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MATTHEW BOSWELL

**THE BLACK BOOK: JOHN BERRYMAN'S  
HOLOCAUST REQUIEM**

MATTHEW BOSWELL

In 1948 Berryman began working on what he termed 'a suite of poems' about the Nazi Holocaust that he planned to publish as a single volume called *The Black Book*.<sup>1</sup> The collection was to be comprised of forty-two sections, and would be illustrated with water-colours or drawings by one of his former students, Tony Clark.<sup>2</sup> Berryman had a highly ambitious, almost monumental conception of what his incipient project might ultimately achieve as both a poetic and a cultural document, going so far as to conjecture 'a diagnostic, an historical survey'.<sup>3</sup> The very title of the collection was itself a reflection of the historical import that he attached to it, referencing as it does the many so-called 'Black Books' that emerged during and immediately after the war, which were amongst the first accounts of the crimes perpetrated against Poles and Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.

For Berryman, *The Black Book* was to be very much a poetic sequence: indeed the extensive lists and notes that he made suggest that this sense of sequence was the true *raison d'être* for many of the planned poems - poems which would be created of necessity as he sought to fill in the gaps of an ordering, and ever-evolving, master narrative. Hand-written

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1. John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman*, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, Ark Paperbacks, 1983, 206.

2. *Ibid.*, 206.

3. *Ibid.*, 205.

sheets make diverse and fascinating suggestions as to what this master narrative might have been: he describes his intention to ‘parody [the] Mass of Dead’,<sup>4</sup> noting that the volume could take a ‘Mass-form; post-CorbiÑre style’;<sup>5</sup> elsewhere he suggests a ‘Requiem form’,<sup>6</sup> and there exists a plan for the sequence which is based on the structure of Mozart’s *Requiem*. (Berryman’s version of the *Requiem*, however, was to have had an extra section: in the plan this stands slightly adrift from the previous twelve parts, forming a kind of phantom coda in which the poet asks: ‘And where does horror winter? I sleep, I sleep/ If all my friends burned, or I turn inside out.’)<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Berryman initially saw *The Black Book* itself as the first part of an even more ambitious poetic sequence that was to be based on *The Divine Comedy*: it would be a kind of *Inferno*, with *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and ‘Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion’ providing equivalents for *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* respectively.<sup>8</sup>

Four sections of the cycle were published in *Poetry* magazine in January 1950, and three sections were later included in the short work *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Buckt* (1958).<sup>9</sup> However, by around 1 April 1949 Berryman had stopped working on *The*

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4. Berryman, ‘who... inherited’ (MS), University of Minnesota Libraries, Manuscripts Division, John Berryman Papers, Unpublished Miscellaneous Poetry, box 1, fol. 25, ‘Black Book’. (All titles of unpublished work from the John Berryman Papers refer to the first words on the relevant loose sheet.)

5. Berryman, ‘Mass-form’ (MS), *ibid.*

6. Berryman, ‘the resolution for Death’ (MS), *ibid.*

7. Berryman, ‘Mozart’s Requiem’ (MS), *ibid.*

8. John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1980, 165.

9. The poems in *Poetry* were ‘not him’, ‘2’, ‘the will’ and ‘waiting’. *Poetry* LXXV, October 1949 - March 1950, New York, AMS Press, 1950, 192-96. ‘not him’ and ‘2’ (renamed ‘from *The Black Book*’ parts (i) and (ii)) were also published in *His Thought Made*

*Black Book*;<sup>10</sup> despite sporadic attempts to return to it in the 1950s, the sequence was never completed.<sup>11</sup>

In an interview Berryman ascribed his decision to abandon *The Black Book* to the emotional strain involved in writing about such distressing subject-matter, conceding: ‘I just found I couldn’t take it. The sections published...are unrelievedly horrible.’<sup>12</sup> Yet his failure to complete the volume clearly had procedural as well as psychological origins; or rather poetic procedure and psychology seem to have become increasingly interfused as the project developed. Above all, Berryman’s inability to settle on a definite final structure (which anticipates the trouble he would have ordering *The Dream Songs*) reflects a preoccupation with the psychology and historicity of form that may have placed internal halts on his outward ambition.

In his *The Life of John Berryman* (1982) John Haffenden further notes that on the day he abandoned the volume, ‘Berryman wept on reading about the murder of the Polish professors in *The Black Book of Poland*’.<sup>13</sup> Berryman’s journals, on which Haffenden based

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*Pockets & the Plane Buckt*. John Berryman, *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, 154-56.

10. Haffenden, *Life*, 205.

11. According to Paul Mariani, Berryman also worked on *The Black Book* in October 1954 and again in the summer of 1955. Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1996, 287 and 297. He also worked on one poem, ‘from *The Black Book (iii)*’, in 1958 (see below).

12. Haffenden, *Life*, 206.

13. *Ibid.*, 205.

his account, are currently unavailable to scholars,<sup>14</sup> but it seems that he was moved by a description of the murder of professors from the University of Cracow - a passage alongside which Berryman would have found, on a page facing a list of the names of 172 members of the University who were deported to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, a large facsimile reproduction of a poster advertising 'A REQUIEM MASS for the seventeen Professors of the University of Cracow, who died in the German Concentration Camp at Orarienburg [*sic*] or as a result of their treatment there'.<sup>15</sup> The dates given by Haffenden suggest that this poster may have presented Berryman with evidence of a real historical requiem for the dead that caused him doubts about his ability to produce a valid imaginative equivalent; and while this poster alone is certainly not a categorical explanation for Berryman's abandonment of the project, it highlights a root conflict between history and poetry, between factual occurrence and aesthetic form, that was a central concern of Berryman's when he was writing *The Black Book*.

Both published selections from *The Black Book*, and all the drafts and notes that Berryman made for the collection, begin with a poem that was originally called 'not him', and later numbered 'from *The Black Book (i)*':<sup>16</sup>

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14. These diaries are among papers given to the Library of Congress in Washington DC in 1989 by Eileen Simpson, Berryman's first wife, and will not be made available for public use until 2019.

15. *The Black Book of Poland*, ed. Polish Ministry of Information, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942, Picture 128.

16. In Berryman's *Collected Poems* there appears to be a misprint in the second stanza, where the original 'we crawl or gibber' is replaced by 'we call or gibber' (155). I can find no evidence to suggest that the change was made by Berryman himself, and will therefore use the text that appeared in *Poetry*.

*MATTHEW BOSWELL*

Grandfather, sleepless in a room upstairs,  
Seldom came down; so when they tript him down  
We wept. The blind light sang about his ears,  
Later we heard. Brother had pull. In pairs  
He, some, slept upon stone.  
Later they stamped him down in mud.  
The windlass drew him silly & odd-eyed, blood  
Broke from his ears before they quit.  
Before they trucked him home they cleaned him up somewhat.

Only the loose eyes' glaze they could not clean  
And soon he died. He howled a night and shook  
Our teeth before the end; we breathed again  
When he stopt. Abraham, what we have seen  
Write, I beg, in your Book.  
No more the solemn and high bells  
Call to our pall; we crawl or gibber; Hell's  
Irritable & treacherous  
Despairs here here (not him) reach now to shatter us.

The uncomplicated, abbreviated language and syntax of the first sentence, the narrator's description of the grandfather's arrest by an anonymous 'they', and his or her over-simplified notion of causation, suggest a child's eye-view of events. As the grandfather is taken away to some kind of internment or concentration camp, the subject matter becomes increasingly horrific. However, Berryman does not give us a realistic or plausible depiction of the man's life in a Nazi camp: rather the grandfather is subjected to grotesque, almost cartoonish, acts of violence - 'The windlass drew him silly and odd-eyed' - further intimating a child's perception of barbarity. The time frame of this section is the recent past, but a vagueness

about the temporality of the action complements the otherworldliness of the space in which the grandparent is brutalised; only the most basic form of temporal continuity is established through the repetition of the single word 'later'.

This uncertainty of time and location is representative of both the narrator's naivety and the grandfather's battered condition, of his disorientation and damaged vision: he is described as 'odd-eyed' and witness to a 'blind light'. The second stanza begins with another reference to his blindness: 'Only the loose eyes' glaze they could not clean/ And soon he died.' Yet while the poem's representation of 'sight', in both a physical and narratorial sense, is that of a faculty prone to failure, both character and narrator retain the capacity to hear and make noise: in the second stanza, for example, we are told that the grandfather 'howled a night' before he died. Thus even as the poem is unable to make clear sense visually, through its infantile perspective on events and its opaque imagery, it does contain a certain sonic sense; and the sound of the poem, like the sounds of the events it describes, is violent: 'blood/ Broke from his ears before they quit.'

The metre is irregular throughout, as are the end rhymes, yet they create specific acoustic effects. The first full rhyme is spaced four lines apart, and is relatively tame in semantic terms - 'upstairs'/ 'pairs' - but then suddenly the rhymes close in towards the end of the stanza to form a macabre couplet that rhymes 'mud' with 'blood'. On the other hand, Berryman deliberately *avoided* certain rhymes, particularly those that would have produced an unwanted harmoniousness: drafts for the poem show that the final line of the first stanza had originally read 'they cleaned him up a bit'.<sup>17</sup> This earlier version would have created a full end rhyme with the preceding line, but the poet clearly wished to obviate this consonance. In its place 'somewhat' suggests both semantic and sonic uncertainty, while

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17. Berryman, 'THE BLACK BOOK' (TS with MS corrections), JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, box 1, fol. 25, 'BB'.

interjecting a mannered Anglo-American voice into the poem which further contributes to the pervasive feeling of disparity and awkwardness.

The second stanza recounts the abrupt and harrowing denouement of the grandfather's story. The description of his 'loose eyes' glaze' evokes the physical violence done to him, and also the resultant disconnection between his inner and outer worlds, which prevents both narrator and reader from 'seeing' exactly what has happened to this man, or understanding what inner destruction has occurred. In this way the victim is figured in an essentially negative relation to both narrator and reader: he is both 'him' and, as in the original title of the poem, 'not him'; someone whose terrible injuries and suffering are such that they place him beyond any of our familiar fields of conceptual or emotional reference.

The grandfather lacks a human language: all he can do is 'howl' like a wolf, and his ululating has a disconcerting effect on the narrator, who describes how it 'shook/ Our teeth before the end'. There is a dark irony in this reference to his family's full sets of teeth: the reader knows that the grandfather's murder - which is only accomplished after his release from the concentration camp - must in fact prefigure the rapid accentuation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, for whom the loss of teeth, through either malnutrition and disease, or as a result of the Nazis' practice of extracting gold from the teeth of their victims, would become commonplace. The reference could also be biblical: after the description of 'the loose eyes' glaze' the mention of teeth in the next line forms a parody of the Old Testament moral code of 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. And indeed while all Christian ceremonies, such as its rituals of mourning, are summarily banished from the poem - 'No more the solemn and high bells/ Call to our pall' - the narrator upholds the Old Testament tradition as represented by Abraham, whom he calls on to write in his 'Book' of the historical crimes that 'we' (himself, his family, his tribe, his readers) have 'seen'.

The poem's biblical allusions portray the Jews as a people whose fate presents a challenge to the Christian God; so much so that the tribe of Israel comes to resemble the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost* in the final part of the poem. The final clause's lineation is

such that the first four words could be read as a self-description of the narrator and the rest of the Jews (whom he now seems to represent, or who now speak collectively *through* him) as being, like Satan and the fallen angels, ‘Hell’s/ Irritable & treacherous’, with the adjectives of the penultimate line assuming the status of nouns. The layout of the final three lines of the stanza ensures that this false sense, or misreading, is actually retained by the reader as a more obscure ‘full’ meaning is developed through the last line.

A late switch to the present tense, a sense of rhythmic and syntactic urgency (the last clause is doubly enjambed, and covers three lines without being interrupted by any form of punctuation other than a short parenthesis), and the repetition of ‘here here’, combine in these last lines to make the Jews’ condition seem horrifically *present*. Yet their claim to authority, and to the reader’s attention, remains precarious: they ‘beg’ Abraham that their story be told, even as they themselves disappear (Hell’s Despairs ‘reach now to shatter’ them); and the victim himself is enclosed by brackets, and is thus only visible in terms of grammatical and linguistic negativity: ‘(not him)’. This apostrophe to Abraham - a narratorial apostrophe that could almost be understood as being targeted from within the poem at Berryman himself, as a generative poet-Patriarch - is thus beset by paradox and self-doubt. Even the way that the narrator(s) ‘beg’ Abraham to write of ‘what we have seen’ in a ‘Book’ is undermined by the content of the poem, which constantly draws attention to the fact that we ‘see’ very little.

While a requiem would traditionally call for the peaceful repose of the souls of the dead, the narrator of the first section of *The Black Book* seems to doubt that the poet - his creator, his Abraham - will ever be able to complete this weighty undertaking precisely because *the dead will not rest*. In the final lines this rapidly maturing narrator seems to transcend the limits of his fictive corporeality, as though Berryman sends him out as an emissary into an obscure threshold space, an interstice where he meets with, and usurps the identity of, those who ‘crawl or gibber’, and finds an opening into their Hell. But as he reaches this point, the narrator’s vision of his own imminent annihilation warns the poet-

Patriarch that even if he is able to lay the single soul of the Grandfather to rest by writing of it in this book, there are still souls all around with invisible bodies and silent voices, dead souls with Hell's Despairs who will reach through and 'shatter' his fragile song. In this way, this final stanza - which obliquely refers to the Nazis' genocidal persecution of the Jews, but which also shows how that murder is already vanishing from *within the very text* which describes it - might be said to form a kind of template for the entire sequence, introducing the reader to the metaphysical, historical and representative parameters within which Berryman would craft the volume.

The poem that Berryman originally proposed to place second in *The Black Book*, 'Rising Hymn', has never been published, and was never finished in a way that was satisfactory to Berryman: on what appears to be the last complete typescript of the poem there are large hand-written crosses against two stanzas, smaller crosses against key lines, and on the top of the page the blunt directive: 'rewrite'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed the poem is a particularly turbid and contorted work; for example, a whole stanza is taken up by the single question:

Who will complain when murmur must  
Such guest that instant entertain,  
Moving the spirit from its dust,  
Rooted, dividing cheek and brain?

As its title suggests, the poem is written in a traditional Christian hymnal form, and its language and references derive from the Christian tradition; yet the historical subject matter of the poem, the Holocaust, was a predominantly Jewish experience. While 'Rising Hymn' remains more of an experiment than a fully realised piece, the dialogue it consequently

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18. Berryman, 'Rising Hymn' (TS with MS corrections), *ibid.*

engenders between its content and its form significantly shows Berryman attempting to embody theological and historical argument through poetic structure.

With Berryman's failure to complete a satisfactory version of 'Rising Hymn', the poem that had previously been numbered (iii), and given the provisional title of 'Warsaw', became 'from *The Black Book (ii)*'. It is the longest of all the completed poems, and also the most overtly innovative and ambitious in language and style, and in its drifting, oneiric narrative, in which both distant and more recent elements of Polish history are intertwined, as in this central section:

'Boleslaus brought us here, surnamed the Good,  
Whose dust rolls nearly seven hundred years  
Towards Sirius: we thank that King  
As for the ledge whereto we cling,  
Night in the caves under the ruins; stars,  
Armbands come off, for which we could  
Be glad but the black troops gather.'  
So those who kneel in the paling sky & shiver.<sup>19</sup>

The final stanza of the poem, however, provides a stark counterpoint to the poem's (and *The Black Book's*) previous mixture of allusion, periphrasis and rhetorical bombast:

One officer in black demarches here  
Cupshot, torn collar by a girl unwilling  
Native & blonde through the debauch  
That kept him all night from his couch,  
Hurts his head and from the others' howling  
Drove him out for morning air.

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19. Berryman, 'from *The Black Book (ii)*', *Collected Poems*, 155-56.

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Brooding over the water

He reddens suddenly. He went back & shot her.

The girl's murder is described in a comparatively straightforward manner, and this stylistic simplification suggests a kind of truth claim - one that is made all the more effective and morally emphatic by the more obscure stanzas that precede it. However, in a reversal of the technique used in the first poem of the sequence, where the past tense narrative suddenly becomes present in the last line, Berryman switches from the present to the past tense, creating a dividing gap between 'then' and 'now' which counters the line's syntactic clarity. Up until this line a community of temporality is established through the use of the historic present, meaning that throughout the final stanza the reader is effectively placed *alongside* the officer, in his time and space. This remains the case right up to the point where the man (presumably a Nazi) reddens by the water; but between that moment of shame or embarrassment or feared discovery and the shooting of the girl there is a gulf that those of us who were not there cannot hope to bridge. The use of the past tense to represent the murder thus nudges this final act into a place where we, the readers, and perhaps even the poet himself, can no longer quite reach it, shifting it beyond a common temporality of ongoingness and into a zone of finitude and belated incomprehension.

The third poem from *The Black Book* published in *His Thoughts Made Pockets & the Plane Buckt* was written over a decade after Berryman first began work on the project (a handwritten draft of the poem includes the note '16 July '58, largely remade'),<sup>20</sup> which is to say several years after he seems to have given up hope of ever actually finishing the sequence. This is nonetheless the only poem written for the collection in which Berryman makes unveiled reference to the most notorious features of the exterminatory process:

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20. Berryman, 'Lover & child' (MS), JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, box 1, fol. 25, 'BB'.

MATTHEW BOSWELL

Lover & child, a little sing.  
From long-locked cattle-cars who grope  
Who near a place of showers come  
Foul no more, whose murmuring  
Grows in a hiss of gas will clear them home:  
Away from & toward me: a little soap,  
Disrobing, *Achtung!* in a dirty hope,  
They shuffle with their haircuts in to die.  
Lift them an elegy, poor you & I,  
Fair and strengthless as seafoam  
Under a deserted sky.<sup>21</sup>

For this poem Berryman drew on a factual report outlining conditions in the death camp of Treblinka. The document, compiled from eyewitness accounts given both by victims and by persecutors, was written by Vassili Grossman, and was published in another Black Book - this one brought out just after the war, and entitled *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People* (1946).<sup>22</sup>

Grossman's narrative, like Berryman's poem, begins with the moment when the deportees arrived at the infamous fake station in Treblinka. He describes how, during the thirteen months that it was operational, Treblinka became a 'conveyor belt execution block',<sup>23</sup> with each new train's arrival designed to coincide with the so-called 'liquidation' of the previous batch of victims. As soon as the victims got out of the cattle-cars they were led to a square near the station, where they were immediately forced to surrender their

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21. Berryman, 'from *The Black Book (iii)*', *Collected Poems*, 156.

22. *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People*, New York, The Jewish Black Book Committee, 1946, 398-413.

23. *Ibid.*, 398.

possessions. They were then escorted into the camp through a barbed-wire fence. The men were told to remain where they were, and the women were ordered to go and undress in a nearby barracks. Grossman continues:

And again the square resounded with the word: - *Achtung!* - *Achtung!* It is at such a moment that the peoples' minds [*sic*] must be confused again; they must again be filled with hope, with rules of death given out as if they were rules of life. And the same voice shot out each word distinctly:

'Women and children are to take their shoes off at the entrance to the barracks. The stockings are to be put into the shoes. The children's socks are to be placed in the sandals, in the little shoes and slippers. Be neat.'

And then again:

'When going to the baths, take along your valuables, documents, money, a towel and soap ... We repeat ...'

Inside of the women's barracks there was a barber shop. The naked women were given hair cuts, and the wigs were taken from the old women. This death hair cut - according to the testimony of the barbers - convinced the women that they were being taken to the baths.<sup>24</sup>

Susan Gubar has theorised how verse is the ideal literary form for the practice of 'proxy-witnessing', whereby poets bear witness not to events themselves, but to the depositions of the victims. This particular poem, with its evident dependence on Grossman's text, displays many of the aesthetic features and representative strategies that Gubar suggests characterise this verse form:

The shortness of verse; its deliberate placement of words in lines that do not necessarily accord with syntactic breaks; the use of rhythm or rhyme; the compression of a plethora of details into fewer and therefore more charged terms and images; the reaching for analogies,

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24. *Ibid.*, 404.

albeit inadequate ones; the suppression of logical, narrative links: these lead creative writers to take factual material [...] and, paradoxically, use their imagination to make it more palpably real. [...] Poets of proxy-witnessing attempt to return what they have borrowed 'sharper' than they received it.<sup>25</sup>

I am dubious of Gubar's contention that poetry is somehow able to make documentary accounts 'more palpably real', as this seems to fail to account for poetry's deliberate stylisation of source material, and to foreclose the disjunction between historical reality and aesthetic representation that has formed the definitive agon of post-Holocaust poetics. However, it is certainly the case that our understanding of source material can be radically altered when a poet makes innovative use of the sorts of stylistic and formal techniques that Gubar draws attention to: for example, the dramatic and acoustic elements of poetry can give documentary material a greater sense of immediacy than it has in prose. The sound of poetry can also be used to create the emotional terrain for the action described in its lyric: in Berryman's poem the prisoners 'shuffle' to their deaths to the accompaniment of a sombre iambic pentameter. Verse form also allows a writer to generate a more dynamic interplay of emphases; so when Berryman rhymes 'soap' with 'hope', he dramatically highlights the precise connection that the Nazis wanted the Jews to make.

This is not to say, however, that Berryman sees verse as an art form that intrinsically sanctions the free play of the creative imagination. Other than in the final couplet, almost all the figures and metaphors that he uses actually belong to the discourse and pseudo-ideology of the Nazis themselves. For example, as the victims leave the cattle-cars they are described as being 'Foul no more', Berryman here drawing attention to the Jews' place in the Nazi mentality as tainted and socially undesirable *Untermenschen*, while also showing how this conception of the Jew became literalised through practices such as the use of cattle-trucks,

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25. Susan Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2003, 149-50.

where Jews were treated like animals (like fowl). The reference to the soap that prisoners were given to hold as they were led to their deaths, and the description of how the gas would 'clear them home', also emphasise the way that the Nazis would physically stage their anti-Semitic construction of the verminous, disease-carrying Jew. For the Nazis, killing was above all a matter of hygiene (we recall that Zyklon B was a form of rat poison). In a subtle interiorisation of this Nazi metaphor, it is not the Jews themselves, however, but rather their desperate, deluded *hope* that they would not be killed that Berryman emotively calls 'dirty'.

It is not only what the formal elements of poetry add to documentary texts, by way of an altered focus gained through rhyme or rhythm or a fragmentation of narrative, that can change a reader's perception of that material: what poets *leave out* in their revisions of historical documents can be just as significant, and Berryman's poem is a very good example of a poet becoming an astute editor of primary material. A key difference between Grossman's prose report and Berryman's poem is that any form of extended commentary on events is noticeably absent from the latter. In his report Grossman expands on the barbers' interpretation of why they thought they had to give victims the 'death hair cut' (they believed it was simply a way of convincing the victims that they were being taken to the baths), adding that the hair itself had economic value, and was sent back to Germany where it was used as raw material by the army and navy for such things as stuffing mattresses.<sup>26</sup> There is no explanatory or discursive equivalent in 'from *The Black Book (iii)*'; but rather than extended commentary *on* events themselves, what we find in Berryman's poem is a contemplation of the non-victims' *mode of relation to* these events: a self-reflective consideration of encounter that is explored primarily through the writer's control of poetic address.

Berryman begins his narrative with a characteristic piece of baby-talk: 'Lover & child, a little sing.' The phrase 'a little sing' seems to introduce a song, which is possibly a reference to the poem itself, and the suggestion is that the unidentified 'Lover & child' are its

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26. *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime*, 404.

addressees. Given the content of the rest of the poem, we assume that this 'Lover & child' are victims of the Nazi genocide; and even if their identity is never made particularly clear, the possibility that the narrator might here be addressing the dead, along with the tender, private language used in the line, implies a certain narratorial *intimacy*.

This poignant sense of personal contact between the poem's narrator and its addressees also inheres in the fifth and sixth lines, where he describes how the deaths of the Holocaust victims in the gas chambers 'will clear them home:/ Away from & toward me'. However, the narrator's relation to the dead is here conceived of in terms of a more ambiguous double movement, as though it is their passing away from the living that brings them somehow closer to those they have left behind. The counterpoised forces of this double movement are also reflected in the reference to a 'home' - a word with both domestic and theological connotations - which leaves it unclear whether the poet is describing a relation to things past, and the revisiting of a shared past through memory, or if the dead are here being conceived of as spirits whom the narrator hopes to join in the afterlife.

This representation of simultaneous loss and contact, of immediate absence and premonitions of presence, could also be understood as a meditation on the role of the Holocaust poet: even a reflection on how Berryman conceived of his own personal relation to the murdered Jews whose deaths were the subject of *The Black Book*. The ambiguity of address might thus figure the poet's uncertain relation to historical women and children whom he feels compelled to write about, and yet with whom he fails to make complete poetic contact. In this context the relation between the narrator and his 'lover' significantly has connotations of illegitimacy, even indecency, with the word 'lover' displacing the more normative 'mother' (while also evoking the Nazi practice of separating the women and children from men on entry to the camps, as described in Grossman's report). The suggestion is that the male poet is illicitly infatuated with his own grievous subject matter.

If the poem follows an abiding trajectory of descent, a katabatic plunge into the depths of history, into mass murder and the death camps, then the final three lines clearly

describe a reciprocal movement of *ascent*, hauling the subject-matter heavenward in a manner that seems integrally bound to the production of the elegy itself. As the poem goes on, its imagery lightens, with the weighty ‘long-lockt cattle-cars’, wrenched together with firm, brace-like hyphens, giving way to ethereal ‘seafoam’ and ‘sky’ in the final two lines. The poet wishes to ‘lift’ an elegy to the dead, and in a manner reminiscent of the call to flight in the opening couplet of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ - ‘Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening is spread out against the sky’<sup>27</sup> - he enjoins the reader to take part in this burdensome task. It is almost as though poet and reader, ‘poor you & I’, have become involved in a Dantean partnership of guide and pupil; and as we come out on the other side of this Gehenna we *join together* to tell our tale (and thus we perform the requisite task of all those who journey into the underworld).

The reader is therefore directly implicated in the struggle to produce meaning, or, like a modern-day Atlas, to *hold up* meaning, after Treblinka; but the unexpected lightness and vacuity of the imagery at the end of the poem is profoundly at odds with our sense of the monolithic character of the elegy, and confounds our earnest attempt to shoulder the dead weight of the Holocaust. Rather than lifting up totemic meaning, we actually find meaning itself floating away, and the final two lines confirm that we are *unable* to lift even this increasingly flimsy-seeming elegy: the sky is ‘deserted’, void of elegiac commemoration and consolation and also God after the *tremendum* of the genocide;<sup>28</sup> and the partnership of poet and reader is termed ‘Fair & strengthless’, our fine Aryan heads of hair making our attempt to

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27. T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *Collected Poems: 1909 - 1962*, London, Faber and Faber, 1974, 13.

28. For an influential interpretation of the Holocaust as a human equivalent of the *mysterium tremendum*, the terror-mystery of God, see Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981.

raise an elegy to victims whose heads were shaved seem like an incongruous, almost obscene sort of enterprise. The gap between the two key duos of the poem - the 'Lover & child' on the one hand, and 'you & I' on the other - widens, and the only simile of the poem, the comparison of the 'Fair and strengthless' dyad of reader and writer to 'seafoam', emphasises our ineptitude, our elegiac labour merely washing around the outermost fringes of a vast, oceanic crime. The allusion to the birth of Aphrodite, who rose from the foam of the sea, again figures the poet's obsession with history as a dubious kind of love affair, or worse: the way the word 'foam' harks back to the 'soap' that the prisoners were made to carry to the gas now makes this attraction almost seem repulsively necrophilic.

The image of 'seafoam' also brings to mind the writings of Primo Levi, and in particular his description in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) of how, even after the war, the victims were overcome by the 'memory of the offence': 'The ocean of pain, past and present, surrounded us, and its level rose from year to year until it almost submerged us.'<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Berryman imagines a union between writer and reader which clearly presupposes that *neither partner was there*. We remember nothing and, as a result, we can only ever skim the surface of an 'ocean of pain' whose awesome depths remain hidden from us. The very fact that we have never descended in the way that Levi describes means that neither can we take it upon ourselves to represent any kind of ascent from the depths of history, thus forestalling the elegy's implicit promise of imaginative resurrection. For Berryman, 'you & I' remain the uninitiated: those who must act as the witnesses to the witnesses, yet who must continually falter in our attempts to lift them a befitting elegy of permanence.

The handful of published poems from *The Black Book* represents a mere fraction of the forty-two sections that Berryman had planned to write; yet the voluminous notes and drafts that he

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29. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, London, Abacus, 1996, 65.

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made for the sequence do at least offer some tantalising clues about what other material might have been included. For example, a hand-written draft describes a motorcade heading towards a concentration camp:

South thro' unwintering boroughs the big cars glide  
Foreign & swift; officials snug inside;  
A tinkle from a foreign orchestra  
Startles the Polish fields. Until these arrive,  
The ceremonial fires delay,  
Eight thousand bodies are & are alive.<sup>30</sup>

Another hand-written lyric portrays 'the crematorium at Maidanek':

So many bodies in a breathless space  
To dust & air! Your bloody body burns  
Three to an hour, save the bigger bones,  
Haircuts have saved the hair.<sup>31</sup>

The published poems and drafts seem to indicate that Berryman's suite of Holocaust poems would have mirrored the actual chronology of the 'Final Solution': the first poem is set in a period before the Nazi purges had reached their worst; the next describes a central precursor to the destruction, the establishment of Jewish Ghettos, and the murder of a single woman in Nazi-occupied Warsaw; a poem called 'waiting' (published in *Poetry*) is a dramatic monologue spoken by a man who is about to be interrogated; the poems 'the will' (also published in *Poetry*) and 'Rising Hymn' are then set in Nazi camps; and the Jewish genocide

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30. Berryman, 'Dawn like a rose' (MS), JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, box 1, fol. 25, 'BB'.

31. Berryman, *ibid.*

is the subject of 'from *The Black Book (iii)*'. As the sequence developed, Berryman thus moved deeper into the heart of the extermination process, tracing a gradual journey of descent, a Dantean progress through the worsening circles of this historical *Inferno*.

George Steiner has claimed: 'The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the *unspeakable* is to risk the survivance [*sic*] of language as creator of humane, rational truth.'<sup>32</sup> Berryman's Holocaust sequence, however, suggests the opposite: that after Auschwitz the survival of a rational language is not a risk but a necessity, and that language, and also certain narrative structures (such as religious schemas of ascent and descent), have become *even more* redolent with meaning - albeit with direly inverted meaning - than ever before. A central feature of both the sequence as a whole, and of individual poems - most notably 'from *The Black Book (ii)* - is that as their subject matter becomes more horrific, Berryman's style grows increasingly perspicuous.

The volume was thus underpinned by a strong impulse towards clarity; but at the same time poems such as 'from *The Black Book (iii)*' do, of necessity, confront the *limits* of Holocaust representation, and the difficulty - even the undesirability - of transgressing these limits. They do not concur with Steiner's assessment that Auschwitz lies 'outside speech'; but in drawing attention to their own inner silences, they do anticipate what Adorno would diagnose in his essay 'Commitment' as art's situation of permanent, disabling *paradox* after Auschwitz. For Adorno, any cultural representation of 'the unthinkable fate' of the victims could turn that alien experience into something potentially gratifying and meaningful, with the result that 'it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed'.<sup>33</sup> Yet equally, he argued, art could not *not* confront that past: the same suffering that calls into question art's

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32. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*, New York, Atheneum, 1982, 123.

33. Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', trans. Francis McDonagh, *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, London, NLB, 1977, 189.

right to exist also ‘tolerates no forgetting’, and therefore ‘demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it’.<sup>34</sup> So while ‘to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’, literature must nonetheless ‘resist this verdict’.<sup>35</sup> In identifying this aporia in culture’s confrontation with real historical suffering, Adorno seems to call for a self-scrutinising and morally scrupulous art - an art that would aspire to document its own impossible position - and Berryman’s *The Black Book* precociously highlights the possibilities and the limitations inherent in Adorno’s vision of the legitimate post-Holocaust artwork, being both driven and stalled by the need to incorporate antagonistic ethical imperatives into its representative logic.

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34. *Ibid.*, 188.

35. *Ibid.*, 188.