Title

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Permalink

Journal

Author

Gross, Andrew S.

Publication Date

2009-02-16

DOI

Peer reviewed

Imaginary Jews and True Confessions: Ethnicity, Lyricism, and John Berryman's *Dream Songs*

ANDREW GROSS

> *. . . Jews, who have changed much in the course of history, are certainly no race, [but] the anti-Semites in a way are a race, because they always use the same slogans, display the same attitudes, indeed almost look alike.*
>
> —Max Horkheimer[1]

John Berryman's "The Imaginary Jew," published in the *Kenyon Review* of 1945, is in some ways a rather programmatic account of one man's conversion from parlor anti-Semitism to a feeling of solidarity with Jews. The climax occurs when a bigot accuses the narrator of being Jewish in order to discredit him in an argument over Roosevelt's foreign policy prior to the American entry into World War II. The accusation completely unnerves the narrator in ways he does not immediately understand, and he is shocked to see that it discredits him in the eyes of the crowd, which has assembled at Union Square to hear impromptu debates. Later, after leaving the scene of his embarrassment, he decides to lay claim to this mistaken, or *imaginary*, identity, and comes to the following conclusion about the nature of prejudice: "My persecutors were right: I was a Jew. The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew. Every murderer strikes the mirror, the lash of the torturer falls on the mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow down together."[2]

The story garnered some attention when it appeared in 1945. It was Berryman's first major publication and it won him the *Kenyon Review* award for the best contribution of the year, bringing him a badly needed prize of $500. Erich Kahler, author of *Man the Measure* and a number of essays and monographs on Jewish identity and anti-Semitism, published a translated version in *Die Neue Rundschau*, a significant postwar periodical in Germany; Cyril Connolly printed it in the influential

British literary magazine *Horizon*. Berryman himself was to return to the theme and even the phrase "the imaginary Jew" throughout his career, referencing it in his *Dream Songs* and in the autobiographical novel *Recovery* he did not complete before his suicide.

"Imaginary Jews" were quite common in the late 1940s, although, given our current sensibilities about ethnicity, the prevalence of such impersonations might strike us as strange. Arthur Miller's novel *Focus*, published the same year as Berryman's short story, tells the story of a man who begins to "look Jewish" when failing eyesight compels him to wear glasses. By the end of the novel his family and neighbors have turned on him, and he resolves to join forces with the only Jew on his street to face down a violent anti-Semitic attack. In other words, he chooses to "look Jewish" not only as an *object* of other people's perceptions but as a *subject*.[3] Laura Z. Hobson's novel *Gentlemen's Agreement*, about a WASP reporter who impersonates a Jew to uncover anti-Semitism in New York and Connecticut, reached the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1947. The film adaptation of the novel, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Gregory Peck, won three Oscars and was nominated for several more.

Identifying with Jews, and especially Jewish victims of the Holocaust, was also a common practice in mid-century American poetry. Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Getting There," all from 1962, are the most obvious and widely cited examples. The list could be extended to include Robert Lowell (Mordecai Myers in *Life Studies*), Charles Olson (*The Distances*), Randall Jarrell ("In the Camp There Was One Alive," "A Camp in the Prussian Forest"), Anne Sexton ("After Auschwitz"), and Anthony Hecht, whose army unit helped liberate Buchenwald ("Rites and Ceremonies"). (If we add Jewish American poets to the list of those identifying with Holocaust victims, it would grow to include Allen Ginsberg, Charles Reznikoff, Denise Levertov, and Hilda Schiff, among others.)[4] The imaginary Jew was not a major postwar figure, but it was certainly a consistent one, and this consistency makes its subsequent disappearance—and its strangeness from a contemporary perspective—all the more striking.[5]

The imaginary Jewishness evident in postwar poetry and culture completely reversed the anti-Semitism typical of prewar modernism, which tended to represent Jews through grotesque images rather than as figures of identification. T. S. Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" are prominent examples of the earlier trend, as are Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, the novels of Nathanael West (sometimes pointed to as examples of "Jewish self-hatred") and even aspects of James Joyce's otherwise sympathetic representation of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.[6]

Recent criticism has tended to judge the "imaginary Jew" almost as harshly as Eliot's line in "Gerontion," "the Jew squats on the window-sill," and Pound's disparaging remarks about "the intramural, the almost intravaginal warmth of / hebrew affections" and the "big jews' vendetta on goyim."[7] Hilene Flanzbaum, for

instance, accuses Berryman—and through him postwar American culture generally—of misappropriating Jewish identity.[8] While this accusation registers our contemporary discomfort with ethnic impersonations, it fails to account for their pervasiveness. It also fails to recognize the explicitly *imaginary* nature of Berryman's Jewishness—an identity he never claimed to be his own.

Berryman is an important test case here because he comes under fire from two divergent critical discourses in ways that highlight their common assumptions about ethnic and poetic identity. The criticism directed against Berryman's supposedly inappropriate "ethnic" identification recapitulates the first wave of sustained anti-Berryman criticism to emerge in the 1970s, when he was accused of being too personal (wrapped up in quotidian problems) or personal in the wrong way (expressing these problems through the indirection of *dramatis personae*). In a sense, Berryman gets lost in the transition from prewar anti-Semitism to contemporary multiculturalism in the same way that he gets lost in the shift from high modernism to confessional poetry.

The determinate context here is indeed confessional poetry, widely understood by Berryman's contemporaries to be a naïve form of lyricism grounded in the authenticity of experience.[9] Berryman resisted applying the term "confessional" to his own poetry, and even those who actively cultivated the label rarely subscribed to a form of lyricism as naïve or spontaneous as their supporters (and detractors) claimed. However, confessional poetry did self-consciously cultivate *personality* in an agonal relation to the doctrine of *impersonality* propounded by Pound and Eliot. The new poetry focused, in sometimes embarrassing detail, on the particular experiences of identifiable individuals in concrete emotional, professional, and even therapeutic situations. This "situatedness," in turn, became an important motif in the struggle waged by the feminist and ethnic literatures of the 1960s and 1970s against the abstract universals of both traditional (high modernist) culture and liberal subjectivity.[10]

Berryman, opposing both tradition and the younger talents, is neither impersonal nor personal but *impersonating*. He does not differ from Eliot and Pound in his reliance on personae, masks, or dramatic monologue and dialogue, nor does he diverge from the confessionals in the painful subject matter he called "the soul under stress."[11] Rather, it is his construction of identity that is discordant—and in a way that calls the assumptions of both his predecessors and peers into question. From the perspective of Berryman's poetic practice, Eliot's *impersonality* comes to resemble the *invisibility* of white male privilege, and confessional *personality* appears to invert the values without challenging the basic structure of modernist prejudice. Berryman's dramatic impersonations, in no way atypical of literary and filmic narratives of the 1940s and 1950s, deliberately oppose some of the basic principles of twentieth-century verse, and in doing so reveal the ethnic assumptions behind modernist theories of lyricism as well as the hidden lyricism of contemporary ethnicity.

The ethnic lyricism typical of high modernism and confessional poetry is fundamentally melancholic, preoccupied with an Other it can neither ignore nor assimilate. The Other is an excluded or missing object whose "absent presence" effectively restricts the modes of poetic expression to the philippic and the elegiac, and the means to parody, apostrophe, and prosopopoeia. Just as Eliot's grotesque anti-Semitic imagery cannot be separated from his call, in *After Strange Gods*, to limit the numbers of Jews in communities in order to "protect" cultural tradition, Plath's fascination with Jews and Nazis is not to be separated from the recent memory of mass deportation and murder.[12] The political impulses here are fundamentally opposed, but both poetic practices depend, in the proleptic or the commemorative modes, on the representation of Jewish identity as *absence*. Berryman, contrary to Pound and Plath, neither excludes nor elegizes Jews; he impersonates them, as well as African Americans and women, in a deliberately theatrical way. His impersonations are part of a twofold strategy to dramatize the dangerous links between imagination and violence in modernist poetry, and to reveal the modernist poetic persona's deep investment in racial or ethnic identity.

The theory supporting Berryman's poetic project involves the *mirror* of anti-Semitism alluded to at the end of his short story. It was widely assumed in mid-century psychological theories that prejudice turns its object into an inverted mirror, simultaneously reflecting and alienating those aspects of personality the bigot is incapable of facing in himself. Berryman's poetry attempts to transform this violent mirroring into recognized interdependency. To borrow Berryman's own terminology, his "imaginary Jew," far from appropriating or rejecting a "foreign" identity, shows how "selving" is linked to "othering," whether we like it or not.[13]

1. "The Imaginary Jew" and the Mirror of Anti-Semitism

"The Imaginary Jew" evidently had a strong personal significance for Berryman, who is described by one of his biographers as having briefly flirted with anti-Semitism during his student days.[14] The short story is based on an actual incident in 1941 that alerted him to the dangers of prejudice and racist stereotyping. He tried to write about the incident for four years—including in poetic form—before finally deciding on the short story format. This casting about for a form is significant. The short story allowed Berryman to work out at the level of plot, setting, and characterization certain relations between image and identity that would later prove crucial in his poetry. I will pursue this point in the next section. First I want to examine the relations between image, identity, and prejudice as they appear in the short story, along with the similarities between the short story's account of prejudice and contemporary theories of anti-Semitism.

A close reading of the story does not support the claim that Berryman is trying to "appropriate" Jewish identity. There are some hints, for instance, that the man who mistakenly—and threateningly—accuses the narrator of being Jewish is also the

narrator's double. This doubling is suggested by the fact that the bellicose aggressor in the story is Irish (as was Berryman), and even more strongly by the image of the mirror at the end of the story and the repetitive and ambiguous syntax. There is also a telling repetition of the key word "cut" to evoke both anti-Semitic violence and circumcision, when the bigot ultimately challenges the narrator to show his penis to prove his identity.[15]

While the story plays up the connections between the non-Jewish narrator and his anti-Semitic antagonist in their violent but also strangely intimate encounter, it repeatedly warns against the narrator's reactive tendency to over-identify with Jews. In fact, there are several warnings against the dangers of joining image and reality through either over-identification *or* prejudice, which are presented as mirror images of one another. The narrator informs us, apropos of nothing, that in a moment of excitement he inadvertently scratched—cut?—a record of Haydn's *London Symphony* where "oboe joins the strings" in the final movement. Other significant details call seemingly arbitrary moments of "joining"—either of aggressor and victim or victim and Jew—into question. There is a seemingly gratuitous reference, for instance, to a female badger who keeps turning somersaults, "quitting the wall, by the way, always at an angle in fixed relation to the angle at which she arrived at it" (244). This observation, seemingly irrelevant to the central conflict of the story, is picked up in an apparently random description of the mind's "weak . . . talent" to conceptualize pure relation, described as the "immaculate relation of K alone," the alphabetic character here describing, when considered as an ideogram, the badger's approach and retreat from the wall at an oblique angle (244).[16] These details, existing in a relation of supplementarity to the main plot events, throw those events into a new light, warning against the dangers of confusing image and identity through either prejudice or over-identification. In other words, the short story endorses neither the anti-Semitic identification of the Jew with Jewish stereotypes, nor the philo-Semitic identification of the non-Jew with the Jew. Identification necessarily involves imagination, or the projection of images of the self onto the other, but the moral of the story is that imagination can also lead to acts of violence. Accusations of identity theft seem to miss the mark.

The point of the story is not identifying with Jews but *imagining* "the Jew" as a "real image," to use Berryman's term, i.e., as a symbol that can actually designate victims of real violence. Berryman was concerned with the way symbols produce reality, and with how reality is materialized through the bodies of victims forced to stand for the social groups to which they allegedly "belong."[17] These concerns had a pressing political significance in 1945. Thus Berryman goes to some lengths to contextualize his story in relation to German violence against Jews (the narrator mentions 1933, the year of Hitler's rise to power, as the date he became aware of anti-Semitism in his American college) and in relation to other examples of American prejudice (the narrator describes himself as a "nigger-lover," despising the term and lacking a cognate to explain his affection towards Jews).[18]

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. Most early theorists were concerned with the practical problem of putting a stop to anti-Semitism—and indeed all forms of prejudice—once and for all. Their motivation was not elegiac or commemorative but preventative, as it was assumed that the war could actually lead to an increase of anti-Semitism in the United States, especially among returning veterans who, traumatized by combat and frustrated with civilian life, would look to vent their frustrations on scapegoats. This is what was understood to have happened in Germany after World War I. Max Horkheimer made the dire observation in Ernst Simmel's landmark volume *Anti-Semitism* (1946) that anti-Jewish prejudice was a stronger social factor in the United States in 1945 than it was in Germany before Hitler's rise to power, and Douglass Orr predicted that veterans would be extremely susceptible to prejudice.[19] This is, in fact, the premise of one of the most important studies of its day, the famous *Dynamics of Prejudice* (1950) by Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, which bases its analysis of social attitudes towards Jews and African Americans on a survey of returning veterans. The difference between the United States and Germany was assumed to be a function not of some supposedly exceptional American character, but of the presence of multiple American minority groups. In Germany the whole list of stereotypes were applied to the Jews, while in the United States they were divided between Jews and African Americans.[20]

This is not the place to evaluate Bettelheim and Janowitz's ego-psychological model, which theorizes the anti-Semitic portrait of the "Jew" in terms of character traits associated with the superego (e.g., greed, control) and the "Negro" in terms of those traits associated with the id (e.g., irrational drives). Such studies tend to be overlooked today not merely because of their theoretical apparatus but because the very situation they set out to describe seemed like ancient history after a decade. Bettelheim and Janowitz's follow-up study fourteen years later, *Social Change and Prejudice*, expresses the authors' surprise that anti-Semitism seemed to have almost disappeared in the United States, at least according to available indicators, while prejudice against African Americans remained disturbingly strong. The factors they point to as having reduced one form of prejudice but not the other are the by then widespread knowledge of the Nazi genocide, the emergence of communists as replacement scapegoats for Jews in the Cold War context, and the importance of the fighting Israeli Army to counter anti-Semitic stereotypes of weakness (7). The Bettelheim-Janowitz studies allow us to date with some precision the remarkable transformation that is now commonly called the "whitening" of American Jews.[21] It is during this period of "whitening"—roughly the 1960s—that the figure of the "imaginary Jew" became embarrassing; in popular culture it was replaced by what might be termed the progressive blackface of books such as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961). Berryman, as we shall see when turning to his poetry, also puts on blackface in the 1960s, but without abandoning his early experiments in imaginary

Jewishness. Those who point to Berryman's imaginary Jew as an example of identity theft ignore both its substantial connection to contemporary theories of anti-Semitism and the historical significance of Jewish social integration.

What is significant about the Bettelheim-Janowitz model for our purposes is the assumption that prejudice has more to do with the character of the bigot than the supposed characteristics of his victim. This claim, novel for its time, defined prejudice as a form of misidentification or morbid projection. Berryman's metaphor for this is the "mirror" struck by the murderer at the end of his story.[22] Variations on the theme of mirroring are evident in many of the influential theories of the day, for instance in the language Simmel used to explain pogroms: "Massacres of the Jews have always been preceded by a rabble-rousing period during which the Jew is accused of the very crimes the anti-Semite is about to commit."[23] We can find almost identical language and structures in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, the first chapter of which appeared in translation in the *Partisan Review* as early as 1946; the mirroring argument is even evident in Hannah Arendt, who was critical of psychoanalysis and of Sartre.[24] Mirroring also plays a prominent role in the chapter on anti-Semitism in Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[25] Anti-Semitism was widely understood to be a neurotic projection, a pathology having more to do with the character of the anti-Semite than the supposed characteristics of the Jew. At the group level, projection was understood to take on the dangerously delusional character of psychosis, which could easily lead to a massive negation of reality through acts of mass violence.[26] While such theories run the risk of denying a positive content to Jewish identity and thereby reducing Jews to mere projection screens of anti-Semites, they do point out the role played by "imaginary Jewishness" in the persecution of real Jews. Anti-Semites strike at their own dark imaginings in their victims, regardless of who their victims really are.

2. Genocide, Poetry, and the Doctrine of Impersonality

Berryman's ethnic impersonations were typical for the 1940s and 1950s and resonated with those theories of anti-Semitism stressing the way prejudice imagines its objects. Impersonation is not primarily self-invention for Berryman; it is an attempt to embody the images—and caricatures—produced by ethnic mirroring and projection. Arguments about ethnic "appropriation" miss the significance of Berryman's project because they depend on the assumption, which Amy Hungerford has shown to be typical of much writing about ethnicity after the Holocaust, that the text is a personified substitute for the author and bears the ethnic and cultural markers of the author's identity.[27] Berryman is not interested in claiming Jewish identity but with creating "a compelling counter-image of the Jew, still somehow authentically American" to oppose the "Jewish character . . . invented, and . . . frozen into the anti-Jewish stereotype."[28] This is Leslie Fiedler's statement on the task of the Jewish American novelist in the 1960s. Berryman, of course, is not Jewish, and his

poetic strategy calls into question the "personalist" or "identitarian" assumption that only Jews could be interested in combating anti-Semitic stereotypes. Berryman's project is closer to what Kenneth Gross, in analyzing Shylock, calls "the inner life of a slander": "Shakespeare's startling achievement is that whatever we call Shylock's humanity emerges exactly through rather than simply in spite of the shapes of anti-Semitic abuse that frame his character onstage."[29] (It should be remembered that Berryman was a Shakespeare scholar.) Berryman is not operating in the personal register at all, or even through the trope of personification. Instead he dramatizes his literary persona by impersonating those images that define the literary and political identity of "the Jew."

Berryman persisted in his impersonations until the end of his life in 1972, long after it became fashionable to do so, because they allowed him to work out certain formal problems of voice and persona. Berryman struggled his entire career against both the doctrine of impersonality, as it was advocated by Eliot and Pound, and what in contemporary parlance is called ethnic essentialism.[30] The model of identity emerging from his writing is highly performative, and it relies on the structures of mirroring and projection he explored in "The Imaginary Jew." Poetry is like prejudice, for Berryman, in the way it projects and mirrors multiple identities. While Berryman would never confuse real victims of violence with the characters in a short story or the *dramatis personae* in his verse, he does understand that imagining the Other, even in poetry, can have very real political implications. His later poetry in particular attempts to assign the lyric voice to the Other, using this "external" vocalization point to describe "self." Traditionally his *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) is pointed to as his breakthrough poem in this regard.[31] However, it is arguably Berryman's earlier preoccupation with anti-Semitism and genocide that led to his poetry of impersonation.

Berryman's preoccupation with the connections between poetry and prejudice are already evident in his 1948 "New Year's Eve," a poem showing the influences of the Auden school in its attempt to impose strict form (a variation of *ottava rima*) on painful subject matter, resulting in pairings that perhaps sound forced or even disrespectful to contemporary ears, e.g., "Ages we have sighed, / And cleave more sternly to a music of / Even this sore word 'genocide.'"[32] We are likely to cringe at the jarring rhyme between "sighed" and "genocide," but the mere mention of the word (in quotation marks) is significant, as the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide that would offer the first legal definition of the neologism was not passed until after the publication of the poem (9 December 1948).[33] Berryman's metaphor flies in the face of contemporary concerns over the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, concerns usually linked to Adorno's dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[34] The poem is not insecure about the ability of language to represent atrocity; on the contrary, it assumes that rhyme and meter can contain or make sense of genocide, and in doing so turns genocide into a metaphor of the universal human condition, so that Nazi

cruelties become a symbol of what time does to everyone: "brownshirt Time chiefly our works will burn."[35]

Berryman seems to have become dissatisfied with this universalizing approach to oppression—which does misappropriate Jewish victimization for the sake of poetic production—when he began to work on Ezra Pound. Although Pound would have a major influence on Berryman (*The Cantos* are in many ways a model for *The Dream Songs*), Berryman was uncomfortable with what he began to see as the linked Poundian problems of anti-Semitism and impersonality. Shortly after publishing "New Year's Eve" he began but never completed an essay entitled "Antisemitism Here," which was intended to defend Pound in the Bollingen Prize Controversy (1949). The unfinished piece apparently mentions the short story and admits that Berryman himself suffered bouts of anti-Semitism. It represents this prejudice not as exceptional but as typical for the American cultural establishment, citing as evidence Mark Van Doren's 1932 *Anthology of American Poetry*, which included only one Jewish voice. (Van Doren was Berryman's mentor and friend.) Rather than defending Pound's beliefs or actions during the war, Berryman seems to be making a "cast the first stone" argument: he and his readers should not sacrifice Pound for prejudices they share.[36] The essay Berryman did eventually publish on Pound was originally intended to serve as the introduction to the 1949 New Directions edition of his *Selected Poems*. Berryman had been commissioned to come up with an alternative to the 1948 reissue of Eliot's 1928 edition for the London publisher Faber & Faber, and although Pound largely accepted Berryman's selections, he rejected the introduction, putatively on the grounds that it was too academic, but more likely because it does not refrain from mentioning his anti-Semitism and fascism. After another failed attempt at an introduction by Rolfe Humphries—rejected by Pound for mentioning fascism and anti-Semitism—the volume eventually appeared without one.[37]

Scholars have begun to explore the ways in which anti-Semitism not only embellishes (or blemishes) but actively informs Pound's and Eliot's poetry.[38] Maud Ellmann, for instance, has pointed to the political significance of Eliot's and Pound's doctrine of impersonality, which she convincingly links to their efforts to instigate a cultural "revolution" against liberalism, usury, and supposed Jewish influence.[39] It is true that Eliot's most famous essay on the topic, the influential "Tradition and the Individual Talent," remains scrupulously nonpolitical on the surface, defining the "impersonal" emotion of art as a formal relation between the poem, the historical present, and literary tradition.[40] According to Eliot a poem is "depersonalized" when tradition speaks through it; it embodies a collectivity, which he defines as a sort of select club of the world's greatest poems (38, 40). In the years leading up to World War II, however, Eliot was quite willing to be more specific about the kind of tradition he understood to be speaking through impersonality. His *After Strange Gods* (1934), based on the Page-Barbour lectures he delivered at the University of Virginia in 1933, is framed as an elaboration of the concepts first presented in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"[41] and it offers the following account of whom tradition includes

and excludes: "The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (20).

Berryman owned *After Strange Gods*, along with most of Eliot's books.[42] He was clearly aware of the motive behind the doctrine of literary impersonality and the kinds of personalities ("free-thinking Jews") excluded by it. In his rejected introduction to Pound, Berryman argues that "the notion of the 'impersonality' of the poet," which he links to Eliot and describes as "perverse and valuable," actually works to conceal the "motive" Berryman takes to be one of the most important sources of poetic inspiration.[43] Berryman argues against Eliot and Eliot's Pound by claiming that we should consider Pound's motives and continue to read his poetry with those motives in mind. In other words, part of what we can learn from Pound as a poet has to do with his antagonism towards Jews and the imagery and sentiment through which he expresses it. Most of Pound's defenders in the Bollingen controversy took the opposite tack and endorsed separating poetic considerations from political ones.[44] Berryman's opposing claims that the "subject" of Pound's poetry is the "life of the modern poet," that "Pound is his own subject *qua* modern poet," that "the persona increasingly adopted, as the Poet's fate clarifies, is Pound himself," reject *both* the impersonality of Pound's art and any presumed autonomy of the aesthetic realm.[45] Berryman does not offer a systematic account of how the motive of anti-Semitism informs Pound's poetry. In fact, at this early stage in his career, Berryman's functional hemming-in of the role played by personality in verse (Pound represents himself as poet, not as himself) serves to minimize Pound's guilt (in an odd and almost unintelligible footnote Berryman attempts to define treason as a private as opposed to a political affair) and to blame his reactionary politics on the widespread disregard of his poetry (387). However, Berryman's rejection of the doctrine of impersonality is also an attempt to make poetry political rather than simply "traditional." Ideology informs imagery, in other words, and imagery can produce very real political results.

3. *The Dream Songs*, Impersonation, and Palatable Monstrosity

While working on the Pound essays Berryman also began a series of poems based on the *Black Book of Poland*, a documentary account of Nazi atrocities in occupied territory, including the systematic murder of Polish professors. This story in particular is reported to have moved Berryman to tears.[46] Only three short poems from the project were published, and these vary in form and quality. One, like "New Year's Eve," is a variation on *ottava rima* ending in a rhyming couplet; it describes life in the ghetto with a rhyme whose inappropriateness underscores the inadequacy of the elegiac landscape convention being applied: "Hands hold each other limper / while

the moon lengthens on the sliding river." The third poem also comments on the inadequacy of the elegiac tradition.[47]

Berryman subsequently gave up this "Mass for the Dead . . . about the Nazi murderers of the Jews," as he later described the project, because "I wasn't able at this time . . . to find any way of making palatable the monstrosity of the thing which obsessed me."[48] *The Dream Songs*, which obsessed Berryman for most of the remainder of his life, were originally intended to provide an "interlude" from the *Black Book* project, which he always meant to resume.[49] Their innovation is the figure of the imaginary Jew, and it is with the help of this figure that Berryman is able to make the monstrous "palatable." The term is misleading, as it suggests Berryman was attempting to aestheticize catastrophe—something a closer look at the poetry shows he was not trying to do. What Berryman probably found unpalatable was the poetic form he had, until then, developed to represent prejudice, violence, and mass murder.

The Dream Songs employ a more flexible, dialogic structure, emphasizing multiple personae and points of view. The 385 songs are composed in six-line stanzas in groups of three, with irregular rhyme schemes and often inverted syntax. Their diction fluctuates between the formal and the colloquial; they juxtapose high and vulgar references, erudition and slang. Their themes are as varied as their diction and tone, ranging from banal everyday experiences to lust, envy, depression, melancholia, and existential angst. The unifying element of the sequence is a central figure named Henry, who impersonates African Americans—in a self-consciously minstrel style—as well as Jews.[50] The following is Berryman's widely-cited introductory note to the 1969 edition: "The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof."[51] While Berryman ironically denies his identity with his main character, Henry, the poems unabashedly present private details from his life as if they were Henry's experiences. Using a figure such as Henry as a mask is well within modernist tradition, but the changing points of view, the flirtation with minstrel conventions, the multiple identities all bound up in a single persona or ego structure—these techniques recall the projections and mirrorings elaborated in the ego-psychological analysis of prejudice. Henry does not try to become a Jew—the performance is too much like an exercise in method acting—but his imaginings do tell us something about poetic voice and its relation to tradition or "whiteness." Kevin Young has made a similar argument about Berryman's minstrelsy in his introduction to the new American Poets Project edition of Berryman's *Selected Poems*: "Much of the force of *The Dream Songs* comes from its use of race and blackface to express a (white) self unraveling. Berryman explores the 'blackness' of whiteness . . . even if, from another angle, he might be said to replicate in all too

familiar a fashion the constant use of blackness by whites to say the unsayable."[52] One aspect of the "unsayable" articulated through Berryman's ethnic impersonations is the Holocaust. In the interest of showing the links between poems, I will start by analyzing Dream Song 41, which deploys imaginary Jewishness as personification or prosopopoeia, then move to 48, which mentions the figure by name.

The explicit mention of Warsaw ("phantoms of Varshava") in Dream Song 41 makes it likely that the poem emerged from Berryman's work on the *Black Book* project. It is the kind of poem that would presumably be objectionable to those accusing Berryman of identity theft. Not only does the poem impersonate a Jewish survivor, it repeats in each of the three stanzas variations on the refrain "Death is a German expert" // "Death was a German / home-country," which is adapted from the English translation of perhaps the most famous Holocaust poem ever written: Paul Celan's "Death Fugue." The reduction of the protesting and poetic voice to an animalistic scream suggests the end of culture, humanity, and individuality.[53]

> . . . it's not we would assert
> particulars, but animal; cats mew,
> horses scream, man sing.
>
> Or: men psalm. Man palms his ears and moans.[54]

The parallel transformation of "sing" to "psalm" to "palm" to blocking the ears and moaning in the second stanza effects the same degeneration of poetry, and religious belief, into an animal level of existence or "bare life." The second part of that stanza ("odd and trivial") offers a double commentary on both the randomness of death and survival during the Holocaust, and the oddness and arbitrariness of the trope of remembrance for someone who did not actually witness the events. The wound on the instep at the end of that stanza ("a bullet splitting / my trod-on instep, fiery") puts the speaker in the position of Eve from Genesis 3:15, which metonymically suggests the old anti-Jewish linking of Judaism to Satan. The wound in the foot may also allude to the death of Achilles. The injured foot explains the metaphor of lurching and stumbling in the final stanza, which itself stumbles through the broken rhyme-scheme and metrical feet, disrupting the *a-b-c-a-b-c* of the preceding two stanzas to emphasize the forced rhyme between "burned" and "German." Stumbling is significantly the opposite of the marching of the oppressors. By transforming "German expert" to "German home-country" in the poem's final line, Berryman changes the emphasis of Celan's original "Meister aus Deutschland," suggesting that the status of being nationless is ultimately as material to death as a bullet or blow. This reflects Berryman's hard-won insight that imagination—whether mobilized to generate anti-Semitic stereotypes or, in this case, racist legal classifications—can be

fatal. The vulnerability to denaturalization was, of course, the Achilles' heel of the European Jewish population.

Dream Song 48 comments not only on the "imaginary" perspective of this Holocaust poem—"imaginary Jews, / / like bitter Henry"—but on the loss of faith that may itself be traced back to the experience or memory of atrocity.[55] The diction suggests an argument on the street, but this is actually a moment of divine address or interpellation:

> He yelled at me in Greek,
> my God!—It's not his language
> and I'm no good at—his Aramaic,
> was—I am a monoglot of English
> (American version) and, say pieces from
> a baker's dozen others: where's the bread?[56]

The "my God!" in the second line is not (only) an expletive but the name of the implied divine addressor, Jesus, who instead of using his native Aramaic speaks through the language of the New Testament, Greek. This is recounted from the perspective of the irreligious speaker, whose comment on his own difficulty in mastering foreign languages ("a baker's dozen") leads, through metalepsis, to a series of ironic and irreverent reflections on the Second Coming and the Eucharist, as Henry answers his own rhetorical question about bread with the line "but rising in the Second Gospel, pal." It is in part this irreverence that leads Henry to identify himself as an "imaginary Jew" (as the reference in the poem is plural, Jesus may be the other). Berryman's appropriation of his own figure—an appropriation that shifts the tenor of the metaphor from anti-Semitism to Christian theology—is striking. What does the loss of Christian faith or the historical criticism of the New Testament have to do with Jews and Judaism? Precious little. It is this kind of imaginative leap— blaming the loss of Christian faith on Judaism—that galvanizes the kind of violent projection and mirroring explored by Berryman in his early short story. The Warsaw poem evokes the imaginary Jew as a victim; this one explores the kind of ethnic mirrorings and projections that can lead to violence and victimization.

The poem provides a different version of mirroring, with the speaker in the role of aggressor rather than victim—hence the reflections in the final stanza on Henry's own uncomfortable, Macbeth-like ambitions ("Cawdor-uneasy"). References to "the death of love" and "the death of the death of love" suggest negative and positive states of grace, but also potentially murder—death in its transitive form— and the way violence begets violence through a dynamic René Girard termed mimetic.[57] Henry is the potential murderer here, and there is at least a suggestion that a possible target is the "real" Jew behind the imaginary projection, since "the death of love," which could be read as the murder of Christ, is a standard anti-Jewish libel.[58] When the Christ figure "sybills" "the death of death"—and it is impossible to

read the word "sibyl" without thinking of Eliot's *The Waste Land*—this again suggests Christian links to the ancient Greek language and mythology and hence to paganism. The Christianity alluded to in this poem is just as "heathen" as Judaism, but the accusation of heathenism has historically been used to justify Christian violence against Jews. Henry flees the anti-Semitism of this dynamic in the final line, but even this means conforming to a certain "image" of the Jew: namely the rootless, wandering cosmopolitan.

Juxtaposing Dream Songs 41 and 48 reveals a connection between the alienation of imaginary Jews and the factual exclusion of historical Jews from the "imagined community" of the nation. Exclusion is the deadly fact of a set of widely accepted fictions: ethnic, religious, and national. Exposing these fictions *as* fictions, as Berryman does, leads to another form of poetic exclusion—one not at all incompatible with the persona of the alienated poet. However, the speaker does not fully identify with the wandering Jew because he is also the expelling anti-Semite. Berryman at his best is not open to the accusations of identity theft because he does not claim a stable relation to Jewishness. His dramatic verse deploys impersonation in a way that allows him to avoid turning Nazi cruelty into a symbol of the human condition or Jews into figures of alienated poets. Or rather, his poetry does turn to such universalizing metaphors but immediately evacuates them of their pathos, either in the same poem or in linked poems in the series. Berryman represents himself as a white man, in blackface, who is a Jew but also an anti-Semite. The serial nature of these impersonations, and the relations established between them, are of central importance. The Warsaw poem impersonates Jewish identity, and the "imaginary Jew" poem comments on that impersonation—or establishes the conditions that make it possible—as an exercise in masking and projection.

A more thorough analysis of the figure of the imaginary Jew in Berryman's work would look at Dream Song 53, where the speaker discusses "identifying" with everyone in the newspaper, including corpses; 82, which explores the differences between Jehova and Yahweh; the series of elegies for Delmore Schwartz, especially 149 and 151, which states "let's all be Jews bereft"; and 220, which begins "—If we're not Jews, how can messiah come?" The complicated relations between imaginary Jewishness and minstrelsy also remain to be explored, for instance by looking at the discussion of passing in 119 and the commentary on burnt cork and blackface in 143. The mere mentioning of these themes will have to suffice as I now turn to the critical reception of Berryman's work.

4. Imaginary Jews, True Confessions, and Ethnicity

Throughout this essay I have referred to Hilene Flanzbaum as representative of those critics accusing Berryman of appropriating Jewish identity. Flanzbaum does not examine Berryman's poetry or offer an extended analysis of the way the figure of the imaginary Jew works in his short story. She is more concerned with what the story

has to say about wider cultural trends, namely "the meaning of ethnicity, and especially the condition of Jewish ethnicity, in America in 1945."[59] Basing her argument on a comparison between Karl Shapiro, the Jewish author of the Pulitzer-prize winning *V-Letter* (1945), and Berryman, she draws the following conclusions about the story's implications for ethnicity in postwar America: "That Berryman is able to claim the category of Jewishness for himself spotlights the void in the cultural American landscape that the assimilated Jew has left. In other words, it is precisely Shapiro's claims to being American that have made becoming Jewish an option for gentile poets. Shapiro's assertion that he is not marginal and no one's victim corresponds to his lack of Jewish ethnicity; at the same time, his position thrusts Jewishness into the world of metaphor" (30). Flanzbaum's essay is the first piece in her influential edited volume *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, and the assertion that "Berryman is able to claim the category of Jewishness for himself" informs her general argument about how the Holocaust has become an American (as opposed to Jewish) symbol. Like the confessional poets he is made to stand for, Berryman is a "representative victim," i.e., one who feels victimized by "mainstream culture," so "in the post-Holocaust world, where the most recognizable feature of Jewish identity became victimhood, John Berryman has no problem slipping into the role" (30, 32). The appropriation of Jewish victim status, which "thrusts Jewishness into the world of metaphor," is the literary and historical prelude to the more contemporary problem Flanzbaum mentions in her introduction, namely that "most Americans seem so well acquainted with at least some version of the Holocaust that they freely invoke it in metaphor, and often with an inflammatory casualness" (7). The appropriation of victim status and the universalization of the Holocaust as metaphor are countered, at least in part, by a third aspect of Americanization: the reclaiming of the Holocaust by American Jews as part of their own cultural memory after an initial decade or so of silence (32). In this struggle over who owns the Holocaust, confessional poetry in general and Berryman in particular play crucial roles in establishing the provenance of memory and distinguishing it from "mere" metaphor. Berryman is identified with the latter insofar as he appropriates somebody else's memories, and Shapiro with the former (albeit negatively) insofar as he represses his Jewish identity. These extremes define the range of what I call *ethnic lyricism*, the notion that the individual (poetic) utterance expresses the speaker's relation to a group.

What about Jewish American poets who did not experience the Holocaust directly? Flanzbaum deliberately contrasts Berryman with Shapiro, who is not a victim but a veteran and in a sense as close as a Jewish American poet could get to the Holocaust (although he served in the Pacific). A better comparison would have been Berryman's close friend Delmore Schwartz, who did not serve in the military and who actually wrote an essay, "The Vocation of the Poet," depicting modern poets as symbolic Jews.[60] Flanzbaum needs to get as close as she can to firsthand experience because her distinction between memory and metaphor works best when applied to

the poetry of actual survivors. It is difficult to maintain that Berryman is somehow more distant from the Holocaust than Schwarz or other Jewish American poets, although Flanzbaum's model of ethnicity is meant to suggest precisely that.

Ethnicity is a lyrical model of group identity in Flanzbaum, functioning analogously to individual identity in the way it links memory to event. Modern sociology from Maurice Halbwachs to Paul Connerton is more or less unanimous in the opinion that memories are *collected* rather than *collective*, that all social groups, whether ethnicities or nations, are to some extent produced by the metaphors they circulate and the stories they tell about themselves.[61] Flanzbaum, however, reverses this analysis, assuming that ethnicity precedes memory and distinguishes it from "mere" metaphor. Pushed to its extreme, such a theory verges on a model of causality as deterministic as any biological account of race: only those with some direct relation to an event can actually remember it, ethnicity somehow providing the connection when actual presence fails.[62]

This story of Jewish cultural heritage and its usurpation as imaginary Jewishness is underwritten by what Flanzbaum states as her deliberately provocative "assumption" on the first page of the book, that Americans and American Jews said little about the Holocaust in the decade following World War II.[63] She does not mean that the Nazi genocide was not discussed at all—such an assertion would be preposterous—but that it was discussed in universal terms, as a human rather than a particularly Jewish catastrophe.[64] A number of influential historians concerned with the "Americanization" of the Holocaust have postulated that the shock caused by the enormity of the Nazi atrocity, coupled with the postwar emphasis on assimilation, led to a general moratorium among Jews on the topic of the Holocaust until the 1960s, when the widely publicized Eichmann trial (1961) and the Six-Day War (1967) illustrated both the ongoing plight of the Jewish people and the strength and self-confidence of Israel as a nation.[65] This account is widely accepted, in part because it corresponds to the predominant psychological model of remembering in a traumatized individual: shock, followed by repression, slowly giving way to the "return of the repressed." Whether this model can be transferred from the individual to the level of "collective consciousness" is an open question, but it certainly reveals a longing to convert history into memory and make the past the property of individuals or groups conceived as organic units.[66] This shift from history to memory in current debates over the Americanization of the Holocaust, and the corresponding valorization of memory over "mere" metaphor, is typical of what Walter Benn Michaels has defined as a posthistorical and postideological turn in cultural politics, replacing questions of *what we believe* with those involving *who we are*.[67] According to this logic, not speaking (like Shapiro) is understood as a form of repression, and performance and impersonation are tantamount to identity theft.

In literary criticism it is possible to date with some accuracy the shift from universalist approaches to Nazi genocide to particularist interpretations of the Holocaust as a Jewish catastrophe.[68] The decisive study is Alvin Rosenfeld's *A Double*

Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature (1980), a book that anticipates Flanzbaum's arguments about appropriation. Rosenfeld takes Plath and (less systematically) Berryman to task for appropriating Jewishness and the Holocaust as metaphors for their own personal anguish.[69] The "exploitation of atrocity," evident in the "universaliz[ation] of Auschwitz as a murderous thrust against 'mankind'" and in its treatment as a "metaphor" for individual experience, finds its fullest expression in confessional poetry, "where the vocabulary of the ghettos and camps is often employed as a public reference not for the pain of history but for private pain."[70]

Like most critics of the poetic "appropriation" of the Holocaust as a symbol of personal anguish, Rosenfeld is more concerned with Plath than with Berryman. Nevertheless, his argument is directed explicitly against the "imaginary Jew," a concept he runs across in an early analysis of Plath by A. Alvarez. Alvarez famously claimed that Plath "is not just talking about her own private suffering. . . . She assumes the suffering of all the modern victims. Above all, she becomes an imaginary Jew."[71] Rosenfeld holds that "what is so terribly wrong with such criticism, as with the poetry that it offers easy sanction . . . is [the] radical imbalance between anyone's personal horrors of divided identity and the horrors brought on by the Nazis, an imbalance as fundamental as that between Belsen and Brooklyn" (178).

Rosenfeld misunderstands Alvarez's point in the way exemplified by Flanzbaum and criticized by Michaels, i.e., by assuming that lyricism expresses personal suffering attributable to group identity.[72] Alvarez, however, is not interested in comparing personal or group victimization; rather, he places the concentration camps on a continuum of the various assaults on humanity perpetrated by mass society: "Individual suffering can be heroic provided it leaves the person who suffers a sense of his own individuality—provided, that is, there is an illusion of choice remaining to him. But when suffering is mass-produced, men and women become as equal and identity-less as objects on an assembly line, and nothing remains—certainly no values, no humanity. This anonymity of pain, which makes all dignity impossible, was Sylvia Plath's subject."[73] Plath's suffering, according to Alvarez, is not comparable to the victims of Nazi oppression, but it is the result of the same violent process of de-individuation at work in totalitarianism and in some aspects of democratic society. The placing of Western democracies and totalitarian regimes along a continuum is what is shocking about this argument, not the comparison of the suffering of a mid-century American poet with that of a camp inmate. However, we should remember that this argument against mass society, and the totalitarian undercurrents of (nominal) democracies, was a typical one for the non-communist left during the Cold War. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), for instance, includes a chapter on "Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp," in which she understands housewives as having "adjusted" to their suburban homes in the same way that prisoners "'adjusted' to the conditions of the camps[,] surrendered their human identity and went almost

indifferently to their deaths."[74] Bettelheim put forth a version of the argument linking capitalist democracies to totalitarianism, as did Adorno.[75]

Confession, in this Cold War context, has less to do with the particulars of ethnic identity than with the generals of social structure; it is metonymic rather than metaphoric, testifying to a situation rather than an identity. M. L. Rosenthal's influential 1967 definition of the confessional poet—the "individual as a *victim*"—should be distinguished from the cultural-hero paradigm of the high modernists, but also from the ethnic lyricism of contemporary identity politics.[76] For Rosenthal and his contemporaries, the act of poetic confession forges the link between the individual "experience of reality" and "symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis."[77] It does not primarily or even necessarily give expression to ethnic—or for that matter sexual or class—identity.

Berryman's poetry, a product (although an idiosyncratic one) of the Cold War context, is as much opposed to the "impersonal" tradition of epic modernism as it is to the very personal one of ethnic lyricism. His oddity helps explain his disappearance from the critical scene. Contemporary critics accuse him of identity theft, when they discuss him at all. An earlier generation of critics accused him of being both too personal and too impersonal, or simply personal in the wrong way.[78] In the 1980s there was some scattered praise of Berryman's densely populated verse as predictive of the various postlyrical trends of postmodern poetics.[79] The most concerted effort to rehabilitate his reputation, however, has been conducted under the sign of empathy.[80] Discussing the short story "The Imaginary Jew," James Young argues that "the fine line between empathetic identification [with Jews] and actual conversion fascinated Berryman—and became in itself a kind of no-man's-land in which he lived and wrote."[81] Susan Gubar's *Poetry After Auschwitz*, building on Young, but not focusing explicitly on Berryman, explores identification as an elegiac *and* empathetic figure, which functions through simultaneously invoking and distancing the perspective of the dead.[82] These are important contributions to the relatively thin field of Berryman criticism, but they remain trapped in the logic of identity politics—or ethnic lyricism—and miss what is perhaps the most innovative aspect of Berryman's verse. Berryman is not primarily concerned with recovering his identity or appropriating (even at a distance, and even in mourning) anyone else's; he seeks instead to bring slanders and stereotypes to life through impersonation. In other words, his poetry does not authorize its voice in the first person, as in the ethnic lyricism that grounds the metaphor of cultural memory by eliding the difference between first-person singular and plural; rather, his voice emerges in the second person, both nominative and predicative, as is revealed by the dialogic quality of *The Dream Songs.*

Berryman's poetry does not originate in the "I" of recollection but in the "you" of interpellation. The political implications of this second-person lyricism become clear in the way Berryman picks up on the figure of the imaginary Jew in his final, unfinished book *Recovery*, which was to have ended in a chapter entitled "The

Jewish Kick." According to Berryman's notes, the chapter would have linked "the drive to become a Jew" to the need to "expiate imaginary transgressions—cf. Guardini—join son and dead friend [Delmore Schwartz]."[83] Berryman's son was Jewish because his divorced second wife was Jewish. The Guardini he refers to was the Catholic theologian and priest Romano Guardini, who in a speech in Munich in 1955 argued that while there is no such thing as German collective guilt, as one man could not be guilty of the crimes committed by another, there is such a thing as collective responsibility (236). Berryman quoted from this speech at length in a letter protesting the Vietnam War that he sent to the editor of the *New York Times* while he was working on *Recovery*. The letter was never printed but is included in the volume among the author's notes. Perhaps because of Vietnam, and the responsibility he feels for it as an American, he links Jewishness to what he calls in his notes, in capitals, "THE PRESENT SICK WHITE WORLD" (230).[84] Imaginary Jewishness is not a figure for Berryman's personality or identity but for his responsibility; it was also his point of protest against those Cold War policies he understood to be implicated in another genocide.

Conclusion

"The Imaginary Jew" is absolutely central to Berryman's poetic project and to his self-fashioning as a poet. To read the story as an attempt to appropriate Jewish identity, as Flanzbaum does, is to miss the strong elements of self-accusation and self-limitation implicit in the metaphor of mirroring, and to miss the fact that mirroring is indeed a metaphor, performing not only psychological and political but also literary work. The imaginary Jew is an enabling fiction allowing Berryman to articulate his dramatic poetic voice. It is also his point of entry into politics. Berryman resists Eliot's and Pound's doctrine of impersonality in the same way he resists their anti-Semitism, and he resists contemporary identity politics in the same way he resists first-person lyricism. Berryman does not claim to be the "other" or try to tell us about the "other"; rather, he is interested in how the process of "othering" (Dream Song 66) is linked to the process of "selving" (Dream Song 44). His poetic voice is so schizophrenic as to be epic in scope, and this does confront us with an early version of the multiple identities typical of postmodern literature. More significant than Berryman's postmodernism, however, is his portrayal of anti-Semitism as a creative force, like poetry only much more violent, maintaining its myth of pure, almost lyrical identity by *materializing* otherness in the Jew.[85] Jewishness is not an "identity" in Berryman; it is the figure of a form of mirroring—a projection—that is implicated in both poetry and prejudice. In writing about the imaginary Jew, Berryman confesses something even more personal than ethnicity; he confesses imagination, and its power to create and destroy.

Notes

[1] Max Horkheimer, "Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach," in *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease*, ed. Ernst Simmel (New York: International Universities Press, 1946), 1–10, 6.

[2] John Berryman, "The Imaginary Jew," included as the final chapter in his uncompleted novel *Recovery* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 252.

[3] Arthur Miller, *Focus* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1986). Even a minor metaphorical difference between Miller's use of the metaphor of distorting lenses (glasses) and Berryman's mirror disappears in the 1984 preface to *Focus*, which restates the moral of the novel in terms of the "the mirror of reality" (5).

[4] For this list I am indebted to the volume edited by Hilda Schiff, *Holocaust Poetry* (London: HarperCollins, 1995). I am also indebted to Susan Gubar's *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) and to Hilene Flanzbaum's "The Imaginary Jew and the American Poet," in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 18–32.

[5] On the prevalence of the imaginary Jew in postwar fiction, see Leslie Fiedler, *The Jew in the American Novel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herzl, 1966), especially 47–48: "What, after all, *is* a Jew in this world where men are identified as Jews only by mistake, where the very word becomes merely an epithet arbitrarily applied? It is difficult to make a novel about anti-Semitism when one is not sure exactly what, beside being the butt of anti-Semites, makes a man a Jew."

[6] For a general discussion of the "discourse of Semitism" in English literature, see Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially the introduction, the conclusion, and the final chapter on "Modernism and Ambivalence: James Joyce and T. S. Eliot." Cheyette makes the important point that "the Jew" is not a fixed or mythic character, but rather an indeterminate symbol—and a symbol of indeterminacy—which can serve as both grotesque image and object of desire and/or identification (see 3–4, 268). See also Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988). On Pound, see Robert Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988). For a discussion of

West, see Stacey Olster, "The 'Other' in Nathanael West's Fiction: Jewish Rejection or Jewish Projection," *MELUS* 15, no. 4 (1988): 51–65.

[7] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 29. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), cantos 35 (172–73) and 52 (257).

[8] Flanzbaum, "Imaginary Jew," 25, 28–30.

[9] Robert Shaw offers the following definition of confessional poetry in Shaw, ed., *American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives* (Chatham, UK: W & J Mackay, 1973): "The basic challenge . . . was directed against the Eliotic cult of impersonality. The poet no longer hedged himself about with ironic literary allusions, but presented the reader with (we were asked to believe) unvarnished portraits of himself, the more warts the better" (11).

[10] David Simpson's *Situatedness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) defines situatedness as a compromise formation; we know we cannot offer an essentialist account of ourselves, but we suspect such an account would have something to do with background and location: "*Situatedness*, I have been suggesting, is one of the currently fashionable neologisms that claims to indicate if not a breakthrough then at least a temporary accommodation with the intractable demands placed on the self toward justifiable self-description. To announce one's situatedness appears to preempt the accusation that one is not being adequately self-aware, and at the same time to provide a limited authority to speak from a designated position" (195). For a complementary account of the way "identitarian" considerations begin, in the 1960s, to replace Cold War concerns with value and belief, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[11] The phrase "soul under stress" is from an interview Berryman gave to Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversations with Berryman," *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 340–47, quoted in Bo Gustavsson's doctoral dissertation, "The Soul under Stress: A Study of the Poetics of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*" (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 1984).

[12] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 20.

[13] "Selving" and "othering" are Berryman's terms from Dream Songs 44 and 66 respectively. Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (1969; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982), 48, 73.

[14] Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 31.

[15] Berryman, "Imaginary Jew," 252.

[16] The letter K seemed to have a special significance for Berryman, the precise nature of which I have not been able to determine. See Dream Song 105 for another example of its use (Berryman, *Dream Songs*, 122).

[17] See Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) for a contemporary account of the way organized violence

transforms the bodies of victims into emblems of external ideas, such as the power of a regime or the conspiracy of a group.

[18] Berryman, "Imaginary Jew," 246.

[19] Horkheimer, "Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach," 5. Douglass W. Orr, "Anti-Semitism and the Psychopathology of Everyday Life," in Simmel, *Anti-Semitism*, 95.

[20] Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, *Social Change and Prejudice, Including Dynamics of Prejudice* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 145–47.

[21] See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[22] Berryman, "Imaginary Jew," 252.

[23] Simmel, "Anti-Semitism and Mass Psychology," in Simmel, *Anti-Semitism*, 51.

[24] Sartre formulated the concept of mirroring in a now-famous epigraph in *Anti-Semite and Jew*: "If the Jew did not exist, the antisemite would invent him." Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 13. In her preface to the 1967 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt remarks on the popularity of Sartre's definition, at the same time commenting on its unfortunate propagation of the "myth" that "Jewish self-consciousness was ever a mere creation of anti-Semitism." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harvest/Harcourt, 1976), xv. See, however, her discussion of the way the "tribal nationalism" of the early national socialists merely inverts a misconception of Jewish "chosenness" (242–43). A thought experiment posed by Sidney Hook in his 1949 review of Sartre could be taken as the plot outline for Berryman's story and its literary and filmic relatives: "Let any Catholic Irishman or Boston Brahmin or Southern aristocrat move into a community in which he is unknown and pretend he is Jewish only to the extent of *saying* he is Jewish, and he will be treated like all other Jews including those who do not *say* they are Jewish but whom the Gentile community regards as Jews." Hook, "Reflections on the Jewish Question," *Partisan Review* XVI, no. 5 (1949): 475.

[25] See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993): "Anti-Semitism is based on a false projection. It is the counter-part of true mimesis, and fundamentally related to the repressed form; in fact, it is probably the morbid expression of repressed mimesis. . . . Impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object—the prospective victim" (187).

[26] Simmel, "Anti-Semitism and Mass Psychology," 44.

[27] Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Hungerford persuasively argues that the denial of individuality implicit in genocide encourages a strong identificatory response in writing after the Holocaust, and a tendency towards personification as a literary device. Personification, in her account, is the literary response to mass murder, and it depends on a theory of

personality or personhood that views the individual as an embodiment of his or her culture. See the introduction, especially pp. 3–13.

[28] Fiedler, *Jew in the American Novel*, 8; see also 48.

[29] Kenneth Gross, *Shylock Is Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10. See also Gross's account of how anti-Semitism provides the language and imagery for a character that embodies stereotypes while fundamentally contradicting them (17) and his description of the way "the Jew hold[s] up to the Christians a mirror of their own hatred" (73–74).

[30] See Berryman's account of the personality of the poem in John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 351–52.

[31] See in particular Haffenden's discussion of the way Berryman materializes Bradstreet in order to present himself—or his poetic persona—as a figment of *her* imagination: "The true perspective on this state of affairs is illusorily reversed within the poem, since the figure of Anne Bradstreet is highly realized, while the poet himself is attenuated—no more than a voice. She is substantiated in order that Berryman may introduce himself almost as a projection of her fantasy." Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 11.

[32] Berryman, "New Year's Eve," *Partisan Review* XV, no. 4 (1948): 456–58.

[33] See Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 57.

[34] Recent scholarship convincingly argues that the object of Adorno's critique is not so much the aesthetic discontinuity between representation and its object as the historical continuity between totalitarianism and the "total society" of consumer culture, which Adorno describes as an "open-air prison" in his *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34. See in particular Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2000), 106; and Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 35–36.

[35] Berryman, "New Year's Eve," 457.

[36] Mariani, *Dream Song*, 225. Haffenden points out that in 1950 Berryman also published a poem on Pound which, while not unsympathetic to his plight, points an accusing finger at his anti-Semitism. See Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, 214.

[37] See Hugh Witemeyer and Rolfe Humphries, "The Making of Pound's 'Selected Poems' (1949) and Rolfe Humphries' Unpublished Introduction," *Journal of Modern Literature* 15, no. 1 (1988): 76–78.

[38] See Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*; Julius, *T. S. Eliot*; and Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew."* In a review of Julius, for instance, Louis Menand argues that anti-Semitism was "a relatively minor aspect" of Eliot's thought: "part of the reason it was so half-baked even as

anti-Semitism was that Eliot didn't give much attention to it, and in most of the poetry and almost all of the literary criticism it fades into insignificance." Menand, *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 58. See Sharon Cameron's reading of the *Four Quartets* for an account of the way Eliot's own (late) practice of poetic impersonality strays from the orthodoxy and tradition he advocated in *After Strange Gods*. Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 176.

[39] Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1987), 14.

[40] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 37–44.

[41] Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 15.

[42] Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman's Personal Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 107.

[43] John Berryman, "The Poetry of Ezra Pound," *Partisan Review* XVI, no. 4 (1949): 389.

[44] See the articles collected in William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone's *A Casebook on Ezra Pound* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959), especially Dwight Macdonald's "Homage to Twelve Judges," originally appearing in *Politics* 6, no. 1 (1949): "Such imperfect democracy as we of the West still possess depends on our continuing ability to make the kind of discrimination the Bollingen committee made, to evaluate each sphere of human activity separate from the rest instead of enslaving them all to one great reductive tyrant" (48).

[45] Berryman, "Poetry of Ezra Pound," 385–86, 388, 393.

[46] Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, 206.

[47] John Berryman, *Short Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), 106–9.

[48] Quoted in Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, 206.

[49] Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary*, 37.

[50] Berryman apparently read his dialect passages over the phone to Ralph Ellison, who joked about being a Mister Interlocutor—or Mister Tambo—to Berryman's Mister Bones but ultimately found the poetry "fascinating." See Mariani, *Dream Song*, 387.

[51] Berryman, *Dream Songs*, vi.

[52] Kevin Young, introduction to John Berryman's *Selected Poems*, ed. Young (New York: Library of America, 2004), xxiv–xv.

[53] The passage also recalls Adorno's revision of his "after Auschwitz" dictum after reading Celan: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write

poems." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2004), 362–63.

[54] Berryman, *Dream Songs*, 45.

[55] On this point see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), especially Ch. 4, 238–66.

[56] Berryman, *Dream Songs*, 52.

[57] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

[58] Henry often refers to his capacity for violence and murder in *The Dream Songs*. The widely anthologized Dream Song 29 concludes with the following homicidal stanza: "But never did Henry, as he thought he did, / end anyone and hacks her body up / and hide the pieces, where they may be found. / He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing. / Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up. / Nobody is ever missing" (Berryman, *Dream Songs*, 33).

[59] Flanzbaum, "Imaginary Jew," 28.

[60] Delmore Schwartz, "The Vocation of the Poet," in *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Donald Dike and David Zucker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 14–23.

[61] See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[62] Walter Benn Michaels's contribution to Flanzbaum's collection critiques precisely this alignment of memory with collective identity, and not knowing with forgetting. See Michaels, "You Who Never Was There," in Flanzbaum, *Americanization of the Holocaust*, 181–97.

[63] Flanzbaum, "Imaginary Jew," 1.

[64] Lawrence Baron, drawing attention to the significant corpus of scholarly and popular work on the Nazi genocide produced between 1945 and 1960, argues that many of these texts have been forgotten because their focus is not narrowly ethnic but universal. This early work on Nazi genocide includes monographs by Bruno Bettelheim, Hannah Arendt, Viktor Frankl, Alan Bolluck, Eugen Kogon, and many others; countless articles; popular TV programs and movies; and the serialization of William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in *Reader's Digest* in 1959. See Baron, "The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (2003): 62–88.

[65] The broad outlines of this argument were established by Deborah Lipstadt's "America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950–1965," *Modern Judaism* 16 (1996): 195–214. Her thesis has influenced Peter Novick's *The Holocaust and American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000) and Tim Cole's *Selling the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

66 On the transferability or "contagious" transmission of trauma, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), especially Ch. 8 on "The Pathos of the Literal," and the conclusion, p. 304.

67 Michaels, *Shape of the Signifier*, 24.

68 For a concise account of this paradigm shift in Holocaust representation, see Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

69 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 18, 178, 181. Flanzbaum is also indebted to Rosenfeld's "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *Commentary* 99, no. 6 (1995): 35–40, as she acknowledges in her notes.

70 Rosenfeld, *Double Dying*, 159, 167, 181, 174–75.

71 Quoted in Rosenfeld, *Double Dying*, 178. The passage is originally from A. Alvarez's essay "Sylvia Plath," *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 65. See also Rosenfeld's use of the term on Rosenfeld, *Double Dying*, 181.

72 Alvarez does criticize "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" for what he calls their "details," giving as an example the rhyming of "knees" with "Japanese." (Alvarez asks, in parentheses, "Do you just need the rhyme? Or are you trying to hitch an easy lift by dragging in atomic victims?") See Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," 64; and also A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Random House, 1972), 17.

73 Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," 65.

74 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 305–6.

75 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: Avon/Discus, 1979).

76 M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 15.

77 Rosenthal, *New Poets*, 13. See also Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973). Phillips takes the personal trauma of the victim-poet to be symptomatic of larger social dynamics. Society is sick, in other words, but only poets can admit it. See pp. xi–xiii. Robert von Hallberg has pointed out that the lyric was the privileged form of Cold War poetry because it was taken to demonstrate the individualism supposed to be at the heart of democratic freedom, even—or perhaps especially—in its criticism of the mass society of which it was a part. See Hallberg, "Poetry, Politics, and Intellectuals," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 8, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2005), 25–26.

[78] Rosenthal, for instance, sees Berryman as one of the poets at "the end of the confessional movement in American poetry" because his poetry depicts "a divided self" on the one hand and assumes that "every nuance of suffering brought out on the couch or in reverie is a mighty flood of poetic insight" on the other. In pointing to what he sees as the related problem of "commandeer[ing] political themes too facilely or fashionably," Rosenthal draws particular attention to "the presumed identification with the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto in Poem 41." Rosenthal, *New Poets*, 112–13, 119, 122–23. Even Berryman's supporters admit that the vast cast of characters in the poem lead to both problems of coherence and self-indulgence. See Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986), 163; and Edward Mendelson, "How to Read Berryman's *Dream Songs*," in Shaw, *American Poetry Since 1960*, 35. Mendelson is for the most part supportive of Berryman's efforts to diversify poetic personality, emphasizing the importance of "dramatic indirection" and "dissociated personality" (29, 32). For other appreciative accounts on this point, see Steven K. Hoffman, "Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic," *ELH* 45, no. 4 (1978): 687–709, and especially p. 694 for his account of the role of the dramatic in confessional poetry. Ernest J. Smith argues that Berryman was after a "*less* obvious-lyricism" or a "survival-epic" in Smith, "John Berryman's 'Programmatic' for 'The Dream Songs' and an Instance of Revision," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23, no. 3–4 (2000): 430, 432.

[79] Donald K. Hedrick makes this point in terms of Berryman's editorial and textual metaphors, which become increasingly central to his poetry in later years: "Individual lives are texts, as they are in the structuralist notions that Berryman anticipates." Hedrick, "Berryman Text Dreams," *New Literary History* 12, no. 2 (1981): 297. See also Gustavsson, "Soul under Stress."

[80] See Kathe Davis, "The Li(v)es of the Poet," *Twentieth Century Literature* 30, no. 1 (1984): 63. Even a recent collection edited by Eric Haralson, *Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community, and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), does not offer so much a re-reading of Berryman but an account of how contemporary poets have been influenced by him. The essay by Stephen Burt, "My Name Is Henri: Contemporary Poets Discover John Berryman," in Haralson, *Reading the Middle Generation*, 233–52, points to a recent poem by Joanna Fuhrman that picks up the figure of the imaginary Jew: "Glimpsing John Berryman Reborn as a Hasid" (234).

[81] James Edward Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 112–13.

[82] Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz*, 202.

[83] Berryman, *Recovery*, 239, Schwarz's interpolated name in the original.

[84] The editors of *Recovery* thought this provisional ending to be so relevant to Berryman's early short story that they appended "The Imaginary Jew" to the novel in place of a concluding chapter.

[85] Young makes a similar point about the *function* of imagery in motivating persecution: "The Holocaust Jew was not yet a figure in its own right when Berryman wrote his story, but it

might be said that with knowledge of the Holocaust in mind, this figure accrued added weight and gravity. For he understood that the figurative Jew—the victim—was necessary for the actual victimization of Jews." Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 116.

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