# “So-called *black*”: Reassessing John Berryman’s Blackface Minstrelsy

Peter Maber

Keywords: Berryman, John. Blackface Minstrelsy. American Poetry. Race.

This article offers a reassessment of the racial performances of *The Dream Songs*. Whereas previous criticism has focused for the most part upon Berryman’s source, Carl Wittke’s *Tambo and Bones*, this article considers the minstrelsy elements in a far broader context: in the context of the original minstrel shows (not filtered through Wittke’s nostalgia), dialect literature, modernism’s racial ventriloquisms, 1950s and 60s liberalism; and in the light of recent theories of race and minstrelsy. Most discussions, furthermore, have attempted to resolve the question of legitimacy: this article, by contrast, pursues the line that representations are not inherently any one thing, in order to get beyond the limitations of essentialist readings. Such a view is most in keeping with the instability of Berryman’s racial masquerade. The fluidity of role in the *Songs* is examined, and close (re-)readings are offered, which illuminate the ambivalent relations between language and race.

**"So-called *black*": Reassessing John Berryman's Blackface Minstrelsy**

John Berryman's decision to have his main character Henry in *The Dream Songs* perform "sometimes in blackface" came as a shock (*Songs* vi). Not only did the inclusion of dialect radically unsettle his once conservative literary voice, but here was a liberal intellectual in the 1960s apparently reverting to the crudest racial stereotyping of the past. Here was a character appearing to black up in the minstrel tradition to become "Mr. Bones", performing minstrelsy skits with his fellow "end man", and speaking in a dialect that approximated the offensive invention of white racists. Early responses to the poem were mostly so confused that the shock was somewhat mitigated by the general sense of disorientation; as critics began to unpick the *Songs*' many-leveled influences the minstrelsy elements began to be examined in more detail, and uncertainty over how to react to them gave way to the sense of a need to account for them, an urge to explain away that has led to traduction of their actual content and their function. Surveying the whole body of criticism today it becomes clear that little perspective has ever been gained on this problematic mode. There is an urgent need for a reassessment and indeed a reorientation of this perplexing and uncompromising aspect of one of the mid-twentieth century's most important poems.

Despite their varied interpretations discussions of *The Dream Songs*' blackface are almost invariably framed in terms of an argument about legitimacy. Most critics, seemingly embarrassed by this anachronistic usage – coterminous with the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s – have sought to justify the move. Kathe Davis, despite going further than most in analysing the constitution and function of the dialect, epitomises the tendency to plead exculpation on Berryman's behalf. She concedes that

"Berryman's use of [blackface dialect] may seem questionable if that literary and stage tradition is seen to represent a history of white expropriation", but insists that "Berryman made it clear that he meant the dialect to express himself as 'imaginary Negro' […] going beyond mere sympathy to an imaginative identification with oppressed peoples" (33-34). The difficulties with these sorts of claims are multiple. Berryman's intentions may differ from what he actually achieves. Furthermore, the phrasing of blackface dialect's connotations as a choice needs qualification: whilst its entire history and usage are bound up with competing white impulses – love and theft as Eric Lott has it – its consistent *raison d'être*, in both minstrel shows and in dialect literature, has always been one of white control. Davis's final rejoinder is to echo the earliest critics of the *Songs*, and indeed Berryman's source Carl Wittke, remarking that "the original Jim Crow was not a white imitation, but a crippled black man" (34).[1] From the varying accounts and historical mythologizing of the Jim Crow story, however, it is impossible to speak with any certainty about the origins of the minstrel acts, and in dedicating the second Dream Song to Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, Berryman makes it clear that such representations of black behavior are viewed through the filter of white performance: the whole question of authenticity lying at the heart of this debate is far from clear-cut.[2]

Some responses to this mid-twentieth-century poetic incorporation uncannily echo the responses of writers to the antebellum minstrel shows. J.M. Linebarger, for instance, concludes that "Berryman admires Negroes for their creation of a dialect" (86); and William Wasserstrom, one of the first critics to detect the importance of the minstrel elements, nonetheless betrayed the confusion of the early commentators on blackface minstrelsy when he referred to Berryman's "undisguised importation of Negritude" that

is "drawn straight from the heart of misery incarnate" (176).[3] Wasserstrom apparently conflates black and blackface, and equates sorrowful expression with black expression.[4] This ostensible diagnosis in fact raises so many more questions than it answers: is Negritude something which can be said to be imported; or, rather, as an inherent quality – what has since been termed "the essential black subject" (Hall 28) – is it not in fact in direct opposition to supposedly transferable racial qualities, the concept having developed in the 30s and 40s as a defensive stance against Colonial, commodifiable definitions of race?[5]

Those critics who have been less sympathetic to Berryman's blackface include Joel Conarroe, who has concluded that Berryman's employment of "inflammatory" language is naïve, implausibly deciding that it can only have been Berryman's isolationism in Minneapolis which led him to believe such language acceptable. Nonetheless Conarroe asserts that from Berryman's point of view the move was "well-intended" (104). Bruce Bawer has bluntly referred to *The Dream Songs*' "race question", but despite making noises of disapproval, rather feebly backs out of articulating his latent judgement: "one wouldn't want to have to defend him from the charge [of racial insensitivity]" (25). Aldon Lynn Nielsen appreciates that Berryman "is not attempting to represent black speech", but finds his representations to be "racist" and the dialect to be "offensive" (141, 143).

Most recently, David Wojahn has declared Kevin Young to have "set this can of worms to rest". Young, it is claimed, vindicates the *Songs*' blackface through analysis of its stylistic functions; yet Young's consideration of *The Dream Songs*' minstrelsy amounts to a mere two paragraphs that, despite their sensitivity, describe rather than

analyze, adding little to our critical understanding of the subject (xxiv-xxv). Wojahn also appears to stake his claim for Young's definitive reading at least in part on the fact that "Young is a writer of color". Even if these were legitimate grounds on which to assess the degree to which Berryman may or may not be justified in his representations, to assume that this contentious debate can in such a matter-of-fact way achieve resolution is short-sighted, flying in the face of the nature of all such debates over racial representation. Once again the pursuit of a verdict adds little to our understanding, and seeks to close off rather than generate hermeneutical possibilities.

It is not enough, then, to condemn or defend Berryman according to the accuracy of his representations of black speech and behavior, nor to defend him according to the 'purity' of his intentions. Some of the most subtle and surprising accounts of Berryman's blackface come from Berryman's black friends and fellow writers. A highly personal response to the dialect is to be found in Michael S. Harper's memorial for Berryman, "Tongue-Tied in Black and White": Harper's "quarrel" with Berryman is that he "wrote in that needful black idiom/ offending me"; his "ear lied": "only your inner voices/ spoke such tongues". The easy answer to this is Nielsen's, that Berryman does not claim to be representing real black speech, so his ear cannot be said to be lying. One might add that Berryman listened too to literary voices insofar as Berryman's version of the dialect owes much to *Uncle Remus* and the literature of the dialect movement, as well as to modernism's racial masquerades, and of course the minstrel shows themselves. But what appears at first straightforward in Harper's poem is rapidly complicated when we begin to notice his ambiguities and qualifications: where, for example, does the need of this "needful idiom" lie, to whom does it belong? Harper goes on to describe the idiom as

"your father's soft prayers/ in an all black town in Oklahoma", suggesting a latent desire for white domination as well as Berryman's association of the dialect with the tragic loss of his father. Or does needful here mean "necessary", hinting at the unavoidability of racist impulses; a similar ambiguity inheres in the word "forced" when Harper concludes: "*That slave in you was white blood forced to derision*".

Ralph Ellison's account of *The Dream Songs*' minstrelsy makes a conscious effort to put concerns about legitimacy to one side. Though notoriously hostile to the blackface minstrel tradition, Ellison is able to delight in Berryman's exploration of that tradition. He recalls being directly involved in the compositional process:

> Usually he wanted my reaction to his uses of dialect. My preference is for idiomatic rendering, but I wasn't about to let the poetry of what he was saying be interrupted by the dictates of my ear for Afro-American speech. Besides, watching him transform elements of the minstrel show into poetry was too fascinating. Fascinating too, and amusing, was my suspicion that Berryman was casting me as a long-distant Mister Interlocutor – or was it Mister Tambo – whose ad lib role was that of responding critically to his Mister Bones and Huffy Henry. (Mariani 387)

This is a tantalizing account of Berryman's working methods: is Berryman trying to provoke Ellison? Is he really transforming the black writer into a white interlocutor? Is Ellison's description of the dialect as unidiomatic not a euphemism for the racist distortions of blackface: or does Berryman really create his own "poetic" version of a dialect? Ellison gestures towards many of the ambiguities that we find inherent in the finished *Dream Songs*.

*The Dream Songs*' blackface will doubtless continue both to excite and to give offense: it is, as Michael North says of Ezra Pound's use of 'black dialect' in the Confucian Odes, "either an act of great cultural daring or a clumsy and insensitive mistake" (98). Whilst we cannot neglect the need for palliation it engenders, and particularly not its capacity to give offense, there is now a need to move beyond univocal readings which seek to justify or to condemn.

There is a pressing need to situate Berryman's representations in contexts beyond the account given by Carl Wittke in Berryman's named source, *Tambo and Bones*. Whilst surface details in *The Dream Songs* have been shown to be lifted directly from Wittke's descriptions of the original shows, that account with its "elision (but for assurances about the character of the 'darky') of racial politics altogether", paints a distorted, nostalgic picture of the shows that Berryman himself does not take at face value, and which is dangerous to take in isolation (Lott 240).[6] Consideration of the vast body of writing on the minstrel shows since 1930, and in particular recent reappraisals of the form in the light of theories of race, will clearly help with this realignment. Situating Berryman's borrowings in a white literary context is also productive, both for comparison and for contrast. Though there are many similarities, many shared impulses in his racial explorations with those of his modernist predecessors, unlike much of the dialect of the modernists, and unlike the dialect literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Berryman does not present a version of black culture that can be said to be being passed off *as* black. He adopts the strategy of T.S. Eliot in *Sweeney Agonistes*, of taking the minstrel show context itself, with the crucial difference of carrying that dramatic mode over into his poetry.[7] Berryman's distance in time from these conventions

(as they became) and his unparalleled inclusion of explicit racial politics in conjunction with minstrelsy and dialect enable him to create something which can produce quite different effects.

The most useful theoretical models to point us in the direction of a reappraisal are those that follow the line that representations are by definition not inherently any one thing.[8] Applied to blackface minstrelsy, for example, such an approach, without ignoring the essentialisms on which its racist element is based, opens up the possibility of other impulses that are at work. Thus recent discussion of blackface minstrelsy has moved beyond the severe bifurcation between the populist interpretations, which celebrate minstrelsy for its putative 'blackness', and the revisionist interpretations, much needed at their time, which hold that blackface minstrelsy is predicated upon racial aversion, and that it enforces white domination. The more subtle approach to the representations exposes their contradictions and their conflicts: as Lott says, we should now think of the blackface mask

> as less a *repetition* of power relations than a *signifier* for them – a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations. (Lott 18)

In reactivating that mask it is into these metaphorical and illusory representations that Berryman taps: in revisiting the form he inherits the old ambivalences, as well as adding his own and those of his own time, creating his own equally fluid representation of a representation.

It is my contention that Berryman's poem responds particularly well to such an approach because of its self-awareness of its ambiguities and instabilities: its constantly playful and subversive approach conjures up the impression of multiply determined subjects more often than it reverts to essentialisms. Berryman I believe chose the minstrel show as a means both for self-exploration and for racial exploration precisely because of its contradictions and its inauthenticity. The minstrel show figures as a site of inherent instability which climaxes in the possibility of a complete reversal: "Some time we'll do it again,/ in whiteface" (Song 220). Berryman is aware of the performances he is invoking and creating, aware of the artificiality of these constructed delineations of race; and by suggesting reversing the performance, as Genet actually does in *Les Nègres*, he demonstrates the absurdity of taking any one mode at face value. At its best, the effect of *The Dream Songs* is that racial identity as a concept becomes in its very essence a matter of performance. To demonstrate such fluidity in *The Dream Songs* I shall examine first the dramatic structures that Berryman puts into place, then specific instances to reveal their many-leveled, frequently contradictory and ambiguous meanings.

*The Dream Songs* was subject to a constantly shifting conceptual framework; forms and models from a plethora of sources were picked up and partially incorporated at many different stages, sometimes imposed retrospectively, but no one form or mode or character became preeminent.[9] The result is that it is difficult to locate absolute models from which any set of *Dream Song* elements is derived. During the process of composition the minstrel elements ranged from being merged with other influences – the friend and his relation to Henry for example are "compounded of more than one

paradigm" beyond the minstrel show – to being held up as the conclusive, albeit all-inclusive, structure (Haffenden *Commentary* 48).[10] Concentrating on the minstrelsy elements alone in the finished *Songs* we find multiple variations within and upon the already unstable minstrel forms.

The minstrel show, in its standard format, was framed by two endmen, so called because of their on-stage situation at the ends of the semi-circle arrangement; the traditional names for the pair were Tambo and Bones, in reference to the instruments they played. In his notes Berryman refers to the friend as both "endman" and "Tambo";[11] Henry, then, as Mr. Bones would appear to complete the arrangement of a pair of oppositely-positioned endmen.

Endmen, as defined by Wittke, "furnished the comedy of the show, and according to all accounts [...] were universally successful in keeping their audiences in uproar" (141). The friend fulfils this role of quick-witted comedian, most commonly by cutting into Henry's speech with a pun, a contradiction, or a reproach. He can be deliberately provocative, and often manages to shape the flow of the Songs in which he appears: he transforms the lyrical and pleading tone of Song 51, for example, into a minstrel catechism:

> –Are you radioactive, pal? –Pal, radioactive.
>
> –Has you the night sweats & the day sweats, pal?
>
> –Pal, I do.
>
> –Did your gal leave you? –What do *you* think, pal?
>
> –Is that thing on the front of your head what it seems to be, pal?
>
> –Yes, pal.

At first the friend seems reasonably sympathetic, and the antithetical positioning of "radioactive pal", "pal, radioactive" has a close-knit charm. Rapidly the friend asks one question too many, though, and Mr Bones seems to be losing his temper at the close-to-the-bone question about his girl: but he finally submits to the bawdy joke at his expense. The stanza's great *tour de force* is the many tones it elicits from that one colloquialism, "pal".

Henry less frequently manifests the jokey characteristics of an endman. Though endmen would banter back and forth, for the most part the target of their humor was the interlocutor, positioned in the center of the semi-circle, whose control of the proceedings they conspired to undermine. In his much-quoted *Harvard Advocate* interview Berryman describes Henry's friend as "the interlocutor", contradicting the definition in the conceptual notes. It remains unclear whether the interview remark reflects a change in Berryman's thought, is merely a lapse in memory, or whether it is rather an example of the poet's delight in obscuring origins. In the same section of the interview Berryman playfully taunts the interviewers, creating deliberate mystery about the friend's identity: "He is never named; I know his name, but the critics haven't caught on yet. Sooner or later some assistant professor will become an associate professor by learning the name of Henry's friend" (Plotz 8). Most critics have taken Berryman at his word and labeled the friend the interlocutor, and despite identifying with pride the missing name as "Tambo", have ignored the fact that this is the name of the other endman. Role-analysis is similarly prescriptive, and has rarely extended beyond a nod towards the friend's questioning of Henry and his air of superiority.

The endmen in fact had the upper-hand, taunting the interlocutor, confusing him and leading him into traps with their questions. Wittke tells us that the endmen's gags were "to the apparent discomfort of the pompous interlocutor, whose intellectual standing always suffered in comparison with the nimble wits of the burnt cork stars on the ends" (138). The interlocutor is a parody of authority and of pedantry with his "big, booming voice", and the demand for his deflation is explained in terms of "that curious American trait which disdains even the appearance of too much intellectuality, and somehow, likes to see the triumph of the 'low brow' over what it chooses to call 'high brow'" (139). The show depended upon the interlocutor for "the successful and smooth unfolding of the program", though the endmen would do their best to put him off course. The interlocutor is, then, another model for Henry, and for Berryman himself. The friend's routing of Henry includes an element of self-parody as Berryman puts himself down as "pompous intellectual" who, in the words of the friend in Song 272, "don' make sense".

The interlocutor did not black up, and Henry often appears with the friend not blacked up – that is, not speaking in dialect. However, the appearance or absence of dialect is not an entirely reliable indication of the minstrel role Henry is playing. Henry, speaking 'straight', may be "a clown" (Song 199); or in blackface he may be the butt of the jokes (Song 2). Henry and his friend do not fit perfectly into either of the two categories, but rather resemble the Virginia Minstrels, who, in the words of their violinist, Daniel Decatur Emmett, "were all endmen and interlocutors", even switching roles within the same song (Wittke 46).[12] Both have their moments of cruelty, of affection, of wit and of humility. They also have moments of deep seriousness quite outside the

minstrelsy models, and moments when they are clearly signposted as black citizens rather than blackface performers (Song 40, for example).

Concomitant with these unstable performances is Berryman's version of the dialect. According to Davis, Berryman's blackface is the "stylized dialect of literary convention, bearing only a tangential relationship to actual black English." (33). Berryman's dialect is in fact far less exuberant in its distortions than the printed approximations of the original minstrel skits and songs, and, aside from the odd contorted invention, is closest to the mildest popular dialect literature of the late nineteenth century. But a form of speech that by its definition contravenes the conventions of standard English is extremely hard to pin down, and Berryman's dialect does not adhere even to any set of irregularities.[13] There are certainly different dialects at play in the Songs that help account for apparent inconsistencies; Helen Vendler has suggested that "Male American Midwest Colloquial" is "crossed with blackface dialect" (121). Berryman's ear is acute enough to record both subtle distinctions and overlapping similarities between various idiolects.

Berryman's own comments on his use of dialect are typically brusque and unexpected: "I have been interested in the language of the blues and Negro dialects all my life, always been. Especially Bessie [Smith]. I picked all of it up from records", he told *The Harvard Advocate* (Plotz 8).[14] Is Berryman really suggesting that he believes all the dialect associated with minstrelsy in the *Songs* to be closer to black speech than to blackface? In countering the expectations of his reader with a contradictory asseverance he in fact forces us to reconsider the rigid cataloguing of language; and he, perhaps

deliberately, taps in to yet another well of linguistic ambiguity, the blues tradition that had by the time of recording artists begun inextricably to pass between black and white.[15]

A form already steeped in ambiguous relations, then, is made still more protean by the inconsistent role-playing between endmen and interlocutors, between Henry and Mr. Bones, and between both Henry and Mr. Bones and Berryman himself. And the language through which these roles are realised hesitates between the language of blackface minstrelsy, the language of white dialect literature, the language of the blues, and the language of black Americans. The irreducible polyphony of such mixed voices and performances is captured in *The Dream Songs*' own dramatic stylistic convention of shifting pronouns, whereby Henry can refer to himself "sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second" (v); and in the imported dialect convention of subject-verb disagreement, which indicates the possibilities of multiplicity within the self: "Henry contain within hisself/ Henry young, Henry almost beautiful/ Henry the seducer/ Henry the mad young artist…"[16] These ambiguities all point towards the conclusion that language will not submit, that it constantly defies categorisation; and that no sooner can human identity be tied down to any one label. In the remainder of this essay I shall consider what are two of the most potent topics with which his blackface concerns itself, in its ostensible, surface subjects, in its latent implications, and in its interrelation with the other forms and modes of *The Dream Songs*: namely, the topics of identity and freedom.

Michael North has convincingly shown that dialect came to represent a form of insurrectionary freedom to the Anglo-American modernists, whilst for the African-

American modernists such language was a “chain” from which it was necessary to try to escape; even in its ostensible flouting of convention the dialect employed by Eliot, Pound and others often ultimately reinforced the status quo through its derogatory connotations, being affiliated to blackface minstrelsy, or being used in conjunction with stereotyped behavior (10-11; 77-99). Berryman though, a generation on, and ambivalent in relation to high modernism, has no unqualified investment in the freeing power of dialect; *The Dream Songs* is, rather, alert to both its liberating and its constricting effects. The transposition of Wittke’s epigraph to *Tambo and Bones*, to become one of the epigraphs of *77 Dream Songs*, tells the story of the changing perceptions of blackface: whereas “Go in, Brack Man, De Day’s Yo’ Own” in the first instance inculcates Wittke’s sentimentalization of both minstrelsy and slave life, in the *Songs*, juxtaposed with the quotation from *Lamentations*, the gap between surface freedom and underlying imprisonment opens wide, suggesting irreconcilable differences beyond the initial sense of singing in enslavement.

*The Dream Songs* in fact persistently questions our understandings of the notion of freedom, and this is a questioning that is frequently bound up with what has been designated the poem’s largest subject: a search for and an exploration of identity. It is often remarked that Berryman undertakes this process through the donning of masks; more light may be shed on the interrelation between freedom and identity by elaborating upon both the freedom and the restriction with which his masks may be associated. Robert Langbaum has described how masks function as a means of identity-searching through an escape from circular introspection into “an objectification of [the subject’s] deepest will” which enables that subject through the restraints of necessity to find out

"what [it] really want[s] and who [it] really [is]."(175). Whereas such a process may be applicable to the early dramatic monologues, "The Nervous Songs", in *The Dream Songs* this kind of relation, between subject and object or author and persona, is highly problematized, as the prolific examinations of Berryman's personal relation to Henry testify; Henry's relation in turn to the other characters and voices of the *Songs* results in a metadramatic exploration of identity. With such fluid characterization the "restraints of necessity" can hardly be said to be put into place, and the mask is unfixed; the additional schematic restraints Langbaum speaks of, such as predetermined plot, are equally lacking.

A blackface mask is highly unstable by nature, and it brings with it its own set of liberties and limitations. For Susan Gubar "burnt cork draws attention to its own artifice" (79);[17] yet there were also those minstrels who were uncannily authentic, to the extent that audiences genuinely believed they were watching black performers. The blackface mask thus has the power both to reveal its dual nature, and to conceal it, just as Berryman draws attention to the performance at certain times and not at others. To the modernists racial masks could be emblems of authenticity, ethnographic signifiers of elemental, uncorrupted nature; but at the same time they could be essentially opaque and artificial, suggesting an indecipherable alterity.[18] Such ambiguities are of course part of the age-old dichotomous response to the racial other as either excessively literal or excessively metaphoric.[19] This fundamental interpretative variability is layered by the modernists' competing desires in their works to estrange themselves from the dominant culture, to romantically identify with the racial other, to disrupt convention through the adoption of

seemingly arbitrary ethnic aesthetics, and to self-fashion through the other. Such attitudes are vitally fought over in *The Dream Songs*.

The most perceptive accounts of blackface minstrelsy itself have tapped into the contradictory impulses at its heart. Ellison, anticipating much later analyses of blackface's ambivalence, identifies the threat to freedom that can accompany the superficially liberating experience of racial masquerade: for the white man in blackface his freedom "is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize" (53). Such an analysis is pertinent, and in particular relates to the *Songs*' intermittent associations of the mask with the irrational. Furthermore, the danger of getting trapped in, or being destroyed by a mask as opposed to exploring oneself through its medium obtains in *The Dream Songs*. We see this most explicitly in the nexus of performances, which though they can be life-affirming can readily grow destructive, becoming "hellish vaudeville turns" (Song 168) or generating "terrible applause", which in Song 179 leads to the suggestion of death ("Why don't we fold us down in our own laps?"). The friend, and perhaps Mr. Bones too, moreover, is associated with death in Berryman's conceptual notes: "Mr. Bones is *Death*, Henry's friend – who at the end takes him off-stage" (Haffenden *Commentary* 49). Their stage performance is a heightened version of life in which the threat of death and disintegration is ever-present, with the fear of the performance getting out of control, of the skit or turn coming to a close, or of being lured to a premature ending: "Come away, Mr. Bones."

Dream Song 119 introduces its consideration of race relations with a nod to Ellison: "Shadow & act, shadow & act". The poem is composed shortly after the

publication of Ellison's essays under that title in 1964, and seems to hold in mind his analyses of racial ambivalence: "Better get white or you' get whacked,/ or keep so-called *black*/ & raise new hell".[20] This "so-called *black*" raising hell suggests the artificial blackness the modernists associated with an insurrectionary power, an impression that is heightened by the traces of dialect in which it is phrased; but the emphasis on artificiality also questions the constructedness of 'white' and 'black' on which such imitations are necessarily based. The whole phrase suggests the possibility of racial passing, the choice of to "get" or to "keep". But phrased from a black perspective, the choice of becoming white comes as wholly ironic: it is the white perspective alone which has the freedom to decide its fate. It has been suggested that for Henry blackness is "a liberating device" and that lines such as these show him to be "freed from strictures of white society" (Nielsen 142); but the poem is far more hedged about kinds of available freedom. On the contrary, those strictures, manifested in the "whack", are felt most acutely when 'whiteness' is left behind – and it is then that the possibility of revolt begins.

Berryman's poetry began to engage with politics in the late thirties and early forties; from a highly abstracted verse he began to write directly about forms of oppression: about Fascist Germany, and Capitalist America, and this concern with contemporary politics continues through *The Dream Songs* and even *Love & Fame*, in poems such as "Regent Professor Berryman's Crack on Race". The earlier political poems are dry and detached, products of their time that in their sub-Auden style and in their recording of contemporary events now seem dated and insignificant. At the same time as he was writing these poems, though, Berryman had begun also to write directly about his own life and circumstances; and it is when he brings together this concern with

the self with the concern with the events of the wider world that he finds his distinctive dramatic style. It is precisely this sense of drama that makes these later political poems engaging and unsettling.

Dream Song 60 takes for its subject the inability to resolve racial conflicts and to alter a prejudiced society. Mr. Bones rails against the continuing segregation despite it being "eight years" since the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling (the poem was indeed composed in 1962). But considering dismal statistics for racial integration in schools in the South, Henry is interrupted by his friend: "–Is coloured gobs, is coloured officers,/ Mr. Bones. Dat's nuffin?" Bones' response to this has been taken to be the *Songs*' most explicit rejection of the minstrelsy tradition "–Uncle Tom,/ sweep shut yo mouf" (Davis 34). But what kind of rejection is this, phrased in the very same way? Whilst seeming to advocate racial equality – and even affirmative action – the racial politics of the poem's style tells a different story. The dialect of Song 60 is some of the strongest and most contorted of the *Songs*, and the two voices are indistinguishably dialectal, neutering their own dialectic; the end-rhyming of Bones's "Souf" with the friend's "mouf" reinforces their underlying collusion. Bones's opening protest even phrases itself as an address that derives from one of the crudest stereotypes of the minstrel stage: "distinguish' friend" harks back to "the Negro's alleged love for the grand manner", that even Wittke finds putative (8). Perhaps, though, the dialect is designed here to enact the continued oppression, and thus might be seen to reinforce Bones's argument as well as the friend's obliviousness: like Bones its constant usage seems to be saying that racism is so deeply entrenched that there is no possible way out in sight. But it is clear that the dialect stands as no straightforward symbol of oppression.

As Song 60 moves to consider how the only certainty in race relations seems to be violence, the broad minstrel dialect persists, and its essentialist characterization seems all but complete with talk of "ofays"; except that at the same time a process of disorientation begins that leads us away from such obvious binary oppositions:

> 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?

Ambiguities begin to cross the strong divide: who are "dey", exactly? At first we expect them to be the whites, ruling from above, but "dey" fly "ober ofays", an action which sorts with the *Songs*' pattern of divine overseers. Is the "dey" the same or different from the non-dialectal "they"? Berryman's subtly ambiguous pronouns undermine the relations; even the seemingly static statistic, "is million blocking from de proper job,/ de fairest houses & de churches eben", is in fact loosened by the ambiguity of subject: is the subject the millions who are being blocked, or the millions who are doing the blocking? It was the possibility of such delicate blurring of character that Berryman had in mind when he spoke of the "monstrous ambiguity" of dramatic verse (*Honour* 82).

The extraordinary usage of "brown" as a verb functions in a similar fashion: "brown down" is perhaps a corruption of "bow down", or "ground down", implying a subservience that might hark back to slavery. "Brownin up", on the other side of the equation sounds like a form of grovelling, perhaps implying the do-gooding of liberal

white America, but it might also be more aggressive, implying something akin to "squaring up". Together these competing directions add up to a form of battle: but is this a physical battle, or a battle of "moans", of which side is the most justified in its grievances? The delicacy here resides in the taking of a racist minstrel convention – the distortion of words, or perhaps misuse/ coinage of words – and in using it to unfold polysemic possibilities that lead us away from essentialist cliché. Perhaps "brown" here is also indicating a midway point between 'black' and 'white'. The final couplet brings this Song's effects home in both its punning and its dual perspective: "I never saw no pinkie wifout no hand./ O my, without no hand." The "pinkie" is both a white person, alluding to the amputation of slaves' limbs; and it is the little finger, the phrase suggesting a saying along the lines of "there's no smoke without a fire", appropriate to the preceding consideration of causes. The refrain of the final line signals a voice outside the dialect, a realisation, perhaps, of its limitations.

In Song 40, at the close of a blues-style lament, Henry announces himself to be "free, black & forty-one". Though clearly sarcastically distorting the coming-of-age dictum, "free, white and twenty-one", the phrase raises the issue of cross-racial identification (especially since Berryman was himself forty-one when he wrote this Song) that is so frequently taken for granted by critics. If, as Davis claims, Berryman is forming an "imaginative identification with oppressed peoples" one might want to debate the moral foundations of such a stance: even putting aside issues of the poet's class and race, and the constant complication of the blackface, can any artist legitimately claim to experience vicarious sufferings, or weigh their own against another's?[21] Such concerns have similarly been generated by Sylvia Plath's poetic references to the holocaust. But in

both writers it is hardly possible to reach the point at which such questions of legitimacy could be debated; when we attend to the particularities of their poetry any firm handle onto the issue of identification slips away. The closest we can definitively say that *The Dream Songs*' identities come to identifying with an implied blackness is as metaphor: in Song 51, for example, another instance when Berryman explicitly implicates himself in the poem as "cagey John", the extended master and slave analogy of the second stanza figures Berryman as a slave but in no way claims that his sufferings are comparable to those of a black slave.

It is clear that Berryman develops the range of material to which the blackface dialect may be applied, bringing to the dialect "the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment" which James Weldon Johnson, writing in 1927, argued had not yet happened (7).[22] Yet the limits to which Berryman will put blackface minstrelsy are tested by the most personal of *The Dream Songs*' subjects, Berryman's father. In Song 76, "Henry's Confession", Berryman's father's apparent suicide is referred to directly in the presence of the friend. Things appear to be going well for Mr. Bones, but the realization that this is because of his abstinence, "Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones", engenders thoughts of death: "–*If* life is a handkerchief sandwich,/ /in a modesty of death I join my father/ who dared so long agone leave me." The extraordinary conditional metaphor suggests that if life is a disappointment – if it has no satisfying substance but only grief at its center – it is not worth living. When the friend then bathetically reduces the metaphysical poetic formulation to a stage prop, "I offers you this handkerchief", and tries to lead Bones away "arm in arm, by the beautiful sea", he is again fulfilling his role of death. The handkerchief itself may derive from the trappings of

minstrelsy, and the phrasing may suggest a minstrel conundrum; but the blackface voice, although only faint in the rest of the Song, noticeably here disappears.

In Song 143, the other principal minstrel Song which deals with the death of the father, a similar transition takes place, though here it is complicated by a merger. The Song is presented as spoken by the friend: the dash which characteristically introduces him begins the poem, and the first line refers to "Mr. Bones". The friend here has a similar role, trying to lift Henry's mood, drawing him away from the "animal moment" of the preceding Song; but as the Song progresses, the friend merges into Berryman, singing a song "the like of which may bring your heart to break:"

> he's gone! and we don't know where. When he began
> taking the pistol out & along,
>
> you was just a little; but gross fears
> accompanied us along the beaches, pal.
> My mother was scared almost to death.
> He was going to swim out, with me, forevers,
> and a swimmer strong he was in the phosphorescent Gulf
> but he decided on lead.

This account delicately negotiates the erratic behavior of John Allyn Smith leading up to his supposed suicide. Berryman later recalled how Smith "had not only threatened suicide, repeatedly, but murder. He had threatened to swim out into the Gulf – he was a strong swimmer – taking either my brother or me with him"; but there remained a great deal of uncertainty about the incident: Berryman's mother sent her son conflicting

accounts of her memories, and an unpublished story by Berryman suggests that his father really did try to drown himself and his elder son (Haffenden *Life* 24-25). The autobiographical foundation for the Song leads us to parse "he" as Berryman's father, but also adds to the possible readings of the sliding pronouns: "you" can be the friend speaking to Henry; or it could be Berryman speaking to his father. By the same token, "us" may refer to Henry and his friend, joined before the friend merges entirely into Henry; or to Berryman and his father, with Berryman empathizing with those "gross fears".

This Song plays out the ambiguities surrounding the incident, and the ambivalence of the blackface mask might be said to relate to those tergiversations. The suggestion that the friend here metamorphoses is unique, allowing the friend, Henry and Berryman all to come together. The Song's idioms though are less entangled than one might expect if Berryman were drawing comparisons between blackface minstrelsy and autobiographical performances.[23] There are but the vestiges of the blackface dialect: "you make", "a little", "pal", "forevers"; and by the last stanza, which is a direct engagement and reconciliation with the father, the traces of dialect have disappeared altogether. Berryman does consciously seem to be placing limitations on his blackface's scope, steering away from the point at which it all could become *too* muddled; after all the blackface's freedom, the final, fitting irony is that a line is drawn.

*The Dream Songs*' minstrelsy is far freer, yet at the same time more constricted, than has been appreciated. The work drastically expands and subverts minstrelsy's conventional range; but at the same time it reveals limitations in its self-conscious, self-reflexive awareness of minstrelsy's ingrained racism and its previous literary

transgressions and appropriations. Taken in isolation the *Songs'* minstrelsy manifestations can give an impression of irresponsible light-heartedness; or they can appear an emphatic damnation, emblematic of "[Berryman's] own and civilization's doomed patterns" (Gubar 166). But analyzing these elements in their contexts we enter a liminal world in which the language will not lie down so easily. Perhaps the *Songs* does mark the end-point of modernism's racial ventriloquism; but in its refusal to hem-in meaning, in its refusal to offer compromise, it dramatizes the involute tensions between language and race that are still crucially at issue today.

Notes

[1] See also Arpin p. 75; for Wittke's account see Wittke pp. 24-25.

[2] For various accounts of the Jim Crow story see Lott pp. 56-57; "Obsessive accounts of minstrelsy's origins" and attempts to "legitimate or resolve pressing ideological questions raised by [blackface]" also characterize contemporary responses to the nineteenth-century minstrel show (Lott 55). For a theory of Jim Crow's hybrid origins see Lhamon p. 152.

[3] Cf. an anonymous article in the New York Tribune from 1855 quoted by Lott pp. 15-16.

[4] Elsewhere in his essay Wasserstrom offers some explanation for this comment when he pursues the idiosyncratic argument of LeRoi Jones in *Blues People* that black performers themselves blacked up to "create a black travesty of white burlesque" in singing the true blues; by a leap of faith from this tenuous suggestion he finds Berryman to be in a similar position. Though the blues is an important influence Wasserstrom is not clear in his distinctions, and even the broadest aspects of the dialect he interprets as black, as when he describes grotesque distortions and punning as "Negro rhyming slang" (173-75).

[5] The Négritude movement is principally associated with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, and believes in the possibility of a common black identity.

[6] For example Wittke suggests that "from the pathos and humor of the Negroes, their superstition and their religious fervor, their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech, the white minstrel built his performance" (7).

[7] It has been argued, though not convincingly, that the minstrel show was a model for *The Waste Land* (Sanders 23-38); what is certain is that minstrel songs had a prominent

position in the original draft, and that these were excised so that only residues remain, such as the "Shakespeherian rag" (North 85-86).

[8] See, for example, Stallybrass and White p. 14, and Lott p. 24.

[9] For the complicated genesis of *The Dream Songs* and the incorporation of minstrelsy see Haffenden *Commentary* pp. 46-51.

[10] Haffenden also describes how in 1962 Berryman considered arranging the first set of thirty-six songs as a form of minstrel show, to include "dances, jokes, superstition, fear, ballads, weird costumes, and burlesques of opera and personalities", and to culminate "in a 'walk around' of ALL" (*Commentary* 51). The appellation "friend" is Berryman's, in *The Dream Songs*' "Note".

[11] "Unpublished Dream Songs", Box 1, folder 2, "Dream Songs Conceptual", John Berryman Papers, University of Minnesota Libraries Manuscripts Division, Minneapolis.

[12] Quoted by Berryman in his *Harvard Advocate* interview (Plotz 8). Berryman's personal copy of Wittke highlights the quotation. See Kelly, 3199: ST-S 407 MNU.

[13] Davis categorizes the varied features of Berryman's dialect (34-36). She does not take account of different dialects however.

[14] In the same interview, though, he refers to "the Negro business – the blackface"; he elsewhere refers to "the blackface business" (Kostelanetz 346).

[15] See, for example, Hurston p. 838.

[16] Published in *Fate*, p. 27.

[17] Gubar's readings of Berryman's blackface follow suit, suggesting that it "foregrounds its status as a debased imitation" (163).

---

[18] See for example North's chapter on Stein and Picasso's use of African masks, pp. 59-76.

[19] Paraphrasing Sara Suleri (163).

[20] The Song is dated 15 October 1964; see Haffenden *Commentary* p. 160.

[21] Paradoxically Davis is claiming the identification in order to put to rest such problems of legitimacy with the blackface.

[22] Rejecting the dialect for his own poetry Johnson argues that it is has been limited to "two complete stops, pathos and humor".

[23] Cf. Gubar's contrary claim that it is only *through* the blackface that "the pain of recollection [is] bearable for the poet" (165).

---

Works Cited

Arpin, Gary Q. *The Poetry of John Berryman*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press Corp., 1978.

Bawer, Bruce. 'Dispossession, Dreams, Delusions: The Poetry of John Berryman.' *The New Criterion* 8.4 (1989): 19-28.

Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs.* [1964, 1969] London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

---. "Unpublished Dream Songs", Box 1, folder 2, "Dream Songs Conceptual", John Berryman Papers, University of Minnesota Libraries Manuscripts Division, Minneapolis.

---. *Henry's Fate and Other Poems.* Ed. John Haffenden. [1977] London: Faber and Faber, 1978.

---. *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letters to his Mother*. Ed. Richard J. Kelly. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988.

Conarroe, Joel. *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Davis, Kathe. '"Honey dusk do sprawl": Does Black Minstrel Dialect Obscure *The Dream Songs*?' *Language and Style* 18.1 (1985): 30-45.

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act.* [1964] New York: Vintage, 1972.

Gubar, Susan. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Haffenden, John. Introduction. *Henry's Fate and Other Poems.* Ed. John Haffenden. [1977] London: Faber and Faber, 1978.

---. *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary.* New York: New York University Press, 1980.

---. *The Life of John Berryman.* Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

Hall, Stuart. 'New Ethnicities.' [1988] Ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies.* London: Routledge, 1997.

Harper, Michael S. *Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Hurston, Zora Neale. 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' [1934]. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995. 830-46.

Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse.* [1927] New York: Penguin, 1990.

Kelly, Richard J. *John Berryman's Personal Library: A Catalogue*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.

Kostelanetz, Richard. 'Conversation with Berryman.' *The Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 340-47.

Langbaum, Robert. *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1970.

Lhamon, W.T. Jr. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Linebarger, J.M. *John Berryman.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Mariani, Paul. *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman.* [1990] Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

Nielsen, Aldon Lynn. *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Plotz, John *et al*. 'An Interview with John Berryman.' [1969] *Berryman's Understanding.* Ed. Harry Thomas. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988. 3-17.

Sanders, Charles. '*The Waste Land*: The Last Minstrel Show?' *Journal of Modern Literature* 8 (1980): 23-38.

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* London: Methuen, 1986.

Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Vendler, Helen. *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Wasserstrom, William. 'Cagey John: Berryman as Medicine Man'. [1968] Thomas 167-85.

Wittke, Carl. *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage.* Durham, North Carolina, 1930.

Wojahn, David. '"In All Them Time Henry Could Not Make Good": Reintroducing John Berryman.' *Blackbird* 4.2 (2005).
<http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v4n2/nonfiction/wojahn_d/berryman.htm>

Young, Kevin. Introduction. *John Berryman, Selected Poems.* New York: Library of America, 2004. xxiv-xxv.