Berryman’s description in Dream Song 172 of a “geography of grief” summarizes his career-long charting of a textual and psychical space that is regularly occluded and effaced by traditional methods of literary interpretation. To narrow the gauge somewhat, and to facilitate a discussion of Berryman’s deployment of language to access such realms of intangible absolutes, his long poem *The Dream Songs* rises as the central work in his corpus in which language is pushed to the extreme in its attempts to write the unsayable. So numerous are the Dream Songs in which Berryman engages with the questions of death and suicide, that one encounters an almost insurmountable difficulty in addressing Berryman’s position in relation to his poetic subjects and the linguistic modes that avail his discussion of them. *The Dream Songs* represents an engagement with language and its disintegration as it encounters the void, be that a psychical internal one or the ultimate abyssal experience of death. Reading suicide as the ultimate incarnation not only of a personal subjectivity but also as the endgame to a philosophical imponderable restructures how we read the works of this generation and of Berryman in particular. The urge to commit suicide and the mental processes involved in such an act are instincts and articulations that are located within the individual’s mental world and, for Berryman, particularly within the philosophical debate that centers in the role and possibility of language. It becomes akin to creative endeavour, much as Albert Camus intimated: “An act like this … is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art.” ¹ The comparison is

more than simply apt: the essential silence that preludes the creation of art preludes the commission of this act, the understanding of which pivots on whether suicide can be deemed to be creative or destructive.

Berryman’s contemporary Anne Sexton muddies the waters of this debate, possibly with self-serving reasons. When she declares, in an interview that discusses Sylvia Plath’s death, that “Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem”, she simultaneously opens and closes a debate the terms of which once more rotate about the irresolvable question of language. If this sentence does relate Sexton’s own philosophy with regard to suicide, it produces a range of problems. If suicide is the opposite of the poem, then the reverse by this logic is also true, that poetry is the opposite of the act of suicide. The moment of suicide is one that leads to death; therefore, the moment of poetry must be one that leads to the opposite of death, to not-death, to life, birth even. Poetry then is not a birth as such but a conception, just as suicide is not death but an action of death, an action leading to death. For the two to be opposites, they must be located as threshold moments, prior to both the beginning and the termination of language.

If poetry operates as the expression of the essence of language and as the possibility of discovering or encountering language at its source, suicide is itself an expression, an encounter with the moment of death, of death in its essence even if the totality of the experience of Death can never be realized (either through language or the act of suicide). As an act that may seek to accelerate the experience of death, suicide can never encompass Death; it may seem to offer access to a full encounter with Death, but the moment of its realization is the simultaneous moment of the impossibility of any such encounter.

Acknowledging that the two events are recognized as opposed impulses, suicide becomes anti-poetry in this taxonomy, an impulse that is anti-language, or is the physical refusal or rejection of the possibility of language. It is the cataclysmic intrusion of the eradicated

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3 Maurice Blanchot relates how the moment of suicide is remote from the actuality of death, connected more to life than to the abyssal beyond: “Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave, even so Thomas felt himself, at the moment he knew himself to be dead, absent, completely absent from his death”. See Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lamerton, New York: David Lewis Inc., 1973, 36.