

The Unfinalizability of the Dialogic in John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*

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Abstract

In my essay, “The Unfinalizability of the Dialogic in John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*” I address the confessional nature of John Berryman’s collection of poetry, *The Dream Songs*, viewing the songs through the prism of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of polyphony and dialogism. Bakhtin believed only fictional works could be polyphonic, but in this paper I highlight the polyphonic and dialogic nature of the poetry of *The Dream Songs*, many of which contain a variety of dialogues in and of themselves. According to Bakhtin, the dialogic work is unfinalizable, that is, it leaves meaning unresolved and incomplete, and therefore infinitely responsive. Berryman’s formalistic and innovative invention of the dream sonnet form frames the unfinalizability of the Songs by providing a means to construct his many-voiced poetic vision. *The Dream Songs* seek to present a montage of voices centered on Berryman’s poetic alter-ego Henry, this polyphony arises out of Berryman’s own trauma, which is in an ongoing conversation with the dialogic elements of the Songs. These dialogic elements construct the confessionalism of *The Dream Songs*, defined as that which investigates the experience of the individual psyche under the pressure of trauma. The way to investigate Henry’s personality is through dialogue with a diverse array of voices whose unfinalizability construct the final, incomplete, and fractured form of the dream sonnet, which highlights the inability of language to say, but never mean. But this unfinalizability itself is responsible for the resonance of Berryman’s work, whose unfinalizable quality strives above all to communicate with others. In the dream world that Berryman constructs, wordlessness in the face of trauma would be the most tragic thing of all.

1. Body of Paper

1.1 The Unfinalizability of the Dialogic in John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*

John Berryman, to his own “rage and contempt,” is considered part of that movement of poetry referred to as confessional poetics. *The Dream Songs* (1969), part of the confessional canon, is Berryman at his most personal, however Berryman’s “I” is nowhere identifiable but everywhere present. The Songs, then, are sifted through the prism of Berryman’s colorful alter-ego Henry, who is, according to his author:

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 (1969, vi).

This introduction to Henry and his fluid use of voice invites questioning about the identity of the narrator(s) in the Songs which, from one poem, one stanza, one line to the next, appear to be in constant flux. These fluctuations in voice are further complicated by the difficult-to-stomach minstrelsy conceit Berryman engages to, arguably, unsettle

his reader with its parodic and grotesque elements. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Soviet literary critic, recognizes the significance of the multiplicitous voice in his work *The Dialogic Imagination*. For Bakhtin, the dialogic is the medium of expression (utterance) that participates in a polyphonic (many-voiced) dialogue with the other. The other exists as the addressee, the poised listener and responder, yet the dialogue is always unfinalizable, that is, always ongoing, always responding, and waiting for a response. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism helps to illuminate Berryman's energetic and frenetic interplay of voices because many of the *Songs* contain dialogues in and of themselves. These voices in conversation create the dialogic expression of the *Songs* that is always changing and unfinalizable, thus, leaving meaning infinitely open to interpretation. However, this fluidity is marked by a tragic influence to the true, always unfinalizable nature of language that leaves the *Songs* open-ended and unresolved. *The Dreams Songs* seek closure through the confessionalism of each poem, but instead inevitably highlights the tragic quality of language to say, but never mean. Yet this unfinalizability is responsible for the resonance of Berryman's work which above all strives to communicate with others.

The multiplicity of voices in the *Songs* represents the word which is alive in the dialogic, and no one can dispute that the word is not alive in *The Dream Songs*. Bakhtin writes, "The relationship of the author to a language conceived as the common view is not static—it is always found in a state of movement and oscillation that is more or less alive" (1981, 302). The first lines of the first song demonstrate this liveliness: "Huffy Henry hid / the day, / unappeasable Henry sulked" (1). The trochaic beats throb with a chant-like sprung-rhythm that lures and slows the reader on through the poem's unbalanced, catalexis peppered lines as if to demand close attention. Berryman invented the dream sonnet form to address the significant, traumatic issues that plagued him, most notably the suicide of his father (the "departure" (1)) when Berryman was a child, as well as the small, seemingly inconsequential and spontaneous events of day to day life. The form itself conforms to sonnet standards, three stanzas of six lines, but the varying length and irregular rhyme schemes of free verse makes it unique and inventive. Berryman, through an unfinalizable and many-voiced perspective, wielding the dream sonnet form and through the mediator of Henry, engages in a dialogue with the world, his father, God, his desires and fears, and himself, all to give voice to his emotions and finally, to seek an elusive closure. In this way the *Songs* function as a fracturing of the self, that is, the splitting of the self into polyphonic selves ever in conversation with one another.

The necessary corollary to a polyphonic and dialogic work is the monologic, explained by Bakhtin as an absolute, closed, and complete work such as an epic like *The Iliad*. The monologic work has one integrated ideology which its narration adheres to throughout the work. Berryman's stated intention for the poems in the *Songs* to be read in sequence, each song growing out of the other just as chapters build upon each other in a novel. The novel, as presented in the *Dialogic Imagination*, is everything the epic is not, that is, unfinalized, open-ended, intertextual, and *alive*. Bakhtin goes on to write, "The word is living conversation directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (1981, 280). *The Dream Songs* deal in this way dialogically, intertextually, and conversationally with many ideologies, in fact each song itself seems to function as its own fluid ideology, producing the heavy, freighted language of the *Songs* and invoking the names of the great poets (Rilke, Yeats, Keats), historical figures, and Berryman's own ghosts in a textual resurrection of voices. Henry's polyphonic consciousness lends itself to an intertextual reanimating of what is dead, all in attempt to dialogically resolve the trauma of that first "departure" (1). But this is the tragedy of the *Songs* in which, "Buoyant, chockful of stories, Henry lingered / at party after party, a bitter ender" (182). The tragedy of Henry lingering at each party just in order to tell stories indeed lends a bitter taste to the language of the *Songs*, highlighting the impossibility of language to ever be enough. Later, in the same song, "and he held the world up like a big sea-shell / ...harkening to follow" (182), the devastating simile of the world like a shell, merely echoing the infinite sea it can never contain, evokes the dialogic engagement with the world that is central to the *Songs*. All Berryman can do is echo Henry's own voice back to himself, and all we can do is follow.

Berryman animates Henry in order to make use of the dialogic in a way other poets do not. Berryman addresses this engagement with "two souls" in his work:

All the way through my work... is a tendency to regard the individual soul under stress. The soul is not oneself, for the personal 'I', one with a social security number and a bank account, never gets into the poems; they are all about a third person. I'm a follower of Pascal in the sense that I don't know what the issue is, or how it is to be resolved—the issue of our common human life, yours, mine, your lady's, everybody's; but I do think that one way in which we can approach it, by the means of art, coming out of Homer and Virgil and down through Yeats and Eliot, is by investigating the individual human soul, or human mind, whichever you prefer. I have tried, therefore, to study two souls in my long poems (1959, xvi-xvii).

The individual soul, under stress to articulate and resolve the issue of identity and trauma, is Berryman's "I" and the only way to give words to these expressions is through the medium of Henry's songs, that is, "the means of art" put into the larger conversation between two souls. This concern with two souls is what creates the fraught language of the *Songs*. The vivid mingling that occurs often blurs the borders between speakers, further enhancing the presence of the polyphonic which Henry constantly employs. Berryman's engagement in his own poetry is first and foremost with his own trauma. This is the confessionalism of *The Dream Songs*, defined as that which stresses the personality of experience, individual psyches, and of course, the condition trauma imposes on a person. The dialogic and active engagement with the wor(l)d can be heard in song 10 where it appears Berryman is speaking about Henry addressing his audience in confessional "gasps of love," which, "after all, had got him ready. / However things hurt, men hurt worse. He's stark / to be jerked onward? / Yes" (10). The 3rd person narration makes the confessionalism near-tragic with the incongruous distance it attempts to establish between the addresser and addressee. However, the resounding "yes" Henry offers in consensual response to the world comes close to overshadowing the inadequacy of language to overcome the distance between conflicting voices. "So may be Henry was a human being. / Let's investigate that" (13). The nature of understanding Henry's humanness is at the center of the *Songs* and the foremost way to investigate is in dialogue with others, which Bakhtin stresses, reveals us to ourselves.

Many of the songs are dialogues in and of themselves like song 51, which begins with a shared feeling. "Our wounds to time, from all the other times... / Henry them mentions" and ends with the dialogue:

-- 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.

The interlocutory nature of this song is poignant yet flippant, like Berryman often is. These dual psychological portraits here mirror the side of the dialogic that is inherently combative and parodic, designed to produce a response. Here the outcome exaggerates alienation and anxiety to comic radioactivity, and mockingly employs the informal noun "pal." This overt usage of the dialogic mimics the ambiguous lively, and open-ended understanding inherent to human consciousness. Most, if not all, of the other songs have overt dialogues within them ("--What happened then, Mr Bones? / I had a most marvelous piece of luck. I died" (26)) and all exemplify Berryman's formalistic and emotional innovations that frame every part of the dialogic and unfinalizable *Songs*.

Henry's polyphonic voice is further revealed in the second song, "Henry are / baffled" (2). Henry is plural, Henry is many voices in conversation with one another. This linguistic mix-up is the linguistic oddity of Henry's baffling minstrel tongue-catching voice and ambiguous tense-usage ("I is on your side / I smell your grief. (36)), which in itself, is part of the cultural sphere of *The Dream Songs*' dialogic at work. Henry is created out of utterances, and it is through Henry that Berryman engages in dialogue with the inner turmoil of trauma, loss, and identity. All speech and writing is utterance, the Russian term *vyskazyvanie* ("utterance") that Bakhtin uses is fraught with semantic weight. The active process of speaking out and of postulating to or with an interlocutor mirrors Henry's engagement with the multiplicity of subjects each song takes. Speaking probes every poem for their full weight, meaning(s), and marvelous lines, ranging from the devastating to the comic (often both!), of confessionalism that infuse the *Songs* with its voice(s). "Bats have no bankers," (63) and "Fall is grievy, brisk" (385). Berryman's words, from "grievy" to "famisht" are like Shakespearean etymologies, wrapped and delivered in his varying colloquial and scholarly verse. The socio-linguistic poetics of Bakhtin and Berryman's covalency allows a view into the *Songs* to recognize the imponderable way in which Berryman manipulates language in order to, by any means necessary, communicate. Language as it is just is not enough, but the unfinalizable open-endedness of each *Song* allows for this fluidity of language to strive against the odds.

The dream sonnet form lends itself to discussion about the nature of sonnets themselves. Berryman was influenced both by Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets, but his own form defies definition. Each song bends syntax and breaks structure, weaves colloquial speech and scholarly lingo together, all as if each emotion within each song itself had a different voice, a different form. The most notable voices being those that inhabit Henry, who like Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophil is also lamenting "I am not I; pity the tale of me." The final, incomplete, and fractured form of the sonnet mirrors this failure of language that produces the unresolvable, unfinalizable voice(s) of the sonnets. Take song 1 in which the final stanza displays on this same fractured form:

What he has now to say is a 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)

Berryman's voice here is prominent but suddenly shifts again into first person. Henry identifies the oneness of the feelings to express its absence: "Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang." This shift in voice and heightening of absence represents Henry's frustration with the world with which he is in dialogue, "the thought that they thought / they could do it made Henry wicked & away." Through this format of transgression Berryman renders stark the juxtaposition of voice to separate the time in which he "sang" and now when he does not. The next lines, "Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed" exemplify in full the loosened and ambiguous nature of language. Berryman can't help but end the song with an ambiguity; images of sea and bed conjure the entropic and erosive effects language produces in any form. In this way the first *Song*, though it appears as a beginning, is the ending Berryman always sought. The unfinalizable nature of the dialogic is exactly the opposite of whatever "the world like a woolen lover" once was to Henry.

Despite the fact that Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that all poetry in reality is monologic, everywhere this is refuted by the intermixture of voices, utterances, and usage of dialogue in the *Songs*. Each song is alive and unfinalizable, functioning as an open wound that is ever festering. This wound is exemplified by the fact that Berryman wrote in the dream sonnet form until his death and, tragically, even his last poem/suicide note was written in the dream sonnet form. Berryman never truly escaped the *Songs*, but enduringly it is the most daring and effective way he had to express himself. The deepest affinity between Berryman's *Songs* and Bakhtin can be felt in their appreciation for the striving in speech and the inner lives of all people who experience their own subjectivity in the form of addressing others. Only through the *Songs* could Berryman find a salient and powerful form to address his father, the world, and us, all to reach out through the language of his poetry. Though its final failure is tied up in its dialogic dimensions, *The Dreams Songs* continues to be important and carries on due to its dialogic nature. Wordlessness, otherwise, would be the most tragic thing of all.

2. Works Cited

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