REVIEWS

John Berryman. *The Selected Letters of John Berryman*. Edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae, Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2020, 736 pages.
Eric Hoffman, editor. *Conversations with John Berryman*. UP of Mississippi. 2021, 175 pages.

Not that long ago, in 2014, to mark the centennial of John Berryman's death, Farrar Straus and Giroux republished his three books of poems: the groundbreaking *77 Dream Songs* (from 1964), the less well-known *Berryman's Sonnets* (1967), and his opus magnum, *The Dream Songs* (1969), complemented by *The Heart Is Strange: New Selected Poems* (edited by Daniel Swift, 2014) and a reissue of *Poets in their Youth* (2014), a memoir by Berryman's first wife, Eileen Simpson. "These books make a fierce little pile," wrote Dwight Garner in the *New York Times:* "When you aren't looking, they may scald a hole through your bedside table" (Garner 1). Signaling, perhaps, a rising interest in the work of one of America's more original and difficult twentieth-century poets, they were recently followed by *The Selected Letters of John Berryman*, edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae (2020), and *Conversations with John Berryman*, edited by Eric Hoffman (2021). Both constitute a needed addition to the field of Berryman studies

Hoffman's collection gathers over twenty conversation reports and interviews conducted with Berryman on various occasions between 1939 and 1971, including the transcript of the 1970 televised meeting, prefaced by William Heyen's poignant account of the day itself and the events preceding it. Published in 1974 in *Ohio Review* (two years after the poet's death by suicide), Heyen's "A Memoir and an Interview" is a harrowing portrait of a man "shortly after the beginning of another slip" (Haffenden 379): Berryman had just joined Alcoholics Anonymous and was an outpatient at St Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis. Referring to the crucial notion of irreversible loss underpinning his poetic activity, and the "epistemology of loss" from "The Ball Poem" (1948), Berryman remarks to Heyen and Mazzaro: "isn't it true that the three of us sitting here, began with a great loss, from the controlled environment of the womb?" (qtd. in Hoffman 112, cf. Warso 77-81). Discussing Dream Song 1 in a 1971 letter to Peter Stitt, he'll note: "the first line drifted into my head and I saw that it's about The Fall…. But as I followed the Song thro', mentally, it seemed also to dramatize the birth-trauma… the terrible 'departure' is from the womb) (*Selected Letters*, n.p.). Hoffman's collection includes several other important conversations, among them "The Art of Poetry" from 1970, conducted by Stitt and published originally in *Paris Review*, and the *Harvard Advocate* interview from 1968. Both had been reprinted before, in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman* (edited by Harry Thomas, Northeastern UP, 1988) but the book, itself surely of use to anyone interested in Berryman, has now been out of print, and Hoffman manages to partly fill the gap. It is in the *Harvard Advocate* that Berryman remarks on the possibility of an "ulterior structure" to the Dream Songs (ironizing

that one day, perhaps, "somebody can get to be an associate professor or an assistant professor by finding it out," 73), discusses the importance of naming in Henry James and Stephen Crane (all while denying any special significance to the name of the Songs' hero—the question of Henry's name is dismissed also in the 1965 Lundegaard interview), finally, refers to the arguably shocking minstrel presences in the Songs, also in relation to his often overlooked, early short story, "The Imaginary Jew" (1945). In "The Art of Poetry" Berryman famously expresses "rage and contempt" at being labeled "confessional" (Hoffman 122) and talks about his relationship with other poets, from Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, and Dylan Thomas to W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Walt Whitman, and William Shakespeare, returning yet again to the question of Henry's name and its insignificance. While any poet's commentary on their own work needs to be approached with caution, this one's insights into the work of others prove revealing, and it is worth remembering that Berryman was also a literary scholar and biographer. As such, *Conversations* provide useful context for the reading of his work, now available in a single book, each interview accompanied by a small introduction. Hoffman's collection includes also a brief chronology, a list of recommended, selected secondary sources, a personal yet informative introduction to the whole, and an appendix with the editor's own, hand-picked "selected Berryman" for the reader's consideration.

Edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae, the 2020 selection of Berryman's correspondence opens with the poet's 1925 letter to his parents, sent from a boarding school and signed "your loving son, John Allyn." Less than a year later, his father, John Allyn Smith, commits suicide in Tampa, Florida, "close by a smothering southern sea" (*The Dream Songs* 83). Reflection on the impact of this loss and its formative function ("You is from hunger, Mr Bones"; *The Dream Songs* 83) can be found also in Berryman's correspondence, for instance, in the letter sent in 1955 to Saul Bellow, after Abraham Bellow's sudden passing:

> The trouble with a father's dying very early (not to speak of his killing himself) is not so much just his loss as the disproportionate & crippling role the mother then assumes for one. The three men I chiefly think of all lost their fathers when you have. The results as I make them out seem to be: grief, remorse, loneliness, and an entirely new strength. Shakespeare was probably in the middle of *Hamlet* and I think his effort increased; also he then wrote *Othello*, within about a year. Freud was 40, and wrote to Fliess a week later: 'By one of the obscure routes behind the official consciousness the old man's death affected me deeply… the whole past stirs within one. I feel now as if I had been torn up by the roots' and his self-analysis gained in intensity and it was exactly a year later that he recognized the Oedipus complex. Luther's sec'y [secretary] wrote to his wife: 'The news of his father's death shook him at first, but he was himself again after two days. When the letter came, he said, "My father is dead." He took his psalter, went to his room, and wept so that he was incapacitated for two days, but he has been all right since.' May you be now or soon. (*Selected Letters* n.p.)

Coleman and McRae's voluminous edition now complements *We Dream of Honour*, the 1988 selection of the poet's letters to his mother, edited by Richard E. Kelley. Martha Berryman was a continuous presence and influence in his life—in the

1972 semi-autobiographical, Freudian and unfinished *Recovery,* he'll have Dr. Alan Severance remark in his journal:

> Maybe my long self-pity has been based on an *error* and there has been no (hero-)villain ruling my life but ONLY an unspeakably powerful possessive adoring MOTHER, whose life at 75 is still centered wholly on *me*.... And my vanity based on *her* uncritical passionate admiration (letter ten days ago on my lectures twenty years ago!)—rendering me invulnerable ('indifferent'—a fact, too) to all criticism and impatient with anything short of total prostration before the products of my genius[.] (*Recovery* 80)

This impatience and not a small amount of vanity, ambition, irony, a sense of failure, and inner torment reverberate in over 600 letters selected for the volume. Addressed to family, friends, other poets, editors, colleagues, and former students, they are filled with tedious and touching reports—on "endless negotiation about teaching, magazine commissions, publishers & agents" (letter from 5 October 1953), contemporary literary life, and what is otherwise referred to as Henry's "plights and gripes," all because:

> Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
> After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
> we ourselves flash and yearn,
> and moreover my mother told me as a boy
> (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
> means you have no
>
> Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
> inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
> Peoples bore me,
> literature bores me, especially great literature[.] (*The Dream Songs* 16)

Coleman and McRae's selection closes with a 1971 letter to Edward Hoagland, whose "delicious, solemn, funny, original, pathetic, vivid, tragic, exuberant" *Notes from the Century Before* Berryman admired in a letter sent to Hoagland on January 2, 1968. The other one, dated for "Xmas 71," is short enough to be quoted in full:

> Delighted abt the coming reprints—I hope you are working on a new novel, tho' I spent a rare happy envying evening last month with your essays. It is high time, my boy, for the one 'that will beat Bellow.' He's half through one on our tragic & beloved Delmore Schwartz. I wasted eight months this year on a novel myself, 220 pp of it, and have nothing good to say for myself at all except affection to you. We had a baby, Sarah Rebecca, in June—a beauty.
>
> John
>
> Kate says Hi! Be merry w. Marion. (*Selected Letters*, n.p.)

On January 7, 1972, Berryman jumped off the Washington Avenue Bridge onto the west bank of the Mississippi River. His correspondence has so far been accessible through the University of Minnesota Libraries, and otherwise, mainly, quoted in his two biographies: John Haffenden's *The Life of John Berryman* (1982) and Paul

Mariani's *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (1990). Coleman and McRae's selection, available now both in print and a search-friendly digital format, accompanied by useful notes, a glossary, chronology, and a short introduction, constitutes thus an indispensable resource for anyone interested in researching Berryman's life-work. Coleman's continuous efforts for the development of Berryman scholarship are nothing short of admirable.

Works Cited

Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs*. 1969. Farrarr, Straus and Giroux, 1993.
——. *Recovery / Delusions etc*. Dell Publishing, 1974.
Haffenden, John. *The Life of John Berryman*. Ark Paperbacks, 1982.
Garner, Dwight. "A Chance to Read Between the Lines." *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 2014, Section C. 1.
Warso, Anna. *Staging America, Staging the Self: Figurations of Loss in John Berryman's Dream Songs*. Peter Lang, 2021.

Anna Warso
SWPS University, Warsaw

Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich. *Między Freudem a Bogiem. Życie i twórczość Anne Sexton* [Bewteen Freud and God: The Life and Work of Anne Sexton]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2020, 340 pages.

Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich's book on Anne Sexton is a well-researched biography, which effectively weaves together in-depth readings of the poet's work and refreshing insights into her turbulent life, marked by emotional upheavals, internal conflicts, and mental illness. Even though the title itself seems to imply a duality of work and life, the book vividly illustrates how in Sexton's case the two were inextricably embedded in each other. The author carefully analyzes how Sexton's life informed her poetic thinking and how the act of writing affected the way she experienced the world, placing special emphasis on the poet's relationship with psychoanalysis and her unorthodox approach to religion and spirituality as intimately tangled with the body.

Composed of eight chapters, the book focuses on those aspects of Sexton's life and work that have received slightly less attention from scholars, critics, and translators alike, as the author explains in the introductory note (11). While in the United States Sexton's work is widely known and discussed, in Poland it remains largely unexplored. Sexton published ten poetry collections (three of them appeared posthumously), including a Pulitzer-winning *Live or Die* (1967), and a play *Mercy Street* staged in New York City in 1969. Even though she was later overshadowed by Sylvia Plath's fame, she received much critical acclaim and was widely recognized on the American literary scene already in her lifetime. In Poland, however, only one collection, *Kochając zabójcę*, was published in 1994. As Aleksandrowicz-Pędich points out, the Polish anthology of American women poets *Dzikie brzoskwinie* (2003), edited by Julia Hartwig, includes only two poems by Sexton (in Hartwig's translation), while fourteen poems by Plath. More recently, two of Sexton's poems were translated by Magdalena Szewczuk and Adam Buszek for the literary magazine