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## John Berryman's Last Prayers

Almost half a century has passed since his death, but the poetic legacy of John Berryman remains a challenging one. As a writer he engaged with a diverse range of scholarly and literary interests. The briefest analysis of the myriad terrains covered by his teaching and research reveals a lifelong and labyrinthine engagement with theology, philosophy and literature from the very earliest extant writings. Widely read in scholastic philosophy, Berryman taught a 'Christian Origins' course when first appointed by the University of Minnesota in 1955; he continued to offer similar multidisciplinary survey options in western civilisation at Minnesota as Regents Professor of Humanities up to the time of his death by suicide in January 1972. This article argues that, in the last two poetry collections he either saw into print or had collected for publication before his death—*Love & Fame* (1970) and the posthumously published *Delusions, etc.* (1972)—Berryman's search for resolution to questions of divine possibility and humanity's relation to God reached a theological as well as a biographical peak. Moreover, it contends that one particular touchstone proved central to Berryman's understanding and articulations of these complex issues: the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, especially his 1843 volume *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*. Kierkegaard's delineation of Christian belief and his understanding of prayer's role within a dialectical discourse with the divine position him as a key nineteenth-century exponent of traditions of negative theology that, arguably, stretch back to Plato's *Phaedo*. While exploring his intricate engagement with Kierkegaard, specifically in his last two poetry collections, Berryman's own late contributions to the apophatic tradition more generally will be examined. Additionally, Berryman's attraction to Judaism in his last years will be analysed alongside the theological crossovers between Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas, particularly in relation to the role of prayer and silence as articulations of human suffering.

Berryman's poetry prior to *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc.* regularly investigates the imponderables raised by human existence and by divine possibility set against the constant shadow that suicide cast across his life and his writing. To these ends, his research career was one dedicated to scholarly investigations of scripture and of the historical figure of Christ. The voluminous range of references accrued from decades of theological study that recur across his work requires that critics engage in the types of scholarly practice that he himself prioritised. The 'confessional' critical approach to his poetry—so often the default position in relation to Middle Generation writing—irritated, but did not surprise, Berryman. When Peter Stitt conducted his *Paris Review* interview on 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> October 1970, while Berryman was an inpatient at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, Berryman noted that '[t]he professional critics, those who know what the literary, historical, philosophical, and theological score is, have not really gone to work yet, and may not do so for a long time yet.'<sup>1</sup> His point is clear: the four-fold approach he brought to his own work requires a matching four-fold critical response. My focus here is how Berryman navigates his last years and why he turns in both *Love & Fame* and in *Delusions, etc.* to prayer as, and for, poetic inspiration. Prayer, either in terms of form or content, facilitates what would be Berryman's last poetic understandings of humanity's relation to the possibility of a divine being. It also registers how the self's sense of suffering and guilt can offer a position in which prayer is the necessary response and through which a relation with the Absolute can be articulated. Prayer and poetry, for Berryman, are paired aspects of the same impulse for reckoning and reforming the self: '[p]oetry is a terminal activity, taking place out near the end of things, where the poet's soul addresses one other soul only, never mind when. And it aims—never mind either communication or expression—at the reformation of the poet, as prayer does.'<sup>2</sup>

Berryman's turn to prayer in his writing follows earlier engagements (e.g., in *The Dream Songs*) with an inability to communicate, with repeated failures of language and,

centrally, routines of silence.<sup>3</sup> Broken communication recurs across the 385 Dream Songs: their protagonist Henry, dead for fourteen of the poems, regularly stammers or remains silent. Failed communication and silence vie in those poems with Berryman's grappling with philosophical questions about existence: central to these was the urge to suicide that Berryman debated, not as a loosely confessional revelation of his own mental state, but as a key ontological issue of being. The possibility of (knowing) God, or of belief in an entity beyond our mortal comprehension—what Wallace Stevens characterised as 'a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract'<sup>4</sup>—compounded the complexities of Berryman's aesthetic, philosophical, and theological enterprises. His last collections seek affirmation through prayer that re-position his previously well-established routines of silence.

While apophasis, or negative theology, has been a long-standing dimension of theological and philosophical enquiry into the silence of God, Arthur Bradley for one is correct to note that it is 'extremely difficult to identify any consensus view about exactly what "negative theology" is or even whether such a thing actually exists.'<sup>5</sup> By defining the existence of a being that exists beyond all human capabilities of naming by almost exclusive reference to what it is not, apophasis registers as an unsaying, representing 'a sort of paradoxical hyperbole'<sup>6</sup> traced through the Gnostics, Neoplatonism, Baroque mysticism, Romanticism and through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'from Kierkegaard to Dada, Expressionism, and Existentialism, each in different ways assaulting the word by a reality gone mad beyond saying.'<sup>7</sup> Richard Kearney identifies its centrality to the 'so-called "religious turn" in contemporary French philosophy,'<sup>8</sup> and Bradley too argues that the *via negativa* arose as 'above all the product of [the] intellectual dialogue between Neoplatonism and Christian concepts of the relationship to ultimate reality.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for Bradley, applying the logic of Derridean deconstruction, 'negative theology can at best be a *via negativa* of the *via negativa* – a statement of what it is not – because negative theology is definitively

suspicious of every concept of received identity including its own.’<sup>10</sup> As an entity that resists any one fixed position or definition, negative theology unsays, however tentatively, what it is possible to say about it, reducing us to the very silence it ultimately inhabits. Yet, such silence speaks, as Berryman knew and his late poems show: it speaks in varied ways, whether as unsaying, as the end of discourse, or as the very ‘essence of discourse’<sup>11</sup> which Levinas identifies as prayer.

Turning more directly to Berryman, and for critics engaging with his work, biography has too often been the primary critical lens for reading his poetry. For the purposes of this analysis, some particular facts and parameters in relation to Berryman’s life are required before setting these aside to focus on the layers of philosophical and theological intricacy brought into his work by his engagement with questions of belief, prayer, and silence. Predominantly biographical readings are circuitously reductive, their biographical strait-jacket continually obstructing and obscuring the writer’s work. As M.L. Rosenthal noted in 1967, ‘confessional poetry was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school of poetry has by now done a certain amount of damage.’<sup>12</sup> When it comes to Berryman in particular, and the American Middle Generation more generally, biography as the mode of critical first contact has contributed considerable disservices. For example, Philip Coleman highlights the ‘troubling’ nature of Michael Hofmann’s selected Berryman (Faber, 2004): ‘[t]he often ugly realities of Berryman’s private life [...] frame Hofmann’s selection in a way that insists the poetry should be read only as a footnote, a perverse postscript to the poet’s troubled life and death.’<sup>13</sup> As a critical response, Coleman’s *John Berryman’s Public Vision* (2014) importantly resets the balance by analysing Berryman’s work as both shaped by and responding to the social and political environments of his world.

The last years of Berryman's life in St Paul Minnesota were divided between sporadic periods of teaching at the University of Minnesota and increasingly regular inpatient treatment for alcohol dependence. Although the author of key poetic works of the Middle Generation, Berryman believed himself first and foremost a scholar, then a critic, then a poet. His suicide in 1972 left several unfinished projects: a 'Life of Christ', a historical biography of a figure who fascinated Berryman; another oft-returned-to enthusiasm was Shakespeare and he was gathering material for a full-length study of, arguably, his favourite poet and writer;<sup>14</sup> plans for an edited anthology, *The Blue Book of Poetry*, were left as was his unfinished novel *Recovery* (set in an alcohol rehabilitation unit; published, incomplete, in 1973).<sup>15</sup> Also incomplete was Berryman's Holocaust 'requiem' that he had been working on intermittently from 1948 to 1955. Titled 'The Black Book', it was to be a forty-two-section work that in part, as his notes indicate, would 'parody Mass of Dead' and would adapt the structure of Mozart's *Requiem* for its poetic narrative.<sup>16</sup>

Berryman's teaching in Minnesota followed earlier positions at Harvard, Princeton, Iowa, and Cincinnati; and it was in Minneapolis that he jumped to his death from the Washington Avenue Bridge on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1972. Critical attention to his poetry has concentrated on his earlier works, *The Dream Songs* (1969) particularly, though schematic readings of his work as part of the mid-century turn toward 'confessional' poetry have had a detrimental effect on his reputation. Recent critical studies have challenged such reductionist approaches; this discussion continues that move away from confessionalism in part by rehabilitating the term confession as a doctrinal node within Berryman's theological conceptions of selfhood in relation to God and the role of prayer. When asked in the *Paris Review* interview about his work being confessional, Berryman's reply was straightforward: '[t]he word doesn't mean anything. I understand the confessional to be a place where you go and talk with a priest. I personally haven't been to confession since I was twelve years old.'<sup>17</sup>

While reacting with ‘rage and contempt’<sup>18</sup> to the suggestion, Berryman was not oblivious to the more sacramental or etymologically doctrinal definitions of the term.

Critically, Berryman was drawn to a different discourse and to alternative definitions of what poetry could do. Rather than being dictated by the concerns of the self, the correlations that Berryman traced between poetry and prayer instead point toward a negation of the self, and this is registered most tellingly in the entity that the two activities share: silence. Setting aside communication or expression, as Berryman noted in *The Freedom of the Poet*, poetry and prayer attempt contact with that which does not yet, or cannot ever, exist within language. Being attentive to silence and its alternative designations of absence opens the self to the limitless realms beyond the self. ‘Love silence above all things, because it brings you nearer to the fruit that the tongue cannot express,’ declared the seventh-century Christian ascetic theologian Isaac of Nineveh, continuing, ‘then, from out of this silence something is born that leads to silence itself.’<sup>19</sup> Increasingly in his writing and his researches into the subject, Berryman identified silence as the location within which contact with God can become possible. ‘God speaks in and as the silence:’<sup>20</sup> if prayer is the primary mode of addressing or speaking to God, silence is fundamental to it, is an intrinsic part of this discourse. Berryman’s incorporation of prayer in his last collections is a logical progression from the silences that pervade *The Dream Songs*: prayer, when a solitary activity, is a silent or internalised form of communication, mirroring the impulse toward poetry to which Berryman certainly subscribed. Poetry, as a self-conscious action of and about language, navigates the possibility of its own being. Silence is both negation (i.e., obstructing speech) *and* the generative condition required for poetry’s creation: the ‘Nothing that is not there’ for Stevens ‘and the nothing that is.’<sup>21</sup>

Post-*The Dream Songs*, Berryman raises the stakes, pushing against the silence that envelops many of those poems to find another method to speak (with) the Absolute or to

write the impossible task of literature.<sup>22</sup> In part, his late poems gravitate toward prayer because Berryman conceived of poetry and prayer as emanating out of divine silence. Critics disagree about the importance of Berryman's referring in his *Paris Review* interview to a moment of conversion experienced during alcohol treatment in the Spring of 1970. Tom Rogers's *God of Rescue: John Berryman and Christianity* (2011) begins with this incident, but then overplays its bearing and significance by reading the late poetry as Berryman rejoicing in the aftermath of a reconciling with God.<sup>23</sup> Yes, Berryman seeks a new relation with a reimagined God in his last years, but doubt and torment course through his late work (even before one mentions the fact of his suicide). Coleman more accurately notes that '[t]here is something profoundly uncertain and desperate about the poet's performances of prayer in the poems of *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc.*, and they are at all times intensified by a sense of the world as a hostile and unforgiving environment, one in which the poet feels he has no option but to express hope for some form of divine intervention.'<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Coleman's argument that Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* from 1843 allows Berryman to explore an 'ethical-existential'<sup>25</sup> structure in *Love & Fame* has been an important critical move that again connects Berryman and his work to the wider theoretical nexus that encapsulated his intellectual as well as his personal life.

Albert Gelpi's *American Poetry After Modernism* (2015) makes similar moves toward a new reading of Berryman, particularly in relation to his late poetry. Gelpi agrees with Christopher's Ricks's view of Berryman's work as a theodicy<sup>26</sup>—Berryman did too in his interview with Stitt after all—and notes how Berryman's mind '[t]hroughout his life [...] turned on questions of ultimate belief and disbelief; he avidly read—and in his classes taught philosophy and theology, scripture and church history.'<sup>27</sup> Gelpi usefully identifies Berryman's collections *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, *The Dream Songs*, and *Love & Fame* as 'the three major phases or "spasms" of [Berryman's] work as he finds a voice and form to



articulate, out of his experience of pain and desolation, a desperate dialogue with God.<sup>28</sup> However, after offering this signpost, and accepting Berryman's point in the Stitt interview about discovering a 'God of rescue', Gelpi does not extend the argument into more nuanced and theologically informed discussions of Berryman's work.

Coleman and Gelpi offer necessary steps along the road away from biographical confessionalism and toward a realisation that there is considerably more to Berryman's writing than has previously been believed. Yet, much remains to be done. Helpfully, Berryman provides the keys for unlocking his work: knowing the literary, historical, philosophical and theological score is fundamental to understanding the complexities he builds into his poetry. One of these complexities was Berryman's engagement with the work of Søren Kierkegaard, a career-long interest arising from two interconnected sources. First, Berryman identified aspects of a shared biography between himself and the Danish theologian, philosopher and poet. In his notes on Kierkegaard held in the Berryman archive, Berryman provides a brief outline of Kierkegaard's younger years: '[r]an up bills, entertained; drunken, suicidal early. Opera enthusiast, theatre—Mozart.'<sup>29</sup> Berryman's own knowledge of classical and operatic music was encyclopaedic, while his drinking and his persistent circling of the issue of suicide have been the subject of numerous studies. In terms of Kierkegaard's writings, Berryman was drawn to *Either/Or* from 1843 and its delineation of the two spheres of existence (one aesthetic, the other ethical), and this is where Coleman positions his reading of *Love & Fame*. Yet, Berryman engaged with a considerably larger amount of Kierkegaard's writings than just *Either/Or*; one reason for this was Kierkegaard's articulation of shared concerns about the absence of God and the demands of faith.

To offer one specific example: inside the back cover of his copy of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), held at the University of Minnesota library,<sup>30</sup> Berryman's handwritten notes reveal a snapshot of the intellectual and literary interests that preoccupied

his life. Although the individual comments are undated, Berryman provides two dates inside the front cover: underneath 'Princeton' appears '30 Oct 1943' and then '21-2 Mar 1944'. An accompanying Princeton University Press memorandum dated May 2 1944 notes receipt of Berryman's \$24.65 check for payment in full for a further eight volumes of Kierkegaard's works: *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844), *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *Training in Christianity* (1850), *For Self-Examination* (1851), and *The Attack on Christendom* (1854-55). Another insert referencing Kierkegaard is dated '2.4.65', February 4<sup>th</sup> 1965: twenty-one to twenty-two years after purchasing these volumes Berryman's 'serpentine researches'<sup>31</sup> into Kierkegaard were clearly still active intellectual pursuits.

At the top of this same cover page is written the underlined term 'poetice', the vocative masculine declension of 'poetic': someone (male and poetic) is being addressed. At the bottom, two page references to an unspecified volume by Shakespeare; and in between a confluence of notations concerning guilt, sin, and the self, arising out of reading Kierkegaard coupled with Berryman's own musings on these subjects. In red ink Berryman differentiates between 'the willed self (false)' and 'the self proper' noting that 'the self does not exist, it is becoming'. At another time, certainly in different ink, he refers to 'the self-consuming fire' the experience of which is 'not negative' (here also a reference to 'the Gugg', possibly a Guggenheim Fellowship application; Berryman did receive one in 1952-53 to work on a critical biography of Shakespeare and also a proposed edition of *King Lear*, both abiding passions though neither were completed). This may explain an emphasised 'not getting it' comment also on this page. Further down he notes 'two roads to death', these being: '1. Mania 2. To be beaten utterly down' and that 'Both issue in "silence", the end of my self'. Then, with double underlining, 'To believe in possibility'. Also underlined the (possibly)

opposed terms 'sin/faith' beneath which 'offense' is also underlined and, in quotation marks, 'poems anxiously concerned'. To the left, a single question asks: 'Can I pray?'

To research this landscape in miniature of Berryman's mind might take a lifetime: it did for Berryman, defeating him in the process. The analysis here focuses on Berryman's last two years and centres on that question 'Can I pray?' and the related issues it raises: how prayer functions and to what or to whom one prays. Understanding prayer as discourse and situating its evolution within Berryman's scholastic, philosophic and theological enquiries as well as in his poetry directly connects his particular and lifelong investigations with the traditions of apophasis, or negative theology. '[P]rayer can be a form of "apophatic" discourse,' argues Derek Nelson in relation to Kierkegaard's conception of prayer, 'in the sense that it seeks to convey indirectly what cannot, or should not, be directly said.'<sup>32</sup> Prayer in the face of the Absolute must be characterised through and as silence because it seeks communication with 'the Good beyond Being';<sup>33</sup> as Berryman's last collections indicate, it was this that he sought contact with most of all.

While Coleman offers *Either/Or* as a key to understanding Berryman's later works, it is to another Kierkegaard work, also from 1843, that attention should turn if Berryman's last poems are to be understood more fully in relation to prayer and the position of the individual in relation to God: that text is *Fear and Trembling*. In Philippians 2, verses 12-13, the following instruction is provided to those who have not seen but want to believe: 'Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure.'<sup>34</sup> For Kierkegaard, the prime example of faith in action is the Biblical story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, culminating in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham's show of absolute faith places him in an impossible position: knowing the instruction of God but not

able to speak it to his wife or his son. When challenged by Isaac on the Mount of Moriah as to what would be sacrificed in the absence of a lamb, Abraham initially remains silent.<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard observes, ‘if Abraham were to have replied, “I know nothing,” he would have uttered an untruth. He cannot say anything, for what he knows he cannot say.’<sup>36</sup> The ethical strain of Abraham’s silence and then his faith-bound diversion ‘My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering’<sup>37</sup> intrigues Kierkegaard and, by extension, Berryman. Abraham suffers for his faith and suffers for his God: he occupies the allotted human space in relation to the Absolute, that is, the space of suffering.

Identifying suffering in Berryman’s work before his last two collections is nothing new. In 1975 Gary Q. Arpin signalled a way into Berryman that few have explored (including Arpin himself in his subsequent analysis):

[t]he references to Lamentations [in the epigraphs to *The Dream Songs*] serve—and perhaps this is their most important function—to indicate the relationship between the poet and his world and the poet and his audience. Henry’s suffering is meant to embody ours ... In *The Dream Songs* Henry suffers not as Job—an individual bearing great personal pain—but as Jeremiah—an individual bearing our general pain, for what reasons he knows not.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, and particularly in the last collections, prayer as the response of the suffering individual predominates for Berryman, not as a solipsistic exercise, but as the self speaking on behalf of a wider human community. Berryman supplements the efficacy of these supplications with his wide-ranging knowledge of scholastic philosophy and theology. In ‘The Search’ from *Love & Fame* he acknowledges:

I began the historical study of the Gospel  
indebted above all to Guignebert  
& Goguel & McNeile  
& Bultmann even & later Archbishop Carrington.

The Miracles were a stumbling-block;  
until I read Karl Heim, trained in natural science;  
until I had sufficiently attended to  
The Transfiguration & The Ecstasy.

I was weak on the Fourth Gospel. I still am,  
in places; I plan to amend that.  
Wellisch on *Isaac & Oedipus*  
supplements for me Kierkegaard.

Luther on *Galatians* (his grand joy)  
I laid aside until I was older & wiser.  
Bishop Andrewes' account of the Resurrection-appearances  
in 1609 seemed to me, seems to me, it.<sup>39</sup>

His alleged weakness on John's Gospel may be an honest admission, though it could also be a humorous self-reference and/or a failure to accept the variations in John from the Synoptic accounts of the other three gospels. The poems that follow 'The Search' chart a decline from hope and ecstasy contrary to the optimistic rise that Rogers reads; even their titles mark a turn toward despair—'Damned', 'Of Suicide', 'Despair', 'The Hell Poem', 'Death Ballad',

‘Purgatory’—all resist the sought-for conversation with, or understanding from, God. ‘Despair’ ends with the line ‘Utter, His Father, one word’,<sup>40</sup> recalling Christ’s agony in the Garden: Christ’s prayer ‘let this cup pass from me’<sup>41</sup> goes unanswered by an unresponsive God, Christ the son experiencing the full extent of human suffering in the face of an absent and silent God. God’s silence condemns his incarnated son to the human experience of God’s existence, and it is this version of the Christ that Berryman comprehends. It could be for this reason, rooted in silence, that John’s Gospel does not find favour with Berryman, opening as it does ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’<sup>42</sup> For Berryman in his late collections, humanity’s experience of God, on the contrary, is marked by and negotiated through silence.

For Kierkegaard, despair is the human response to knowing that one cannot die, that ‘the last hope, death, is not available’;<sup>43</sup> this is the ‘sickness unto death’,<sup>44</sup> the ‘self-consuming’<sup>45</sup> fire that results from Christianity which has ‘taught the Christian to think dauntlessly of everything earthly and worldly, including death.’<sup>46</sup> Christian consciousness is instructed, as Kierkegaard argues in *Fear and Trembling*, by a paradoxical faith in man’s relation to God and to universal man: ‘[f]aith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, not subordinate but superior’.<sup>47</sup> Perceiving oneself as greater than the universal tempts the self to sin, to break the universal, ethical rules of humanity:

[a]s soon as the individual would assert himself in his particularity over against the universal he sins, and only by recognizing this can he again reconcile himself with the universal. Whenever the individual after he has entered the universal feels an impulse to assert himself as the particular, he is in temptation (*Anfechtung*), and he can labor

himself out of this only by penitently abandoning himself as the particular in the universal.<sup>48</sup>

*Love & Fame*'s four sections move from relations of the self with others—sexual, personal, purgatorial—to a relation with God in the fourth section 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord'. En route Berryman achieves more than name-checking millennia of scholastic, philosophic and poetic enquiry: he builds a matrix of associative references that particularises his own understanding of questions of guilt and the options for salvation. *Delusions, etc.* then extends the terms of the debate across five sections, the first of which, 'Opus Dei,' is subdivided into the canonical offices of daily prayer, opening with 'Lauds' and ending with 'Compline.' So, structurally at least, Berryman locates himself within a Christian understanding of the role of prayer in the daily life of the self. Within the individual 'offices' though, Berryman's questioning of possible fractures between God and Christ continues—in 'Vespers' he writes 'Maybe it's not God's voice/only Christ's only'<sup>49</sup>—alongside anxieties over the conflict established between the universal and particular. Berryman's search for 'avenues of out' in this poem is set in the context of God's perceived injustice in his dealings with humanity, specifically Jewish peoples:

If more's demanded of man than can  
man summon, You're unjust. Suppose not. See Jewish history,  
  
tormented & redeemed, millennia later  
in Freud & Einstein forcing us sorry & free,  
Jerusalem Israeli! flames Anne Frank  
a beacon to the Gentiles weltering.<sup>50</sup>

Doubt and fear characterise Berryman's understanding of prayer in *Love & Fame's* 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord': 'If I say Thy name, art Thou there? It may be so';<sup>51</sup> 'Across the ages certain blessings swarm,/horrors accumulate, the best men fail:/Socrates, Lincoln, Christ mysterious./Who can search Thee out?'<sup>52</sup> By Berryman's tenth address to the Lord, he writes:

Fearful I peer upon the mountain path  
where once Your shadow passed, Limner of the clouds  
up their phantastic guesses. I am afraid,  
I never until now confessed.<sup>53</sup>

Penitence becomes the condition of an existence given to suffering for faith in, and bearing witness to, God. The eleventh address cites Polycarp, a first-century martyr taught by John and burnt to death for his faith:

'Eighty & six years I have been his servant  
and he has done me no harm.  
How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'  
Polycarp, John's pupil, facing the fire.<sup>54</sup>

Berryman, both another pupil and another John, prays 'Make too me acceptable at the end of time/in my degree'.<sup>55</sup> Prayer serves as a call for redemption of the individual sinner who then gives testament to God's glory and forgiveness: *Love & Fame* closes 'I pray I may be ready with my witness.'<sup>56</sup> Salvation as the potential endpoint of this discourse with God is retained



despite Berryman noting God's being 'incomprehensible':<sup>57</sup> 'I do not understand; but I believe'<sup>58</sup> is an acceptance of self-negation, placing faith in an 'Unknowable'<sup>59</sup> God above and beyond Berryman's individual particularity. The penitent self before God is recognised as a self in retreat, not one in any way approaching a level equivalent to the divine. Indeed, quite the opposite: our mortal particularity, dwarfed by the infinitude of God, is registered increasingly through our diminished status because of our very sinfulness; as Nelson observes: '[p]rayer as communication is also a form of penitence. In becoming aware of God one simultaneously becomes more aware of one's own limitations and sins.'<sup>60</sup>

*Delusions, etc.* extends this discourse of fear and trembling across its five sections. Kierkegaard's text is his most important work in Berryman's intricate assembly of meaning in these late poems that attempt speech with, or pray to, the Absolute. For readers as well-versed in Kierkegaard as Berryman was, the fact that *Fear and Trembling* was first published under a pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio (John the Silent) merely adds to its significance for a poet who regularly confronted silence in his work: Berryman would have enjoyed the manifold intertextual issues raised by that signature move. Kierkegaard's choice of pseudonym<sup>61</sup> doubles its own apophatic potentiality by replicating the early negative theological trait of masking the author's name (e.g., Isaac of Nineveh, or Isaac the Syrian; Dionysius the Areopagite) and doing so with the direct referent 'silent.' For his part, Berryman redoubles Kierkegaard's negative theological masking through his own strategic echoing of this 'silent' intertext throughout *Delusions, etc.*

Kierkegaard, however, was not the only Dane to influence Berryman's relational accounts of mankind's contact with the divine. In 'Gislebertus' Eve', which opens the third section of *Delusions, etc.*, Berryman quotes the Danish physicist Niels Bohr in a poem about the twelfth-century French sculptor Gislebertus' depiction of Eve: 'The opposite of a true/statement is a false statement. But the opposite/of a profound truth may be another

profound truth.’<sup>62</sup> Bohr was the Nobel Prize-winning physicist who discovered that atoms consist of a positive nucleus surrounded by negatively charged electrons and that these electrons travel in individual orbits around that nucleus.<sup>63</sup> Bohr keeps interesting company (da Vinci, Darwin, Freud) in this poem ostensibly about the work of the Romanesque sculptor Gislebertus, most famous for his work on the Cathedral of St Lazare in Autun between circa 1120 and 1135 A.D.; his depiction of Eve originally adorned the door lintel of the cathedral’s north transept. Her secretive whispering to Adam, revealing how to taste of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, transposed to Berryman’s ‘passion for secrets the passion worst of all,’<sup>64</sup> is an insistently human trait, a passion for unlocking the unknown, for revealing truths, whether modelled in Darwin, da Vinci, Freud or Bohr. For Bohr, one profound truth does not cancel or invalidate other profound truths; more than one truth can be held within a system of complementarity: in a wider understanding of universal truth, everything becomes relative. Berryman’s search for proof of God’s existence as Absolute truth is undermined by Bohr’s relational conceptualisation of matter and reality; indeed, it casts him out, much as Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, denied, as all humanity after them, from seeing the face of God. Intentional sin or not, the consequence is ‘we’re nowhere’ and ‘suffering we know it’<sup>65</sup>: knowledge of our banishment from the divine is our constant punishment for which we suffer. Yet, this suffering can also be ‘delicious’<sup>66</sup> because in part we exist within a paradoxical relation with God. The fruit is simultaneously tempting and forbidden, and tasting of it the delicious consequence of our suffering in the absence of God.

Kierkegaard, in *The Sickness unto Death*, explores the paradoxical bind in which Christianity places believers:

[t]he doctrine of Christianity is the doctrine of the God-Man, of kinship between God and men, but in such a way, be it noted, that the possibility of offense is, if I may dare to express it thus, the guarantee whereby God makes sure that man cannot come too near to Him. The possibility of offense is the dialectical factor in everything Christian. Take that away, and then Christianity is not simply paganism but something so fantastic that paganism might well declare it bosh. To be so near to God as Christianity teaches that man can come to Him, and dare come to Him, and shall come to Him in Christ, has never entered into any man's head.<sup>67</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the Incarnation of Christ was not God saying to us that we are like him and that we are one with him, but the very opposite: 'God is more different than any difference we can imagine'.<sup>68</sup> The appearance of the Christ confirms God's absence, his remoteness, from us, his absolute inaccessibility confirmed in our rejection of his only begotten son who is 'Ditheletic'<sup>69</sup> as Berryman reminds us, having two wills, one human and the other divine.

Questioning belief in a remote God, simultaneously positioning Christ as one example of the suffering that God encounters through contact with humanity, and instructed in Kierkegaard's theologistics of offense and paradox, it's understandable how Berryman came into conflict with orthodox Christianity. Precipitated by his father's suicide in Tampa, Florida in 1926 when Berryman was eleven years old, the moral, ethical and theological questions raised by suicide preoccupied Berryman's life. By prioritising the particular over the universal, suicide places the individual (in Christian theology) in direct confrontation with an all-powerful God. Berryman's uncertainty about the nature of God's existence also contributed to his failed attempts at recovery from alcohol dependence: the heavily Christian-inflected nature of Alcoholics Anonymous's self-help programme and its self-negating submission to a Higher Power ultimately proved insurmountable for him. Consequently, a

solely Christian inflection to his late work, and the ‘Eleven Addresses to the Lord’ in particular, is rejected by Berryman:

the point is, I have been interested not only in religion but in theology all my life. I don’t know how much these personal beliefs, together with the interest in theology and the history of the Church, enter into particular works up to those addresses to the Lord in *Love & Fame*. [...] those addresses to the Lord are not Christian poems. I am deeply interested in Christ, but I never pray to him.<sup>70</sup>

Berryman’s prayers are not prescribed by orthodox routines of Christian faith. Moreover, he does not pray to a figure deemed more human than divine, who manifests the rupture between the possibility of a divine being and the suffering and fallen nature of the human self. By distinguishing between a Christ more human than divine and the concept of a ‘God of rescue’, Berryman negotiates a space of potential salvation in which prayer functions as the iteration of God’s being in the world. The Incarnation of Christ proves God’s love for mankind and, simultaneously, the absolute alterity of the being of God. Yet, the Incarnation also registers suffering as the consequence of God’s contact with mankind, while the faithful man wishing to access the divine will similarly, must similarly, find himself within a state of suffering.

The (in)justice of this causes Berryman considerable difficulty. As ‘Compline’ from *Delusions, etc.* suggests, either humanity is condemned to eternal suffering, or everyone shall be redeemed:

if He loves me He must love everybody  
and Origen was right & Hell is empty

or will be at apocatastasis.

Sinners, sin on. We'll suffer now & later

But not forever, dear friends & brothers!<sup>71</sup>

Origen, credited with writing the first theology of Christian faith, believed the divine trinity was a hierarchy not a unity and that all creatures will be redeemed on the final day, the day of apocatastasis, when all souls will be brought into heavenly salvation. Sin is not the eternal condition of humanity in this reading, and God's love for man is signalled in his incarnation of the Christ in human form. Simon Critchley, in *The Problem with Levinas* (2015), identifies Origen as the source of the 'Christian allegorical reading' of the *Song of Songs* noting that '[w]ithin Christianity, the *Song of Songs* is the mystical book of the Bible par excellence. It is regarded as the supreme expression of the love of God in the person of Christ by the soul or by the community, the Church.'<sup>72</sup> Origen's dialectical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* sets in motion a Christian journey from a world of mortal suffering to an ecstatic union of the soul with God into which Berryman implicates his own complex and intricate glosses on belief and the role of prayer in the alleviation of human suffering.

Critchley discusses Origen in conjunction with Levinas whose essays 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' (1951), 'Prayer without Demand' (1984), and 'Judaism and Kenosis' (1985), when read in parallel with Berryman's late collections and their impulse toward prayer, destabilises Rogers's reading of a solely Christian relevance in Berryman's last prayers. When he commented to Stitt that 'I have been interested in religion and theology all my life'<sup>73</sup> Berryman also meant faiths beyond mainstream Christianity. In 1945, *The Kenyon Review* published his short story 'The Imaginary Jew', winner of the magazine's short story contest that year;<sup>74</sup> *The Dream Songs* also contain individual poems about Judaism (e.g.,

Songs 41 and 48); and Alan Severance in *Recovery* ‘brood[s] on a passage in one of his Jewish books (“Even selfishness, the most dangerous of human traits, has its proper place. A modicum of it is a *sine qua non*. ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me?’ asked Hillel, going on, however, to add, ‘If I am for myself alone, what do I amount to?’”).<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in notes titled ‘The Jewish Kick’ for unfinished sections of *Recovery* Berryman raises the prospect of conversion, not back into ‘Xt’y (Christianity)’, but into Judaism: ‘[I]eft and came to my room and incredibly thought of *becoming a Jew*. Always held it impossible because of inadequate concept of God’.<sup>76</sup> These notes continue with references both to ‘The Imaginary Jew’, ‘my old story’ and ‘*The Black Book*—abandoned—obsessed—now take it up again? *My position is certain*’<sup>77</sup> and that becoming Jewish would be ‘the wonder of my life—it’s possible!’ permitting him to be ‘alone with God, yet *not* alone, one of many worshippers, like them except in blood (who cares?)’.<sup>78</sup>

The panorama of Berryman’s religious and theological engagements, the planned Holocaust sequence, and his difficulties in submitting to A.A.’s Higher Power are funnelled in his last collections into his search for a new relation with God. ‘*All* has pointed HERE’:<sup>79</sup> another method of understanding and speaking (to) God is located, emphatically, within Jewish conceptions of faith and prayer. Richard Kelly’s *John Berryman’s Personal Library* notes that Berryman owned two volumes by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber—*The Writings of Martin Buber* (1956) and *Hasidism and Modern Man* (1958)<sup>80</sup>—though it is certain that Berryman read and consulted numerous Jewish philosophical and theological texts. Buber’s particular articulation of I-Thou ethical relations offers a base of enquiry for both Berryman and Levinas who notes: ‘whoever has walked on Buber’s ground owes allegiance to Buber, even if he didn’t know where he was. It is as if you were about to cross the frontier without knowing it; you owe obedience to the country where you are.’<sup>81</sup> What also brings Berryman into conversation with Levinas is the increased engagement in their

work with Kierkegaard, this potential triangulation helpfully supported by Westphal who notes that '[t]he affinities between Levinas and Kierkegaard are deeper and more extensive than one had any reason to suspect.'<sup>82</sup> For Levinas, prayer facilitates our understanding of the other as other and yet as the same. This reconfigures Kierkegaard's delineation of the particular and the universal; Critchley also notes this facet in relation to Origen's allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. In 'The *I* and the Totality', Levinas establishes that 'the crisis of religion results from the impossibility of isolating oneself with God and forgetting all those who remain outside the amorous dialogue.'<sup>83</sup> Alone with God and yet not alone, one of many, a self subsumed within the universal: this too became Berryman's understanding of prayer and selfhood.

By moving away from a stable, Christianity-focused interpretation of humanity's relation to God, Berryman replicates the amorphous evolution of apophatic theology, the reach of which encompasses a variety of silences offered for example by mysticism or by contemporary philosophical and theological enquiry. Berryman's blend of Christianity and Judaism moves him toward a position similar to that outlined, for instance, by Nigel Zimmerman: as a Roman Catholic theologian, Zimmerman argues that the effect of Levinas' writing on Christian theology has been one of 'provocation', repositioning theological discussions in relation to ethics and, essentially, redefining '[t]heology as *prayer*.'<sup>84</sup> Any initial struggle between a Christian and a Judaic interpretation is reconsidered, in many ways realigned, when the theological positions of both faiths are reconceived as being coterminous and imbricated rather than as opposed. To give oneself truly to God through prayer is 'often the arduous territory of despair and anxiety.'<sup>85</sup> Such a dilemma is clearly mapped in Berryman's last poems in which doubt, penitence and suffering alternately take precedence in works that seek – and wish to speak (to) – God; as Zimmerman notes: '[a]t the very point of

suffering, God's name is invoked and his own presence re-situates suffering in relation to his will. At this juncture – the experience of suffering – prayer becomes a participation in God.<sup>86</sup>

Michael Andrews, distilling a Levinasian position in relation to prayer, inverts Zimmerman's interpretation arguing that the possibility of God, despite the philosophical and phenomenological issues related to his eternal silence and invisibility, makes prayer possible, connecting this to Levinas' understanding of an ethical response to the demand of the Other. For Levinas, ethics exist because of other people; and we have prayer because of the existence (we believe) of God. Prayer creates God, or offers a bridge to the ineffability of a divine possibility, though this raises the question: does it do this as a self-indulgent activity or as an 'efficacious'<sup>87</sup> one? Andrews asks: '[i]s the God to Whom I lift up my soul merely a deified, analogical extension of my own ego, constituted from within a solipsistic sphere of conscious activity? Or is prayer essentially dialogical in nature, directed always toward a personal yet infinite horizon of nonthematic givenness?'<sup>88</sup> Prayer names, or attempts to name, that which does not exist or which exists beyond all naming, that which is external to language. Poetry and prayer share this quest, writing/speaking in the face of the void and the eternal silence of God. They share a similar risk: that their essential, necessary activity emanates out of and returns into the silence it seeks to provoke and from which it yearns to receive a response.

This is where Levinas provides a way across the seemingly unbreachable divide established between the self and the Absolute. In 'Prayer Without Demand,' Levinas writes: '[o]nto-logy—that is, the intelligibility of being—only becomes possible when ethics, the origin of all meaning, is taken as the starting point.'<sup>89</sup> Meaning becomes possible when I surrender *myself* to the demand of the other, recognising in the suffering of others the potential for a universal salvation. He expands this point in 'Judaism and Kenosis': '[f]ar from being a demand addressed to God, prayer, in this view is the soul's rising upward like the smoke of



sacrifices, the soul's delivering itself up to the heights—dis-inter-esting itself in the etymological sense of the term.'<sup>90</sup> Consequently, 'at no time is prayer an entreaty for *oneself*; properly speaking it is not an entreaty, but an *offering of oneself*, an outpouring of the soul. At least that is what true prayer is meant to be in Jewish piety, according to *Nefesh Hahaim*.'<sup>91</sup> Such a mode of prayer is 'an act of love'<sup>92</sup> as Michael Morgan defines it in *Discovering Levinas* (2007), continuing, '[t]he just man prays *to* God and also *for* Him, and this he does by reaching out to the other person who suffers.'<sup>93</sup> It is our ethical relation to others that defines the possibility of justice in the world: '[t]his is the origin of justice, the ground of purpose and meaning, what brings significance to existence, or, in an older vocabulary, value to a world of fact.'<sup>94</sup>

'True prayer, then, is never for oneself, for one's own needs', argues Levinas.<sup>95</sup> In the poem 'Matins' from *Delusions, etc.* a penitent Berryman recognises this truth. Discarding his anger at a perceived 'tyrannous' God he realises his offense in prioritising his own self in the face of God's suffering:

However, lo, across what wilderness  
in vincible ignorance past forty years  
lost to (as now I see) Your sorrowing  
I strayed abhorrent, blazing with my Self.<sup>96</sup>

True prayer is that which sublimates the self within the universal. For Berryman, deeply immersed within Kierkegaardian thought, the possibility of being a self at all is always in question; recall his handwritten notes in *The Sickness unto Death*: 'the willed self (false)' and 'the self proper' noting that 'the self does not exist, it is becoming'. For Kierkegaard, the human being is composed of the body and the psyche but with a necessary third aspect, a

consciousness of the relation between the body and the psyche, manifested as an awareness of the possibility of the self. This relational endeavour within the particular individual, and of the individual to the universal, operates much like Bohr's electrons orbiting the nucleus of an atom, the highest realm of relation existing not within the self for Kierkegaard but between the self and God.

It is this relation that Berryman continually encounters in his last two collections as he attempts to tease out the limits of the divine and what he can retain as a true faith in the face of evidence to the contrary. In this enterprise, poetry as prayer for Berryman functions as a dialectical discourse that, setting aside the question of Christ's divinity, positions Berryman in an anomalous relation to the requirements of a faith he had supposedly returned to as well as the Christian tenets that underwrote his A.A. treatment. Closer to Kierkegaard's dismissal of Christian paradox—'Mutinous & free I drifted off'<sup>97</sup>—Berryman's last poems are prayers, not of Christian orthodoxy, but of 'wondering and wandering' as outlined by Levinas 'filled with absence, radical silence, fear and trembling'<sup>98</sup>: 'Father, Father, I am overwhelmed/I cannot speak tonight'<sup>99</sup> opens 'A Prayer After All' echoing the calls of Christ on the Cross 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'<sup>100</sup>

Andrews notes that '*Pregare*, "to pray," derives from the Latin *precare*, which means to beg or to entreat. In an etymological sense, "to pray" signifies more than mere supplication; it means to give (*donner*), to for(e)-give, to forgive a debt, to forgive debts freely and without reservation. *Pregare* thus infers the beseeching of request as well as the giving of pardon, it implies giving away without condition of receiving, giving graciously.'<sup>101</sup> Prayer is not *for* the self; true prayer requires an emptying out of the self so that we can approach an understanding of the incarnated suffering of God. Berryman's late poetry, as prayer, 'taking place out near the end of things', rather than an enterprise of solipsistic self-indulgence, formulates his approach to such an understanding. Prayer recognises and is this

intermediate condition of being, like Christ both human and divine, and suffering for it. As with Kierkegaard's third essential element in the possibility of selfhood, this position acknowledges our physical and spiritual relation. Prayer is the consciousness of our own relational status, both with ourselves and with the divine, like Berryman's opposed portrayals of Christ in 'Ecce Homo', either as the all-powerful Pantocrator (one of the names for God in Judaism) that '[makes] me feel you probably were divine/*but* not human',<sup>102</sup> or eternally figured in the moment of suffering, *the* condition of prayer: 'your dead head bent forward sideways,/your long feet hanging, your thin long arms out/ in unconquerable beseeching –'.<sup>103</sup> This Christ, his 'Semitic stature'<sup>104</sup> the ultimate embodiment of prayer, is for Berryman the incarnation of 'attenuated'<sup>105</sup> human supplication. In 'The Prayer of the Middle-Aged Man' the fourth last poem of *Delusions, etc.* and the last of five in the collection with prayer in its title, Berryman finally achieves this position, as much as any human is able to: 'a sinner' (unlike Christ) 'nailed dead-centre too',<sup>106</sup> suspended in suffering and supplication.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Stitt, 'John Berryman, The Art of Poetry No. 16', *Paris Review* 53 (Winter 1972) 177-207; <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4052/john-berryman-the-art-of-poetry-no-16-john-berryman>.

<sup>2</sup> John Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p.312

<sup>3</sup> For fuller discussions of silence in Berryman's work, see: Philip McGowan, 'John Berryman and the Writing of Silence', in Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan (eds.), *After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.241-55; Philip McGowan, 'Berryman, Sexton and the Possibilities of Poetic Language' in *English* (2013) Vol. 62, No. 239, 380-404.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Letter to Henry Church', 8 Dec. 1942, in Holly Stevens (ed.) *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p.434.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Anselm K. Min, 'Naming the Unnameable God: Levinas, Derrida, and Marion', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 60, No 1/3 (Dec. 2006), 99-116 (106).

<sup>7</sup> William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Vol.2 'Modern and Contemporary Transformations' (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Kearney, 'Returning to God After God: Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur', *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009), 167-83. For a fuller account of Kearney's approach in this regard, see for example Richard Kearney, *Anatheism Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy*, p.13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?', *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London and New York: Continuum, 1998), p.7.

- <sup>12</sup> M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.25.
- <sup>13</sup> Philip Coleman, *John Berryman's Public Vision: Relocating 'The Scene of Disorder'* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2014), p.7.
- <sup>14</sup> John Haffenden edited these materials to form *Berryman's Shakespeare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
- <sup>15</sup> John Berryman, 'Letter to Robert Giroux', May 1971, in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p.viii.
- <sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion of this unpublished work, see Matthew Boswell, 'The Black Book: Berryman's Holocaust Requiem' in Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan (eds.), *After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.11-27. The manuscripts for 'The Black Book' are among Berryman's papers at the University of Minnesota Library: Unpublished Miscellaneous Poetry, box 1, folder 25, John Berryman Papers (JBP/Mss043), Manuscripts Division, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- <sup>17</sup> Stitt, 'John Berryman, The Art of Poetry No. 16', <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4052/john-berryman-the-art-of-poetry-no-16-john-berryman>.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Isaac the Syrian, 'On Silence' in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p.33.
- <sup>20</sup> Merold Westphal, 'Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self' in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (eds.) *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp.13-31 (p.20).
- <sup>21</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Snow Man', in Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p.10.
- <sup>22</sup> Maurice Blanchot maps this essential but impossible task across his works, notably 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.256-70, and *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
- <sup>23</sup> Tom Rogers, *God of Rescue: John Berryman and Christianity* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).
- <sup>24</sup> Coleman, *John Berryman's Public Vision*, p.197.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.
- <sup>26</sup> Albert Gelpi, *American Poetry After Modernism: The Power of the Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.41.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> John Berryman Papers (JBP/Mss043), Manuscripts Division, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota. By permission of Kate Donahue Berryman.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> John Berryman, 'Olympus', *Love & Fame* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p.18. All quotes from Berryman's published poems and unpublished manuscripts are by permission of Kate Donahue Berryman.
- <sup>32</sup> Derek R. Nelson, 'The Speaking That Silence Is: Prayer as Openness to God', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol.52, No.4 (Winter 2013), 332-39 (336).
- <sup>33</sup> Rico Sneller, 'Crisis in Our Speaking about God: Derrida and Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*' in Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (eds.) *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp.223-49 (p.237).
- <sup>34</sup> Philippians 2: 12-13.
- <sup>35</sup> Genesis 22: 1-13.
- <sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p.124.
- <sup>37</sup> Genesis 22:8.
- <sup>38</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, "'I Am Their Musick'" Lamentations and *The Dream Songs*', *John Berryman Studies*, vol.1, no.1 (Jan. 1975) 5-6.
- <sup>39</sup> Berryman, 'The Search', *Love & Fame*, pp.55-6.
- <sup>40</sup> Berryman, 'Despair', *Love & Fame*, p.72.
- <sup>41</sup> Matthew 26: 39.

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- <sup>42</sup> John 1:1.
- <sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, p.151.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.
- <sup>49</sup> John Berryman, 'Vespers', Charles Thornbury (ed.) *Collected Poems 1937-1971* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p.233.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Anne Frank was the subject of a 1967 essay, 'The Development of Anne Frank', in which Berryman parallels Frank's 'conversion of a child into a person' with Augustine's *Confessions*, the epitome for Berryman of a text offering the 'experience' of the 'phenomenon called religious conversion.' Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet*, p.93.
- <sup>51</sup> Berryman, 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord', *Collected Poems*, p.217.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.217-8. Socrates was Kierkegaard's touchstone for a way to resolve the paradoxes of Christian faith: 'Socrates, Socrates, Socrates! Yes, one may well call they name thrice, it would not be too much to call it ten times, if that would do any good.' Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, p.223.
- <sup>53</sup> Berryman, 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord', *Collected Poems*, p.221.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.216.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.215.
- <sup>60</sup> Nelson, 'The Speaking That Silence Is: Prayer as Openness to God', 336.
- <sup>61</sup> For a fuller discussion of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms in his work, and of Johannes de Silentio in particular, see Mattias Martinson, 'The Incapable Poet: Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Theodor W. Adorno's *Critique of Poetic Philosophy*', *Literature and Philosophy*, Vol. 33 (March 2019) 50-68. As Martinson notes in a detailed footnote, '[t]he literature on the issue of Kierkegaard as a philosopher and of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is nothing but enormous' (66) though he picks out two articles by Joseph Westfall as relevant starting points, particularly in relation to Kierkegaard's doubling of the issue of silence with which his text deals: 'Saving Abraham: Johannes de Silentio and the Demonic Paradox', *Philosophy Today* 48 (2004) 276-87 and 'Kierkegaard and Intentionally Fictional Authors', *Philosophy Today* 56 (2012) 343-54.
- <sup>62</sup> Berryman, 'Gislebertus' Eve', *Collected Poems*, pp.245-6
- <sup>63</sup> Another Bohr discovery, that electrons can be either viewed as waves or as particles, but not both at the same time, was central in the development of quantum theory.
- <sup>64</sup> Berryman, 'Gislebertus' Eve', p.245.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.246.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>67</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, p.256.
- <sup>68</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Suspending the Ethical: R.S. Thomas and Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*', in Damien Wolford Davies (ed.) *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p.213.
- <sup>69</sup> Berryman, 'Gislebertus' Eve', p.246.
- <sup>70</sup> Stitt, 'John Berryman, The Art of Poetry No. 16', <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4052/john-berryman-the-art-of-poetry-no-16-john-berryman>.
- <sup>71</sup> Berryman, 'Compline', *Collected Poems*, pp.234-5.
- <sup>72</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.121-2.
- <sup>73</sup> Stitt, 'John Berryman, The Art of Poetry No. 16', <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4052/john-berryman-the-art-of-poetry-no-16-john-berryman>

- <sup>74</sup> In an engaged reading of ‘The Imaginary Jew’, Andrew Gross argues that ‘Berryman’s triangulation of American anti-Semitism between Nazi genocide and homegrown racism places the story firmly in the context of mid-century American responses to the Holocaust.’ Andrew Gross, ‘Imaginary Jews and True Confessions: Ethnicity, Lyricism, and John Berryman’s *Dream Songs*’, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1.1 (2009); [www.eschoarship.org/uc/item/4035s7ss](http://www.eschoarship.org/uc/item/4035s7ss). Along with Boswell’s archival research on ‘The Black Book’, it is clear that the Holocaust and Jewish persecution were ongoing issues for Berryman.
- <sup>75</sup> Berryman, *Recovery*, p.105.
- <sup>76</sup> John Berryman, *Recovery* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p.240.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241; emphasis in original.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.240; emphasis in original.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>80</sup> Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman’s Personal Library A Catalogue* (New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), p.50.
- <sup>81</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Philosophy, Justice, and Love’ in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London and New York: Continuum, 1998), p.102.
- <sup>82</sup> Merold Westphal, ‘Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task’, *Modern Theology* 8.3 (July 1992), 241-61 (241).
- <sup>83</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The *I* and the Totality’, *Entre Nous*, p.18. In ‘A Man-God?’, also collected in *Entre Nous*, Levinas engages directly with Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* and the concept of transcendent truth. Additionally, Levinas’ liturgical source for kenosis (emptying oneself) is the description of Christ in Philippians 2: 6-7–‘Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to cling to, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness’—shortly before the admonition to work out one’s salvation with fear and trembling.
- <sup>84</sup> Nigel Zimmerman, *Levinas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.81.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90.
- <sup>87</sup> Michael F. Andrews, ‘How (Not) to Find God in All Things: Derrida, Levinas, and St. Ignatius of Loyola on Learning How to Pray for the Impossible’ in Benson and Wirzba (eds.) *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, pp.195-208 (p.196).
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>89</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Prayer Without Demand’, in Sean Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.231.
- <sup>90</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Judaism and Kenosis’, *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.128.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.
- <sup>92</sup> Michael J. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.349.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.350; emphasis in original.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p.351.
- <sup>95</sup> Levinas, ‘Judaism and Kenosis’, *In the Time of Nations*, p.128.
- <sup>96</sup> Berryman, ‘Matins’, *Collected Poems*, p.226.
- <sup>97</sup> Berryman, ‘The Form’, *Collected Poems*, p.250.
- <sup>98</sup> Andrews, ‘How (Not) to Find God in All Things’, in Benson and Wirzba (eds.) *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, p.206-7.
- <sup>99</sup> Berryman, ‘A Prayer After All’, *Collected Poems*, p.252.
- <sup>100</sup> Matthew 27: 46.
- <sup>101</sup> Andrews, ‘How (Not) to Find God in All Things’, in Benson and Wirzba (eds.) *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, p.197.
- <sup>102</sup> Berryman, ‘Ecce Homo’, *Collected Poems*, p.251; emphasis in original;
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.252.
- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>106</sup> Berryman, ‘The Prayer of the Middle-Aged Man’, *Collected Poems*, p.262.