

John Berryman Interview with John Plotz

INTERVIEWER: Why do you call *The Dream Songs* one poem rather than a group of poems in the same form?

Ah?it's personality?it's Henry. He thought up all these things over all the years. The reason I call it one poem is the result of my strong disagreement with Eliot's line?the impersonality of poetry, an idea which he got partly from Keats (a letter) and partly from Goethe (again a letter). I'm very much against that; it seems to me on the contrary that poetry comes out of personality. For example, Keats?I'm thinking of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," I'm thinking of that; and I'm thinking of Hopkins?any one of the sonnets. So I don't buy this business about the eighteenth century being impersonal, either. Now Johnson's best poem in my opinion is about a factor in his household?I forget the name of it?and it's a beautiful poem, and it's extremely personal.

[....]

INTERVIEWER: You admire Stephen Crane, we know, and many of his characters are named "Henry"; is this the origin of the name?

Oh, no?that's all just accident and junk. I'll tell you how the name Henry came into being. One time my second wife and I were walking down an avenue in Minneapolis and we decided on the worst names that you could think of for men and women. We decided on Mabel for women, and Henry for men. So from then on, in the most cozy and adorable way, she was Mabel and I was Henry; and that's how Henry came into being.

INTERVIEWER: What is the relationship between you and Henry?

I think I'll leave that one to the critics. Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand I am not Henry. You know, I pay income tax; Henry pays no income tax. And bats come over and they stall in my hair?and fuck them, I'm not Henry; Henry doesn't have any bats.

[....]

INTERVIEWER: What about the influence of blues and minstrel shows on *The Dream Songs* ?

Heavy. I have been interested in the language of the blues and Negro dialects all my life, always been. Especially Bessie. I picked all of it up from records, although while I was at Columbia the Apollo on 125th Street used to have blues singers. It was a completely coony house, and I used to go there sometimes; but mostly from records. For example, I never heard Bessie herself?she died.

[....]

INTERVIEWER: Why did you choose to employ the Negro dialect in *The Dream Songs* ?

Well, that's a tough question. I'll tell you, I wrote a story once called "The Imaginary Jew." I was in Union Square in New York, waiting to see my girl, and I was taken for a Jew (I had a beard at the time). There was a tough Irishman who wanted to beat me up, and I got into the conversation, and I couldn't convince them that I wasn't a Jew. Well, the Negro business?the blackface?is related to that, That is, I feel extremely lucky to be white, let me put it that way, so that I don't have that problem, Friends of mine?Ralph Ellison, for example, in my opinion one of the best writers in the country?he has the problem. He's black, and he and Fanny, wherever they go, they are black,

[....]

INTERVIEWER: A formal question about the unit in *The Dream Songs* of three stanzas?did you have any idea of this particular length from earlier poems, specifically *The Nervous Songs*, which have a similar structure?

Yes, well, the stanza is complicated. It goes 5-5-3-5-5-3, 5-5-3-5-5-3, 5-5-3-5-5 3?that's the business?and it's variously rhymed, and often it has no rhyme at all, but it sounds as if it rhymed, That I got from Yeats?three six-line stanzas. His songs don't really resemble mine, but I did get that from him. It's rather like an extended, three-part sonnet.

[....]

INTERVIEWER: You said yesterday that to be a poet you had to sacrifice everything, Can you amplify on that, and tell why and how you first decided to make the sacrifice and be a poet?

Well, being a poet is a funny kind of jazz. It doesn't get you anything. It doesn't get you any money, or not much, and it doesn't get you any prestige, or not much. It's just something you do.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

That's a tough question. I'll tell you a real answer, I'm taking your question seriously, This comes from Hamann, quoted by Kierkegaard. There are two voices, and the first voice says, "Write!" and the second voice says, "For whom?" I think that's marvelous; he doesn't question the imperative, you see that. And the first voice says, "for the dead whom thou didst love"; again the second voice doesn't question it; instead it says, "Will they read me?" And the first voice says, "Aye, for they return as posterity." Isn't that good?

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