

## Henry House or The White House: The Political John Berryman

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### Abstract

For several decades now, John Berryman (1914-1972) has been classified as a Confessional poet; a categorization that has nonetheless been used to dismiss his claims to public concern. Critics as diverse as M. L. Rosenthal, Bruce Bawer, Marjorie Perloff, Michael Hofmann, Joel Conarroe, Luke Spencer, and many others have been persistent in censuring Berryman as a poet who lacks broader social and political scopes; who “expresses his own confusion and irresolution in the face of current events”; who “cannot make things cohere on the level of international politics any more than he can on the level of his own life”; and who fails “to become the public poet he wanted to be.” Besides, critics claim, that even when Berryman is overtly political by any definition, his words lack real public significance or resonance, and his writings are hollow or failed gestures.

As the confusion between the “personal” and the “public” in John Berryman’s poetry has always puzzled critics and readers alike, this essay attempts to resolve this critical debate in his works. The essay examines *The Dream Songs* and the life they represent in the larger context of Berryman’s country and period—America in the middle forty years of the twentieth century—to demonstrate that, against that backdrop, the poems are political at the profoundest level, where “the personal is political.” The essay also shows that Berryman, like Henry, his *alterego* in the *Dream Songs*, broke the silence of his personal despair to make poetry of it; poems in which personal and spiritual dilemmas are brought together with the political events that are evidence of his entire nation’s moral and spiritual difficulties.

**Key Words:** John Berryman, Confessional poetry, Personal/Public, *The Dream Songs*, Henry