, Berryman personally identified. And by choosing to incorporate personal (autobiographical) experiences as raw material for the “Songs,” Berryman’s sequence, while maintaining the limitation of metrical control on the local, lyrical level, achieves the ability to continue *ad infinitum*. As Thornbury observes in his
introduction to Berryman's collected poetry: "While the rhythms of The Dream Songs ebb and flow, they may be more accurately characterized as a series of Henry’s departures and returns, his deaths and rebirths” (xxxii). The continuity created by the cycle of Henry’s “deaths” and “rebirths” shows The Dream Songs as following the basic pattern of more limited sequences within the larger sequence that characteristic of a number of American Modernist texts such as the Cantos. However, a great deal of contemporary Berryman criticism still reads Henry’s character and, thus, the narrative of the “Songs” as a whole, as an extension of Berryman’s own personality due in large part to the considerable amount of autobiographical detail found in connection with Henry. The label of “confessional poet” follows Berryman like a tin can tied to his tail, and such a reading impedes a larger appreciation of Henry’s character and Berryman’s text.

The fashion of biographical positivism is making a resurgence in literary studies after falling out of favor with New Critical / Formalist attempts to remove the “author” from the consideration of the text as well as the efforts of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida to reduce the “author” to a “function” (Foucault) and to consider the “author” as “dead” (Barthes) at a time contemporary with the composition of the “Songs.” New Historicism is reviving the corpse of the “author,” and though there is merit in contextualizing “authors” within their respective historical worlds, such contextualizing carries with it the power to shift agency away from the text and back to an “author” representing a cross-roads of history and culture. I have avoided, as much as is practicable, considering The Dream Songs in terms of Berryman as an “author.” In the present study, Berryman is viewed as making conscientious choices: words, metrics, allusions, attempted structures. But to see Henry or the “Songs” as autobiographical recordings
or reflexes of the poet’s psychology greatly narrows the richness of the sequence and limits the
repercussions of the multiplicity of the text’s language.

On the local level of the text of *The Dream Songs* as well as the many intra-poetic
relationships serving to blur the boundaries of that text, the fourth characteristic of the “author
function” as defined by Foucault best serves to illuminate Berryman’s role in the context of his
sequence:

[The author function] does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it
can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that
can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (113)

The Berryman who makes extra-textual statements in public in the form of letters, interviews,
etc. is differentiated from the figure who composes the “Note” preceding *The Dream Songs* that
states “[the] poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary
character (not the poet, not me) named Henry [. . .]” (vi). This “author” of the “Note” is
differentiated further from the speaking “I” of the “Songs,” a figure who remains highly
complex, ambiguous, and unstable. The location of Berryman-as-“author” is never betrayed in
the (at least) three “I”s associated with the text of the “Songs”; Berryman-as-“function,”
however, informs and colors all aspects of the text.

The “function” of Berryman informing the various aspects of the text of the “Songs”
through the exercise of aesthetic choice does not, as Eliot identifies in “Tradition and the
Individual Talent,” operate in a vacuum; Berryman, in part, gains his “significance, his
appreciation [in] his relation to the dead poets and artists.” Following Foucault’s analysis of the
“author function,” he identifies what he terms “founders of discursivity,” those “author”-as-
“functions” that are “unique”:
[Founders of discursivity] are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts. [...] [Founders of discursivity] have established an endless possibility of discourse. (114)

Foucault identifies Freud and Marx as such “founders” of twentieth-century thought, but the “founders” who generate the aesthetic field in which *The Dream Songs* finds itself are those figures central to the conventionally conceived Western literary canon: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Whitman. As will be shown, a significant dimension of Berryman’s poetics engages itself in both interacting with and appropriating the Western literary canon, and the means by which *The Dream Songs* achieves this interaction and appropriation with these “founders of discursivity” is through the complex deployment of narrative strategies.

The narrative strategies of *The Dream Songs* hinge upon the figure of Henry, the “hero” and most consistent feature of the sequence. By focusing the development of the “Songs” through Henry and his companion, the unnamed speaker, as they interact with each other in the “world,” *The Dream Songs* appropriates elements of Petrarchism incarnated in the character-oriented text of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* as well as elements of Classical and Christian epic inherited from Homer, Virgil, and Dante. *The Dream Songs* utilizes codes from these genres, but such codes, like the language deployed in the “Songs,” are never stable. The instability of Berryman’s language, best illustrated by the competing and oscillating speech genres of Henry and the unnamed speaker that reinforce both the comic and tragic modes of the “Songs,” leads to the overall instability of the text. Though the narrative development of *The Dream Songs* functions to appropriate canonical works of the Western literary tradition, the sequence refuses to
adhere to generic expectations evoked by the works it appropriates and is thus revealed to be an inter-text engaged in a revisionary generic modulation.
I. Time, Personality, and the Genesis of Berryman’s Sequences

“a sourcing whom my lost candle like the firefly loves”

*(Homage to Mistress Bradstreet 57.8).*

John Berryman’s engagement with formalized poetic sequences traces back to the completion of *Sonnets to Chris*¹ in 1947. *Sonnets to Chris* represents a major shift for Berryman’s poetics away from the composition of the non-sequential lyrics found in his first collection, *The Dispossessed* (1948), to the extended sequences dominating Berryman’s later career. Following *Sonnets to Chris*, Berryman either completed or left fragmentary seven other major sequences before his death in 1972: *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, The Black Book, 77 Dream Songs, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest,*² *Formal Elegy, Love & Fame,* and *Delusions, Etc.*

Berryman’s conscious interaction with the Petrarchan tradition of poetic sequences from *Sonnets to Chris* through *The Dream Songs* and the later sequences represents what Runchman identifies as “the challenge of reconciling [Berryman’s] English and European literary influences with his American heritage,” agreeing with Matterson that Berryman’s poems “[achieve] their finest effects through being considered as sequences”(35-6).³ Berryman’s decision to turn to the Petrarchan tradition in hopes of integrating European and American influence within his own unique poetic vision entails a two-fold objective: to appropriate characteristics of Petrichanism in order to provide lyrical sequences with narrative unity as well as both to engage and appropriate the Western poetic canon.

The first sonnet of the *Rime sparse* introduces the highly complex element of time which, through the unfolding of Petrarch’s sequence, serves to generate a multiplicity of narrative perspectives:

You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs with
which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error, when
I was in part another man from what I am now:

for the varied style in which I weep and speak between vain
hopes and vain sorrow, where there is anyone who understands
love through experience, I hope to find pity, not only pardon.

But now I see well how for a long time I was the talk of the
crowd, for which often I am ashamed of myself within;

and my raving, shame is the fruit, and repentance, and the
clear knowledge that whatever pleases in the world is a brief
dream. (36)4

In this first sonnet, the speaker of the Rime sparse establishes the varying temporal frames that
come to consist Petrarch’s mode of narration. Here, time operates in concert with subject; the
youthful “I” for whom the “sighs” of the “scattered rhymes” “nourished [his] heart during [his]
first youthful error” is explicitly differentiated from the “I” of maturity who, while speaking in
the present tense, “[hopes] to find pity, not only pardon” for the poems he created when “[he]
was in part another man from what [he] is now.” The third figure, the “you” above, bears the
responsibility of listening to the “sighs” of the youthful “I” and passing further judgment on what
the mature “I” characterizes as his “ravings.” The mature “I,” the youthful “I,” and the “you”
who must judge the latter and perhaps redeem the former, all occupy a distinct time in Petrarch’s
sequence so that the poems of the Rime Sparse may be read as a distinct competition between the
“error” of the past and the redemption of the present with the “you” for whom the “sighs” of the “ravings” are proof of “love through experience” being capable of synthesizing the alternate times of the “I.” The concept of “love through experience” announced in “Sonnet 1” maintains a central position to the sequence as the concept suggests that love and the time in which it is situated are known by the speaker(s) experientially despite being deeply ambivalent. The past, so central to the speaking “I,” remains the source of his “shame” and “error,” but the speaker’s distaste for his “youthful” self is resolved (at least partially) by the placement of “Sonnet 1” within the sequence of “scattered rhymes.”

The text of “Sonnet 1” is representative in terms of its content as well as its placement of the larger conflation of time found in the Rime sparse. “Sonnet 1” functions as a proem in the sense that it introduces the central theme of Petrarch’s sequence, “love through experience,” as well as the speaker’s characterization of his poetry as “sighs” and “scattered rhymes,” but in terms of the narrative development of the sequence, “Sonnet 1” remains posterior to the other 365 lyrics of the Canzoniere. “Sonnet 1,” then, occupies an ambivalent position in regard to the other lyrics in the sequence. As a proem, “Sonnet 1” remains anterior to the sequence, but considering the “then-now” construction of the lyric oscillating between the speaker’s “youthful error” and his desire for “pity,” “pardon,” and “repentance,” “Sonnet 1” maintains a posterior position as well that allows the mature “I” to chastise the youthful “I.” The doubled position “Sonnet 1” occupies in regard to the subsequent Canzoniere provides insight into the seemingly paradoxical title, Rime Sparse; though the mature “I” characterizes the poems of the sequence as “ravings” and as being “scattered,” they are nonetheless “rhymes,” or a kind of ordered chaos that constructs narrative through a conscious manipulation of time that leads to the character differentiation found in the opening of the sequence. Though the youthful “I” remains in the past
and the mature “I” in the present, the “you” who must judge and redeem the “sighs” of the sequence retains the privilege of encompassing both past and present; the youthful “sighs” and the mature “ravings” are united in the “you” who experiences Petrarch’s text.

Narrative in the *Rime sparse* develops cross-textually from the same “then-now” construction found locally in “Sonnet 1.” As Greene aptly observes, the “then-now” orientation of “Sonnet 1” distinguishes the *Rime Sparse* from the lyrical sequences preceding it as well as establishes the fictive narrative that unites the individual lyrics of the sequence:

> Here for the first time in a Western lyric collection, [. . .] the proem does not stand alone at the head of a chain of temporally polymorphous fragments. Rather, this proem introduces a temporal program, an alternation of tenses in single lyrics that will remain in force throughout the *Canzoniere*. Keeping a *then* and a *now* accessible at closely intermittent points in the larger work, Petrarch creates a fictional process that holds the entirety of the *Canzoniere*. He makes, in effect, a large-scale lyric fiction by the systematic repetition of what had been merely a local strategy in lyric anthologies and narratives. (42)

The repetition of the “then-now” construction, as Greene claims, imbedded at various points throughout Petrarch’s text generates the unity of narrative progression through constantly relegating each successive lyric to the past once it has passed “out of the reading present”:

> [The] past seems to engulf each lyric as it slips out of the reading present, and our serial assimilation of the work ensures that the fund of present moments [. . .] stretches inexhaustibly forward. Since each lyric quickly joins the accumulating past, the series never arrives at the flat, continuous present of a ritual poetics [. . .]. Soon the later pieces in the sequence appear to look back at the anterior ones, and
before we get very far we notice the sensation of our passing, not across 366
lyrics gathered into a book, each with a native, independent history, but through a
single span of fictional time, a process. (42)

“Sonnet 1,” in its dual function as an anterior introduction to the youthful speaker’s journey to
know love through “experience” as well as a posterior commentary on the speaker’s “sighs” and
“ravings” for his beloved Laura, initiates while simultaneously concludes the “fictional process”
of Petrarch’s sequence.

The boundaries of the fictional process of the Rime sparse consist of two distinct
moments in time; the first, the recalled innamoramento marking the beginning of the speaker’s
love for Laura that manifests itself as early as “Sonnet 2,” and the second, the speaker’s
anticipation of Laura’s as well as his own death, create the frame in which the “large-scale
fiction” of the Rime sparse operates (Greene 52). These two events, in addition to the placement
of lyrics containing the “then-now” arrangement at strategic points in the sequence, achieve the
effect of constantly pulling the speaking “I” into both the future and the past simultaneously—an
ambivalent motion that can be seen in the differentiation between the youthful and mature “I” in
“Sonnet 1.” However, though the speaker constantly refers to the past in the “then-now” lyrics,
he nonetheless fails to experience the full actuality of time’s passage as can be seen in “Sonnet
118”:

Now remains behind the sixteenth year of my sighs, and I move
toward the last; yet it seems to me that all this suffering
began only recently.

The bitter is sweet to me, and my losses useful, and living heavy;
and I pray that my life may outlast cruel fortune; and I fear that before then Death may close the lovely eyes that make me speak.

Now here I am, alas, and wish I were elsewhere, and wish I wished more, but wish no more, and, by being unable to do more, do all I can;

and new tears for old desires show me to be still what I used to be, not for a thousand turnings about have I yet moved. (226)

In the first stanza above, the speaker’s experience of calendrical time does not correspond to his subjective perception of that time’s passing: “Now remains behind the sixteenth year of my sighs [. . . ] / yet it seems to me that all this suffering / began only recently.” Though his “sighs” possess the duration of sixteen years, the speaking “I” perceives his sadness as lacking an extensive past that makes his “suffering” remain “recent.” “Seems,” however, makes the speaker’s perception of time ambiguous, and the remainder of “Sonnet 118” indicates that the speaker is equally torn between the past of his innamoremento and the future where Laura’s and his own death await. The structure of “Sonnet 118,” moving from an unremembered past to a future colored with death, “I fear / That before then Death may close the lovely eyes that make me / speak,” ends with the speaker’s meditation on the present:

by being unable to do

more, do all I can;
and new tears for old desires show me to be still what I used to
be, nor for a thousand turnings about have I yet moved.

The speaker’s reflection on the present evokes a powerful sense of stasis contrary to the fictional
process established by the poem’s “then-now” construction as well as the speaker’s invoked
innamoremento and future death that form the beginning and end-point of Petrarch’s narrative.

By remembering the innamoremento of falling in love with Laura and making it present through
a misprision of perception, Petrarch’s speaker in “Sonnet 118” desires the stasis he believes he
has created: “new tears for old desires show me to be still what I used to / be, nor for a thousand
turnings about have I yet moved.” The speaker “[does] all [he] can,” but he fails “to do more” in
terms of the emotional progress inherent in the “experience” of his love. The speaker’s failure
serves as a strategy employed to delay the progression of time which, in “Sonnet 118,” evokes
“the telos of Laura’s death” in the lines, “I pray that my life may outlast my cruel fortune; and I
fear / that before then Death may close the lovely eyes that make me / speak” (Greene 55).

Greene identifies “Sonnet 118” as the first moment in the Canzoniere where Laura’s death is
overtly mentioned, and her death, closely associated with the speaker’s fears of his own
mortality, produces the boundary that allows the telos of narrative in the Rime sparse to operate.

It is this teleological movement from a remembered love to the anticipation of Laura’s
(and the narrator’s) death that generates the conflict between time’s continual, forward motion
indicated by the poems containing the “then-now” arrangement and the poems representing
lyrical digressions. By constantly referencing the innamoremento while anticipating Laura’s
death, the language of Petrarch’s sequence constantly looks to the past as well as to the future,
and the overwhelming sense of inevitability produced by the tension between the celebrated past
and the dreaded future has the effect of creating narrative unity in the Rime sparse out of a
seeming lyrical discontinuity. “Sonnet 1,” epitomizing the simultaneous anterior and posterior vision of the *Canzoniere*, then, comes to occupy not only the place where narrative unity begins, but also where teleological inevitability ends.

Berryman’s interaction with the Petrarchan tradition began in the spring of 1947 as a result of having an extra-marital affair with a woman named Lise, a married friend who lived near the Berrymans in Princeton, New Jersey (Haffendon *Life of John Berryman* 167). Caught between nervous exaltation over his illicit affair and a deep sense of shame for betraying his wife, Eileen, Berryman began writing what would become *Sonnets to Chris*, and by the 27th of May, Berryman “began to see [the sonnets] as a sequence, running in tandem with what he otherwise felt to be the ultimate passion and squalid deception of the real affair” (Haffendon 175). The sonnets, published twenty years later under the title *Berryman’s Sonnets*, lay the fundamental methodological foundations for Berryman’s composition of sequences through the subsequent *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*.

Berryman’s choice to participate in the Petrarchan tradition reflects his desire to render what he conceives of as radical content within the stable form of the sonnet sequence, a choice reflected by Berryman’s notation in his journal on the 26th of July, 1947:

> Why did I attempt that exhausted and contemptible art-form the Sonnet Sequence anyway? Partly events seduced me, so that I was in the thick of it, with a dozen sonnets, before (I think) I much reflected. But partly I had several things in mind. I wanted *one form* . . . in order to record (form, master) what happened. Well, but not an invented form—I wanted a *familiar* form in which to put the *new*. Clearly
a sonnet sequence. And this gives me also a wonderful to me sense of continuity
with lovers dead.7

By his own admission, Berryman’s decision to utilize the sonnet sequence as a “familiar form” in
which to enunciate the “new” engages him directly with the Petrarchan tradition extending back
to the Rime sparse. This “continuity with lovers dead,” expresses itself in Sonnets to Chris as
well as in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs in terms of an often subversive
elaboration of Petrarchan themes and devices, but Berryman demonstrates his rebellion against
Petrarch’s text mainly through the means by which he attempts to generate narrative unity.

Berryman consciously recognizes the debt Sonnets to Chris owes to Petrarch, but
Berryman also carefully distinguishes his own sequence from Petrarch’s text. “Sonnet 75”
illustrates the tension between Petrarch’s poetic achievement and Berryman’s demand that his
own sequence be “new”:

Swarthy when young; who took the tonsure; sign,
His coronation, wrangled, his name re-said
For euphony; off to courts fluttered, and fled;
Professorships refused; upon one line
Worked years; and then that genial concubine.
Seventy springs he read, and wrote, and read.
On the day of the year his people found him dead
I read his story. Anew I studied mine.

Also there was Laura and three-seventeen
Sonnets to something like her . . twenty-one years . .

15
He never touched her. Swirl our crimes and crimes.

Gold-haired (too), dark-eyed, ignorant of rimes

Was she? Virtuous? The old brume seldom clears.

—Two guilty and crepe-yellow months

Chris! Be our surviving actual scene. (1-15)§

The opening octet of the above sonnet describes a basic biography of Francesco Petrarca, but Berryman's speaker in line 8 suggests that he represents a sort of Petrarch by virtue of engaging in an adulterous affair with Chris. The remaining seven lines of the poem, however, compare the speaker's and Chris's situation with Petrarch's and Laura's. Chris is contrasted starkly to the figure of Petrach's Laura, "Gold-haired (too)," creating a gulf between what Berryman's speaker constructs as Chris's actuality and Laura's potential. Here, Petrarch's sonnets are addressed not necessarily to Laura but to "something like her," and Laura's figure is abstracted further through the questioning of her character, "ignorant of rimes / Was she? Virtuous?" Laura, like Chris, may also know nothing about poetry or the process of composition, but the question, "Virtuous?" raises the speculation that Petrarch and Laura may have actually consummated their relationship, making them more similar to Berryman's speaker and Chris. However, the sudden termination of the twelfth line isolates the question "Was she?" casting Laura's existence into doubt, a doubt that is further reinforced by the temporal distance separating Petrarch and Berryman across literary history suggested by "The old brume [that] seldom clears." Petrarch and Laura's relationship is shrouded in a fog ("brume") of obscurity perhaps created by the immense historical distance separating the events of the fourteenth-century from the speaker's twentieth-century reality but which might also be made obscure by the force of Petrarch's canonization and influence on Western poetics. The only evidence available to the speaker, however, remains the
text of the *Rime sparse* in which Petrarch and Laura’s relationship is left unconsummated for “twenty-one years . . . [during which] He never touched her.” The actual, biographical details of that relationship escape the speaker, and Petrarch and Laura come to represent an abstracted coupling taking place in an ethereal time that is strongly contrasted by the concrete “Two guilty and crepe-yellow months” of the speaker and Chris.

The conclusion of “Sonnet 75” demonstrates Berryman’s privileging of personality as a means to create narrative unity in *Sonnets to Chris*. The “twenty-one years” of Petrarch’s unconsummated and abstracted relationship with the ambiguous Laura are narrowed myopically into the “two months” that serve as the “actual scene” of the speaker’s relationship with Chris. Though the speaker possesses guilt stemming from the “crimes and crimes” of infidelity, he desires the lack of ambiguity and obscurity that conceals the reality Petrarch’s love. If Laura, whose physical existence is questionable, remains nothing but impenetrable fog, then the speaker thoroughly prefers Chris, a concrete stage upon which the “scene” of both presence and reality is expressed.

Despite the speaker’s desire to create a sharp contrast between the concrete reality of his affair with Chris and the obscure relationship that binds Petrarch and Laura, the basis for the comparison between the two remains the pairing of the poet who writes with his beloved who, in both Petrarch’s sequence and others of the Renaissance, is dehumanized by the poet’s writing. Relatively early in the *Rime sparse*, Petrarch’s speaker transforms Laura into an object of poetic inspiration; Laura essentially becomes a textual feature that allows the poet to write:

> Because time is short, my pen cannot follow closely my good will; wherefore I pass over many things written in my mind and speak only of some, which make those who hear them marvel.
Nor by being silent could I
draw it from her hand or give any aid to my afflicted powers.

Words spoken aloud were forbidden me; so I cried out with
paper and ink: "I am not my own, no; if I die, yours is the loss."

("Canzone 23" 64.64-70)

Though the speaker is confined by “time” (again an enunciation of the constant pressure of the sequence’s teleological development) which prevents the faithful rendering of his “will,” the speaker cannot remain “silent” in the face of his overwhelming emotion; as the speaker must enunciate his emotion, the only avenue of expression left available to give voice to his “cries” is “paper and ink.” The speaker’s “paper and ink” remains the only space where the figure of Laura can be manifested, and she exists only within the lyrics of the *Rime sparse*. As the speaker of Berryman’s *Sonnets* views the love shared between Petrarch and Laura as highly ambiguous due to the “brume that seldom clears,” he dehumanizes Chris in only a slightly more explicit way than Petrarch does Laura above. Chris, in “Sonnet 75,” becomes the “scene” of the speaker’s love; she is the stage where the “actual” affair takes place free from the ambiguities plaguing the historical Petrarch and Laura.

“Sonnet 75” typifies the central narrative difference between *Sonnets to Chris* and Petrarch’s *Rime sparse*. Considering that Berryman’s sequence depends on the onset of the speaker’s affair with Chris as well as the deterioration and failure of that affair as beginning and end-points of the sequence, Berryman relies solely on the unfolding of biographical detail and personality instead of a “then-now” construction to give *Sonnets to Chris* its narrative unity. Though Berryman’s sequence obviously owes a debt to the *Rime sparse* in terms of the speaker’s treatment of his beloved as well as Berryman’s depiction of Chris and the topical content of
“Sonnet 75,” *Sonnets to Chris* bears a stronger connection to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* which is suggested by the first sonnet of Berryman’s sequence:

I wished, all the mild days of middle March
This special year, your blond good-natured might
(Lady) admit—kicking abruptly tight
With will and affection down your breast like starch—
Me to your story, in Spring, and stretch, and arch.
But who not flanks the wells of uncanny light
Sudden in bright sand towering? A bone sunned white.
Considering travellers bypass these and parch.

This came to less yes than an ice cream cone
Let stand . . though still my sense of it brisk:
Blond silky cream, sweet cold, aches: a door shut.
Errors of order! Luck lies with the bone,
Who rushed (and rests) to meet your small mouth, risk
Your teeth irregular and passionate. (1-14)

This first sonnet of the sequence contains many of the elements associated with Petrarchism as it is inherited through Shakespeare. The temporal is presented through the invocation of “March” and “Spring” with the coldness and isolation of winter poised against the potential manifestation of the speaker’s erotic desire in the warmth of spring. The seasonal symbolism of “Sonnet 1” anticipates Shakespeare’s use of summer in “Sonnet 18”:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date. (1-4)

Whereas Shakespeare is concerned with the themes of eternal beauty resisting the inevitability of death in “Sonnet 18,” Berryman shies away from such lofty, Petrarchan themes and focuses almost solely on the deliciously erotic possibilities of a sexual affair with Chris. In Berryman’s poem, spring is not the season in which Chris’s aesthetic appeal reaches full bloom, nor is “Sonnet 1” an attempt to make permanent a fading moment of powerful beauty resembling the sequence of lyrics in Shakespeare devoted to the “Young Man”; spring becomes only the season during which the speaker hopes to achieve sexual satisfaction. The notorious Shakespearean pun, “will,” is used to highlight the speaker’s blunted hopes of copulation as his “Lady [...] kicks] abruptly tight / With will and affection down your breast like starch” (3-4). The speaker’s premature ejaculation of the “will” in the first quatrain is linked to the speaker’s erection (“bone”) in the second, and the sestet concludes with the act of fellatio as the only viable alternative to copulation: “Luck lies with the bone, / Who rushed (and rests) to meet your small mouth, risk / Your teeth irregular and passionate” (12-14). The obvious sexual allusion here is complicated by the speaker’s “bone” that represents the phallus as well as death (eros / thanatos) and Chris’s “teeth irregular and passionate.” Chris’s “teeth” are both arousing and dangerous and appeal to the speaker’s sexual desire as well as his eroticized conception of death.

The “irregularity” of Chris’s “teeth,” too, is loosely connected to the irregular structure of Berryman’s sonnets that break with the sonnet forms used by Petrarch and Shakespeare, but Berryman’s structural innovations do not exempt him from acknowledging the Petrarchan tradition in “Sonnet 1.” Apart from the seasonal symbolism above, Berryman’s “Sonnet 1”
makes at least three distinct references to Shakespeare’s and Petrarch’s respective sequences. The first reference occurs in Berryman’s speaker’s description of Chris as a “Lady,” as “Blond,” and associated with “bright.” “Sonnet 1” and “Sonnet 75” (among others) make the connection between Chris and Laura in that both are blondes, but, as Runchman identifies, Chris, who is often associated with “white or bright things,” comes to represent “a snub to Shakespeare’s ‘Dark Lady’ and a refutation of the Renaissance association of fairness with purity” (36). From “Sonnet 1” on, then, Chris represents a dual parody on both Petrarch’s Laura and Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady.” Berryman’s explicit depiction of the speaker’s sexual desire and graphic act stands in stark contrast to Petrarch who ambiguously veils sexual desire for Laura as in “Poem 237”:

that she who before vespers gives me evening
with the moon and with Love to that shore
might come alone to stay there one night,
and that the day might stay, and the sun, forever under the waves! (396.33-6)

Berryman’s “Sonnet 1” is closer to the lyrics comprising Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” cycle in terms of Chris’s physical imperfection (her teeth are “irregular”) and explicit sexuality. “Sonnet 1” references Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130” which undercuts the idealization of the beloved woman found in Petrarch, and Berryman’s poem also references “Sonnet 136” in which Shakespeare doubly and triply employs the word “will” to illustrate the speaker’s desire for sexual satisfaction: “Will will fulfil (sic) the treasure of thy love, / Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one” (5-6). Just as Shakespeare undercuts Petrarch by choosing to celebrate a man while characterizing the woman of the sequence in deeply unflattering terms, Berryman undercuts both
Shakespeare and Petrarch through celebrating a graphically sexualized affair with a “blond,” “bright,” and fair woman.

A definite line of development can be drawn connecting Petrarch through Shakespeare to Berryman in terms of diminishing concerns for thematic elevation, but this line of connection also includes a diminishing concentration on the passage of time. As has already been mentioned, Petrarch’s sequence is united by temporality, and the simulated passage of time found in the “then-now” construction provides the Rime sparse with telos. Shakespeare, however, expresses great concern over the passage of time in the cycle of sonnets devoted to the “Young Man,” but Shakespeare abandons this concern after “Sonnet 126” as the “Dark Lady” comes to dominate the remaining twenty-eight lyrics of the sequence. The “then-now” structural motif that supplies the narrative progression of the Rime sparse does not appear in such an overt manner in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and is almost absent from Berryman’s Sonnets to Chris; neither Berryman’s nor Shakespeare’s sequences contain a distinct teleological movement as both rely on the biographical circumstances of their respective characters to advance the plot.

Berryman’s refusal to elevate the speaker’s beloved also characterizes his revolt against his Renaissance precursors, and this can be seen best in his depiction of Chris. In “Sonnet 1” Chris is depicted as a “breast” and “mouth,” only as a body into which the speaker hopes to find sexual fulfillment, and in “Sonnet 75” she becomes the “scene” or stage upon which the reality of the speaker’s affair can be contrasted to the obscured lovers of the Petrarchan tradition. But toward the end of the sequence, in “Sonnet 114,” Berryman’s speaker enunciates clearly that Chris has been entirely dehumanized while reiterating that, since “Sonnet 1,” Chris represents only a feature of the poetry the speaker writes:

You come blonde visiting through the black air
Knocking on my hinged lawn-level window
And you will come for years, above, below,
& through to interrupt my study where
I’m sweating it out like asterisks: so there,—
You are the text, my work’s broken down so (1-6)\textsuperscript{12}

The remnants of temporality inherited from Petrarch persist as the backdrop against which Chris shall perpetually “interrupt” the speaker, but the Petrarchan anxiety over time’s passing is absent. Time functions only as a point of irritation, that “you will come for years” in an inexhaustible cycle of “interruption.” Whereas the speaker views Chris as a “story, in Spring” in “Sonnet 1,” she has become the labored “text” over which the speaker “[sweats] it out like asterisks.” Like the Laura of Petrarch’s sequence and the “Young Man” and “Dark Lady” of Shakespeare’s, Chris remains textualized at the conclusion of Berryman’s cycle, and, also similar to Shakespeare’s depiction of the objects of his speaker’s affections, Chris deteriorates into a collection of language which strains the speaker and causes his “work [to break] down so.”

Despite the motion of deterioration in Sonnets to Chris which opposes itself to the spiritual elevation found in the Rime sparse, the strategy of relying on the details of developing personality Berryman borrows from Shakespeare informs the narrative unity of both Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs.

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, begun the same year as Sonnets to Chris but not finished until 1953,\textsuperscript{13} covers the familiar Petrarchan terrain of the lover addressing his beloved, but the temporal element of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet is complicated by the more than three centuries separating Berryman’s speaker and Bradstreet herself. Whereas the time’s motion is treated in terms of a (semi)autobiographical progression, Berryman’s actual affair with Lise, and
dominates the narrative of *Sonnets to Chris*, time asserts itself in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* both in terms of Bradstreet’s and the speaker’s personalities as well as on the meta-textual level; the entire sequence stands as a statement on history and the presence of the poetic self. In explaining his subject matter in the essay “One Answer to a Question: Changes,” Berryman identifies history and literary culture as his principal concerns:

As for the subject: the question most put to me about the poem [*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*] is why I chose to write about this boring high-minded Puritan woman who may have been our first American poet but is not a good one. I agree, naturally, and say that I did not choose her—somehow she chose me—one point of connection, at any rate, being the almost insuperable difficulty of writing high verse at all in a land that cared and cares so little for it. (328)

By generating an amorous dialogue with Anne Bradstreet with whom Berryman identifies a shared sense of poetic rebellion, Berryman collapses the historical distance separating Bradstreet’s position in American poetry in the mid-seventeenth century with his own in the middle of the twentieth. Berryman’s manipulation of the traditional Petrarchan lover enables him to position the “poet” of the *Bradstreet* sequence as a figure conspiring with Anne Bradstreet in cultural rebellion. The historical Bradstreet, writing in Puritanical, colonial America, comes to represent the prototypical poet-in-rebellion to Berryman through Bradstreet’s “dissatisfaction with her marriage, her resistance to dogma, her close friendship with the antinomian Anne Hutchinson” in addition to her status as a woman doubter and poet within the male-dominated Puritan society that was “inimical to poetry” (Golding 60-1). And it is Berryman’s affinity for Bradstreet as an historical figure that leads to one of the significant features of *Homage*: the total conflation of the sequence’s “poet” with the Bradstreet’s character.
The function of the “I” throughout the stanzas of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* represents another dimension of Berryman’s borrowing from Petrarchism, and the “I” in *Bradstreet* sets the sequence apart from Berryman’s earlier *Sonnets to Chris*. In the latter sequence, Berryman consciously separates Chris (Lise) from his “I” figure in keeping with the (semi)autobiographical nature of the sequence, but in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, the “I” ambiguously oscillates between the “I” of the poet-figure and the “I” of Anne Bradstreet to the point where the two are inseparable:

—Ravishing, ha, what crouches outside ought,
flamboyant, ill, angelic. Often, now,
I am afraid of you.
I am sobersides; I know.
I want to take you for my lover. —Do.
—I hear a madness. Harmless I to you
am not, not I? —No.
—I cannot but be. Sing a concord of our thought. (32.1-8)\(^4\)

These lines fix upon the persistence of the speaker’s identity, “I cannot but be,” but that identity serves to ambiguously encompass the contemporary poet-figure as well as Anne Bradstreet through the back and forth of their dialogue of seduction. The fear of the third line provides the hesitation implicit in the subjunctive “want” of the fifth line, but the acceptance of one “I’s” desire is subsumed by the other “I’s” acknowledgement of “madness”: “I want to take you for my love. —Do. / —I hear a madness.” This “madness” is similar to the mad “ravings” of Petrarch’s speaker where “shame [becomes] the fruit, and repentance, and the / clear knowledge that whatever pleases in the world is a brief / dream” (9-11).\(^5\) But the “madness” of love here
also doubles for the “madness” suggested in the cultural rebellion in which Berryman’s poet and Bradstreet engage. That the two characters recognize the “madness” but persist to “Sing a concord of our thought” establishes the polemical intent of the sequence that shows Berryman, like Bradstreet before him, firmly rooted in “the role of the cultural outsider” (Golding 63).

The blurring of the poet-figure with Bradstreet in the above lines, “Harmless I to you / am not, not I,” represents the total conflation of the subject-object distinction in the sequence. The importance of Bradstreet, inter-changeable with the poet, is that through the conscious blending of subject and object seen in the multiplicity of the “I”s, Bradstreet appears less a character than a mask; Berryman transform the historical Anne Bradstreet into a symbolic persona the poet creates to then conflate into his own figure. Petrarch, too, engages in the conflation of subject and object in the *Rime sparse* so that the fictive poet of the sequence can achieve a state of transcendence by being “the one transformed” as well as the force of transformation:

This pointing to the poet’s agency demonstrates that, despite the powerlessness suggested by the [Ovidian] metamorphoses, the poet transcends the very transformations he has evoked, playing both parts in the drama of metamorphosis through his self-referentiality and through shifts in subject and object relations within the poem. (Moore 47)

But just as the fictive poet transforms Laura into an extension of himself, Laura, too, possesses the power to transform the writing poet into an object of her gaze (Moore 47-8). Bradstreet, however, is not the Laura of Petrarch’s poems, the symbol of an almost religious absolute with which the poet demands communion and whose gaze transforms the poet into an object; instead,
Bradstreet becomes the mask of the arch-poet of rebellion, the symbol of an entire generation of poets writing under the constraints of a society that “cares so little” for verse:

Berryman mythologizes Bradstreet, turning her into a figure in the psychic melodrama of his whole “tragic” generation, the generation also of Jarrell, Schwartz, and Lowell. We have, then, a case of one poet canonizing not another’s actual work, but her poetic stance, in his poetry. (Golding 68)

Berryman’s canonization of Bradstreet, not as an actual figure but as an aesthetic attitude communicated through her role as a poetic mask, represents a logical progression in Berryman’s use of Petrarchism from the earlier textualization of Chris as well as the dependency on biographical details to fuel narrative unity and progression. Whereas Chris literally becomes the text Berryman’s speaker writes, all distinctions separating Bradstreet from the writing poet-figure are stripped away leaving no barriers among the poet, the object of his love, and the medium of his expression. Bradstreet, like Chris, takes part in the amorous communion that is central to the sequences of the Petrarchan tradition, but as Chris deteriorates from a body with a “story” into the text as a whole, Bradstreet is resurrected only to be subsumed by the poet-figure leaving the historical Bradstreet’s life and work as an extension of Berryman’s fictional poet who writes.

Berryman’s conscientious conflation of the poet’s figure with Bradstreet’s, however, is highly significant in context of the European and American poetic tradition. Though Berryman could “hardly be described as a marginal poet in critical and institutional terms after the first ten years of his career,” his contradictory rebellion against Eliot and the then contemporary trends in English and American poetry is satisfied by the composition of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet.
As Golding observes, Berryman’s use of Anne Bradstreet as an historical figure represents Berryman’s own ambivalent revolt:

[Berryman] finds in her a female precursor who enables him to sidestep issues of literary paternity, specifically his relationship with Eliot. [...] Berryman’s response to Bradstreet, however, is not aesthetic. He does not incorporate her work into his own through the metalepsis or transumption that Bloom sees as the defining trope shaping poetic traditions; and he writes in full awareness of the institutional factors affecting his own canonical status. (68)

Berryman’s self-conscious use of Bradstreet solely as a figure into which he blends his own personality enables him to assume an antithetical posture in American poetics that challenges Eliot’s poetic stance of impersonality. However, by countering Eliot as Golding argues, Berryman places himself “into the most established narrative in American literary history, that of the major writer in conflict with his or her culture” (69). Through the development of sequential texts possessing the unity of personality, Berryman’s rebellion becomes, ironically, one of careful positioning within the American and European poetic canon. Though Eliot’s theory of impersonality held a great deal of cultural currency in the mid twentieth-century, Berryman’s revolt against that theory places him in an already established polemic. And the tool Berryman chooses to communicate his rebellion against Eliot is the concept of the narrative:

Narrative! Let’s have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT The Waste Land, the best long poem of the age. So maybe the hostility keeps on going.¹⁶

The sense of narrative Berryman receives from Shakespeare and, ultimately, from Petrarch that is upheld most faithfully in Sonnets to Chris and transformed in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,
satisfies Berryman’s desire to oppose the “impersonality” of The Waste Land, and the narrative strategies received not only from the Renaissance but from his earlier work form the basis for the innovations in the Petrarchan tradition found in The Dream Songs.

Berryman transforms Petrarchism into a weapon against poetic culture in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, and Bradstreet as this weapon in the form of a mask prefigures the dominant personality of The Dream Songs, Henry. Berryman’s intent for both sequences is made clear in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award he received for His Toy, His Dream, His Rest in 1969:

I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on The Waste Land: personality, and plot—no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner. [Likewise] I set up The Dream Songs as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry [. . .]. The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined, in one case feminine, in the other masculine. (Haffendon 352)

As in Sonnets to Chris and Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, Berryman organizes the narrative development of The Dream Songs around the personalities of its characters, and “Song 1” introduces Berryman’s narrative strategy of creating unity through personality while simultaneously invoking the structure of Petrarch’s “Sonnet 1”:

Huffy Henry hid the day,
unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point,—a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
they could do it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry’s side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don’t see how Hemy, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is long
wonder the world can bear & be.
Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed. (1-18)

Henry’s introduction gains much of its conflict from the complex of temporality that has caught Henry in a “sulking” state; Henry, aware of his present position, bewails the passage of time that has made him “wicked & away.” The above lines, designed to prepare the reader for the lyrical “Songs” that are to follow, contain three distinct, competing temporal frames. The first of these, presenting Henry in an unspecified past, inaugurates the action of the Songs by providing insight in Henry’s state: “Huffy Henry hid the day, / unappeasable Henry sulked.” These lines, written in the simple past and thus slightly deferred, fail to provide a sense of immediacy while simultaneously suggesting a finished state; Henry, “unappeasable [...] sulked” as a result
of some unknown loss occurring long in the past. The simple past of Henry’s state is juxtaposed to the simple present of the “I” who “[sees Henry’s] point.” And the third stanza beginning with the lines, “What he has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be,” initiates the future narrative of the poem. Like Petrarch’s proem that functions in an anterior and posterior capacity in relation to the remainder of the *Rime sparse* through its unification of past, present, and future, Berryman’s proem deploys the same interplay of time showing Henry as simultaneously past, present, and future through the presence of the speaking “I.” The “I” in “Song 1” is quite similar to the “You” of Petrarch’s “Sonnet 1” in that just as the “You” must judge the “sighs” and “ravings” of the following poems of the *Rime sparse*, so the “I” of Berryman’s poem who understands that Henry is “pried / open for all the world to see” listens to what Henry “has now to say.”

The temporal references associated with Henry (past, future) and the “I” (the present) in “Song 1” also reference the Petrarchan separation from the beloved. As the “I” relates, at one point “All the world like a woolen lover / once did seem on Henry’s side,” but then there was a “departure” after which “nothing fell out as it might or ought.” Henry’s “departure” from his “lover,” while never explicitly described in *The Dream Songs*, nonetheless represents the source of his present isolation and “sulking;”; as in Petrarch’s text where the speaker never achieves physical union with Laura or Shakespeare’s where constant infidelity mars the speaker’s relationship with both the “Young Man” and the “Dark Lady,” Berryman’s Henry becomes the dejected lover of the Petrarchan tradition. However, *The Dream Songs* breaks with tradition through the personification of the world as the unfeeling beloved, the “woolen lover” who has left Henry, throwing his life out of joint, “[prying him] / open” for that “world to see.” Henry’s “lover” is described here as being “woolen” which simultaneously suggests that the lover is
warm and yet uncomfortable at times, a surprisingly compact yet accurate personification of the “world” that, for some unknown reason, has rejected Henry. But what is equally significant is that Henry’s suffering due to the “world’s” rejection has “pried / [Henry] open for all the world to see.” This “[prying] open” is precisely what “Song 1” accomplishes as a proem; it “opens” Henry’s character not only to the observance of the present-speaking “I” but also to the reader of the sequence, and Henry, who has “survived” the “departure,” now emerges into the present tense announcing the inauguration of the future utterances to follow: “What he has now to say is a long / wonder.” The “wonder” attached to the promise of future enunciation is addressed, like Laura in the Rime sparse, to the “world” that has been his “lover” as well as the source of his incommunicable “loss” that functions throughout The Dream Songs like Petrarch’s innamoremento.

The third stanza of “Song 1” continues the temporal dimension of the poem but significantly includes the speaking “I” into time’s oscillation. Following the enunciation that Henry’s “Songs” are to be directed to his “lover” the “world,” the speaking “I” inserts himself but not in the simple present through which he speaks earlier in the poem. Here, the “I” relates an episode in the simple past tense: “Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang.” Though these lines communicate a simple moment of triumph remembered, a moment when the “I” is literally “all at the top” and glad enough that he “sang,” this remembered, past glory in context of Henry’s present-tense state as “Huffy” and “away” indicates that the “I” of “Song 1,” too, has suffered some nonspecific loss. The glory of being “all at the top” of the “sycamore” is contrasted violently with the image of the waves tearing apart the land, “Hard on the land wears the strong sea,” as well as the universal isolation implied in the line, “and empty grows every bed.” Henry’s loss found in the first and second stanzas connects to the becomes universal by
the conclusion of “Song 1,” and, by juxtaposing the remembered “gladness” of the “I” with the violence of the “sea” and the isolation of “empty beds,” the language of “Song 1” implies a degree of conflation between Henry and the speaking “I.”

Just as in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman consciously blends Henry and “I” of *The Dream Songs* enabling Henry simultaneously to depict himself as well as to be viewed objectively through the projected “I.” The “I” Berryman employs throughout *The Dream Songs* remains highly ambiguous. Not only does the “I” speak for himself as in “Song 1” in offering commentary on Henry’s state (“I see [Henry’s] point,—a trying to put things over”), but the “I” just as often is Henry, speaking from Henry’s perspective as in the first stanza of “Song 312”:

I have moved to Dublin to have it out with you,

majestic Shade, You whom I read so well

so many years ago,

did I read the lesson right? did I see through

your phases to the real? your heaven, your hell

did I enquire properly into? (1-6)

“Song 312” represents another aspect of Berryman’s complex strategy of creating narrative unity through personality. “Song 312” is part of the cycle of “Songs” Berryman composed in Ireland,19 and “Song 312” reflects Berryman’s semi-autobiographical insertion into the text. Just as Berryman has travelled to Ireland in reality, so Henry travels to Ireland in *The Dream Songs* in search of Yeats to whom the “I” directs questions of validation. The “I” here does not speak on behalf of an objectified, ambiguous figure as in “Song 1,” but rather the “I” speaks for Henry and, to a degree, for Berryman himself. This dynamic borrowed from *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and, ultimately, from the *Rime* sparse, blurs the distinctions between the speaking “I”
and Henry, but Berryman’s use of the “I” in *The Dream Songs* ambiguously extends to cover the third major character, the unnamed who is distinguished only by the minstrel dialect in which he speaks and his insistence upon referring to Henry as “Mr Bones.” Henry as “Mr Bones” and the unnamed speaker will be treated later, but what is significant is the triple oscillation Berryman employs in the “Songs.” As in *Sonnets to Chris* and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman relies on personality to further the narrative of *The Dream Songs*, but there is no clear distinction made among the various personalities the text contains.

Though Berryman employs a similar narrative strategy in *The Dream Songs* as he does in his earlier sequences, one notable difference is the lack of fully developed female characters in the “Songs.” Women do appear in *The Dream Songs*, but, unlike Anne Bradstreet, the women of *The Dream Songs* are entirely interchangeable and objectified just as the “blonde” is in the Petrarchan sequences of the Renaissance. “Song 242” is representative of the anonymity of female figures in the “Songs” and provides an example of the complex blending of characters in Berryman’s narrative:

> About that ‘me.’ After a lecture once
came up a lady asking to see me. ‘Of course.
When would you like to?’
Well, *now*, she said. ‘Yes, but I have a lunch-
con—’ Then I saw her and shifted with remorse
and said ‘Well; come on over.’

> So we crossed to my office together and I sat her down
and asked, as she sat silent, ‘What is it, miss?’
‘Would you close the door?’

Now Henry was perplexed. We don’t close doors with students; it’s just a principle. But this lady looked beyond frown.

So I rose from the desk & closed it and turning back

found her in tears—apologizing—‘No, go right ahead,’ I assured her, ‘here’s a handkerchief. Cry.’ She did, I did. When she got control, I said ‘What’s the matter—if you want to talk?’

‘Nothing. Nothing’s the matter.’ So.

I am her. (1-18)

The dialogue above, unique in Henry’s relative refusal to seduce the “lady,” carries in its third stanza the conflation of personality that is apparent throughout The Dream Songs. In keeping with the Petrarchan tradition, the speaker refers to the woman as “lady,” but beyond her gender, her status as a “student,” and her state of distress, little else is known. The “lady” does not function to provide Henry with an opportunity to adore her or celebrate her existence, but, rather, the brief hint of sexuality involved in the “closing” of Henry’s office door runs contrary to Henry’s “principles.” If the ambiguous speaker of the “Songs” is to be believed elsewhere, Henry acting from a sense of moral principle when confronted with the possibility of seduction represents a rare occurrence in context of Henry’s personality, and his decision not to “spring” on his student indicates that her function must be something other than sexual temptation. The “lady” in “Song 242” instead comes merely to provide Henry with yet another opportunity to
talk about himself. The “lady” doesn’t wish to discuss her distress, the ostensible reason for convincing Henry to ignore his “luncheon,” but she only cries and states that “’Nothing’s the matter.’” The “lady” stops herself short of revealing the source of her problems, and as she cries, her actions provide Henry with a sense of empathy: “’here’s a handkerchief. Cry.’ She did, I did.” The “lady” in “Song 242” exists only to illuminate an aspect of the Henry-“I” figure as the first line of the poem suggests; it is a poem “About that ‘me’” as Henry’s conflation with the woman in the final stanza makes explicit. “She” cries; Henry cries, and her refusal to explain her state leads the Henry-“I” figure to remark, “I am her.” The empathy here bears echoes with *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* though in that text the poet-figure’s empathy and blending with Anne Bradstreet achieves an absolute state. In “Song 242” the speaker blends with the “lady” only to appropriate her emotion as his own in order paradoxically to communicate the incommunicability of his own loss and distress. The woman here, undergoing conflation through the bold, Whitman-like statement, “I am her,” is necessary only in the emotional parallel she enables the speaker to realize; she cannot function as a possible subject.

Henry’s high degree of self-involvement, while representing a significant aspect of the Petrarchan tradition from the *Rime sparse* to Shakespeare, breaks with Petrarchism in that Henry, while in contact with other figures, retains a position of utter isolation. Petrarch utilizes the figure of Laura as his inspiration, and the fate of Laura is intertwined thoroughly with that of the speaker enabling telos to provide narrative unity to the *Rime sparse*. Similarly, Shakespeare stakes the fate of his speaker on the success and failure of his affairs, and where there is considerably less teleological development in the *Sonnets*, the speaker retains the hope of finding success by loving another. Such is the case in both *Sonnets to Chris* and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* where Berryman’s speaker interacts extensively with a character outside himself, but
in *The Dream Songs* the speaker can find no personality outside of himself\(^1\) to which he can attach his fate. Henry’s fate is determined by Henry alone, and, as the last\(^2\) of the “Songs” demonstrates, telos in *The Dream Songs* remains highly ambiguous:

My daughter’s heavier. Light leaves are flying.

Everywhere in enormous numbers turkeys will be dying and other birds, all their wings.

They never greatly flew. Did they wish to?

I should know. Off away somewhere once I knew such things.

Or good Ralph Hodgson back then did, or does.

The man is dead whom Eliot praised. My praise follows and flows too late.

Fall is grievy, brisk. Tears behind the eyes almost fall. Fall comes to us as a prize to rouse us toward our fate.

My house is made of wood and it’s made well, unlike us. My house is older than Henry; that’s fairly old.

If there were a middle ground between things and the soul or if the sky resembled more the sea, I wouldn’t have to scold
"Song 385" departs from Thanksgiving, a fixed point in time, in order again to distinguish personality ambiguously in the final moments of the sequence. Though rooted in a determined temporal space of autumn, the time when “enormous numbers of turkeys will be dying,” the poem seizes upon the pun upon the word “house” and the metaphor of the Henry’s “heavy daughter” in order to bring the sequence into focus. The speaker’s daughter who has grown “heavier” is contrasted to the “light leaves [. . .] flying,” and the “leaves,” like the pages of the “Songs” themselves, are attached to “wood” composing the speaker’s “house.” The function of the temporal here is to intone a sense of belatedness as in the allusion to Ralph Hodgson, the English pastoral poet, who perhaps knew the secret “wishes” of the “leaves” when alive. Ralph Hodgson, though, “is dead” and the “praise” he received from Eliot stands anterior to the speaker’s praise which “follows and flows too late.” “Fall” is used doubly moving from its temporal marker into the action of the “tears [. . .] almost” running down the speaker’s face, and it is in this multiple sense that “Fall comes to us as a prize / to rouse us toward our fate.” “Fall” precedes the death it suggests, but the use of the pronoun “us” complicates the notion of “fate” due to the lack of clear reference. The “us” narrowly refers to the speaking “I” and Henry who have dominated the progression of the sequence, but more widely the “us” of “Song 385” refers to the whole cast of The Dream Songs generally and possesses implications for the readers of the “Songs” as well.

The characters of the “Songs,” including the speaking “I,” must come to terms with their “fate,” and the third stanza indicates that Henry will follow Ralph Hodgson’s example before the speaker. As the speaker claims, his “house is made of wood and it’s made well, / unlike us”
implying that all who have been included in the “Songs” and subsumed by Henry and the speaking “I” are subject to a nonspecific deterioration associated with death. The speaker’s “house is older than Henry,” an admission that suggests that the “I” here functions similarly to the “I” in “Song 1” offering objective commentary on Henry’s condition. But the word “house” invoked by the speaking “I” suggests conflation with Henry as “house” is a play on Henry’s name.\(^{23}\) The final judgment of the speaker occurs in the concluding lines where “If there were a middle ground between things and the soul / or if the sky resembled more the sea” he “would not have to scold / [his] heavy daughter.” The use of the subjunctive in these lines indicates that despite what the speaker desires, the “world,” like “fate,” is unalterable and links itself to the final lines of “Song 1” where “Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed” (17-18). The loss from which Henry and the speaking “I” have suffered in “Song 1” remains present in “Song 385” leaving the teleological dimension of narrative development in \textit{The Dream Songs} lacking. Henry’s loss, the occurrence of which, like Petrarch’s \textit{innamoramento} against which the progression of the \textit{Rime sparse} measures time, remains ever-present in Berryman’s text as it does in Petrarch’s. And, like Petrarch’s anticipation of his own death and the death of Laura, Henry constantly awaits his own demise, “Will you die? / —My / friend, I succeeded. Later” (“Song 67” 17-9). From the beginning to the end of \textit{The Dream Songs}, Henry, the unnamed speaker, and the speaking “I” are trapped in Henry’s loss as well as their own suffering at the hands of the “world.” As the concluding “Song 385” suggests, death is all “fate” has left to give the characters of the sequence, but this ultimate end\(^{24}\) lies outside of the text. Berryman’s reliance on the personalities of his figures to communicate narrative unity and progression in \textit{The Dream Songs} as opposed to Petrarch’s structural innovation of carefully positioned lyrics containing a “then-now” arrangement leaves Berryman’s sequence much more
fragmented and temporally disoriented than the *Rime sparse*, but *The Dream Songs* owes its unfolding narrative, the story of Henry’s loss in the “world,” to the Petrarchan tradition of sequential lyrics.
II. Literary Figures: Henry's Other and the Modes of *The Dream Songs*

“LEAR Who is that can tell me who I am?
FOOL Lear's shadow.” (*King Lear* 1.4.221-2)

“—Some, now, Mr Bones,
many.—I am feeling double” (*The Dream Songs* 114.5-6)

In addressing what critics potentially could understand as a lack of unity in *The Dream Songs*, Berryman suggests that the whole poem can be organized in terms of the figure of Henry:

“[*The Dream Songs*] has no plot. Its plot is the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world.”¹ Berryman’s poem can be seen in terms of Henry’s development, but Henry is not the sole character of the narrative. The unnamed speaker, a constant presence in the “Songs,” appears suddenly to either parody Henry or to offer Henry companionship. However, due to the unnamed speaker’s minstrel dialect coloring his speech, the unnamed speaker as a character is similar to Auerbach’s observation of how Lucretius utilizes the term *figura*²:

> Here we see that only *figura* could serve for [the] play on model and copy; *forma* and *imago* are too solidly anchored in one or the other of the two meanings; *figura* is more concrete and dynamic than *forma*. [. . .] A special variant of the meaning “copy” occurs in Lucretius’ doctrine of the structures that peel off things like membranes and float around in the air, his Democritean doctrine of the “film images” (Diels), or *eidola*, which he takes in a materialistic sense. These he calls *simulacra*, *imaginæ*, *effigies*, and sometimes *figuræ*; and consequently it is in Lucretius that we first find the word employed in the sense of the “dream image,” “figment of fancy,” “ghost.” (16-7)
Lucretius's notion of the *figura* in the sense of a complicated interplay between the model and the thing itself connoting the "dream image," the "figment of fancy," and the "ghost" reflects Berryman's deployment of the plural, deeply unstable character of the unnamed speaker. The unnamed speaker appears and disappears in the "Songs" suddenly like a "ghost," and his presence is defined in terms of mimicked, "simulated" dialect that "copies" Henry's gloomy self-obsession while simultaneously parodying Henry's situation. The doubling and tripling of speaking subjects in Berryman's sequence, the oscillations among Henry, the unnamed speaker, and the multiple "I"s which stem from Henry's interaction with the unnamed speaker, generate an interwoven matrix of narration separable only by the competing speech genres of Henry and the unnamed speaker. Though the unnamed speaker exists as a "dream image" or a "ghost" in his fleeting appearances, making himself present as easily as he disappears from one "Song" to the next, the unnamed speaker's interactions with Henry, expressed as a competition between their distinctive speech genres, serves to illuminate the dominating narrative modes of *The Dream Songs*.

The oscillation of speaking subjects in the "Songs" produces a baroque narrative effect typified by the instances where the figures of Henry and the unnamed speaker encounter one another and compete through speech. In "Song 36," Henry and the unnamed speaker explicitly demonstrate through the rejoinder of dialogue Berryman's strategy of multi-voicedness:

The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there?

—Easy, easy, Mr Bones. I is on your side.

I smell your grief.

—I sent my grief away. I cannot care

forever. With them all again & again I died

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and cried, and I have to live.

Now there you exaggerate, Sah. We hafta die.

That is our 'pointed task. Love & die.

—Yes; that makes sense.

But what makes sense between, then? What if I roiling & babbling & braining, brood on why and just sat on the fence?

—I doubts you did or do. De choice is lost.

—It's fool’s gold. But I go in for that. (I-14)

“Song 36” is representative of a larger narrative strategy of dialogue between Henry and the unnamed speaker that Berryman deploys throughout the sequence of the “Songs.” The speaking subjects of “Song 36” are separated through the use of dashes but more importantly through an oscillation of voice. Berryman utilizes the dash to signify a change in speaking subject in many of the “Songs,” most often to denote the alternation between Henry and the unnamed speaker, but, as with most punctuation in The Dream Songs, exceptions abound. What remains constant, however, is Berryman’s use of competing voices. Henry, whose voice ranges from contemporary American vernacular as in “Song 36” to an inverted syntax reminiscent of English Renaissance verse, confronts the language of the unnamed speaker that mimics an African American dialect. The use of the word “De” as opposed to “the”—representing a phonological shift from the voiced /ð/ to the voiced /d/—indicates that the unnamed speaker communicates via African American English (Curzan 420). However, in the second line where the unnamed speaker attempts to calm Henry by stating, “Easy, easy Mr Bones. I is on your side,” where the
nonstandard conjugation of the verb “be” appears to maintain the unnamed speaker’s identification with African American English, the unnamed speaker’s language actually undermines his association as no such morphological feature exists in African American English (Curzan 421). The phonetic and morphological characteristics of the unnamed speaker’s language in conjunction with Henry’s vernacular American English suggests that in “Song 36” and elsewhere, the dialogue is conducted between Henry, Caucasian and educated, and a figure appearing in blackface for the purpose of gross mimicry like Lucretius’ definition of figura as “model” or “copy.”

The linguistic separation existing between Henry’s language and that of the unnamed speaker serves to differentiate the multiple “I”s of “Song 36.” The “I” of Henry, suffering severe existential anxiety over having “to live” while “[the] high ones die, die,” opposes itself to the “I” of the unnamed speaker, confident in the fact that “[we] hafta die.” Henry, over-sensitive in his empathy with the “high ones” like “William Faulkner” who have died (18), contemplates refusing participation in the life that causes him so much pain by allowing him to live: “What if I / roiling & babbling & braining, brood on why and / just sat on the fence?” Henry’s refusal to choose to live and accept the consequences of his empathy suggests an existential crisis similar to Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” where human beings deny the absolute freedom of choice that is the consequence of existence (Sartre 89). The unnamed speaker serves the function of convincing Henry that, paradoxically, the “choice” of acting in “bad faith” no longer is possible, “De choice is lost,” leaving Henry free to “Love & die.” “Bad faith” presupposes paradox; Sartre conceives of “bad faith” as both the denial and the exercise of free choice (89). The individual living in “bad faith” at once denies that he or she is anything but an object in the world and incapable of exercising choice, but living in “bad faith” is evidence that the freedom
to do so persists. The paradox of “bad faith” represents one of the principal difficulties of Sartre’s description of existential crisis, and Henry’s struggle with his own “bad faith” in “Song 36” (at least partially) is resolved by the unnamed speaker who convinces Henry that the decision not to choose cannot be made.

The counterpuntal arrangement of “Song 36” is representative of Henry’s interaction with the unnamed speaker throughout the “Songs” where Henry, often narrowly limited in his perspective of himself and the world that is the source of all his loss, confronts the unnamed speaker who, until “Song 67,” remains antagonistic to Henry and his vision. Berryman’s use of multiple “I”s representing Henry and the unnamed speaker is designed, as in “Song 36,” to develop and / or resolve problems of identity; the unnamed speaker, mimicking the minstrel, acts as a force of reason, and though he often antagonizes Henry, the presence of the unnamed speaker’s voice serves to clarify Henry’s figure.

The unnamed speaker opposing Henry can be interpreted several ways depending on the amount of autonomy granted to the former figure. The text of the “Songs” ambiguously suggests that the unnamed speaker forms an aspect of Henry. On the surface, “Song 36” appears in dialogue form inclining toward a treatment of Henry and the unnamed speaker as separate figures, and Berryman’s “Note” preceding the “Songs” reinforces this claim:

[The Dream Songs] then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof. (The Dream Songs vi)
However, there is a high degree of conflation between Henry and the unnamed speaker from “Song 2” onward. Lines from all three stanzas of “Song 2 (Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance)” not only demonstrate Henry’s plural personality, but the language employed consciously blurs the distinction between Henry and the unnamed speaker:

The jane is zoned! no nightspot here, no bar there, no sweet freeway, and no premises for business purposes, no loiterers or needers. Henry are baffled. [. . .]

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip but is he come? Le’s do a hoedown gal, one blue, one shuffle, if them is all you seem to réquire. Strip, ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on one chaste evenin.

—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well? (1-14)

Unlike “Song 36” where there is relatively abrupt differentiation between the speaking voices, “Song 2” does not make a clear distinction between the language of the voice speaking in the first and second stanzas with the voice of the third stanza. In the first stanza, the speaker employs modern American English in order to comment upon the deserted scene: “no bar / there,
no sweet freeway, and no premises / for business purposes.” But in the second stanza, the speaker adopts the minstrel voice, representing what Berryman identifies in his “Note” as Henry speaking in “blackface”: “Le’s do a hoedown gal.” However, also in the second stanza, the speaker’s choice to stress the first syllable in “réquire” demonstrates the speaker’s sophistication and education; by stressing the first syllable in “réquire,” the line, “if them is all you seem to réquire. Strip,” becomes iambic pentameter, betraying the speaker’s knowledge and awareness of poetic tradition despite his assumption of a mimicked minstrel voice, patterning itself on the unnamed speaker’s voice, engaged in the seduction of an unidentified woman: “Strip, / ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on / one chaste evenin.” The voice of the first speaker of “Song 2” gradually blends with the language of the unnamed speaker of the third stanza, and the unnamed speaker’s presence is detected only through his address to Henry as “Sir Bones, or Galahad.” The language used in the latter half of “Song 2” mimics the speech of African Americans through the clipping of the final “g” in the progressive verbs and nouns ending in “-ing,” the dropping of the “t” in “Le’s,” the use of “dere” and “yo,” and the nonstandard conjugation of “be” in line 14. The continuity of the language of “Song 2” complicates Henry’s dialogue with the unnamed speaker, and the plurality inherent in the lines, “Henry are / baffled,” blurs the differentiation between the poem’s speakers further while explicitly suggesting that the unnamed speaker and Henry are aspects of one another.

The apparent paradox coloring the relationship between Henry and the unnamed speaker, that they both are and are not the same figure, represents the principal effect of Berryman’s complex use of speech genres in The Dream Songs. Speech genres, as defined by Bakhtin, include every conceivable variety of utterance:
[The] category of speech genres should include short rejoinders of daily dialogue (and these are extremely varied depending on the subject matter, situation, and participants), everyday narration, writing (in all its various forms), the brief standard military command, the elaborate and detailed order, the fairly variegated repertoire of business documents [ . . . ], and the diverse world of commentary (in the broad sense of the word: social, political). And we must also include here the diverse forms of scientific statements and all literary genres (from the proverb to the multivolume novel). (60-1)

All human communication, in one form or another, is a kind of speech genre, but of these, literature⁶ occupies a more complex position as a “secondary speech genre” (Bakhtin 62).

Literature possesses the capacity to subsume any number of “primary speech genres” (everyday conversation, etc.) which in turn forces the “primary speech genres” to lose their relationship to “everyday life”:

[In literature these primary speech genres] lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others. [ . . . ] They enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life. The novel as a whole is an utterance just as rejoinders in everyday dialogue or private letters are (they do not have a common nature), but unlike these, the novel is a secondary (complex) utterance. (Bakhtin 62)

The complex, secondary speech genre of literature represents a heterogeneous utterance in which primary speech genres, otherwise incompatible with one another, shed their relevance to the everyday situations in which they occur and establish fresh relationships with one another internal to the larger context of the literary text. Literature incorporates the primary speech genre

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and re-appropriates it, imbuing the primary speech genre with new meaning and an entirely different signifying function from that which the primary speech genre possesses outside of the text into which it has been placed.

The counterpuntal speech between Henry and the unnamed speaker established in “Song 36” represents what Bakhtin conceives of as a simple speech genre, the “rejoinder [of] everyday dialogue,” but it is complicated by the unnamed speaker’s dialect in conjunction with iambic lines more consistent with Renaissance verse. However, just as with an epistle or any other form of simple speech genre placed in the literary text, the dialogue of “Song 36” adopts a fresh signifying function in context of *The Dream Songs* as a whole. Locally, the poem represents Henry’s existential dilemma partially resolved by the unnamed speaker’s insistence that Henry’s “bad faith” must be dispelled. Cross-textually, “Song 36” loses its immediacy when it is considered in context of the larger narrative development of the “Songs,” and the poem becomes yet another instance of figural definition through the oscillation of voice.

The unnamed speaker’s voice, whether as an aspect of Henry or as belonging to a separate character, assumes an important linguistic function when divorced from the locality implicit in the primary speech genre. Unlike the standard American English mostly deployed by Henry, the unnamed speaker’s mimicked African American English operates on a separate rhetorical level. “Song 5,” delivered entirely through the unnamed speaker’s voice, illustrates the rhetorical function of the unnamed speaker through his perception of Henry:

> Henry sats in de bar & was odd,
> off in the glass from the glass,
> at odds wif de world & its god,
> his wife is a complete nothing,
St Stephen

going even.

Henry sats in de plane & was gay.

Careful Henry nothing said aloud

but where a Virgin out of cloud

to her Mountain dropt in light,

his thought made pockets & the plane buckt.

‘Parm me, lady.’ ‘Orright.’

Henry lay in de netting, wild,

while the brainfever bird did scales;

Mr Heartbreak, the New Man,

come from a crazy land;

an image of the dead on a fingernail

of a newborn child. (1-18)

On the surface, “Song 5” appears as a character sketch of Henry delivered through the unnamed speaker’s distinctive minstrel voice. Henry appears in various locations: “in de bar,” “in de plane,” and “in de netting”; Henry is drunk, happy, and helpless like a child with “brainfever.”

“Song 5,” among the other “Songs” in which the unnamed speaker’s voice figures prominently, points to the unnamed speaker’s linguistic function in The Dream Songs; the unnamed speaker engages in what Gates terms “Signifyin(g)” in order to “name a person or a situation in a telling manner” by rhetorically intersecting Henry’s voice that operates along a syntagmatic axis (49-
Gates’s theory of Sigifyin(g) is based on the concept that African American speech operates rhetorically along a vertical axis opposed to the semantic, horizontal unfolding of standard American English (48-9). Signifyin(g) accomplishes the disruption of standard American English through the strategy of re-appropriating the sign through employing tropes that generate a “double-voiced parody” establishing a “homonymic relation of the white term to the black” (Gates 50).

Gates identifies the “calling out of one’s name” as a central aspect of Signifyin(g), and the unnamed speaker’s use of “Mr Bones” cross-textually in the “Songs” as well as “Mr Heartbreak” and “New Man” locally in “Song 5” demonstrates that the unnamed speaker is engaged in the “ritual of Signifyin(g).” The unnamed speaker’s “naming” of Henry in the third stanza of “Song 5” as “Mr Heartbreak” and “New Man” presents the ironic doubling of Henry’s attitude toward himself in “Song 1” as having suffered at the hands of “the world [that was his] woolen lover” (6). Henry as the dejected lover forms one of the central motifs of the “Songs,” but the unnamed speaker’s juxtaposition of the names “Mr Heartbreak” with “New Man” and the subsequent depiction of Henry as an infant serve to insult Henry through mocking his self-perception. Henry “[comes] from a crazy land” where, as a young child, he carries in his infancy the marks of “the dead” on his “fingernails.” The unnamed speaker’s Signifyin(g) voice in “Song 5” relies heavily on ironic juxtaposition in order to generate the devastating parody of Henry’s seriousness. In the second stanza, the unnamed speaker relates how Henry, thoroughly drunk, accidently greets the Virgin Mary while on a plane. The scene, possessing parallel imagery that alludes to the moment when Beatrice descends from Paradise to greet Dante’s pilgrim in the concluding cantos of the Purgatorio,ironically plays upon the unnamed speaker’s Signifyin(g) rhyme in the last two lines of the first stanza: “St Stephen / getting even.”
Stephen, stoned to death for professing his devotion to Christ, is revered as an early martyr by the Church, and his inclusion in “Song 5” in context of Henry’s estranged wife (“his wife is a complete nothing”) and Henry’s meeting with the Virgin Mary parodies Henry’s complicated and strained relationship with women in the “Songs.” The rhyme, “St Stephen / getting even,” itself an element of Signifyin(g), flippantly equates Henry’s failed marriage with the revenge of a martyr for his death, undermining Henry’s sense of self-importance by drawing attention to the explicit causality.

The unnamed speaker’s trope on Henry resonates further through Henry’s drunken encounter with the Virgin Mary as he slurs his line, “'Parm me, lady’” and her equally slurred, “'Orright.’” Mary, whose grand descent from Paradise satirically occurs on an airplane gripped by turbulence, is shown through her slurring not be the immaculate figure revered by the Church; her slurring suggests that she is not the Virgin Mary but rather merely an unnamed female just as intoxicated as Henry. By naming the woman as the “Virgin,” the unnamed speaker rhetorically cuts across Henry’s often hyperbolic perception of himself and of his environment, transforming “Song 5” into a sinister parody of Henry’s situation.

Bakhtin’s understanding of how simple speech genres function inside of the complex speech genre of literature undergoes a complication in context of the “double-voiced parody” presented by the unnamed speaker in the “Songs.” Bakhtin’s definition of parody certainly applies to the function of the voice of the unnamed speaker engaged in Signifyin(g):

[The] author employs the speech of another, but, in contradistinction to stylization, he introduces into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, having lodged in the other speech,
clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims. Speech becomes a battlefield for opposing intentions.\textsuperscript{10} Bakhtin's concept of parody as a "battlefield for opposing intentions" is aptly employed by Berryman in both "Song 36," where the unnamed speaker's voice serves to disarm the antagonistic ideology of Henry's "bad faith," and in "Song 5," where the unnamed speaker participates in "naming" in order to create a deeply sardonic and satirical portrait of Henry in opposition to Henry's previous utterances concerning himself and his reality. But the presence of parody, colored as it is with the comedic, doubled-voice of the unnamed speaker, multiplies the effects of the simple speech genre in the "Songs" where the unnamed speaker either addresses Henry directly in rejoinder or alludes to Henry through character sketch. The simple speech genres of the rejoinder of dialogue or the character exposition where narration is achieved through the voice of the unnamed speaker enter into the complex speech genre of the "Songs" as a whole in an \textit{already} doubled, Signifyin(g) form. Thus, the unnamed speaker's utterance, designed to parody Henry's situation, accomplishes the plural intention of 1) presenting itself as distinct from Henry's voice, 2) entering into conversation with Henry's voice, 3) mocking Henry's self-perception, and 4) complicating while ironically reinforcing Henry's experience of his own reality.

The last of these effects of the unnamed speaker's voice, complicating while ironically reinforcing Henry’s experience of his own reality, is evidenced in part through the effectiveness of the unnamed speaker's power to persuade Henry to accept the "task" of "[loving] & [dying]" in "Song 36": "De choice is lost. / —It's fool's gold. But I go in for that" (8-13). But Henry's experience of his own reality is reinforced explicitly through the presence of the unnamed speaker in the conflation of voices in "Song 2." Under these conditions, "Song 2" becomes re-
doubling of the unnamed speaker’s already doubled-voice. Henry’s adoption of the blackface, minstrel voice in the second stanza of “Song 2” parodies the speech of the unnamed speaker appearing in the third stanza to ask the question: “Is you feel well?” (13). The unnamed speaker in “Song 2” engages, as he does elsewhere, in the “calling out of names” of Signifyin(g), referring to Henry as “Sir Bones, or Galahad” in order to clash Henry’s blatant attempts to seduce the “gal” ironically with the ideal of courtly romance. “Naming” Henry “Galahad,” the knight who discovered the Holy Grail and a figure of Christ,11 puns off of the “gal” Henry is attempting to seduce and shows Henry to be a womanizer through Signifyin(g). But Henry’s own voice in “Song 2,” in its parodying function of the unnamed speaker’s voice, both confirms and conforms to the unnamed speaker’s insulting perception. Henry’s lines “Arrive at a time when all coons lose dere grip / but is he come?” is evidence of Henry’s half-hearted attempt to Signify upon the Signifyin(g) unnamed speaker (7-8). The racially charged “coons” equally applies to both the unnamed speaker and to Henry speaking in blackface, and Henry’s final line, “I votes in my hole,” designates Henry’s resignation and deflated sense of self proving his own attempts at Signifyin(g) (as well as sexual conquest suggested by “come” and “hole”) to be nothing more than an agreement with the unnamed speaker’s harsh critique (18).

The multiple effects of the unnamed speaker’s voice in conjunction with Henry’s in the local, parodying speech genre of in some of the “Songs” generates a language performing the larger function of “Othering” in Berryman’s poem. The unnamed speaker’s strategy of “calling out names” that cuts across the horizontal, semantic axis of Henry’s thought remains connected to Henry’s self-perceptions though the unnamed speaker’s language operates rhetorically. As Gates claims for Signifyin(g):
Signifyin(g) [...] is the Other of discourse; but it also constitutes the black Other’s discourse as its rhetoric. Ironically, rather than a proclamation of emancipation from the white person’s standard English, the symbiotic relationship between black and white, between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, between black vernacular discourse and standard English discourse, is underscored here, and signified, by the vertiginous relationship between the terms signification and Signification, each of which is dependent on the other. (50)

The unnamed speaker’s Signifyin(g) discourse, forming the Other of Henry’s utterance, assists in the production of the complexity of the secondary speech genre of the “Songs” as the unnamed speaker’s voice creates the ironic, parodying corollary to Henry. Without the constant presence of the semantic unfolding of Henry’s voice, the unnamed speaker’s rhetorical Signifyin(g) would lack its referential base, and the Othering of voices in the “Songs” could not be achieved.

The relationship between the unnamed speaker and Henry surpasses the simplistic arrangement of the unnamed speaker acting as Henry’s Other. Though the unnamed speaker’s language persists in its Signifyin(g), Othering function, the conflation of Henry’s voice with that of the unnamed speaker in “Song 2” and in “Song 60” blurs the polarized distinction implicit in Othering through the operation of mimicry. Unlike in “Song 2” where Henry, engaged in the mimicry demanded of blackface, confirms the unnamed speaker’s perception expressed antagonistically through Signifyin(g), “Song 60” witnesses the loss of Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s antagonistic relationship:

Afters eight years, be less dan eight percent,
distinguish’ friend, of coloured wif de whites
in de School, in de Souf.
—Is coloured gobs, is coloured officers,
Mr Bones. Dat’s nuffin? —Uncle Tom,

sweep shut yo mouf,

is a million blocking from de proper job,
de fairest houses & de churches eben.

—You may be right, Friend Bones.
Indeed you is. Dey flyin ober de world,
de pilots, ober ofays. Bit by bit

our immemorial moans

brown down to all dere moans. I flees that, sah.

They brownin up to ourn. Who gonna win?

—I wouldn’t predict.

But I do guess mos people gonna lose.

I never saw no pinkie wifout no hand.

O my, without no hand. (1-18)

Explicitly addressing the problem of racial inequality in America, “Song 60” differs from most of the other “Songs” where Henry and the unnamed speaker confront one another in the linguistic battle of parody. Though Henry adopts the unnamed speaker’s mimicked African American dialect in “Song 60” as he does in “Song 2,” “Song 60” addresses itself to societal problems as opposed to illustrating Henry’s personality. Henry’s concern that African Americans remain barred from schools, jobs, “de fairest houses & de churches eben” despite the
government ordered integration of the 1950s and 1960s appeals to the unnamed speaker who, though initially opposing Henry ("—ls coloured gobs, is coloured officers, / Mr Bones. Dat’s nuffin?"), comes into agreement. Henry’s concern in “Song 60,” that African Americans will remain forever Othered and their presence will never be accepted legitimately by white society, encounters the unnamed speaker’s perspective envisioning the blending of the sufferings of both whites and blacks: “our immemorial moans / brown down to all dere moans. I flees that, sah. /

They brownin up to oun.” The unnamed speaker conceives of this conflation of suffering as conflict, “Who gonna win?,” indicating that African Americans “[browning] down to all [whites’] moans” and whites “brownin up to oun” represent confusion followed by the potential loss of identity. The “[browning] down” and “[browning] up” conducted respectively by African Americans and whites becomes a struggle for legitimacy and appropriation; the unnamed speaker fears that through African Americans “[browning] down,” the uniqueness of the black experience and collective suffering will be lost while the “[browning] up” of whites will disenfranchise African Americans further through subsuming that experience and that suffering. Henry offers the unnamed speaker and his consternation over the contest of suffering in the second and third stanzas of “Song 60” an uneasy and tragic solution in the final lines of the poem. Henry is unable to “predict” the outcome of the contest beyond the tragic consequence that “mos peoples gonna lose,” but most likely the suffering of African Americans will remain unique as “[Henry] never saw no pinkie wifout no hand,” referencing the punishment of African Americans both in the antebellum South as well as in the present day.

Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s shared worry in “Song 60” over whether or not African Americans will be able to achieve a position of legitimacy while retaining their collective and unique history of suffering in the face of an appropriating white society, though
representing the evolution of their relationship from antagonism to friendship,\textsuperscript{12} remains deeply problematic in terms of the Othering present in the “Songs.” Despite the empathy for the African American position expressed by both Henry and the unnamed speaker in “Song 60,” both figures retain their function of mimicking the language of African Americans. Henry, speaking in blackface, and the unnamed speaker, a minstrel figure of the vaudevillian tradition, falsely assume the role of Other (Henry occasionally, the unnamed speaker consistently), an assumption which problematizes Gates’s post-colonial linguistics of Signifyin(g).

Gates conceives Signifyin(g) as a distinct activity of the Other “[constituting] the black Other’s discourse as its rhetoric,” but a crisis concerning the authenticity of the unnamed speaker’s (and, to a degree, Henry’s) Signifyin(g) arises when the activity of mimicry is considered. Mimicry to Bhabha is also the activity of the Other, and, similar to Signifyin(g) in which the Other re-appropriates the white term for rhetoric, mimicry re-appropriates the image of the colonizer in order to “rupture” and re-appropriate colonial authority:

The authority of that mode of colonial discourse [. . .] called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminancy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledge and disciplinary powers.

(381)
The extension of colonial power in the forms of religion, education, etc. re-shapes the Othered individual, transforming him or her into the "mimed" image of that power. However, the doubled activity of mimicry leads to what Bhabha terms as "ambivalence," or "almost the same, but not quite" which serves to preserve Othering while seeming to subvert it (381). Just as Signifyin(g) ruptures the semantic axis of white discourse through a rhetorical imposition leading to an Othered re-appropriation of colonial (white) language, so mimicry re-appropriates the image of the colonizer, "[transforming that image] into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (Bhabha 381). The result of Bhabha's concept of mimicry is the hybrid, split-subject revising both the image and discourse of the colonizing force as well as the image and discourse of colonized peoples.

Berryman's use of Othering in The Dream Songs functions in terms of Bhabha's concept of the mimicking split-subject capable of destabilizing not only the definition of the Other as such but also the definition and discourse of the not-Other. The unnamed speaker as a minstrel figure represents the most consistent recurrence and application of mimicry in the "Songs." Through engaging in mimicry, the unnamed speaker opens the discourse of the "Songs" to what Bhabha calls the "metonymy of presence" with the unnamed speaker's voice behaving plurally both to create a space in which Signifyin(g) is allowed to operate as well as re-appropriating Signifyin(g) within the Anglo-European poetic tradition of which The Dream Songs forms a part. The metonymy of presence that, on the one hand, deploys "the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications, the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic," on the other hand remains the position from which Signifyin(g) becomes possible:

The ironic reversal of a received rascist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning,
ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act. If Vico and Burke, or Nietzsche, de Man, and Bloom, are correct in identifying four and six “master tropes,” then we might think of these as the “master’s tropes,” and Signifyin(g) as the slave’s trope, the trope of tropes […]. (Gates 52)

Through his metonymy of presence that is expressed solely through the occurrence of his distinctive speech genre, the unnamed speaker mimes the language of African Americans and incorporates the rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) into the simple speech genres of the “Songs.” However, because the unnamed speaker remains a mimicking split-subject, the persistence of his voice is capable of injecting the language of the not-Other (white, colonizing) into the Othered discourse characterized by the activity of Signifyin(g).

The presence of the unnamed speaker’s language in the “Songs” destabilizes both the discourse of African Americans as well as the discourse of Anglo-European poetry traditionally conducted by white males. Berryman makes this dual disruption and revision explicit in both “Song 2” and in “Song 60” by having Henry, the dominant personality of the sequence and a representative of the white male in the “Songs,” mimic the unnamed speaker’s mimicry. Henry’s failed Signifyin(g) in “Song 2” achieves the multiple effect of both suppressing the language of the Other (the Signifyin(g)’s failure) while disrupting and revising Henry’s own language (the fact that he attempts Signifyin(g) at all). As representations, Henry, the not-Other white male, and the unnamed speaker, the Other adopting the strategy of African American language, achieve a dual appropriation in The Dream Songs: By creating a figure mimicking the tone and linguistic strategy of the Other, Berryman transplants the Other’s discourse into the “Songs,” but
by embracing mimicry, Berryman also manages to incorporate the discourse of the white European poetic tradition into the discourse of the Other. Thus, when the unnamed speaker remarks in “Song 60” that the Other is “[browning] down to all dere moans” and that the not-Other is “brownin up to ourn,” the unnamed speaker is making a meta-linguistic and metatextual observation imbedded within the locality of “Song 60.” “[Browning] down” and “[browning] up,” the dual occupation of the split-subject representing the metonymy of presence, applies equally to Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s language across the “Songs” brought into being by the presence of their figures.

Berryman’s conscientious deployment of the pairing of Henry and the unnamed speaker in part establishes one aspect of the meta-textual dimension of The Dream Songs. The highly complex linguistic function the pair achieves through their encounters is doubled by their figural status and the connections they establish within the context of the Anglo-European literature Berryman adapts and disrupts through mimicry. In his essay “Balaam and his Ass,” Auden claims that the pairing of literary figures in the European tradition follows the pattern of “master and servant,” a relationship that is entered into “consciously” and is the result of “social and historical” forces (107). Auden’s essay15 centers on the concept that only the master-servant relationship is capable of fully illustrating the complexity of the human character:

To present artistically a human personality in its full depth, its inner dialectic, its self-disclosure and self-concealment, through the medium of a single character is almost impossible. [ . . . ] A dialogue requires two voices, but, if it is the inner dialogue of human personality that is to be expressed artistically, the two characters employed to express it and the relationship between them must be of a special kind. The pair must in certain respects be similar, i.e., they must be of the
same sex, and in others, physical and temperamental, polar opposites [. . .] and they must be inseparable, i.e., the relationship between them must be of a kind which is not affected by the passage of time or the fluctuations of mood and passion [. . .]. There is only one relationship which satisfies all these conditions, that between master and personal servant. (110)

Auden’s analysis of the master-servant relationship conceives of the literary pairing as the most expedient method by which the author might make the internal workings of a single character manifest. And of the literary pairs Auden includes in his study of the master-servant relationship in European literature, the pairs of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza as well as King Lear and the Fool most closely correspond to the relationship between Henry and the unnamed speaker in *The Dream Songs*.

Though the unnamed speaker’s language operates plurally throughout the individual lyrics in which he appears, it is clear that the principal function of his presence is to illuminate Henry’s character. Henry, the only figure consistently represented throughout the “Songs” and thus the sequence’s “hero,” assumes the position of “master” in the master-servant relationship. The unnamed speaker is bound to Henry “consciously” in order often to parody Henry’s situation and self-perception, but, as Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s language suggests, their binding serves a social function as well. Henry’s and the unnamed speaker’s complex strategy of Othering, among the myriad of complications and effects their language creates, underscores the pair’s isolation from the “world,” the larger society from which after “Song 1” Henry and the unnamed speaker find themselves excluded. As in “Song 1,” Henry’s isolation stems from his reaction to the ambiguous “doings” of others: “It was the thought that they thought / they could do it made Henry wicked & away” (4-5). It is in response to this ambiguous injury that Henry
remains excluded and, hence, principally tragic throughout Berryman’s sequence. The unnamed speaker’s concern for Henry, beginning with the question the unnamed speaker poses to Henry in “Song 2,” “Is you feel well?” (14), unites Henry and the unnamed speaker in their isolation: Henry embraces tragic exclusion from society in response to the wrong he has received; the unnamed speaker remains isolated linguistically in his function as a split-subject, mimicking Other.

The isolation experienced by Henry and the unnamed speaker, from the perspective of the unnamed speaker occupying the position of “servant” in the master-servant relationship, resembles the isolation experienced by Don Quijote and Sancho Panza in Cervantes. Despite their widely differing perspectives on reality, both Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, through virtue of their dialectical relationship, remain outside of the society which they attempt to engage. The Don’s madness finds its source in Quixote’s devotion to “reading tales of chivalry” which “cost the poor gentleman his sanity” (Cervantes 13-4). This madness naturally isolates Don Quijote from the larger social world, and Sancho Panza, by being bound to his master and participating in the Don’s quests, finds himself equally isolated. Don Quijote’s special kind of madness capable of “[transforming] the real everyday world into a gay stage,” represents the re-appropriation of external data into a perception that recognizes the metaphorical as the literal (Auerbach “The Enchanted Dulcinea” 351). In the Don’s mind, the people and objects of the external world (like the famous windmills of chapter eight of the first volume of *Don Quijote*) are never what they appear to be; through Quijote’s perception, the critical difference springing from his madness transports both the man, Alonso Quixana, and all external phenomena into the realm of the chivalric. The critical difference of Quijote’s madness functions rhetorically, and this can best be illustrated through the comparison offered by the Don’s pairing with Sancho
Panza. When Don Quijote and Sancho Panza encounter the windmills in chapter eight of the first volume, Don Quijote seizes upon the metaphoric possibility of the windmills and elevates that metaphoric possibility to the level of reality: “‘Look there, Sancho Panza, my friend, and see those thirty or so wild giants, with whom I intend to do battle and to kill each and all of them [. . .]’” (43). Sancho Panza, by contrast of his experience of reality, cannot engage in Quijote’s rhetorical interpretation of the world:

“What giants?” asked Sancho Panza.

“The ones you can see over there,” answered his master, “with the huge arms, some of which are nearly two leagues long.”

“Now look, your grace,” said Sancho, “what you see over there aren’t giants, but windmills, and what seem to be arms are just their sails, that go around in the wind and turn the millstone.”

“Obviously,” replied Don Quijote, “you don’t know much about adventures. Those are giants—[. . .].” (43-4)

Sancho’s reality cannot allow for a windmill to be anything other than a windmill; there is little metaphoric intervention in his world-view capable of liberating the relationship between sign and signified. Don Quijote’s reality, on the other hand, is a reality of liberation, a reality that permits what Bloom calls “play” to allow the Don to retain his freedom of vision until the moment he returns from the “game” of knight-errantry and subsequently dies (“Cervantes: The Play of the World 782). Don Quijote’s sense of “play” allows the total disruption between sign and signified throughout Cervantes’s novel; just as the windmills are giants to Quijote, so nothing he and Sancho Panza encounter retains the meaning its appearance suggests. Any disruption to Don Quijote’s “play” cannot be tolerated, provoking the Don to reprimand Sancho in the above
quotation for not “[knowing] much about adventures” when the latter attempts to stifle Quijote’s “play” by calling a windmill a windmill.

Similar to the critical difference that allows Don Quijote to envision himself and the world rhetorically as a place where a windmill is not a windmill but in fact a giant, Henry possesses a critical difference that allows him to conceive of the world as a “woolen lover” that has, for some unspecified reason, spurned him. Henry’s conception of reality is far less fantastical than Don Quijote’s, but nonetheless there persists in Henry’s perception a principle of transformation that seizes on the metaphorical dimension of all that is external to him and which, in turn, leads to the many quarrels Henry has with the unnamed speaker. As Kameen\textsuperscript{18} observes, strong parallels exist between the characters of Don Quijote and Henry:

The Don is insane with his visions of a world of chivalry long since dead. Henry is insane with the loss of innocence, family and friends, all now dead. Both superimpose their own fantasies, their own dreams, over ‘reality’. But in spite of their personal delusions and lack of sense, both heroes are ultimately engaging their lunacies. (43-4)

Thus in “Song 2,” when the unnamed speaker asks that initial question that signals the beginning of his relationship with Henry while referring to Henry as “Sir Bones, or Galahad,” the unnamed speaker is making one further linguistic move in addition to mimicry and Signifyin(g): The unnamed speaker “consciously” engages Henry’s madness in a dialectic similar to that which exists between Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. The title “Mr Bones” (and the unnamed speaker’s variants thereof) carries as much weight to Henry as “Don Quijote” does for Alonso Quixana. Though the latter title originates in the Don’s sense of self, and the former title stems solely from Henry’s engagement with the unnamed speaker, both the unnamed speaker and
Sancho Panza feed the delusional “play” of their respective masters. To the external world from which Henry and the unnamed speaker remain isolated, Henry remains Henry just as Alonso Quixana remains Alonso Quixana. However, due to the nature of the master’s game in which the servant participates and, to a degree, perpetuates, Henry becomes Mr Bones just as Alonso Quixana becomes Don Quijote.

The central parallel uniting both pairs of figures remains their divergent (and often diametrically opposed) linguistic interpretations of the same event. An analysis of two scenes, one from the tenth chapter of the second volume of *Don Quijote* and the other from *The Dream Songs*, further illustrates the parallelism existing between the pairings of Don Quijote / Sancho Panza and Henry / unnamed speaker.

The episode in *Don Quijote* analyzed by Auerbach in his essay “The Enchanted Dulcinea” involves a strange reversal in roles between Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. Outside of the city of Toboso, Don Quijote and Sancho await the arrival of Dulcinea but instead encounter three peasant girls riding donkeys:

So they rode out of the wood and saw three village girls close by. Don Quijote looked up and down the road to Toboso and, since he could see nothing but the three girls, became confused and asked Sancho whether he’d left Dulcinea and her damsels outside the city.

“What are you talking about, outside the city?” Sancho answered. “Are your grace’s eyes by any chance in the back of your head? Don’t you see them coming, right here, glittering like the sun at high noon?”

“All I can see, Sancho,” said Don Quijote, “is three village girls on three donkeys.” (409)
In this rare moment, Don Quijote does not rhetorically elevate the chivalric metaphor to the level of reality but instead sees the peasant girls on their donkeys as they actually are. Sancho, on the other hand, seizes upon the metaphoric possibility of the three peasants and, though he is pretending to see them as Dulcinea and her damsels in order to feed the Don’s delusion, embraces the disruption and liberation of the sign. For a moment it would appear that Sancho is the madman, and the Don is at last sane—a reversal that threatens the continuity of Don Quijote’s “play.” However, this threatening moment lasts briefly as Don Quijote re-inserts the linguistic difference that allows his “play” to operate by interpreting the peasant girls as manifestation of the evil magician’s “enchantment”:

“How this savage magician persists in harassing me, beclouding my eyes with cataracts which transform—as they and nothing else could do!—[Dulcinea’s] matchless beauty, [Dulcinea’s] peerless face, into that of a poor peasant girl, and perhaps changed me, too, into some horrible monster, to make me loathsome in [Dulcinea’s] eyes!” (410)

Don Quijote’s belief in the magician’s enchantment reaffirms what Auerbach identifies as Quijote’s idée fixe: the treatment of chivalric romance as equivalent to reality (“The Enchanted Dulcinea” 343-4). The Don’s idée fixe, the factor which motivates his madness while providing continuity to his vision of both himself and the world, remains intact solely because of Sancho’s initiative and desire to attempt to envision the world in terms of his master’s rhetoric. There is a great deal of linguistic disruption in the above scene as both Sancho and Don Quijote, united for once through recognizing the peasant women as peasant women, choose to see the peasant women as something other than they are. Sancho embraces the linguistic motion Don Quijote usually employs when encountering the external world where “white is black and black is
white,” but Don Quijote engages in quite a different strategy. Unlike the scene with the windmills where Don Quijote cannot see windmills at all, only giants, his encounter with the peasant women represents Quijote’s full recognition of reality as it appears. The threat this poses to his idée fixe, while dangerously present, cannot manifest itself fully due to Sancho’s participation in “play.” At this moment when the possibility of the Don’s idée fixe is in danger of collapsing, Sancho intervenes allowing the notion of “enchantment” to enter Quijote’s mind, thus preserving the linguistic disruption that allows for the never-ending quest that unites the pair.

The episode from the tenth chapter of the second volume of Don Quijote serves to illustrate the lengths to which both Don Quijote and Sancho Panza strive to maintain the Don’s idée fixe, and the idea of linguistic role reversal therein contained informs a great deal of Henry and the unnamed speaker’s relationship. In “Song 64,” shortly before Henry and the unnamed speaker reach an “understanding” in the eleventh line of “Song 67,” the unnamed speaker makes explicit his role of preserving Henry’s idée fixe that binds the two figures in their isolation from the world:

Supreme my holdings, greater yet my need,
thoughtless I go out. Dawn. Have I my cig’s,
my flaskie O,
O crystal cock,—my kneel has gone to seed,—
and anybody’s blessing? (Blast the MIGs
for making fumble so

my tardy readying.) Yes, utter’ that.
Anybody’s blessing? —Mr Bones,
you makes too much
démánd. I might be ’fording you a hat:
it gonna rain. —I knew a one of groans
& greed & spite, of a crutch,

who thought he had, a vile night, been—well—blest.
He see someone run off. Why not Henry,
with his grasp of desire?
—Hear matters hard to manage at de best,
Mr Bones. Tween what we see, what be,
is blinds. Them blinds’ on fire. (1-18)

In the above poem, the unnamed speaker’s language performs two distinct functions; the
unnamed speaker confirms his role as Henry’s comforter and friend as well as reinforces Henry’s
delusional idée fixe that, quite unlike Don Quixote’s, remains tragic. Henry begins the poem in
complete isolation with only his “cig’s, / [and his] flaskie O” wandering around “thoughtless”
until “dawn,” but he desires recognition that comes with understanding from someone external to
him: “and anybody’s blessing?” Henry’s isolation, however, is broken by the unnamed speaker
who, while upbraiding Henry for his overly-dramatic self-conception, nonetheless provides
Henry with the “blessing” of companionship and understanding he desires:

—Mr Bones,
you makes too much
démánd. I might be ’fording you a hat:
it gonna rain.

The unnamed speaker, again cutting rhetorically across Henry’s language with the use of metaphor, attempts to soothe his master’s consternation through suggesting that, no matter how bad things become, the unnamed speaker will remain by Henry’s side, “fording [Henry] a hat” to keep the “rain” off of him.

The unnamed speaker’s metaphor of companionship links to his second utterance in the final lines of “Song 64” where, despite the unnamed speaker’s criticism of Henry in lines eight through ten, the unnamed speaker upholds Henry’s idée fixe. As the unnamed speaker states, it is necessary for Henry to “Hear matters hard to manage at de best, / [... ] [Though] Tween what we see, what be, / is blinds. Them blinds’ on fire.” The final three lines of “Song 64” fully represent the complexity of the unnamed speaker’s and Henry’s linguistic engagement with reality in the “Songs.” The lines, “Tween what we see, what be, / is blinds,” suggests that there exists a crucial disruption between external reality and the perception of that reality Henry and, through the bond of the master-servant relationship, the unnamed speaker experience. Again, the unnamed speaker initiates a complicated trope by firstly punning “blinds” off of “blind” which he secondly transforms into a metaphor of perception, “[them] blinds on fire,” indicating that not only does Henry’s perception of reality remain “blind,” but that the reality he and the unnamed speaker experience, lacking adequate foresight, drives forward into the ambiguous “fire,” both passionate and threatening, that challenges experience’s very existence and relevance. Like the moment in the tenth chapter of the second volume of Don Quijote where the Don is in immediate danger of losing hold of his delusion that enables him to rhetorically envision his own reality, the line “[them] blinds on fire” presents an imminent threat to Henry’s idée fixe represented by the “blinds” which separate “what we see” from “what be.” Despite the threat posed by the potential
collapse of Henry’s *idée fixe*, that factor which allows the difference between perception and the external to exist, the unnamed speaker, like Sancho embracing his master’s “play,” provides Henry with a “hat” to keep off the “rain” in order to sustain Henry despite his isolated status. Like Don Quijote and Sancho Panza isolated and excluded from society through the madness motivating the Don’s quest, Henry and the unnamed speaker remain isolated but not from one another. Though Don Quijote and Sancho Panza quite often are capable of finding themselves in hilarious situations stemming from the Don’s *idée fixe* that allows for the quest in the first place, the true comedy of *Don Quijote* lies in the alternative community created by Quijote’s pairing with Sancho and how their community remains antithetical to the Spain of Cervantes.

Henry and the unnamed speaker form a similar comedy in *The Dream Songs*; though Henry perceives himself to be in isolation throughout the “Songs,” he possesses this alternative society through the companionship offered by the unnamed speaker who ironically serves to parody while reinforcing Henry’s self-imposed delusions. Generally speaking, the comic mode differentiates itself from the tragic through the motion of the central character in regard to the larger society against which he must act. “The theme of the comic,” as Frye observes, “is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it” (“Theory of Modes” 43). *The Dream Songs*, like *Don Quijote*, problematizes the comic mode of discourse through the Henry’s trenchant inability to join himself with the larger community. The only “integration” Henry comes to experience lies in the unnamed speaker who, in “Song 67,” comes to an “understanding” with Henry:

I don’t operate often. When I do,

persons take note.

Nurses look amazed. They pale.
The patient is brought back to life, or so.

The reason I don’t do this more (I quote)

is: I have a living to fail—

because of my wife & son—to keep from earning.

—Mr Bones, I sees that.

They for these operations thanks you, what?

not pays you. —Right.

You have seldom been so understanding. (1-11)

“Song 67” is unique among the lyrics in which the unnamed speaker figures prominently in that here the unnamed speaker does not engage in Signifyin(g) in his rejoinder with Henry. Henry again is presenting himself in overly inflated terms; he is both like the contemporary conception of the physician as God-like as well as a modern-day Christ who performs the dual miracles of healing the sick and of raising Lazarus:

I don’t operate often. When I do,

persons take note.

Nurses look amazed. They pale.

The patient is brought back to life, or so.

Though Henry represents a figure of the physician-as-Christ here, he does not exercise his ability to perform miracles frequently as he, unlike Christ, has a family and financial concerns: “The reason I don’t do this more (I quote) / is: I have a living to fail— / because of my wife & son—to keep from earning.” However, the unnamed speaker does not perform his usual Signifyin(g) function rhetorically cutting across Henry’s view of himself; the unnamed speaker instead is
capable only of offering Henry empathy for his situation. The unnamed speaker’s empathy with Henry over not being paid for his miraculous operations leads to the moment of “understanding” where, however briefly, the unnamed speaker and Henry lack the antagonism that colors a great deal of their relationship.

This comic moment quickly dissipates as Henry drops his self-likening to Christ-as-physician in the final stanza of “Song 67” where the tragic mode of the “Songs” overrides the comic suggested by Henry finding companionship and community with the unnamed speaker:

Now there is further a difficulty with the light:

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on my self.
—Mr Bones, you terrifies me.
No wonder they don’t pay you. Will you die?
—My friend, I succeeded. Later. (12-9)

The final stanza of “Song 67” reasserts the principally tragic mode of The Dream Songs through showing Henry again in utter isolation. The exclusion caused by never being “paid” for his “operations” is compounded by the ambiguity of the “operations” that Henry must perform upon himself “in complete darkness.” The lack of light furthers the uncertain quality of Henry’s “operations,” and the lack of specificity leads the unnamed speaker to retreat from his empathetic “understanding” to admit that he is “terrified” by Henry. The unnamed speaker’s final question “Will you die?” coupled with Henry’s response leads to the inevitability of fate found in the
That Henry must die, which he “succeeds” in accomplishing in the *Op. posth.* section of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, is represented problematically in the above lines where the speaker’s question, asked in the future tense, is answered by Henry speaking in the simple past. The tense confusion at this moment in Berryman’s sequence, speaking more to a concern of genre in *The Dream Songs* that will be discussed in depth later, furthers Henry’s isolation from the unnamed speaker with whom “understanding” was reached only moments before in that, as the temporal dimension of each speaker’s utterance suggests, Henry and the unnamed speaker do not have access to the same knowledge.

Pairs of characters lacking equivalent knowledge do not necessitate a tragic mode as Don Quijote and Sancho Panza confirm, but the circumstances surrounding the realization that Henry seems predestined to die in “Song 67” places the latter half of the poem firmly in a tragic mode. The “terror” which the unnamed speaker expresses in response to the ambiguity of Henry’s acts upon himself in combination with Henry’s isolation and the inevitability of his death represent major characteristics of the mode that Frye labels as “low mimetic tragedy”:

The best word for low mimetic or domestic tragedy is, perhaps, pathos, [. . .]. Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience. [. . .] The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by social consensus. (38-9)
Though both high and low mimetic tragedy utilize isolation and pathos, the pathos of the mode of low mimetic tragedy is never converted into catharsis; instead, Frye claims that “pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally as sensations” (38). And, also unlike the mode of high mimetic tragedy which often takes the socially relevant leader as its central character (i.e. a figure quite unlike Henry), the mode of the low mimetic tragedy often concentrates upon the alazon for whom the attempt to become more than he is creates tragic inevitability. The unnamed speaker’s sensation of “terror” as an aspect of pathos that refuses to be digested into catharsis as well as Henry’s “over-reaching,” which in the case of “Song 67” manifests itself through Henry’s figural comparison with Christ-as-physician, generates a tragic mixture in which the brief moments of the comic mode’s appearance, represented by Henry’s rejoinders with the unnamed speaker, serve as a running parody on Henry’s tragic inevitability.

“Song 76” reiterates a great deal of the unnamed speaker’s rhetorical play and complex Othering present throughout Berryman’s text designed in part to reinforce Henry’s tragic inevitability, what Frye understands to be indispensible in isolating the “hero” from “society” (“Theory of Modes” 37). But “Song 76” (Henry’s Confession) further illustrates Henry’s tragic inevitability in context of the “death” Henry will suffer at the closing of “Song 77” and the beginning of the Op. posth. section of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest:

Nothin very bad happen to me lately.

How you explain that? —I explain that, Mr Bones,

terms o’ your baffling odd sobriety.

Sober as a man can get, no girls, no telephones,

what could happen bad to Mr Bones?
—If life is a handkerchief sandwich,

in a modesty of death I join my father
who dared so long ago leave me.
A bullet on a concrete stoop
closed by a smothering sea
spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.
—You is from hunger, Mr Bones,

I offers you this handkerchief, now set
your left foot by my right foot,
shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
hum a little, Mr Bones.
—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead. (1-18)

Like the episode in “Song 64” where the unnamed speaker offers Henry the “hat” and in “Song 67” where the “understanding” entailed in the comedy of community is briefly reached, “Song 76” presents Henry and the unnamed speaker again as companions. The unnamed speaker, while trying to give Henry “this handkerchief’ and suggesting that he and Henry lock arms and walk together, attempts to turn Henry’s mind away from an aspect of his despair: the suicide of Henry’s father. Reconciliation with the absent father, a dominant motif in The Dream Songs, forms the dimension of tragic inevitability in “Song 76” as Henry declares “If life is a handkerchief sandwich, / in a modesty of death I join my father.” This statement, in light of the
last line “—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead” and in context of the death Henry suffers following “Song 77,” makes the expression of Henry’s secret knowledge in the conclusion of “Song 67” (“—My / friend I succeeded. Later.”) a self-fulfilling prophecy of the inevitable that is essential to creating the tragic mode.

In the opening lines of the poem, Henry announces in blackface that “Nothin very bad happen to me lately,” and asks the unnamed speaker for an explanation, “How you explain that?” The unnamed speaker, again parodying Henry’s overly dramatic expression of doom, suggests that it is Henry’s “bafflin odd sobriety” that has kept Henry out of trouble. Henry, however, cannot be lifted from his inevitable sense of tragedy, claiming that life is nothing but weeping, “a handkerchief sandwich” which will prompt him to kill himself as his father did “long agone”:

in a modesty of death I join my father
who dared so long agone leave me.
A bullet on a concrete stoop
close by a smothering southern sea
spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.

Henry creates a paradox by describing the death he seeks as “modesty” considering the dramatic manner he adopts in many of the “Songs”; the death Henry wishes to embrace, as his father has before him, is designed to counterbalance Henry’s overly flamboyant conquests of unnamed women as well as his *sturm und drang* philosophy of life. The unnamed speaker functions in the third stanza once again to offer Henry an alternative interpretation of the external world—extending Henry a “handkerchief” that is at once operating on several levels of signification. By giving Henry a literal “handkerchief,” just as he gives Henry a “hat,” the unnamed speaker is Signifyin(g) upon Henry’s concept of the “handkerchief” as a metaphor for life. The act of
giving Henry a handkerchief suggests that Henry does not possess a life, and that life must be
given to Henry by the unnamed speaker. The literal act assumes the metaphorical significance
Henry assigns to the handkerchief and makes Henry dependent on the unnamed speaker for
existence (in a similar way as Don Quijote owes the persistence of his idée fixe to Sancho
Panza). Through providing Henry with this “handkerchief,” the unnamed speaker offers Henry
an antithetical alternative to Henry’s harsh sense of isolation stemming from the scene of his
father’s suicide where there is only the “bullet on a concrete stoop / close by a smothering
southern sea.” The unnamed speaker’s suggested antithesis to the grim scene of suicide,
focalized by the “smothering” “sea,” transforms the “sea” into “beauty” where Henry and the
unnamed speaker walk “shoulder to shoulder” and “arm in arm” in a state of companionship.
However, the unnamed speaker’s antithetical hope is never realized due to his strange
disappearance in the final line of the poem as Henry remarks “—I saw nobody coming, so I went
instead.” The initiative to move without the company of the unnamed speaker at the conclusion
of “Song 76” represents Henry’s rejection of the Other that he courts at the beginning of the
poem (as well as the sequence as a whole) by speaking in blackface. It is as if by the conclusion
of “Song 76” the disruptive power of Henry’s discourse with the unnamed speaker, the Other,
the mimicked Other, and the subsequent series of linguistic reverberations entailed in their
relationship has created a deafening realism that is too much for Henry to bear, and Henry must
leave / vanish to embrace the solitude of death demanded by his tragic inevitability.

Many of the elements involved in “Song 76” (and, by extension, The Dream Songs in
general) such as Henry’s tragic inevitability, Henry’s issues with his father, and the unnamed
speaker’s mysterious disappearance, suggest a strong connection between the figures of Henry
and the unnamed speaker with the cast of figures of King Lear. The most striking textual
similarity between Shakespeare’s play and The Dream Songs is what Booth characterizes as the simultaneity of conflation and difference in King Lear. Henry in blackface adopting the unnamed speaker’s tone and rhetorical strategy as well as the unnamed speaker and Henry reaching understanding followed by the unnamed speaker’s abrupt disappearance all suggest conflation, a slight differentiation within similitude stretching between the unnamed and Henry. Shakespeare adopts a similar strategy in dealing with both single characters and character pairs in King Lear. King Lear and the Fool, Goneril and Regan, Kent and Caius, Edgar and Poor Tom, Gloucester and King Lear, Cordelia and the Fool—all pairs undergo partial blending and oscillation in Shakespeare’s tragedy. The most obvious correlation of characters between King Lear and The Dream Songs unites King Lear and the Fool with Henry and the unnamed speaker respectively. Henry and Lear bear the similarity of having been the source of all their trouble; whereas Lear sets tragedy in motion through possessing a personality that is capable of dividing his kingdom based on insincere flattery (1.1.35-53), a number of “Songs” suggest that the tragic circumstances of Henry’s isolation are generated by his personality—“There ought to be a law against Henry / —Mr. Bones: there is” (4.17-8). But the linguistic parallels between Lear and the Fool and Henry and the unnamed speaker’s complex rhetoric of Signifyin(g) set the two pairs in close contact with one another. Like the unnamed speaker of the “Songs,” the Fool functions to provide a running, parodying commentary on Lear’s actions. The Fool’s appearance in Act 1 involves the Fool rhetorically manipulating Lear’s situation:

FOOL Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet one?

LEAR No, lad, teach me.

FOOL That lord that counselled thee to give away thy land,
Come place him here by me; do thou for him stand.

The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear,

The one in motley here, other found out there.

LEAR Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou was born with.

KENT This is not altogether fool, my lord. (1.4.134-44)

If the prominent function of Sancho Panza remains to preserve Don Quijote’s *idée fixe* and alternative view of reality through providing the Don with the comedy of community, then the intention of Shakespeare’s Fool is entirely antithetical to Sancho Panza. The Fool does not persist to reinforce Lear’s obsession and view of the world; nor does the Fool provide Lear with an alternative community that prevents the tragic from dominating the movement of the play’s action. Though the Fool does remain loyal to Lear as evidenced by the scenes on the heath, the Fool, a kind of truth-teller like Cordelia and Kent, remains linguistically competitive with Lear. The above speech in which the Fool rhetorically transforms and manipulates Lear’s decision to divide his kingdom into an admission of being a “fool” presents an ironic parody of the situation; as Kent remarks, the Fool “is not altogether fool” while Lear, as the play unfolds, is shown to have been one while making his fatal mistake.

The Fool’s function, quite unlike Sancho Panza’s but more like the unnamed speaker of the “Songs,” remains what Auden identifies as “Lear’s sense of reality which he [comes] to reject” (126). The Knight tells Kent in the first scene of Act 3 that Lear has only the Fool as his companion: “None but the fool, who labours to outjest / [Lear’s] heart-struck injuries” (16-7). As Empson argues, the use of the word, “outjest” suggests that the Fool, as “Lear’s sense of
reality," is attempting to keep ahead of Lear’s obsessive madness through the linguistic strategy of the joke:

The idea of “out-” is that of defeating an enemy by doing more of the same kind of thing; if Lear can scorn Nature, or fool Nature, more than she does him, he will defeat her and be safe. The fool is busied in the same way; if he can laugh at Lear’s injuries more than they (being personified) laugh at Lear, [the Fool] will have saved [Lear].” (189)

Both the Fool and the unnamed speaker utilize parody in an attempt to sway their respective “masters” away from the abyss of obsessive madness, and, at the moments when Lear and Henry become irredeemable, both the unnamed speaker and the Fool mostly vanish from the action. Like the Fool, who appears mostly in the first three acts of King Lear and disappears from the play following the sixth scene of Act 3, the unnamed speaker appears only rarely in the “Songs” comprising His Toy, His Dream, His Rest which are initiated by Henry’s death in the Op. posth. section. Both scenes of disappearance are worth examining in detail as they are nearly identical in terms of their performative importance.

At the conclusion of Act 3, scene 6 of King Lear, the Fool says his last words in the play. In the 1608 Quarto version of the play, the Fool’s last line is yet another example of his functioning as external reality that runs contrary to Lear’s madness. In the mock trial Lear creates with Kent and Edgar, he substitutes a wooden stool for Goneril who has betrayed him:

LEAR Arraign her first, ’tis Goneril—I here take my oath

before this honourable assembly—kicked the poor King

her father.

FOOL Come hither, mistress: is your name Goneril?
Though he actively participates in Lear’s madness which, in this brief scene, imposes the same elevation of external reality to the level of the metaphoric that characterizes Don Quijote’s experience in Cervantes, the Fool, for purely comic purposes, cannot resist labeling external reality for what it is. Like Sancho Panza calling a windmill a windmill, the Fool understands Lear’s critical difference that allows him to see Goneril in a “joint-stool,” but at no point in King Lear does the Fool engage in the “play” which eventually overcomes Sancho Panza allowing him to reinforce the Don’s idée fixe. The Fool’s refusal to relinquish his hold on external reality forces him into disappearing in the conclusion of the sixth scene of Act 3 in order to generate room for Lear’s excruciating line that begins his final speech before death: “And my poor fool is hanged” (5.3.304). Lear’s exclamation, implying not only his affection for the Fool, also emphasizes Lear’s relationship to the external reality the Fool represents; Lear laments the tragic result of his madness at the same instant he laments the loss of reality his madness entails.

The Fool’s disappearance, however, is announced by Kent and Gloucester at the end of 3.6, and the Fool silently supports Lear onstage:

KENT Come, help thy master;

Thou must not stay behind.

GLOUCESTER Come, come away! (3.6.97-9)

“Song 77” alludes to the image of the Fool physically holding Lear in the Fool’s final scene through the unnamed speaker’s action of supporting Henry as they prepare to depart:

Seedy Henry rose up shy in de world

& shaved & swung his barbells, duded Henry up
and p.a.'d poor thousands of persons on topics of grand
moment to Henry, ah those to less & none.
Wif a book of his in either hand
he is stript down to move on.

—Come away, Mr Bones. (1-7)

Here, the unnamed speaker performs the same function as the Fool in supporting his master
though the unnamed speaker achieves through utterance what the Fool does through action, and
Henry, like Lear, is prepared to surrender to whatever forces he is subject:

with in each hand

one of his own mad books and all,

ancient fires for eyes, his head full

& his heart full, [Henry’s] making ready to move on. (16-9)

The word “mad” above, though describing Henry’s “books,” suggests that Henry, as Kent says
of Lear, has found “his wits [. . .] gone” (3.6.84). But the service the unnamed speaker provides
to Henry, supporting him prior to a major change, suggests that Henry can be seen as a kind of
Lear looking inward where “love, / [has] raved away so many of Henry’s years” (77.14-5).
Henry’s madness, like Lear’s, also has been caused by misplaced love and “airy occupations”
that are the source of each character’s tragic inevitability, but their chief difference lies in the
courses they take once their respective “servants” vanish (77.14). Whereas Lear spirals on to a
state of complete destruction, Henry suffers death only to be brought back to life in the
beginning of the fifth section of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest.27
Considering the amount of scholarship Berryman conducted on *King Lear*,
Shakespeare’s play must not have been far from Berryman’s mind while composing *The Dream Songs*. *King Lear* provides a context in which a number of features of Berryman’s text can be explained. For instance, following “Song 77,” the unnamed speaker appears only briefly in the remaining 308 “Songs” and does not enunciate whole “Songs” like “Song 5.” Similar to the Fool who later is conflated with a number of characters in *King Lear*, the unnamed speaker, especially in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, becomes an increasingly internalized component of Henry represented by the diminishment of the unnamed speaker’s direct speech. When Lear ambiguously remarks “my poor fool is hanged,” the audience does not know if he is referring to the Fool, to Cordelia (who has been hanged) to himself, or to the figure of the victim in general.

In the fifth scene of Act 1, the Fool actively equates Lear with himself: “Yes, indeed, thou wouldst make a good fool” (1.5.36) preceded by the remark, one scene earlier, that the Fool would “rather be any kind o’thing than a fool, and yet I would not be thee, nuncle” (1.4.176-7). But for the Fool in *Lear*, the life of a fool is as profitless as the unnamed speaker’s attempts to save Henry from his own tragic inevitability: “They’ll have me whipped for speaking true, thou’lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace” (*King Lear* 1.4.174-6). The Fool’s language, whether uttering truths or lies, remains the source of punishment, and the Fool does not even have the recourse of silence. No matter what course of action the Fool takes, he knows he will receive the lash. As Frye observes in his essay on *King Lear*, the label “fool” possesses a special meaning in Shakespeare’s texts; “fool” denotes the victim of fate:
The word “fool” in course of time applied to practically every decent character in the play. Those who are not fools are people like Goneril and Regan and Edmund, who live according to the conditions of the lower or savage nature they do so well in. [. . .] [This] is another sense of the word “fool” that seems to be peculiar to Shakespeare, and that is the “fool” as victim, the kind of person to whom disasters happen. Everyone on the wrong side of the wheel of fortune is a fool in this sense, and it is in this sense that Lear speaks of himself as “the natural fool of fortune” [. . .]. (110-1)

If all of the “decent characters” of King Lear are in ways fools, then Lear’s realization that his “poor fool is hanged” reflects a generalized lament on the fate tragic inevitability has dealt to those characters but also to Lear himself fully aware of the catastrophe his actions have brought to fruition. Lear as the “natural fool of fortune” is doubled by the Fool who expresses knowledge that he, in addition to his “master,” is doomed by fortune. Perhaps as early as the fourth scene of Act 1, the Fool knows that death and destruction will be the end result of Lear’s decision to divide his kingdom. In his appraisal of Goneril, the Fool remarks:

A fox when one has caught her,  
And such a daughter,  
Should sure to the slaughter,  
If my cap would buy a halter;  
So the fool follows after. (1.4.310-4)

As Doloff explains, “halter” here possesses a doubly signifies both a “noosed rope with which to lead animals and a gallows noose” (17). The Fool’s song, a playful joke deriding Goneril, additionally is prophetic of his own fate that is revealed in Act 5. Doloff also suggests that the
Fool’s equation of Goneril to a “joint-stool” carries with it a doubled and prophetic allusion to inevitable death:

The line, a proverbial mock apology for overlooking someone else’s presence, can be understood here as the Fool’s ironic play upon both the proverb itself and Lear’s delusion (the King probably is talking to a joint-stool). It may also, however, serve as an oblique allusion to the infamous Tyburn gallows [....] [that] was also known as the “Three-legged stool.” (17-8)

The plurality of the Fool’s language, in part designed to comically interject at moments of extreme tension, does not serve to alleviate the gravity of Lear’s madness or to distract the audience’s attention from the disintegration of the world of the play; the Fool’s double language, like the unnamed speaker when he states in “Song 36” that “We hafta die. / That is our ‘pointed task,’” points the way to the future—not only the Fool’s future of finding his neck in the “halter” but also Lear’s future as a “natural fool of fortune” reflected in his remark to Gloucester on the cliff in the sixth scene of Act 4: “When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools” (178-9).

Frye’s understanding that “fool,” in addition to the word’s connection to the stability of external reality, indicates victimization illuminates the central purpose of Berryman’s use of the unnamed speaker. Out of all the word play, the rhetorical Signifyin(g) that generates the complex Othering oscillating between Henry and the unnamed speaker, the split-subject mimicry that ruptures the discourse of the “Songs,” the unnamed speaker as Henry’s “friend”ironically serves to illustrate fully Henry’s role as victim. Though the unnamed speaker can be seen as a type of “fool” in the same manner as Lear’s Fool, the unnamed speaker’s complicated linguistic function reflects Henry’s self-obsession with his own victimization, that Henry, too, is a “fool.”
And, seen in the context of *King Lear*, Henry’s final lines at the conclusion of the “Songs” in “Song 385” become full of his self-conceived tragic pathos:

> If there were a middle ground between things and the soul
> or if the sky resembled more the sea,
> I wouldn’t have to scold
>
> my heavy daughter. (16-9)

At this final moment, Henry, like Lear, stands outside of his madness, outside of his *idée fixe* that has excluded the unnamed speaker’s attempts to establish a momentary comedy of community. Henry’s use of the subjunctive suggests that only if circumstances had been different, if there had been a “middle ground between things and the soul,” Henry’s obsession that has created his tragic inevitability would never have taken hold. Like Lear who sees his only loving daughter, Cordelia, hanged, Henry can visualize an alternative to the difference his language creates throughout the “Songs” that would enable him not to “have to scold / [his own] heavy daughter” as Lear scolds Cordelia in Act 1 setting the tragedy of *King Lear* in motion. But circumstances are not different, and Henry must accept his role as the “natural fool of fortune.”

The unnamed speaker, who only briefly speaks directly in the “Songs,” persists in his position as (mimicked) Other in order to attempt to disrupt Henry’s obsession that has no outcome other than tragedy. Though the unnamed speaker’s peculiar genre of speech encompasses Signifyin(g) and at times enforces Henry’s tragic conception of himself in the world, the unnamed speaker mostly attempts to save Henry from himself through a language of parody not unlike Sancho Panza’s speech or the Fool’s. The unnamed speaker, both as a figure and as the initiator of a distinct speech genre internal to *The Dream Songs*, ultimately solidifies Henry’s tragic isolation, but the unnamed speaker as Other (mimicked or otherwise) remains the
only community available to Henry. What Bloom claims for Sancho Panza, that “Sancho [is] the reader in Cervantes” while the “Don [serves as] the writer in Cervantes,”
 could equally be applied to Henry and the unnamed speaker; Henry, after all, prepares to “die” with his own “mad books” in his hands. Other than the reader, the unnamed speaker remains the only witness to Henry’s tragic course throughout the “Songs.”

Without the unnamed speaker, Henry’s claims for his status as tragically isolated as a result of having fallen out with the “world” exist only as a didactic exercise; the unnamed speaker provides Henry with a figure against which he can demonstrate fully the depths of his self-prophesized inevitability and emotional exile. Considering the dominance of the tragic mode that Henry generates throughout the “Songs,” it would appear that the genre of The Dream Songs would be defined as such; however, Berryman’s method of narration defies many of the generic elements appropriate for tragedy. Henry certainly is tragic, but he and the unnamed speaker participate in a kind of epic of tragedy that from “Song 1” onward prevents the hopeful alternative of salvation Henry can envision in the conclusion of “Song 385.”
III. “Under the Stars”: Epic Codes and the Genre(s) of The Dream Songs

“Disengaged, bloody, Henry rose from the shell /
[. . . ] So Henry was a hero, malgré lui” (The Dream Songs 70.1-7)

“A man’s character is his fate.” (Heraclitus)

The question of genre occupies a space in extremely dangerous territory. The danger of
generic definitions, like all definitions, lies in the tendency of ignoring the specific literary text in
favor of making generalized statements about literature dependent on cultural conditions and,
ultimately, history. That historical forces help to create and then manipulate the criteria for
judging the generic qualities of literary texts lies at the heart of a great deal of genre theory, and
the concept of literary genre remains extremely unstable as texts in their “openness” often
present competing axes of interpretation stemming from the codes they contain. As the first to
offer a theory of genre, Aristotle¹ recognizes the dangerous slippage between genre categories in
literary texts. Aristotle’s sense of categorical slippage, however, stems from the narrow number
of texts he selects to treat in the Poetics, and, where Aristotle manages to separate tragedy from
epic in terms of scale, Aristotle’s theory does not take into account the role of texts in canonical
interaction fully.

Aristotle, concentrating on the difference between Homeric epic and the tragedies of
Aristotle’s contemporary Athens, does not consider the evolution of texts internal to literary
genres in terms of intra-poetic relationships. When Virgil composes the Aeneid, for instance, he
is entirely aware of the Homeric tradition preceding him, and the Aeneid, though a distinct
literary text, incorporates numerous codes that indicate that the Aeneid is part of the Classical
epic genre exemplified by The Odyssey and the Iliad. By utilizing codes such as the invocation
of the muse and cataloguing in addition to paralleling the narrative construction of *The Odyssey* (in medias res, the nēkūia, limiting the number of internal divisions to equal a 1:2 ratio to Homeric structure), Virgil not only generates a text that can be categorized as Classical epic, but the inclusion of these codes and narrative organizations patterned on Homer also creates a sense of inter-textuality and continuity within literature through Virgil’s conscientious interaction with the generic canon as he receives it. *The Aeneid*, as both a part of and responding to the genre of Homeric epic, serves the dual function of both re-affirming genre characteristics as well as transforming the generic field of the epic through Virgil’s specific poetic innovations.

This highly complex system of adopting, rejecting, integrating, and revising generic characteristics from one text to the next not only creates the immense instability found in genre definitions but also provides literature with one of the principal means by which it evolves over time. That literature is and always has been dynamic explains a great deal of confusion stemming from organizing texts in terms of their shared generic qualities:

Where do genres come from? Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination. [. . .] There has never been a literature without genres; it is a system in constant transformation, and historically speaking the question of origins cannot be separated from the terrain of the genres themselves.

(Todorov *Genres in Discourse* 15)

“New” genres, then, are always hybrids by definition; generic transformations resulting from a particular writer’s manipulation of codes necessarily involve both the appropriation of texts anterior to the present writer’s text as well as a rejection, in part, of some of the components of those anterior texts. Thus when Dante sets out to write the *Commedia*, he simultaneously
maintains and dismisses aspects of the Classical epic he inherits from Virgil in order to suit the
demands of particular aesthetic and ideological concerns. Virgil’s influence is felt heavily in the
*Divina Commedia*, but by transforming the physical journey of the “hero” of the Classical epic
into an allegorical quest of the spirit,² Dante creates a hybrid text that, on the one hand, maintains
a part of Classical epic’s generic identity while on the other subverts that identity in order to
fashion the “new,” hybrid genres of Christian comedy and Christian epic.

To conceive of genre as a perpetually evolving category of literary texts that heavily
depends on both anterior texts as well as contemporary social and cultural conditions presents a
diachronic portrait of intra-poetic relationships. Though the merits of Bloom’s theory of
“anxiety”³ remain debatable, in the realm of genre formation and evolution, poetic influence
assumes a central position in the process of how one text adopts, rejects, and manipulates the
generic codes of its antecedents. *The Dream Songs*, in all of its oscillating, unstable language
and its non-linear narrative construction, utilizes a number of inherited generic codes that, as in
Aristotle’s consideration of epic and tragedy, serve to blur genre definitions.

As has been demonstrated, the figure of Henry, focalized at the center of the sprawling
series of lyrics of *The Dream Songs*, generates the principal modes of the sequence through his
language. But the comic and tragic modes of the “Songs” double as generic codes when viewed
cross-textually. Henry’s language, which implicates the unnamed speaker and the poetic “I,” is
complicated further by both the local presence of epic allusions as well as Berryman’s choice to
employ epic codes affecting the physical structure of the sequence of “Songs.” Just as Henry’s
language destabilizes *The Dream Songs* locally, the plethora of epic allusions and intra-poetic
relationships in context of oscillating generic codes violates established genre definitions. *The
Dream Songs attempts to generically modify the epic, but the extremity of this modulation ultimately undermines the sequence’s epic approximations.

_Auden, Whitman, and ‘achilles’: Intra-Poetic Relationships and Generic Signals_

Considering the sheer number of lyrics in _The Dream Songs_, Berryman’s sequence bears a resemblance to the epic genre in terms of scale. As the poem expanded from the initial seventy-seven “Songs” to the eventual three-hundred eighty-five at the conclusion of _His Toy, His Dream, His Rest_, Berryman became increasingly anxious over the sequence’s final structure:

> The poem ‘ought’ to be organized in (narrative or implicit) actions—if I can do it, and if it seems truly suitable to the stuff—like pieces of a novel (scenic, panoramic, descriptive, monologue) or Books of _The Iliad_ or Canto’s.

Of the three generic models Berryman considers in the above excerpt capable of supplying _The Dream Songs_ with the unity he constantly felt to be lacking, the generic codes provided by the _Iliad_ occupied Berryman for the longest period of time. The presence of allusions to the _Iliad_ periodically throughout the Berryman’s sequence serves to assert epic codes within the locality of individual “Songs” which, when taken together, provide an interpretation of Henry’s struggles with the “world” in terms of Achilles’ struggles before Troy.

“Song 1,” in addition to introducing Henry, the ambiguous “I,” Henry’s tragic isolation, and the Petrarchan qualities of the text, also functions to connect Henry with the figure of Achilles. “Song 1” characterizes Henry as “huffy,” “unappeasable,” and “sulking,” and this description taken with the image of the “strong sea” alludes heavily to the early episode of the _Iliad_ where Achilles, enraged at Agamemnon, has recently surrendered Briseis and sits beside the sea to weep:

> Achilles wept, and slipping away from his companions,
far apart, sat down on the beach of the heaving gray sea
and scanned the endless ocean. Reaching out his arms,
again and again he prayed to his dear mother: “Mother! [. . .]
[Zeus] should give me honor—but now he gives me nothing.
Atreus’ son Agamemnon, for all his far-flung kingdoms—
the man disgraces me, seizes and keeps my prize,
he tears [Briseis] away himself!” (1.413-22)

In “Song 1,” Henry, like Achilles, “sulks” in isolation by the “sea” as the result of his “loss,” and both figures remain in a state of anger over their respectively injured egos. The allusion to the Iliad, however, remains limited in “Song 1” mainly due to the intercession of the Petrarchan “beloved” that is both the poet’s source of joy as well as desolation. As Achilles “rages” and “weeps” for Briseis who has been unfairly seized by Agamemnon, Henry remains “huffy” and “unappeasable” because the “world,” his “woolen lover,” has stolen herself away. Henry’s lover, quite unlike Briseis, possesses the freedom to choose to abandon Henry, and through the “woolen lover’s” act, the “world” personified here as a feminine figure becomes the source of both Henry’s affection as well as his despair in a similar way as Laura does for Petrarch’s “poet.” Though Henry does express animosity toward his mother and father in a number of the “Songs,” his “gripe” overwhelmingly remains with the “world” from “Song 1” onward.

However, whereas the “rage” of Achilles originates with his injured pride over Briseis and the overly arrogant Agamemnon, and Henry’s “huff” stems from his rejection by the “world,” Berryman nonetheless emphasizes the connection between Henry and Achilles in “Song 14.” “Song 14,” the only “Song” that explicitly equates Henry to Achilles, serves to illustrate Henry’s ironic status as the mythical “hero” of The Dream Songs:
Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.

After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
means to have no

Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.

Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.

And tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag. (1-18)

“Song 14” contains the essential and explicit comparison of Henry to “achilles” at its heart, but the poem also expertly unpacks a generalized attitude toward the “world” and Henry’s role as “hero.” The unidentified speaker of the poem, whose language indicates that he is not Henry’s
Signifyin(g) companion, finds himself “bored” by “life.” This “boredom” occurs despite the tumult of the “world” in which “the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / [as] we ourselves flash and yearn” as well as high art’s reflection of humanity’s and the “world’s” tumult: “literature bores me, especially great literature, / [ . . . ] and valiant art, which bores me.” In addition, the speaker of “Song 14” communicates animosity toward his mother who chided him as a child saying that “Ever to confess you’re bored / means you have no / Inner Resources.” Though the speaker confirms that he has no “inner resources,” he remains somewhat contented in his “boredom” with both “life” and humanity’s artistic commentary on “life.” But through the speaker’s attitude toward “life” and “art” in “Song 14,” the mundane aspects of existence are elevated above the heroic dimensions of myth and the epic genre suggested by Henry’s equation to “achilles.”

Contained within the speaker’s admission that he finds all things “boring” as he has “no inner resources” is a complicated allusion to two poems by W. H. Auden. The third stanza of “Song 14” offers a subtle play on Auden’s ekphrasis, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” in terms of both language and imagery. Auden’s poem serves to emphasize the mundane aspects of “life” occurring simultaneously to culminating events that come to inspire great works of art:

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of a wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree. (5-13)

The central opposition of the “aged” who are “reverently, passionately waiting” for the seminal, myth-making moment to occur to the “children,” the “dogs,” and the “torturer’s horse” creates two levels upon which reality unfolds in Auden’s poem: the heroic and the ironic. Just as in Breughel’s painting Landscape with the Fall of Icarus that is the basis for Auden’s ekphrasis, Auden’s poem foregrounds the figures of the mundane, the “children” who are “skating,” the “torturer’s horse,” and the “dogs” going about their “doggy life” in order to undercut the heroic suffering of Icarus plunging into the sea that will, in turn, be converted into myth by the “aged.” The heroic is back-grounded in both Auden’s poem and in Breughel’s painting, and this backgrounding results in the privileging of the everyday as opposed to the “suffering” of the mythic “hero.”

As Auden’s poem ironically treats the myth of Icarus, so Berryman’s “Song 14” ironically treats both Henry-as-hero as well as the myth of Achilles. The phrase “Where the dogs go on with their doggy life” in Auden’s poem reflects Berryman’s use of the “dog” in “Song 14” in the concluding quatrain of the poem:

and somehow a dog
has taken itself and its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

The connection between Berryman’s “dog” and Auden’s “dog” remains the ironic undercutting of high and “valiant art” like Breughel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus and, by extension, Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” as well as Berryman’s own “Songs.” Just as Auden’s “dog” is
perhaps “bored” by the sight of Icarus plunging to his death in the sea, so Berryman’s “dog,” compelled to leave due to the speaker’s “boredom” with Henry is free to pursue his “doggy life” leaving the “bored” speaker alone and transformed, too, into a “dog” himself in pursuit of the “doggy life”: “me, wag.” The unidentified “bored” speaker who roughly equates to the figures of the mundane in Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” makes a meta-textual statement when extending his “boredom” to include Henry whose “plights & gripes” are just as “bad” as those of “achilles.” Like “great literature” that specifically includes the *Iliad* as well as “valiant art,” the character of Henry as the “hero” of the “Songs” “bores” the speaker because Henry, in part, is a product of that “great literature” that Berryman employs to shape Henry’s character. This point also illustrates the degree to which Berryman intends *The Dream Songs* to be viewed as “great literature” in the same vein as the *Iliad* and is the reason why he juxtaposes Henry and Achilles in “Song 14.” Achilles’ name, though not capitalized, nonetheless represents a generic allusion inserted to shape the reader’s view of the “Songs” as an epic, but by refusing to capitalize Achilles’ name in context of the allusion to Auden’s poem, the unidentified speaker achieves the undercutting of mythic heroism contained in the enunciation of the “hero’s” name. Though Henry is equated to the mythic Achilles in both “Song 1” and explicitly in “Song 14,” Henry is shown to be a deflated, ironic heroic personality.

By juxtaposing the allusion to “Musée des Beaux Arts” with the ironically undercut name of “achilles,” Berryman also implicates Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” in “Song 14.” Auden’s poem, a complicated commentary on the ekphrasis found in Book 18 of *Iliad*, suggests another interpretative level of Henry’s connection to Achilles. In “The Shield of Achilles,” Thetis watches Hephaestos craft Achilles’ shield, but, unlike the episode in the *Iliad*, the images Hephaestos carves into the shield are of a modern, totalitarian world. Hephaestos carves images
of a fascist rally (9-15), a concentration camp in which innocent people are being executed (31-7), and rapes and a murder (50). The world that Hephaestos depicts is as violent as the world Achilles knows in the *Iliad*:

> That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
> 
> Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
> 
> Of any world where promises were kept,
> 
> Or one could weep because another wept. (50-3)

But Auden’s poem depends on the striking modernity of Hephaestos’s images. The modernity communicated by the images of the fascist rally and the concentration camp offsets the historical distance that traditionally isolates Achilles from the audience or reader of the *Iliad* as “epic distance” represents one of the major codes defining epic as a genre. Hephaestos, Thetis, Achilles, and, by extension, the entire Homeric epic of the war at Troy are brought into the modern world through the images on the shield, and this crossing of historical and cultural boundaries serves to generate the central crisis of Auden’s poem: How are “heroes” to function in a decidedly un-heroic world? This crisis in Auden’s poem bears striking similarities to how Henry operates in the “world” that once was his “woolen lover.” The sixth stanza of “The Shield of Achilles,” for instance, bears a great deal of similarity in terms of tone to Henry’s sense of desperation and defeat:

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> 
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> 
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small
> 
> And could not hope for help and no help came:
> 
> What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died. (38-44)

Modern human beings are powerless against the “world” once its “mass and majesty” has been appropriated by antagonistic forces. The “world” so used, despite it containing “mass and majesty,” deprives most people of power and strips them of their “pride” “before their bodies died,” and Auden’s concept accurately sums up how Henry feels about the “world” in many of the “Songs.” In Auden’s text, the “world” makes victims of people, and Henry thoroughly represents himself as a victim:

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry’s heart
só heavy, if he had a hundred years
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
Henry could not make good. (29.1-4)

The “loss” Henry has suffered, the “heavy” “thing” that “[sits] down” on his “heart,” is so severe that no amount of time, not even “a hundred years,” could heal Henry’s wounds. And it is this timeless essence of Henry’s “loss” that firmly situates him in the modern “world” and, like Achilles in Auden’s poem, makes Henry the “world’s” victim. Despite the undermining of the epic “hero” achieved by the allusion to “Musée des Beaux Arts” as well as the unidentified speaker’s “boredom” and “wagging” in “Song 14” that equates Henry to a deflated “achilles,” Henry nonetheless retains an identity and demonstrates an emotional response to the “world” that directly implicates the figure of Achilles.

Henry’s ambivalent feelings toward the “world,” so central to the thematic unfolding of The Dream Songs, underscore the crucial similarity between the “Songs” and the Iliad in that Achilles, like Henry, ultimately remains subject to the fate implicit in the unity of the “world.”
Though Achilles focuses his rage onto defined antagonists (Agamemnon and Hektor), the situation in which Achilles finds himself before the walls of Troy is the product of both the world in which he lives and his pre-formed character. In this sense, Achilles’ antagonist is neither Agamemnon nor Hektor but the series of events put into motion by fate. As Auerbach observes, “[Homer’s inventive gift supplies] the conviction that every character is at the root of his own particular fate and that he will inevitably incur the fate that is appropriate to him” (Dante: Poet of the Secular World 2). It could be said, then, that the figure of Achilles, a portrait of “heroic” man at his strongest and weakest, struggles against the “world” that doubly devises and expedites Achilles’ fate.

Traditional epics depict human beings embroiled in their struggles, and their struggles remain fore-grounded against the larger world of both men and gods in which every man and woman has a destiny. Lukács, modifying Aristotle’s scalar definition of epic, understands that epic in its most essential function is responsible for depicting the actions of individuals deeply rooted in this larger world that determines and is ultimately responsible for their fates:

For the epic, the world at any given moment is an ultimate principle; it is empirical at its deepest, most decisive, all-determining transcendental base; it can sometimes accelerate the rhythm of life, can carry something that was hidden or neglected to a utopian end which was always immanent within it, but it can never, while remaining epic, transcend the breadth and depth, the rounded, sensual, richly ordered nature of life as historically given. (46)

Lukács’s understanding of the epic as expressing the “extensive totality of life,” as opposed to dramatic literature which shows the “intensive totality of essence,” asserts that the epic character
operating under the confines of fate cannot transcend the bounds of the all-determining world of
which the epic character is a part (46).

That the world remains the ultimate principle of existence, incapable of being
transcended by the actions of individual characters who ultimately cannot escape fate but must
submit to it, represents one of the central epic codes through which Henry’s position and actions
can be interpreted. What in the previous chapter is termed Henry’s “tragic inevitability,” his
constant rebellion against community and belief that death is ever-encroaching, can be seen as a
function of the epic code of fate that serves to isolate Henry early in “Song 1.” When the
unnamed speaker remarks in “Song 36” that “We hafta die. / That is our ‘pointed task’ and “De
choice is lost,” he is speaking, in addition to the complex linguistic play of Signifyin(g), directly
about the operation of an epic understanding of fate stemming from Henry’s relationship with the
larger “world” (7-13). Looking at the unnamed speaker’s remarks in “Song 36” in terms of epic
qualities, the unnamed speaker here adopts a role similar to that of Thetis attempting to sooth
Achilles:

“O my son, my sorrow, why did I ever bear you?

All I bore was doom [. . .].

Doomed to a short life, you have so little time.

And not only short, now, but filled with heartbreak too,

more than all other men alive—doomed twice over.” (1.491-8)

Like Thetis reminding Achilles’ of his swiftly approaching tragic destiny in the above lines, the
unnamed speaker prophetically intones Henry’s death in “Song 36,” but prior to Henry’s “death”
in the Op. posth. section, the unnamed speaker does not consistently equate to the figure of
Thetis in the *Iliad* as Henry, too, has possession of the knowledge of his own fate suggested in the final lines of “Song 67”:

—Mr Bones, you terrifies me.

No wonder they won’t pay you. Will you die?

—My

friend, I succeeded. Later. (16-9)

The temporal confusion expressed in the unnamed speaker’s question asked in the future tense and Henry’s answer given in the simple past is indicative of Henry’s prophetic knowledge of his destiny that can be seen as a conflation of roles with the unnamed speaker from “Song 36” as well as with Thetis from the *Iliad*. That Henry knows he will “die” by the end of 77 *Dream Songs* is explicit as he claims in “Song 76” that “in a modesty of death I join my father,” but that Henry is accepting of his fate differentiates him from the heroes of tragic drama who actively rebel, as their personalities demand, against the hand fate has dealt them. Henry remains caught in the driving force of tragic inevitability, but, like Achilles who has full knowledge that death awaiting him, Henry accepts what he understands to be inescapable and partakes in the course the “world” has given him: “—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead” (76.18).

Though Henry realizes that he is the victim of the fate his (former) lover the “world” has given him, he cannot possibly transcend the “world’s” “totality of existence.” “Song 74,” beginning with Henry’s lament over his unspecified “loss” at the hands of the “world,” concludes with a truncated version of epic cataloguing that serves, in Homer’s texts as well as in other epics, as a device employed to illustrate the comprehensiveness of human existence:

Henry hates the world. What the world to Henry
did will not bear thought.
Feeling no pain,

Henry stabbed his arm and wrote a letter
explaining how bad it had been
in this world. [. . .]

“Kyoto, Toledo,

Benares—the holy cities—
and Cambridge shimmering do not make up
for, well, the horror of unlove,
nor south from Paris driving in the Spring
to Siena and on . . .”

Pulling together Henry, somber Henry
wooed at things.
Spry disappointments of men
and vicing adorable children
miserable women, Henry mastered, Henry
tasting all the secret bits of life. (1-21)

Contained in “Song 74” are two distinct but connected epic codes. The first, Henry’s
proclamation of “hate” against the “world” that has caused some grievous injury so horrible “that
[it] will bear no thought,” represents a reiteration of that initial “loss” in “Song 1” that has made
Henry “wicked & away” and serves to reinforce Henry’s connection with Achilles, both of
whom bewail the unfolding of events but ultimately accept life as determined by fate. The
second epic code present in “Song 74” involves the use of epic cataloguing. The presence of the catalogue in works as diverse as the Iliad, the Divina Commedia, and Leaves of Grass serves the function of, among others, “exposition by bringing in characters economically and giving a sense of scope” (Fowler 153). The catalogue in “Song 74” illustrates geography and personality in the third and fourth stanzas respectively. The cities of “Kyoto, Toledo, / Benares—the holy cities—” and “Cambridge,” “Paris,” and “Siena” all have great historical and cultural significance. “Toledo” and “Benares,” in addition to being governmental centers like “Kyoto” also possess religious prestige (Toledo was the site of the Council of Trent and the seat of the Spanish arch-bishop while Benares remains one of the most holy cities in Hinduism). These cities, despite their immense cultural prestige, are employed in “Song 74” in order to illustrate Henry’s despair and isolation: “[these cities] do not make up / for, well, the horror of unlove.” By providing a sampling of the “world’s” cultural centers, Henry’s divorce from the “world” again is stated explicitly; the wide-ranging and rich geography intoning a sense of totality can never heal the wounds of “unlove” Henry has suffered because of the non-specific “loss” inflicted by the “world.”

The epic catalogue of places shifts to a brief catalogue of people in the final stanza of “Song 74”: “Spry disappointments of men / and vicing adorable children / miserable women.” This truncated catalogue uniting both gender and age is distinguished in terms of the adjectives applied to the people; the “men” are “disappointed,” the “women” “miserable,” and the “children” are “adorable” in their “vicing” that indicates that they are conceived of as attractive through the crimes they commit despite their innocence. All three groups suffer from some dysfunction though the “adorable” and “vicing” “children,” who have only limited experience with the “world,” have not been differentiated into either the “disappointed” or the “miserable.”
The presence of this list of dysfunctional groups serves to enlarge the “scope” of the poem in the same way as the listing of cities. The cities cannot redeem Henry’s “hatred” just as the “men,” “women,” and “children” cannot either, but the catalogue of people serves to enlarge Henry’s sense of despair. Henry has “mastered” the “men,” “women,” and “children,” and in them he “[tastes] all the secret bits of life” which, considering the beginning of “Song 74,” are not pleasant. Henry is the “master” of sorrow and “hate” in “Song 74,” an exile amid the world’s “cities.” But despite Henry’s dejected state, he nonetheless is “[pulled] together,” unified by both the “world” in terms of geography as well as the “world’s” “miserable” inhabitants. Henry here is presented as a whole; he has not let his “loss” fragment his sense of self though his “woofing” recalls the deflated hero “achilles” and the ironic undercutting of epic pathos in “Song 14.”

The brief catalogue of people in the last stanza of “Song 74” ties into the earlier “Song 22” where the epic code of cataloguing is also present. “Song 22 (Of 1826),” however, is indicative of a collision among at least three generic codes: the epic code, the Petrarchan narrative strategy of blending subject-object distinctions, as well as Whitman’s transcendental modifications of epic cataloguing:

I am the little man who smokes & smokes.
I am the girl who does not know better but.
I am the king of the pool.
I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut.
I am a government official & a goddamned fool.
I am a lady who takes jokes.
I am the enemy of the mind.
I am the auto salesman and lóve you.
I am a teenage cancer, with a plan.
I am the blackt-out man.
I am the woman powerful as a zoo.
I am two eyes screwed to my set, whose blind—

It is the Fourth of July.
Collect: while the dying man,
forgone by you creator, who forgives,
is gasping 'Thomas Jefferson still lives'
in vain, in vain, in vain.

I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly. (1-18)

The first and second stanzas of “Song 22” relate to the Petrarchan, the Whitmanesque, and the epic codes in the “Songs.” Delivered from the view of the first person, the first and second stanzas of the poem above function similarly as the periodic recurrence of the blurring of the subject and object relationship inherited from the Rime sparse that Berryman uses to great effect in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet as well as in a number of “Songs” involving the unnamed speaker (“Song 36”) and objectified women—“I am her” (242.18). In “Song 22,” however, the figure of Henry is conflated with a number of individuals that, like “Song 74,” includes both the male and female at varying ages but, unlike “Song 74,” includes social functions as well. Henry is a “man,” a “woman,” a “lady,” a “girl,” an “auto salesman,” a “government official,” and a “king.” By equating Henry’s self with this multitude of gender, age, and social class, the first
and second stanzas of “Song 22” achieve a quality of epic catalogue found in Whitman in their democratic relationships to the speaker.

Henry literally is the list of individuals named, but there is an added significance of “Song 22” when the social space occupied by each of the figures Henry metaphorically subsumes is considered. The equations Henry makes between the groups in lines one, two, three, five, six, eight, and eleven all represent the non-“Othered” segments of Western society. But Henry also embraces the “Othered” segments of society through equating himself to “the enemy of the mind” in line seven as well as the “blackt-out man” of line ten. This latter equation, itself suggestive of the possible conflation existing between the figures of Henry and the unnamed speaker, shows Henry to be that “black” voice which he occasionally attempts to mimic as in “Song 2.” The “blackt-out man” also suggests an allusion to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” when the speaker conflates himself with the runaway slave: “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of dogs, / Hell and despair are upon me” (33.129-30). Additionally, “blackt-out man” also reinforces the wider democratic features of the poem in that to be literally “blackt-out” is to have all defining features, those characteristics that differentiate one individual from another, completely removed. By inserting the list of individuals of varying ages, genders, and social occupations in addition to the more subversive conflations, “enemy of the mind” and “blackt-out man,” Henry appropriates a mini-epic catalogue signifying all individuals. This point is made explicit in the allusion to the chapter entitled “Why I am So Wise” in Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo found in the paradoxical line “I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut.” Henry’s allusion to Nietzsche in this context achieves the dual purpose of calling forth the figure of the philosopher who, like Henry, is engaged in rebellion against inherited tradition as well as evoking
Nietzsche’s proclamations beginning “Why I am So Wise” in which Nietzsche claims to have sacred knowledge of both the male and the female:

The fortunateness of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality: to express it in the form of a riddle, as my father I have already died, as my mother I still live and grow old. This twofold origin, as it were from the highest and lowest rung of the ladder of life, at once décadent and beginning—this if anything explains that neutrality, that freedom from party in relation to the total problem of life [. . .]. I have a subtler sense for signs of ascent and decline than any man ever had, I am the teacher par excellence in this matter—I know both, I am both. (8)

Henry’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s Tiresias-like proclamations that culminate in his sense of “fatality” in the beginning of “Why I am So Wise” serve to reinforce the claim of intellectual subversion and “Otherness” in “I am the enemy of the mind.” Henry, who is conflated with both the male and the female as well as with royalty, the “government official,” and the “auto-salesman,” joins with destructive forces including the “teenage tumor” of line 8 in order to provide a sense of total conflation, a conflation of both established society as well as the forces threatening to subvert and to destroy that society, and this intimately connects Henry with the forces of life, culture, and history.

“I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut,” however, remains deeply problematic in terms of cumulative allusion to Whitman found in the first and second stanzas of “Song 22.” Nietzsche’s claims at the beginning of “Why I am So Wise” are not different from Whitman’s position attempting to democratically unite male and female in “Song of Myself.” As Whitman’s speaking “I” states in section 21: “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the
mother of men” (4-6). On the literal level of interpretation, however, “I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut,” paradoxically embraces silence within the communicative function of poetry, and this remark in particular establishes a conflict with the epic catalogue alluding to Whitman in “Song 22.” Whereas Whitman’s “Leaves” seemingly celebrate everything, including Nietzsche’s form of “fatality” that is implied in “I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut,” Whitman never embraces silence. When Whitman’s speaker loudly proclaims “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,” he initiates the process of conflation with everything and everyone he experiences and knows, and this conflation is achieved through the power of enunciation (“Song of Myself” 1.1). Like the authors of the Classical epics, Whitman draws upon the power of oral proclamation to set “Song of Myself” into motion, and Whitman’s *invocatio* at once functions as both a generic code as well as a signal of generic modulation. Whitman critically shifts epic genre definitions in “Song of Myself” through the very strategies that Berryman employs locally in both “Song 22” and “Song 74.” Whitman’s use of the epic catalogue as a means not only to enlarge the scope of the “world” in his poems but to enlarge the characteristics of the speaking “I” represent one aspect of Whitman’s departure from both Classical epic and Christian epic codes. But Whitman’s retention of the *invocatio*, despite the modifications it undergoes in *Leaves of Grass*, nonetheless remains an essential aspect of the text. Whitman’s speaking “I” achieves conflation with the “kosmos” and the great democratic “multitudes” of America only through the enunciation poetry allows him. Thus, when the line “I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut” appears in context of the line “I am two eyes screwed to my set, whose blind—,” Berryman creates a tear in what otherwise would be a “Song” in homage to Whitman’s poetic and generic achievement. A speechless mouth and “blind” eyes, like those ambiguously on “fire” in “Song 64,” are not part of Whitman’s program considering the power
of enunciation found in poems like “Song of Myself” and the power of observation found in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

The rupture created by the lines “I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut” and “I am two eyes screwed to my set, whose blind—” represents Berryman’s continuous modulation upon Whitman’s own generic modulations achieved in *Leaves of Grass*. The epic catalogue of “Song 22” mostly pays homage to Whitman especially when considered in context of the final stanza of the poem:

It is the Fourth of July.

Collect: while the dying man, forgone by you creator, who forgives
is gasping ‘Thomas Jefferson still lives’
in vain, in vain, in vain.

I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly. (13-8)

Ostensibly, the final stanza of “Song 22” treats the death of John Adams, but this stanza also serves to position Henry as a successor to the poetic revolution Whitman begins with *Leaves of Grass*. The subtitle of “Song 22,” *(Of 1826)*, indicates the year, and the date, “July the Fourth,” marks the fiftieth anniversary to the day of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On this day, both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died, and John Adams’ last words were reported to be “Thomas Jefferson still lives.” “Song 22” utilizes this unique moment in American history so as to demonstrate further the connection between Henry and Whitman. As John Adams lies dying and “vainly” uttering “‘Thomas Jefferson still lives,’” “Henry Pussy-cat” steps forward to pronounce his name. The line “in vain, in vain, in vain” can be taken doubly in the passage above to be both literal and figurative. Literally, the line refers to the fact that even
though “Thomas Jefferson still lives” are the last words of John Adams, Jefferson had actually
died a few hours earlier at Monticello. But figuratively, the line “in vain, in vain, in vain” refers
to a potential break in both the revolutionary zeal and the continuity of the American experiment.
Jefferson, as a man of great learning and strong democratic principles, embodies the American
Revolution in many ways. If the American Revolution is looked at in terms of a revolution in
poetry, then Whitman, by answering Emerson’s plea in “The Poet,” becomes representative of
the revolutionary quality of American poetry:

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We [Americans] do not with
sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare
we chaunt our times and social circumstance. [. . . ] We have yet had no genius
in America [. . . ]. (37)

Part of Whitman’s monumental achievement in Leaves of Grass rests in the fulfillment of
Emerson’s demand that the “[American poet is to stand] among partial men for the complete
man, and [to apprise] us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth” (5). Whitman
accomplishes this through the conflation present in his epic cataloguing, and, in a similar way,
Henry’s pronouncement following John Adams’ “vain” utterance in context of his own catalogue
of conflation posits Henry as a natural successor to Whitman. The poetic revolution of Emerson
and Whitman made possible by the political revolution of Adams and Jefferson will continue
through “Henry Pussy-cat” and The Dream Songs.

The Dream Songs suggests a generic connection to Leaves of Grass not only on the local
level of individual “Songs,” the principal method employed by Berryman to illustrate or suggest
generic continuity or modulation, but also through the title of Berryman’s sequence. As Fowler
observes, the titles of Classical and Christian epics often indicate the genre of the text:
[Epics] may be named after a single hero (*Odyssey; Aeneid*). But with multiple heroes “the focus may shift to place: the *Iliad*, the *Pharsalia*, the *Lusiads*.” Later examples abound (*Gerusalemne Liberata; Paradise Lost*). Behind this shifting of focus, as the instance of the *Argonautica* suggests, lies the desire for a title that is fittingly unified. The convention, therefore, belongs to classical epic. (96)

“The desire for a title that is fittingly unified” reflects Lukács’s concept of the “extensive totality of life” that epic strives to illustrate. Whitman’s title, therefore, represents a generic modulation of the titling convention of epic; *Leaves of Grass* communicates the mixed message of totality and separateness. Each poem, a “leaf,” combines with other “leaves” in order to create the sprawling, organic fabric of Whitman’s text; the individual parts create the whole, and the whole can be seen in the parts. Whitman’s poems do contain the “totality” found in epic, and the title reflects the “hero” of the poems (the mass of phenomena, the “multitudes,” experienced by the speaking “I,” the “leaves”) as well as the place of action (America, the “kosmos,” “grass,” i.e. the “world”). But *Leaves of Grass* creates a shift in content away from the recounting of heroic adventures and mythic wars to the speaking “I’s” experiential knowledge and celebration of existence, modulations more similar to Dante’s *Commedia* and Petrarch’s *Rime sparse* than to Homer. And Whitman’s departure from traditional Classical and Christian epics is suggested and reflected by titling the text *Leaves of Grass*, thus shaping how the reader approaches the question of genre.

*The Dream Songs* as a title functions similarly as does *Leaves of Grass*; *The Dream Songs* equally suggests both the separateness of individual poems that in turn create a “totality.” In addition to demonstrating the genre of a text, Fowler also notes that texts often “inherit” the titling conventions of their “generic antecedents” (92). The similarity between the titling of *The
Dream Songs and Leaves of Grass serves to evoke not only generic modulations on Classical and Christian epics but modulations on the modern American long poem that Whitman pioneers. Rosenthal claims that Whitman’s “Song of Myself” persists as one of the main sources for both the Modernist long poem as well as for the modern poetic sequence, and by titling his sequence The Dream Songs, Berryman creates an allusion to Whitman’s text in terms of the separateness of individual poems within a larger, totalizing framework as well as the suggestive use of the generic signal “Song” (25). However, Berryman’s “Song” is quite different from Whitman’s “Song.” Whitman uses the generic term “Song” in order to invoke a sense of musical and mystical incantation in the cases of the speaking “I” as well as of individual poems: “Song of Myself,” “Song of the Open Road,” “Song for All Seas, All Ships,” “Song of the Universal,” etc. But Berryman uses “Song” as though it were interchangeable with the term “canto” as Berryman’s “Songs,” like Dante’s canticles and, to less of a degree, Pound’s Cantos, are formalized without a wide degree of structural variation from one lyric to the next.

This difference in how Berryman uses “Song” is compounded by the word “Dream” in the title. Whereas Whitman’s title suggest concrete substance, the “leaves” of “grass” can easily be apprehended by the human senses, Berryman’s “Dream Songs” carry with them the supremely abstract. Though the “Songs” naturally evoke aural qualities, there is less emphasis on the power of invocation in Berryman than there is in Whitman, and this, in context of the transitory substance of the “Dream” evoking the subconscious or even the hallucinatory, serves to abstract the definition of a “Dream Song.” The attributes of a “leaf” of “grass” provide Whitman’s poems with a well-defined sense of metaphorical definition; the definition of a “Dream Song,” however, remains indeterminate, abstract, fluid—a “Song” sung or heard on the depths of the sleeping imagination.
Though is use of “Song” differs greatly from Whitman’s deployment of the term, Berryman’s choice to use “Song” demonstrates the critical difference between his local allusions to Auden and to Whitman. The allusions to Auden in “Song 14,” limited in the same way as are allusions to Whitman in “Song 22” and “Song 74,” serve to reinforce the lyrical quality of Berryman’s sequence. At most, the diminutive “achilles” and the subsequent reference to “The Shield of Achilles” evoke the epic code by way of oblique suggestion. Auden is known principally as a lyric poet so any reference to Auden in terms of epic codes remains somewhat confused; Berryman does not directly evoke epic by referencing Auden but instead evokes Auden’s critical stance toward reality in “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Shield of Achilles.” Berryman’s allusions to Whitman, however, do communicate a sense of generic continuity mainly because of the ability of *The Dream Songs* to subsume a number of epic codes while simultaneously resisting the generic definition of epic in a similar way as does *Leaves of Grass*. *The Dream Songs* remains firmly linked in terms of genre to *Leaves of Grass* as the latter represents one of the principal antecedents of the “Songs.” But Berryman’s sequence, however, departs from Whitman’s *Leaves* in order to return to more Classical epic signals when the nekuia of the Op. posth. section and the development of Henry’s character in time across the totality of the “Songs” are considered.

*Genre and Structure: The Nekuia and Henry’s Stasis*

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return, which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. *A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder:* fabulous
forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back
from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

(Campbell 30)

While writing 77 Dream Songs, Berryman read and attempted to apply Campbell’s study
of the three-part construction of the epic hero’s journey to the early “Songs.” However, as with
his attempts to apply the structure of the Iliad, Berryman abandoned the effort when confronted
with the sheer proliferation of “Songs” in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest. The textual forces of
addition (scalar) and nonlinear development (structure) compelled Berryman to discard epic
models for The Dream Songs. Whereas the themes employed in 77 Dream Songs readily can be
equated to both the Iliad and the “departure,” “initiation,” and “return” of The Hero with a
Thousand Faces, these equations occur nonlinearly in relation to the narrative progress
suggested by the models. The difficulty of tracing one-to-one relationships between “Songs” and
episodes of the hero’s journey or the Iliad is not a problem in itself, but 77 Dream Songs
contains poems that equate to neither the Iliad nor to the episodes Campbell suggests. Again,
this slight deviation from epic equivocation does not impact the first seventy-seven “Songs” to
any great degree, but a slight deviation among seventy-seven lyrics expands into a massive
deviation when the 308 “Songs” of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest are added to the nonlinear
development of Berryman’s sequence.

Despite Berryman’s inability to equate the sprawling growth of the “Songs” to any
mythic model, Henry’s nekua represents the most significant structural feature of The Dream
Songs expressed in epic codes. The nekua, showing Henry to be both a kind of Odysseus as
well as Dante’s pilgrim, demands that Henry be seen as an epic “hero,” but the nekua remains
an isolated sequence within the larger narrative of the “Songs”; unlike both Classical and Christian epics, the nekvia fails to supply the “Songs” with narrative progression.

The transition from 77 Dream Songs into His Toy, His Dream, His Rest is evidence that Berryman still was considering epic models for the “Songs” due to the placement of the Op. posth. section as Book IV. As Book IV is numerically the middle of the seven sections of The Dream Songs, Berryman follows Classical epic convention by centrally placing the “hero’s” nekvia. Homer situates Odysseus’s nekvia in the eleventh book of The Odyssey and Virgil follows this precedent by placing Aeneas’s descent to the underworld in the sixth book of the Aeneid. Aeneas’s and Odysseus’s journeys to the underworld both involve the gaining of some sort of supernatural knowledge, and Henry’s journey to the underworld, depicted as a stay in the hospital, allows Henry to understand his poetic lineage (modulations on epic codes found in Virgil and Dante) as well as to converse with the shades of dead friends (from Homer, Virgil, and Dante). Though Henry is linked to Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante’s pilgrim in the nekvia, Berryman deviates from inherited epic codes through Henry’s lack of experiential growth.

The Classical epic code involving the hero’s willing descent into the underworld is manifested problematically in The Dream Songs. The final lines of “Song 77,” in addition to continuing the theme of tragic inevitability and the overall tragic mode of the “Songs,” involve references to both the Aeneid and Dante’s Divina Commedia. Here, the unnamed speaker assists Henry along on his journey:

thése fierce & airy occupations, and love,

raved away so many of Henry’s years

it is a wonder that, with in each hand

one of his own books and all,
ancient fires for eyes, his head full
& his heart full, he's making ready to move on. (14-19)

As the final lines of “Song 77” suggest, the unnamed speaker, like the Sybil from the Aeneid and Virgil from the Commedia, is preparing to guide Henry through the underworld that is to follow. In particular, Henry is quite similar to Dante the pilgrim in the Inferno who, too, has become at “odds” with the “world” that has led him to spiritual crisis: “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray / from the straight road and woke to find myself / alone in a dark wood” (1.1-3). Dante the pilgrim’s solitude at the beginning of the Inferno is comparable to Henry’s in “Song 1” in that both, through various transgressions, have become slightly “wicked” and “lost” in the “world.” But whereas Dante the pilgrim has the shade of Virgil as his guide through Hell, the unnamed speaker abandons Henry at the onset of the Op. posth. section to only sporadically re-emerge in the nekūia episode and not as Henry’s guide. And, too, whereas “Song 77” suggests Henry’s willingness to enter the underworld, “he’s making ready to move on,” “Song 78” (Op. posth. no. 1) suggests that Henry’s descent is contrary to his wishes:

Darkened his eye, his wild smile disappeared,
inapprehensible his studies grew,
nourished he less & less
his subject body with good food & rest,
something bizarre about Henry, slowly sheared
off, unlike you & you,

smaller & smaller, till in question stood
his eyeteeth and one block of memories
These were enough for him
implying commands from upstairs & from down,
Walt’s ‘orbic flex,’ triads of Hegel would
incorporate, if you please,

Into the know-how of the American bard
embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being,
and the younger Stephen Crane
of a powerful memory, of pain,
these stood the ancestors, relaxed and hard,
whilst Henry’s parts were fleeing. (1-18)

The first stanza of “Song 78” undermines the potentially epic stature of the first “Song” of the nekuiā. Henry does descend to the underworld, but this descent is the result of unwilling physical and psychological exhaustion: “inapprehensible his studies grew, / nourished he less & less / his subject body with good food & rest.” The unnamed speaker acting as the Sybil or the soul of Virgil in “Song 77” remains absent in “Song 78”; Henry’s journey to the underworld begun unwillingly also must be accomplished in isolation.

Henry’s mental and bodily collapse provides the impetus for his reception of “sacred knowledge.” Henry’s collapse precedes the “questioning” of his memory: “smaller & smaller, till in question stood / his eyeteeth and one block of memories.” The second stanza, then, signals that the acquisition of sacred knowledge during Henry’s nekuiā will call into “question” Henry’s experience in the preceding seventy-seven “Songs.” but Berryman problematizes this supposition with the line, “These were enough for him.” “These were enough for him,” the ninth line of the
poem, implies that Henry’s experiential knowledge “dying” has brought into question is not as unstable as the previous lines would seem to make it. This ninth line represents the moment when the poem pivots to the positive. Though Henry “dies” by not nourishing his “body” leading to his doubting of his own “memory” and “eyeteeth,” this doubting is suddenly dispelled by Henry’s reception of “sacred knowledge.”

Henry’s knowledge, similar to that gained by Aeneas of the future generations of Romans, is of the poetic tradition of which Henry is a part. Whitman, alluded to in “Song 22” and “Song 74” in terms of his generic cataloguing, is here explicitly named: “Walt’s ‘orbic flex.’” As Whitman is joined by Stephen Crane, both are related to Henry through a Hegelian dialectic that will “incorporate, if you please, into the know-how of the American bard.” Just as Dante’s pilgrim encounters a number of poets both contemporary and long dead in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, Henry encounters Stephen Crane and Whitman (Henry is to become “the younger Stephen Crane”) in a vision of intra-poetic relationships. And, too, like Aeneas in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Henry encounters these poetic antecedents as “the ancestors, relaxed & hard” that help clarify Henry’s position in the American literary tradition as the vision of the Romans to come helps clarify Aeneas’s role in the founding and future greatness of Rome. Henry, however, is not Aeneas possessing an originating function; Henry’s gaze here is focused backward as his “parts were fleeing,” opposite in tone but similar to the episode in the *Paradiso* when Dante’s pilgrim learns of his familial lineage from Cacciaguida.

The presence of epic codes inherited from both Virgil and Dante continue through the nekui and are employed in uncovering additional aspects of Henry’s “sacred knowledge.” As in the *Aeneid*, *The Odyssey*, and most prominently in Dante’s *Commedia*, the “hero” receives
knowledge from conversing with the shades of the dead. Henry announces that greeting the dead is one of his principal occupations in the underworld:

In slack times visit I the violent dead

and pick their awful brains. Most seem to feel

nothing is secret more

to my disdain I find, when we who fled

cherish the knowings of both worlds (88.1-5)

Henry here casually treats what to Dante’s pilgrim in the *Inferno* is of the utmost importance. Henry “visits” the “dead” in “slack times” and so contributes to the deflation of the epic “hero’s” quest in the underworld. But, like the souls Dante’s pilgrim encounters, the “violent dead” of Henry’s *nekuia* “seem to feel / nothing is secret more” and are quite willing, to Henry’s “disdain,” to discuss openly the “knowings of both worlds.” Of these “violent dead,” Henry encounters two are poets; Henry greets Dylan Thomas in “Song 88” (15), but in “Song 90,” Henry encounters Randall Jarrell. “Song 90” (*Op. posth. no. 13*), involving Henry’s summoning of the ghost of Randall Jarrell, briefly alludes again to Dante’s *Inferno*, but “Song 90” also evokes Odysseus journey to the underworld in *The Odyssey*:

In the night-reaches dreamed he of better graces,

of liberations, and beloved faces,

such as now ere dawn he sings.

It would not be easy, accustomed to these things,

to give up the old world, but he could try;

let it all rest, have a good cry.

120
Let Randall rest, whom your self-torturing
cannot restore one instant’s good to, rest:
he’s left us now.
The panic died and in the panic’s dying
so did my old friend. I am headed west
also, also, somehow.

In chambers of the end we’ll meet again
I will say Randall, he’ll say Pussycat
and all will be as before
whenas we sought, among the beloved faces,
eminence and were dissatisfied with that
and needed more. (1-18)

Randall Jarrell’s death after being hit by an automobile on a road outside of Chapel Hill in 1965
could have been suicide. The circumstances surrounding Jarrell’s death obliquely alludes to the
episode of the Inferno when Dante’s pilgrim travels through the circle of suicides in Canto 13.
Dante’s pilgrim, however, does not encounter any of his fellow poets in the circle of suicides;
Pier della Vigne, one of Dante’s poetic antecedents, is the only representative of poetic tradition
here, but he confines his remarks solely to the treachery of Frederick II’s court (Inferno 13.58-78). Thus, in terms of the textual evidence of “Song 90,” Henry’s encounter with Randall Jarrell
more directly alludes to Odysseus’s nekuia in The Odyssey.

Henry’s refusal to let Randall Jarrell “rest” in “Song 90” evokes the episode when
Odysseus, wishing to converse with Tiresias, sacrifices the lamb and ewe in order to attract the
shades of the underworld. After speaking with Tiresias and a number of other shades, Odysseus encounters the ghost of Achilles whom Odysseus greets with the words: “We ranked you with immortals in our lifetime, / we Argives did, and here your power is royal / among the dead men’s shades” (*The Odyssey* 11.465-521). Odysseus’s conversation with the slain Achilles is heart-wrenching as the two warriors, who at Troy were competitors, cannot alter their fates. Henry, who elsewhere in *The Dream Songs* is compared overtly to Achilles, is likened to Odysseus in Henry’s reverence for Jarrell, his old competitor who, like Achilles, now resides with the dead. Though they shared a healthy competition with one another, neither Odysseus and Achilles nor Henry and Jarrell were enemies; both pairs fought on the same side of a struggle: Odysseus-Achilles at Troy, Henry-Jarrell in terms of poetry in a country and cultural climate that “cared and cares so little for [verse]” (Berryman “One Answer to a Question: Changes 328). Jarrell, here depicted as a kind of warrior-poet, dies in a cultural and literary war and would be allowed to “rest” had not Henry-as-Odysseus summoned his spirit. Henry acknowledges that he “cannot restore one instant’s good to” the spirit of Jarrell and instead must go on living, must continue his epic journey. Again, Henry’s sense of inevitability, the fact that he is utterly at the mercy of the fate the world has dealt him, triumphs, and he knows that he is “headed west / also, also, somehow.” Henry knows that he, too, will join Randall Jarrell among the dead: “In the chambers of the end we’ll meet again / I will say Randall, he’ll say Pussycat / and all will be as before.”

In addition to the poignant lament over the death of Randall Jarrell, “Song 90” serves to reinforce further the connection between the figures of Odysseus and Henry that emerges as early as “Song 42.” “Song 42” implicates Henry as a kind of Odysseus through the involvement of the non-specific, speaking “I”:
O journeyer, deaf in the mould, insane
with violent travel & death: consider me
in my cast, your first son.
Would you were I by now another one,
witted, legged? I see you before me plain
(I am skilled: I hear, I see)— (1-6)

The “journeyer” here is Henry who in “Song 70” is specifically named “hero” (7), and his “journey” is explicitly evoked in both “Song 76” and “Song 77.” But the portrait of Henry in “Song 42” as “deaf in the mould, insane / with violent travel & death” alludes to Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens in Book 12 of The Odyssey in which Odysseus instructs his crew to stuff their ears with wax in order to protect them from the Sirens’ song that drives men insane (12.140-90). Odysseus, who remains tied to the mast without wax in his ears, becomes like Henry who, too, remains “deaf” to all20 and “insane” in his “travel” that can lead only to “death.”

In the context of “Song 42,” the speaking “I” is Henry’s son, “consider me / in my cast, your first son,” who becomes a figure of Telemachus to Henry-as-Odysseus. The speaking “I” of “Song 42,” however, conflates into Henry in “Song 90” when he says “I will say Randall, he’ll say Pussycat,” and this connection between individual “Songs” provides further evidence of Berryman’s complicated strategy of character and genre conflation. But regardless of the ambiguous, oscillating speaking “I,” there is strong evidence21 that, in addition to Henry’s approximation to Achilles, Odysseus also informs Henry’s character.

The approximations between Henry and epic characters present in both the nekuaia and in other “Songs,” however, have problematic consequences for the narrative development of the sequence. Unlike the Iliad, The Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Commedia and the three-fold journey
of the “hero” in Campbell’s study, the transformation of Henry-as-hero is completely lacking in *The Dream Songs*. Though Henry travels to the underworld and gains knowledge of his position within the American literary tradition and summons the ghost of Randall Jarrell among others, Henry emerges from the *nekuia* unchanged. The *nekuia* represents the single most significant structural component Berryman inherits from the epic tradition, and Henry’s failure to evolve as a character in addition to the failure of the *nekuia* to either advance or alter the narrative of the “Songs” renders Henry entirely static suggesting that epic cannot offer Henry a solution to his central dilemma and, by extension, all people for whom Henry speaks.

The final stanza of “Song 92” (*Room 231: the fourth week*), the lyric immediately following the *nekuia*, treats Henry’s recovery but also evokes the hope of change that ultimately fails:

Soon it will be dark. Soon you’ll see stars
you fevered after, child, man, & did nothing,—
compass live to the pencil-torch!
As still as his cadaver, Henry mars
this surface of an earth or other, feet south
eyes bleared west, waking to march. (14-19)

Though the line, “waking to march,” suggests that Henry, as in “Song 77,” will experience some other change, this change fails to materialize; Henry is left only with the hope of “seeing stars” sometime in the nonspecific future. Dante’s pilgrim, too, sees stars at the conclusion of each canticle of the *Commedia*, but whereas the pilgrim’s view of the “stars” indicates his experiential progress, Henry’s view of the “stars” is not, nor every will be, in reach. Henry here remains
nothing more than “his cadaver” that “mars / this surface of an earth,” a body and a blemish, stuck, as he always has been, inside of himself.

Henry’s inability to see the “stars” that he promises to be present “soon” is indicative of the role of epic codes in the whole narrative development of the “Songs.” Henry in context of the plethora of allusions to Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante’s pilgrim should create a sense that the narrative would, in some way, echo the narrative development of the epics Berryman evokes. Henry’s stasis as a character further suggests that The Dream Songs is a modulation on the epic genre as the “heroes” of Classical epic remain static. The portrait of Achilles we receive at the beginning of the Iliad is not radically different from Achilles at the conclusion of the work, and the same can be said of Odysseus and Aeneas. And the production of static characters, one of the defining generic signals of epic, is achieved principally through the manipulation of time.

Time behaves abnormally in epic; according to Lukács, epic time “has little reality [. . .]; men and destinies remain untouched by it; [time] has a dynamic of its own” (121). Epic, of course, allows for the passage of time; the war at Troy took a decade, and Aeneas and Odysseus wandered for years. But “what [epic characters] experience and the way they experience it has the blissful time-removed quality of the world of the gods” (Lukács 122). This concept is shared by Bakhtin: “The epic past is called the ‘absolute past’ for good reason: it is both monochronic and valorized (hierarchical); it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present” (“Epic and Novel” 15). The “absolute past” of epic explains a number of narrative codes that distinguish epic as a genre; in medias res becomes an acceptable position by which to begin the narrative as the “absolute past” is “as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over” (Bakhtin “Epic and Novel” 16).
Similarly, due to the "finished" nature of time, epic excludes dynamic characters. In the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Milton, the fact that they all address some originating moment (Homer and Virgil are concerned with the beginnings of national identity while Milton addresses the beginning of the world itself) excludes the potential for characters to evolve as the characters of these epics represent well-established cultural figures that are themselves already mythic in stature, already "finished" as the time in which they find themselves is "finished."  

Henry, however, is exceptionally static in relation to Achilles and the other epic "heroes" approximated to Henry, and his stasis, like those of the other epic heroes, can be seen in terms of how narrative time operates in *The Dream Songs*. Looking at "Song 1," the nekua, and "Song 385," it is evident that time remains an ambiguous factor in the "Songs." "Song 1" begins *in medias res*; Henry's "loss" has already occurred at sometime in the past and, as the present of the poem begins, he is suffering. Time extends from "Song 1" until "Song 77" when we learn that Henry is about to "die," and Henry remains "dead" until "Song 92" when he awakens and promises that "soon" we all will see "stars." Time then extends until "Song 385" finding Henry in autumn sometime near Thanksgiving, and this information is the only temporal data given to the reader. We know that time has passed like the ten years in front of the walls of Troy or the ten years of Odysseus's wanderings, but we don't know how much time has passed. Only the individual "Songs" that, like non-linear episodes in Classical epic or in Petrarchan sequences, are equally fore-grounded in the context of an absolute present remain. In his essay, "Odysseus’ Scar," Auerbach characterizes Homeric style as precisely this perpetual foregrounding that evades any distinction between present and past:

One might think that the many interpolations, the frequent moving back and forth, would create a sort of perspective in time and place; but the Homeric style never
gives such an impression. [ . . . ] [Any] such subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style; the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present. (7)

This model applies to the episodic development of the “Songs” where temporal orientation often is nearly impossible to discern. The impetus for progression in the sequence remains Henry coping with the “loss” of the “world,” but, as in Homeric narrative, Henry’s evocations of the past, for instance his father’s suicide in “Song 76,” do not contain a sense of temporal background but remain on the surface, fore-grounded in the presence of Henry’s (and the reader’s) consciousness. The “bullet on a concrete stoop / close by a smothering southern sea / [and Henry’s father] spread-eagled on an island, by [Henry’s] knee” is preceded by the admission, “in a modesty of death I join my father / who dared leave me so long ago” (76.7-11).

Henry’s attempt to provide an historical-biographical background fails here as he begins his discussion of the past with the preface, “in a modesty of death I join my father.” Henry’s prefatory remark remains solidly in the present and prevents the reader from understanding the suicide of the father as anything other than yet another admission of Henry’s sense of predestination, a further uncovering of his character in the immense, immediate present. Like the story of Odysseus’s “scar,” this brief tale of suicide remains fore-grounded as an additional impetus fueling Henry on his tract of tragic inevitability as well as a narrative feature designed to accentuate the complete stasis of Henry’s character.

Narrative development in *The Dream Songs* can best be seen in terms of this foregrounding. By refusing to allow a background capable of providing the depth of anterior
time that is temporally distant from Henry’s present and his “loss,” Berryman is free to pursue a more organic design for the “plot” of the sequence. The additive quality of the “Songs” is perhaps their most striking characteristic; the narrative structure of the first seventy-seven “Songs,” certainly capable of being open to interpretation in terms of Classical epic, falls away to the narrative structure of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest that, like Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, surrenders to sheer, organic proliferation. The silva, “a collection of encomiastic odes, epigrams, and other short verse kinds,” informs the genre of Leaves of Grass, and The Dream Songs, in its recurring use of open-ended epigrammatic, eighteen line lyrics, comes to represent a more formalized version of Whitman’s sequence. But balanced against the silva as represented by Leaves of Grass in all of its open-endedness, “variety and [...] appearance of spontaneity” that is present in so many of the “Songs” is that lingering sense of predestination, of Henry’s fate that, through its continual recurrence, suggests epic narrative strategies lying at the core of the Whitmanesque proliferation present in The Dream Songs.

The death that will come, the demise to be suffered at the hands of the “world” forever looming just over the horizon, and Henry, reminding the reader that “Soon it will fall dark. Soon you’ll see the stars,” all serve to draw the narrative of The Dream Songs forward toward a future that, especially after the nekuia, never materializes. The central tension of the poem remains this sense of fate struggling against the plethora of lyrics designed to divert the flow toward predestination. The considerable anticipation created at the onset of Berryman’s sequence in “Song 1” with the lines “What [Henry] has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be,” in close coordination with the function of “Song 1” as an initiation in medias, never finds a satisfactory release or closure (13-4). Anticipation, what Genette terms “temporal prolepsis” and which dually serves as both a generic code of Classical epic and the novel, manifests itself
through Henry’s gloomy prophecy and emerges to then dissipate repeatedly in *The Dream Songs* (67). Tension and relaxation, tragedy followed moments of high comedy, a narrative that loses its own thread to pick it up again over the course of numerous “Songs,” all in a way evoke the strategy of narration found in Classical epic, but where *The Dream Songs* most significantly deviates from epic as a genre is the failure of fate’s fulfillment. Homeric narration, which Todorov calls “the prophetic future” that “appears in different kinds of predictions [and is] always seconded by a description of the predicted action once it has occurred,” cannot be applied to *The Dream Songs* (*The Poetics of Prose* 63). Henry concludes the poem in “Song 385” in the conditional, and though Berryman approximates Henry and the sequence as a whole to a host of epic models, epic figures, Petrarchism, and the canonical tragedies and comedies of the Western literary tradition, there is the poignant absence of both closure and the possibility of change in Henry’s final lines:

If there were a middle ground between things and the soul

or if the sky resembled more the sea,

I wouldn’t have to scold

my heavy daughter. (16-9)

The “temporal prolepsis” does not slacken, destiny has not been decided, and Henry and the text of the “Songs” remain open. There is still an opportunity to experience the “dark” and to “see stars” if Henry can find some “middle ground.”
Conclusion: The Plural Text of The Dream Songs

“Leaving behind the country of the dead [. . . ]
forever, and he took with him five books,
a Whitman & a Purgatorio,
a one-volume dictionary,
an Oxford Bible with all its bays & nooks
& bafflements long familiar to Henry
& one other new book - O.” (The Dream Songs 279.1-12)

Perhaps the most difficult interpretative task in treating The Dream Songs involves determining the limits of Berryman’s text. Stylistically, The Dream Songs owes much of its disembodied syntax to the language of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,¹ and, on one level, both The Dream Songs and Bradstreet can be seen as illustrating the conflict of the poetic sensibility against an intolerant “world.” Thematic similarity compounded by stylistic continuity in context of Berryman’s evolving relationship with his literary and philosophical precursors made evident in the stances taken by Henry, Bradstreet, and the speaking “I”s of both texts at least demonstrates a degree of cohesion in Berryman’s vision but at most generates a blurring of boundaries separating the “Songs” from Bradstreet. Interpreting Bradstreet in terms of canon formation and interaction, as Golding does, illustrates the similarities and slippage between that text and The Dream Songs; Berryman’s attempts at self-insertion into the American literary canon in Bradstreet through the “I”s” attempts to seduce Anne Bradstreet become less explicit but more ambitious in The Dream Songs where Henry, in love with no single figure, becomes the jilted lover of the “world.” The macrological shift in the recipient of the subject’s (Henry / “I”) affection finds a parallel in the wide variety of inter-textual relationships created in the “Songs.” Just as Henry has lost the love of the wider “world,” the “Songs” attempts to insert itself into the
wider context of world literature—an expansion of context both incorporating and adding to the narrow field of the American canon found in Bradstreet or the Petrarchan / Renaissance sonnet sequences in Sonnets to Chris. Walt Whitman and Berryman’s (mostly) male contemporaries² displace Anne Bradstreet in the “Songs” as exemplars of the American poetic tradition, but the strategy of subsuming canonical figures and texts so as to expand and complicate the reader’s interpretations is evident in the earliest of Berryman’s sequences.

The limits of Berryman’s “Songs” viewed from the perspective of inter-textuality among Sonnets to Chris, Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, and The Dream Songs either is partially solved or problematized further by Berryman’s choice to publish. All three of the works above were approved by Berryman for release, and though they create a continuum of development in terms of characterization, style, and theme, the convention of publication renders them separable and, to a degree, “closed” by virtue of being what Tanselle terms “artifacts” (68-9). Tanselle differentiates between “texts” and “works” claiming that the “verbal text, whether spoken or written down, is an attempt to convey a work,” and that due to the act of publishing in the case of “texts,” the critic can only limitedly discuss “an artificat [and] not [...] the work, [...] only the text of [the work] that happens to appear in the artifact” (69). Whereas Berryman’s titles suggest this separation of his “work” into “texts,” his use of and innovations upon the Petrarchan sonnet sequence indicates to Runchman, Ricks, and Matterson³ that Berryman’s sequences from Sonnets to Chris through The Dream Songs to Love & Fame are inter-dependent parts of Berryman’s larger poetic project.

Though a great deal of editorial theory is concerned with unraveling the textual complications that arise from the act of publishing and views all “texts” as extremely suspect, unstable cultural items,⁴ the limits of the “text” of Berryman’s “Songs” can be viewed more
conventionally in terms of the titles he approved for mass consumption. Despite the affinities shared by Sonnets to Chris, Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, and The Dream Songs as well as the theoretical difficulties brought to light by viewing them inter-textually as aspects of Berryman's "work," the limits of The Dream Songs as an isolated text remain fluid due to the extra-textual "Songs" not included either in 77 Dream Songs or His Toy, His Dream, His Rest. Of these "Songs" Berryman chose to exclude, the last stanza of "Henry's Fate" particularly addresses itself to a number of textual and thematic issues in The Dream Songs:

He crusht a cigarette out. Crusht him out

surprising God, at last, in a wink of time.

His soul was forwarded.

Adressat unbekannt. The little girls with a shout
welcomed the dazzling package. In official rime

the official verdict was: dead. (13-8)

Lying outside of the text bearing the title The Dream Songs, "Henry's Fate" problematically provides resolution to the teleological difficulties inherent in Henry's sense of tragic inevitability as well as aspects of the narrative development of the "Songs." Henry is "officially" declared "dead" in "Henry's Fate"; outside of the context of the nekula, Henry's "death" can be taken as authentic and final, and here is confirmed the sense of unalterable destiny serving the function of isolation that, in turn, helps both to generate the tragic mode and to create the allusion to epic structure found in the "Songs." In addition, Henry's battles with "God," a conflict made explicit as early in The Dream Songs as "Song 13, "God's Henry's enemy," but which is implicated in Henry's conflicts with both the figures of the "world" and his "father," is shown in "Henry's Fate" as finding ambiguous resolution. The suddenness of Henry's "death," "surprising God,"
suggests a kind of afterlife, but Henry does not know whether his soul is destined for heaven or hell: “His soul forwarded. / Adressat unbekannt.” And such information never is revealed. All that is known is that “[the] little girls with a shout / welcomed the dazzling package” of Henry’s death delivered and accompanied by “official” proof of its authenticity. Though “Henry’s Fate” when viewed in the context of *The Dream Songs* provides confirmation of Henry’s constant, prophetic foreboding, the fact that “Henry’s Fate” ultimately lies outside of the text of *The Dream Songs* undermines any assertions made concerning the teleological movement of the narrative development of the “Songs.” That solutions to the narrative of Henry and *The Dream Songs* exist extra-textually adds yet another dimension to Berryman’s sequence that, as has been shown, already involves itself in numerous conversations with a plethora of other texts.

The inter-textuality of *The Dream Songs*, then, can be seen as operating in two directions simultaneously. *The Dream Songs* remains conversant internal to Berryman’s “work” mainly through the stylistic strategies and thematic affinities shared with *Bradstreet* and through the continuation of Henry’s development in *Henry’s Fate & Other Poems*. But the sequence also incorporates key texts of the Western canon so as to suggest the generic identity of the “Songs” and to orient the reader. Centripetal elements of style, theme, tone, and character are balanced against the centrifugal aspects of Berryman’s text that constantly pull the reader to other texts: to Petrarch, to Whitman, to Dante, to Classical epic, and to Berryman’s contemporaries. And these two forces that appeal both to the continuity and unity of Berryman’s “work,” while simultaneously suggesting and reinforcing the difference among the “texts” that constitute it, serve to “open” *The Dream Songs* to plurality.

The element of plurality that permeates Berryman’s language demonstrates the self-conscious manner by which *The Dream Songs* attempts to meta-fictionally assert itself. In
addition to performing the functions of ironically undermining the notion of the “hero” and problematizing generic understanding, the elements of Classical epic (in medias res, the nekuiia) also engage in the meta-fiction of the journey of the “hero” in Western literature. When Henry is compared overtly to “achilles” in “Song 14” in context of the speaker’s “boredom” with all “great literature,” a tear is created in the fabric of the sequence that exposes the text of the “Songs” to be just that—a consciously constructed text that participates with other texts that, too, are constructed consciously. The Classical epic conventions The Dream Songs deploys, conventions like the nekuiia (structural, micrological) or the operation of “fate” in a “world” that represents a “totality of experience” (thematic, macrological), are initiated only to have the expectations they entail betrayed by subsequent events. Though the nekuiia gives Henry knowledge, that knowledge is never practically utilized; and, similarly, though Henry’s “fate” is intoned repeatedly, the realization of prophecy never materializes other than in extra-textual space. Generic modulation in the “Songs,” therefore, is contrasted sharply to how generic modulation operates for Berryman’s antecedents.

Henry’s “journey” through Berryman’s text(s) does not represent merely the modern equivalent of Aeneas, Odysseus, Achilles, or Dante’s pilgrim, but, like all things else concerning The Dream Songs, Henry’s “journey” entails a plurality of intention. Henry comes to represent a doubled commentary on both the situation of the American man of letters at mid-century as well as on the state of American and European literature from their earliest beginnings to the present of Berryman’s poem. Like the unnamed speaker exercising his extremely complex linguistic “play” that at once reinforces and problematizes the modes of the “Songs,” Henry and the network of allusions and contexts he entails becomes the figure through which heteroglossia comes to dominate the text. Henry evokes the Petrarchan lover, the fated epic “hero,” the
dancing minstrel, the tragic “fool” who wears a crown, and the hopelessly obsessed “Don,” and Henry often evokes these aspects of himself simultaneously. Or, as Hutcheon claims for the postmodern text:

Postmodernism both asserts and undercuts [the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object], in its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the “world.” But it is not a return to the world of “ordinary reality” [. . .]; the “world” in which these texts situate themselves is the “world” of discourse, the “world” of texts and intertexts. (125)

Henry’s “reality” and the “reality” of the “Songs” remains this “world” of “text and intertext,” and it is in this context that the lack of telos in the “Songs” must be understood.

Henry does not progress; he is a prisoner inside of his isolation and “loss.” He cannot escape and refuses all assistance from his unnamed “friend.” Henry predicts his death, journeys to the underworld, returns to the land of the living relatively unchanged. Henry lusts, desires, successfully seduces at moments, is rejected at others. Henry wars with God, is thrust into situations of epic dimension, fashions himself an “achilles,” an Odysseus, an Aeneas, a pilgrim but knows no end to his “journey.” Henry is obsessed, delusional, fearful of “following” his “father” in suicide. He muses on the state of his “world,” the “woolen lover” that jilts, isolates, and tortures while “bearing” Henry’s “songs” “to be.” He knows he must “scold” his “heavy daughter,” but we do not know if he does. The figure of Henry and the narration that colors his existence resemble Barthes’s concept of the writerly text, the text that has not yet become a “thing”:
The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (5)

The plurality of Henry and, ultimately, the plurality of Berryman’s narrative strategies, prevent The Dream Songs from becoming this “traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized” text “closed” to the “infinite play” of meaning. Everywhere there is slippage, “entrances,” “the opening of networks”; everywhere The Dream Songs spills into other texts as other texts spill into The Dream Songs. Like Henry’s unfolding “journey” incapable of progression, circular, and perpetually present, Berryman’s sequence doggedly asserts its “openness,” its own static circularity across 385 lyrics. The narrative of Berryman’s text, like Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, suggests a vertigo of presence without the hope of progression that cannot and will not be dispelled. Whether or not Henry will “scold” his “heavy daughter” is of no more importance than whether or not Godot will arrive; the “world” will remain the same, the “sky” will not “[resemble] more the sea,” and Henry will be alone to “bear & be.”
Notes

Introduction


2 Approximately twenty-five “Songs” in Berryman’s sequence contain one or two additional lines though their number does not significantly alter structural effect or regularity. The “Songs” containing additional lines include numbers 18, 36, 38, 73, 74, 77, 92, 96, 99, 115, 138, 144, 167, 213, 215, 230, 253, 326, 334, 342, 351, 364, 376, 378, 385.

3 Though Berryman often employs rhyme in the “Songs,” there is no consistent scheme cross-textually.

4 A survey of the current critical literature available on Berryman ultimately reveals the tendency to read Berryman into Henry as has been the practice since Berryman’s earliest critics such as Haffendon and Arpin. There is a great deal of evidence to support this view. Haffendon quotes from Berryman’s 1957 journal in John Berryman: A Critical Commentary: “I am a strange man, not unitary like other people. I am really Henry Pussycat, and I am also a bastard [. ..]” (50). Reading Henry as Berryman remains one of the dominant critical approaches to The Dream Songs.

5 John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (New York: New York University Press, 1980) 42. By the mid-1950s, Berryman had decided to make his own life available as subject matter for the “Songs.”

Chapter 1

1 *Sonnets to Chris* was the original title of the collection completed in 1947; the title, *Berryman's Sonnets*, was used for the collection’s first publication in 1967. References of publication dates can be found in Kelly’s *John Berryman: A Checklist* and Stefanik’s *John Berryman: A Descriptive Bibliography*.

2 *Dream Songs* (1964) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968) first appeared together under the title *The Dream Songs* in 1969.


4 Durling’s translations of Petrarch’s lyrics do not correspond to Petrarch’s original line numbers. I will cite only the page number of Durling’s edition in which the translation can be found when dealing with whole lyrics, and I will cite the line numbers and the page number of the translation when referencing a portion of a lyric.

5 Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 52. “Petrarch’s fictional accomplishment—never named before this but always an implicit basis of his poetic influence—is to fuse the fragmented lyricism of the traditional collections, Roman, Provençal, and Italian, with the fictional continuum of Menippean satire; he creates a chain of lyrics as integral as the latter, as interchangeable as the former” (Greene 52).

6 Runchman, “‘Continuity with Lovers Dead,’” 32. The title, *Berryman’s Sonnets*, was suggested by Robert Giroux in connection with the title, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, given by


8 “Sonnet 75” is found on page 108 of Thornbury’s edition.

9 John Berryman, “The Sonnets,” Berryman’s Shakespeare, ed. John Haffendon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) 287. Berryman’s thoughts on Shakespeare’s Sonnets represent just one of the many contradictions between what Berryman states in his letters, journals, and essays and what his texts demonstrate: “Shakespeare’s sonnets, taken as a whole, do not make an artistic impression [. . .]; the poet’s effort differs wildly in degree, there is no steady attention to craft; numerous as they are, the best like the worst appear to be thrown off, impulsive. [Also], they follow no general model.” This last line is particularly ironic considering that both Shakespeare and Berryman employ similar narrative strategies in their sequences.

10 “Sonnet 1” is found on page 71 of Thornbury’s edition.

11 “Sonnet 18” is not part of Shakespeare’s sequence that treats the “Dark Lady.” Berryman’s parody of the “Dark Lady” is implied throughout Sonnets to Chris by the speaker’s insistence on referring to Chris as “Lady,” a Petrarchan convention upon which Shakespeare parodies.

12 “Sonnet 114” is found on page 127 of Thornbury’s edition.

13 Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary, 9. The composition of the first stanza of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet predates Sonnets to Chris by several months; the
former's composition took precisely five years—from the 22nd of March 1948 to the 22nd of March 1953—a point in which Berryman took a great deal of pride.

14 Stanza “20” of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet can be found on page 140 of Thornbury’s edition.


18 I choose to modify the speaking “I” of Berryman’s The Dream Songs with masculine pronouns due to the conflated nature of the “I” with the unnamed figure and Henry.

19 Haffendon, The Life of John Berryman, 340. Berryman and his wife, Kate, arrived in Dublin in September of 1966. “Song 311” suggests that the “I” in “Song 312” is Henry: “An old mistress recently rang up, / here in Ireland, to see how Henry was” (311.13-4).

20 As early in the sequence as “Song 4,” Henry is represented as having little control over his sexual desires: “Fainting with interest, I hungered back / and only the fact of her husband & four other people / kept me from springing on her” (4-6). About which the Henry and the unnamed minstrel speaker of the “Songs” remark: “There ought to be a law against Henry. / — Mr. Bones: there is” (16-18).

21 As is demonstrated in the second chapter, the unnamed speaker does attempt to rescue Henry from utter isolation, but the unnamed speaker fails to do so.

22 “Song 385” of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest. Berryman left Henry’s Fate and Other Poems unfinished at the time of his death.
23 Henry goes by two family names in *The Dream Songs*: “Henry Pussy-cat” (19.13) and “Henry House” (12.5). “Song 385” contains an obvious pun on the latter.

24 Henry does suffer a kind of “death” in the beginning of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* during the *Op. posth.* section, but this section represents an epic episode that alludes to the dimension of genre in *The Dream Songs*.

Chapter 2


4 Haffendon, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary*, 47. Haffendon quotes from Berryman’s unpublished manuscripts: “[The unnamed speaker] was to be Henry’s ‘enemy’ at the start, later his ‘friend’ and ‘confidant’ [. . .].”

5 While Curzan’s discussion of African American English linguistics is not comprehensive, it is sufficient for comparison in this context. Berryman’s use of dialect loosely mimics African American speech, and the inclusion of the word “coon” in line 7 of “Song 2” suggests an underlying racism in *The Dream Songs*. I will suggest, however, that Berryman’s use of minstrel dialect forms part of the linguistic and figural “othering” present in the “Songs.”
6 M. M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 62. Literature represents one kind of secondary speech genre: “Secondary (complex) speech genres—novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth—arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on.”

7 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 52. “Signifyin(g) is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis [. . .]. To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g).”

8 Ibid. 50. Gates adopts Bakhtin’s concept of parody as a model for Signifyin(g).


12 Henry and the unnamed speaker each refer to the other as “friend” in “Song 60,” and the two figures reach an “understanding” in “Song 67.”
13 Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Modern Literary Theory, ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, 4th ed. (London: Hodder Headline Group, 2001) 384-5. “[Instances of metonymy] cross the boundary of the culture of enunciation through a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning. For each of these instances of ‘a difference that is almost the same but not quite’ inadvertently creates a crisis for the cultural priority given to the metaphoric as the process of representation and substitution which negotiates the difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications. In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy.”

14 Ibid. 384.

15 Haffendon, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary, 48. Berryman was well-acquainted with Auden’s “Balaam and his Ass” and wrote a positive review of Auden’s The Dyer’s Hand in the article “Auden’s Prose” for The New York Times Review of Books (29 August 1963).


limitedness, and order.” The definitional limitations placed on “play” separates it from “both comedy and folly: ‘The category of the comic is connected with folly in the highest and lowest sense of that word. Play, however, is not foolish. It lies outside of the antithesis of wisdom and folly.’”


19 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, Norton Critical Edition, trans. Burton Raffel, ed. Diana de Armas Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) 408. “So if [Don Quijote’s] crazy, and he is, and if craziness makes you look at one thing and see another, and it makes you say white is black and black is white—the way he did when he said those windmills were giants, and those monks’ big mules were camels, and those flocks of sheep were enemy armies, and all kinds of nonsense like that—it shouldn’t be hard to convince him that some peasant girl, the first one I bump into around here, is his Lady Dulcinea—and if he doesn’t believe it, I’ll swear it’s true—and if he swears she isn’t, I’ll swear she is—and if he’s stubborn, I’ll be stubborner, and that’s the way I’ll come out on top, no matter what happens.”

20 Northrop Frye, “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes,” *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 38. Frye ties the concept of inevitability with that of a character’s exposed position bound to social standing: “The exposed position is usually the place of leadership, in which a character is exceptional and isolated at the same time, giving us that curious blend of the inevitable and the incongruous which is peculiar to tragedy.”

“Song 67” with its allusions to the miracles of Christ a piece of figural foreshadowing that shows Henry to be a type of Christ (Auerbach’s figura) capable of achieving the mystery of resurrection.


23 Ibid. 37. “Tragedy in the central or high mimetic sense, the fiction of the fall of the leader (he has to fall because that is the only way in which a leader can be isolated from society), mingles the heroic with the ironic. In elegiac romance the hero’s mortality is primarily a natural fact, the sign of his humanity; in high mimetic tragedy it is also a social and moral fact.”

24 Ibid. 39. Frye defines the alazon as an “imposter, someone who pretends or tries to be more than he is. The most popular types of alazon are the miles gloriosus and the learned crank or obsessed philosopher.” Of these are included Tamburlaine and Othello (miles gloriosus) as well as Faust and Hamlet (obsessed philosopher).” Henry as alazon is contrasted to the unnamed speaker as eiron, the figure engaged in ironic reflexivity.

25 Stephen Booth, “On the Greatness of King Lear,” King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy (Yale University: Yale University Press, 1983), rpt. in William Shakespeare’s King Lear: Modern Critical Interpretations, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 59. King Lear is a giant amplification of the principle of simultaneous likeness and difference, unity and division, [and] its primary quality—the sense it gives both of defined identity and limitless amorphousness—is only a variation on, and extension of, that principle.”

26 The Folio of 1623 gives the Fool another line at 3.6.82, “And I’ll go to bed at noon.” Regardless of this textual issue, the Fool disappears from King Lear at the end of 3.6 to reappear only in Lear’s speech at the conclusion of the play.

27 Berryman, The Dream Songs, 109. “Song 92 Room 231: the fourth week.”
28 John Berryman, Berryman's Shakespeare, ed. John Haffendon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). Berryman’s critical engagement with King Lear began in the 1940s and continued until his death. In addition to a definitive critical edition of Shakespeare’s text (never completed), Berryman wrote numerous articles and essays about the play and corresponded with major Shakespearean scholars about the text (W. W. Greg and Mark van Doren). Berryman dedicated His Toy, His Dream, His Rest in part to the latter, who was also Berryman’s professor at Columbia. Due to Berryman’s considerable engagement with Shakespeare’s text, the parallels existing between The Dream Songs and King Lear, I believe, are quite intentional.

29 Haffendon, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary, 48. “Although his presence is felt everywhere in The Dream Songs, [the unnamed speaker] figures in direct speech very little: only eighteen times in 77 Dream Songs, and thirteen times in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest [. . .]. His voice is that of democracy, of what commonly passes for common sense, of sanity, of religious orthodoxy, of admonition, and of exhortation.”


Chapter 3

1 Aristotle, Poetics, On Man and the Universe, trans. Samuel Henry Butcher, ed. Louise Ropes Loomis (Roslyn NY: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1943) 437-8. Aristotle identifies that, considering the characters, action, etc. of epic, epic and tragedy would seem to be of the same
literary type. The central difference between epic and tragedy is “scale”: “Epic poetry differs from tragedy in the scale on which it is constructed, and in its meter. [Tragedy] must be capable of being brought within a single view. [. . .] But in epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these [. . .] add mass and dignity to the poem.”

2 David Thompson, *Dante’s Epic Journeys* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 26. The dominance of Neo-Platonic theory in the Middle Ages led many (Bernard Silvestris, et al.) to interpret the epics of Homer and Virgil in terms of personality allegory, i.e. Odysseus and Aeneas as kinds of the Christian “everyman” whose physical journeys corresponded to spiritual transcendence. The functions of the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey* were quite different, however, for Virgil’s and Homer’s pre-Christian audiences.

3 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997) 14-7. Bloom’s theory of influence that he terms “mispriision” consists of six “revisionary ratios” (*clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis,* and *apophrades*) that the poet experiences in relation to his or her “precursor” so as to emerge as a truly “strong” and “original” poet.


5 Ibid. 57. Berryman was occupied with Achilles as an archetype for Henry as late as 1968 with “Song 320” which Haffendon hypothesizes was the last “Song” Berryman wrote.
Berryman’s unpublished papers contain a diagram outlining the parallelism between 77 Dream Songs and the books of the Iliad (the number of the “Song” corresponding the episodes of the Iliad appears in parentheses):

I. Quarrel—“Huffy Henry” (1)
V. Diomedes vs gods—“God bless Henry” (13)
VIII. Trojans to wall—“Silent Song” (52)
IX. Overtures to Achilles—“A Capital at Wells” (6); “Life, friends” (14)
X. Doloneia—“I met a junior” (98); “Her properties” (115)
XII. Hektor storms wall—“Henry is old” (7)
XIV. Zeus conned—“Filling her compact” (4); “Love her he doesn’t” (69)
XVIII. Achilles’ armour—“Supreme my holdings” (64)
XIX. Feud-end—(OUT)—The 3 Frost (Three Around the Old Gentleman) (37-9)
XXIII. Funeral and games—[same “Songs” as XIX. Feud-end]
XXIV. Priam and Achilles—“Peter’s not friendly” (55); “Henry’s Confession” (76); “Pulling” (unpublished); “Seedy Henry” (77)

As Haffendon asserts, “[there] is clearly much that is a posteriori about these approximations, and despite his efforts to categorise (sic) the Songs, the importance of the Iliad to Berryman’s sense of structure remained a matter of example rather than of strict equivalence.”


Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 153. Fowler recognizes the diverse use of epic cataloguing in addition to the scope it provides: “[Cataloguing also] glances at other
legends, ‘matters’ that are to be treated, and so suggests a literary context for the work, perhaps also communicating the poet’s ideas for other projects—as when Milton’s catalogue of devils reflects interests he planned at one time to explore in separate works. Or else it is ordered, like Homer’s, as a structural pattern.” Neither of these alternatives is present in The Dream Songs as Berryman does not use cataloguing in any consistent way (Homer’s structure) or as suggestions for other texts (Milton). Berryman’s cataloguing exists only at the local level of individual “Songs” and as an expedient to illustrate aspects of Henry’s character.

9 Whitman’s speaker in “Song of Myself” makes several pronouncements that equate to Nietzsche’s apocalyptic vision and tone: “I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over, / My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths” (43.1-2); “And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me. / [. . . ] And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths, / (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)” (49.1-10). Whitman’s views on death and faith can be seen in light of Nietzsche’s concept of the “eternal recurrence.”

10 Whitman’s opening enunciation in “Song of Myself” should be compared to the enunciations beginning both Classical epic (Homer, Virgil) as well as Christian epic (Milton): “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” (Iliad 1.1); “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story / of that man skilled in the ways of contending” (Odyssey 1.1-2); “Arms and the man I sing, [. . . ] / Tell me, O Muse, the cause” (Aeneid 1.1-8); “Of Man’s first disobedience and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree [. . . ] / Sing Heav’nly Muse” (Paradise Lost 1.1-6). Though Whitman draws upon the convention of making a pronouncement that he is about to “sing,” his modification of the epic code does not appeal to any “muse” for inspiration in “Song of Myself.”
Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 102. Fowler identifies the epic *invocatio*, the invocation of the muse (see note 10), as one of the many generic signals indicating that the given text belongs to the epic genre. It is important to note that Berryman makes no appeal to the muses at any point in *The Dream Songs*.

M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 25. Rosenthal places “Song of Myself” alongside “Calamus” and “Drum-Taps” as inspiring the modern American poetic sequence. Rosenthal also claims that Dickinson’s fascicles, especially fascicles 15 and 16, equally inform the modern poetic sequence. However, Berryman’s use of Whitman’s narrative strategies and the similarities among the titling of *The Dream Songs, Leaves of Grass*, and “Song of Myself” suggest a stronger generic connection. It could be argued, however, that Berryman inherits the local strategy of fragmentation from Dickinson.


Ibid. 53. Haffendon arranges the 77 *Dream Songs* to correspond with Berryman’s own approximations in relation to Campbell’s work:

**DEPARTURE**

“Huffy Henry” (1) The Call to Adventure

Refusal of the Call

“Muttered Henry” (17) Supernatural Aid

“Turning it over” (75) The Crossing of the First Threshold

“There sat down once” (29) The Belly of the Whale

**INITIATION**

“Henry sats” (5) The Road of Trials
“Filling her compact” (4)  The Meeting with the Goddess
“During his father’s” (6)  The Woman as Temptress
“No visitors” (54)  Atonement with the Father
“Nothin’ very bad” (76)  Apotheosis
“Of 1826” (22)  The Ultimate Boon
“I don’t operate often” (67)

RETURN

“Silent Song” (52)  Refusal of the Return
“The greens of the Ganges” (27)  The Magic Flight
(An unparticularised Song  Rescue from Without
about the Friend)
“The glories of the world” (26)  The Crossing of the Return Threshold
Master of the Two Worlds
“Seedy Henry” (77)  Freedom to Live

15 Odysseus gains both practical knowledge (how to avoid Charybdis) as well as prophetic knowledge (that among other things, that he will die an old man) from Tiresias in the underworld; Aeneas gains knowledge of the lineage of great Romans he will put in motion from his father, Anchises.

16 Dante’s use of Virgil as a guide for the pilgrim in the Inferno and the Purgatorio is evidence of both the power of the intra-poetic relationship between Dante’s text and Virgil’s as well as evidence of Dante’s own generic modulation on the Aeneid.
Haffendon, *The Life of John Berryman*, 200. Haffendon quotes from one of Berryman's notes: “Crane's bad luck under Kipling, mine no doubt under Lowell.” Berryman felt immense competitive pressure with both Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell and here identifies with Stephen Crane's literary position being overshadowed by Kipling. In addition to personally identifying with Crane, Berryman wrote a critical study of Stephen Crane, and it has been suggested that the character name “Henry” is borrowed from the “hero” of Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The dialectical triad is the principal vehicle through which history progresses for Hegel. Berryman’s use of it in “Song 78,” however, relates more to Whitman’s poetry in which the various, opposing phenomena Whitman’s speaking “I” encounters undergo a process of sublimation that further enriches the “I.” Whitman’s Tiresias-like proclamations that claim to know the opposites of life (e.g. male-female, free man-slave) are evidence of a kind of dialectic moving through the poems that produces the “American bard,” Whitman, as the synthesis of the American “kosmos.”

Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso, The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1970). The pilgrim’s encounter with Cacciaguida occurs in Cantos 15-17 of *Paradiso*. This episode, itself similar to Aeneas’s encounter with Achises in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, involves the discovery of origins—an epic code to which Berryman alludes in “Song 78.”

Henry’s description of being “deaf” connects to his inability to accept the unnamed speaker’s companionship (“comedic community”). Refer to the discussion of the unnamed speaker and Sancho Panza in the second chapter.
21 Henry is explicitly compared to Odysseus in “Song 382” and in “Song 383.” After suffering another of his “deaths” in “Song 382”: “she dances Henry away” (18); Henry awakes and considers Poseidon in “Song 383”: “Poseidon, / ruined on Sounion, cares, in the hard cold wind, / who gave hell to Odysseus” (16-8).

22 One notable exception to the static epic character is Dante’s pilgrim who remains quite dynamic in the Commedia. However, like static characters existing in “absolute time,” Dante’s hero is an extension of time. The Commedia is not situated in an originating position but in Dante’s contemporary world (the year of the action in the poem is 1300), and this allows for the pilgrim to change. Freed from the mythic stature preventing the heroes of the Iliad, The Odyssey, the Aeneid, and Paradise Lost from evolving, Dante’s pilgrim, learning from his experiential journey, becomes similar to the hero of the novel.

23 Fowler, Kinds of Literature, 134-5. Fowler views Leaves of Grass, like Stevenson’s Underwoods and Lowell’s Notebook, as a complicated modulation on the genre of silva.

24 Ibid. 135.

Conclusion

Contemporary American poets and writers Berryman mentions in individual “Songs” includes Randall Jarrell, Hemingway, Faulkner, Frost, Roethke, Delmore Schwartz (who shares the dedication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* with Mark van Doren), William Meredith, Saul Bellow, Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Howard Nemerov, and Allen Tate. “Song 172,” interestingly enough, includes a direct address to Sylvia Plath:

You were christened in the beginning Sylvia Plath

and changed that name for Mrs Hughes and bred

and went around the bend

till the oven seemed the proper place for you. (4-7)


G. Thomas Tanselle, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989) 74. “[Every] verbal work must be reconstructed, no text of any such work is ever definitive.”

Works Cited


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