CBC TUESDAY NIGHT/ENCORE
"THE HOURS OF JOHN BERRYMAN"
CBL/CBC: TBA

SCRIPT: George Whalley
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ANNOUNCER: CBC Tuesday Night/Encore presents "The Hours of John Berryman," an exegesis by George Whalley of the sequence of poems entitled "Opus Dei" in John Berryman's last and posthumous book of verse "Delusions, Etc." Dr. Whalley…,

WHALLEY: John Berryman *Delusions*, etc. You take up the volume of only 70 pages. He had corrected the proofs for it before he died on 7 January 1972. You look at the quiet grizzled and despectacled face disposed thoughtfully at 45° on the jacket – the ironic gentle eyes behind thick lenses – and wonder whether *this* is the Henry of *The Dream Songs*, and Henry Pussycat, and Mr. Bones – even though he says himself that Henry is "an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)." And you turn the pages to catch again the last inflection of that voice of his that for thirty years had been gaily poised between song and intellect, and come on the dedication –

READER 1: To Martha B passion & awe.

WHALLEY: – and then the five mottoes to the book –

READER 1: We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced:
We have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

READER 2: On parle toujours de 'l'art réligieux.' L'art *est* réligieux.

READER 1: And indeed if Eugène Irténev was mentally deranged everyone is in the same case; the most mentally deranged people are certainly those who see in others indications of insanity they do not notice in themselves.

READER 2: *Feu*! *feu*! *feu*!

READER 1: Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

WHALLEY: The last motto, from the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, looks back through the threefold cry of "Fire! fire! fire!" – purifying? destroying? – through the recognition of a universal madness, to the affirmation that "Art simply *is* religious," and so to the words in Matthew's gospel that Jesus spoke to the two disciples that John the Baptist had sent from his prison to find whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

READER 2: And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force….But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil…. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; … For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

WHALLEY: – and then to the list of Contents, which shows the book disposed in five parts of sections, only two of which have titles: the first being *Opus Dei* and the fourth *Scherzo*. If the musical term *Scherzo* (Italian

for a joke) suggests that the whole book is perhaps conceived as a musical composition of five movements, we recall that most of Berryman's volumes – at least from *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* of 1956, to *Love and Fame* of 1970 (the book before this one) – were all conceived as single "long poems" – even though many of Berryman's readers and critics don't seem to have understood this. And when we see that the section called *Opus Dei* is evidently based on the sequence of the canonical hours, and notice that this closed *Love and Fame* only a year before, and notice at a glance that *Opus Dei* is even deeper in tone, more agonizing in personal commitment, there seems some reason to concentrate on *Opus Dei* in coming to terms with the last long poem John Berryman was to write.

But Berryman's poems have never been easy to come to terms with. For one thing he is more than a little learned, and his learning is neither trivial nor narrow. The landscape of his mind – the things he knows and cares about, the images that come to mind when he thinks something through, driven by strong feeling and impetuous impulse – this landscape is not much like the landscape of most people's minds. We have to come to terms with this strangeness if we are to read him faithfully.

To make a poem – at least the kind of poem Berryman makes – is a very *internal* activity, and the success of it depends upon the poet finding in his *own* mind the words that react in such a way as to give body to some unique state of mind or feeling, some line of thinking, or some glimpse of a vision of the way things are. In doing this, a poet can work only with what he knows and loves and cares about; only what he cares about will have the clarity and force to work as it must work finally *in* the poem. His first loyalty is to the poem-that-is-coming-into-being, a loyalty to the integrity of what must get said.

He will want the poem to take on life and substance, certainly, in the mind of somebody who reads in order to make the poem *easily* "intelligible" to a "general reader." If a poet happens to be rather learned, and concerned for things that many readers do not know about, that can't be helped: that's all he has to work from. His poems may to some people be obscure; but if the poems (even though obscure) take the reader by the throat, a reader will be willing to resolve the obscurities. The obscurities are after all in the reader's mind, not the poet's.

In any case, to read most poems well, a reader has to "qualify" by discovering and entering into the landscape of the particular poet's mind so that he can find his own mind working in much the same way as the poet's; and that's as true of William Wordsworth as it is of Dylan Thomas or his friend John Berryman. It's not so much that the reader has to *know* in detail everything the poet knows, but that his mind will tend to resonate in much the same way as the poet's; and that sort of resonance occurs only when, knowing what the poet called to mind, we take that knowing for granted.

In finding these resonances, and allowing them to occur in our own minds, we are not *interpreting* the poems; we are helping the poem to *work* as it wants to work. A poem is always "an entity of direct appeal" – it comes straight at us, it speaks in a voice that is somehow a voice that we all recognise, a voice that speaks as directly to us as a gesture does. No matter how *un*familiar some of the elements in a given poem may be to us, a poem is not a *puzzle* to be solved; and even though a poem may speak in a dialect – an intellectual dialect – that is not immediately familiar to us, the poem is nonetheless a direct utterance.

What I want to do is to see whether we can find that these poems called *Opus Dei*, which can be expected to raise difficulty with many readers, can speak to us directly. What I shall do is to look at certain details in each of the nine poems and unravel some of the connections that I see and hear at work in them. We can take up those elements, become comfortable with them, forget about them, and let them be called up to our minds while we listen, when the poems are all read together at the end.

(PAUSE)

Let's begin with the title of this sequence – *Opus Dei* – the Work of God. This is the original name for the sequence of daily offices established by St. Benedict in the early 6th century. The title expresses the Benedictine belief that a monk's first duty to God is his special duty to pray regularly. St. Benedict withdrew from Rome to a life of solitude because of the licentiousness of the life around him; and since John Berryman – though by no means an austere or ascetic man – took a similar view of the life around him, we might wonder whether Berryman has ironically chosen the canonical hours merely as a literary framework – more or less secular – to make comments upon the corruptions of contemporary life. But the mottoes to *Opus Dei* leave us in no doubt. First, he describes the sequence in his own words –

READER 1: (a layman's winter mockup, wherein moreover
the Offices are not within one day said
but thro' their hours at intervals
over many weeks – such being the World)

WHALLEY: Then a verse from Matthew's gospel –

READER 2: Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for ofttimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.

WHALLEY: – and from the second book of Chronicles –

READER 2: And he did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord.

WHALLEY: In the poem called *Tierce* he will say of himself –

READER 1: This pseudo-monk is all but at despair.

WHALLEY: – and at *Nones* –

READER 1: I have done this & that which I should do,
and given, and attended, and been still,
but why I do so I cannot be sure,
I am suspicious of myself. Help me!

I am olding & ignorant, and the work is great,
daylight is long, will ever I be done,
for the work is not for man, but the Lord God.
Now I have prepared with all my might for it

and mine O shrinks a micro-micro-minor
post-ministry, and of Thine own to Thee I have given,
and there is none abiding but woe or Heaven,
teste the pundits. Me I'm grounded for peace.

WHALLEY: Berryman's way of putting words together is often knotted and elliptical, the movement of his mind both dense and mercurial; and

as for his learning, he uses it as though everybody naturally knew what he knows. But in this group of poems it's in the tone and structure of the daily offices that we find the principal resonances for a set of variations on the theme of desolate self-dedication. He has entitled the poems of *Opus Dei* according to the names of the eight offices – Lauds, Matins, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline – and has placed an "Interstitial Office" between Prime and Tierce. But we should expect that, since the offices – as acts of daily devotion – are through repetition full of an undertow of subtle and haunting echoes, the structural similarities between the offices and the poems will probably be allusive and resonant rather than detailed and systematic.

In the course of more than 1500 years the use in the daily offices has varied much, both locally and officially, and even now the offices vary a little in detail from Order to Order. The offices are fixed in the sense that each office has distinct devotional intention. But the substance of the offices varies to some extent according to the day of the week and the time in the ecclesiastical year. Some psalms, bible readings, and Ambrosian hymns are fixed to particular offices, and some elements are used in sequence to encompass in a week or a month or a year a wider range of sacred texts than the set text of daily offices would otherwise allow; and some prayers, psalms, and bible readings (called "Chapters") are (as the term is) "proper" to certain feasts, saint's days, and turning points in the Church year. Although the use is rather intricate and complex, we can pick up clues from these poems – this "winter mockup" – that show that they refer to a period from shortly after Christmas to some time after St Valentine's Day – or say late December to about mid-March –: all within the compass of winter, not late enough to catch any premonition of the resurgence of spring or the great resurrection

festival of Easter. (On this evidence I feel sure that the poems were written in 1971.)

The sequence of Offices, or canonical Hours, is distributed throughout the day, beginning originally with a midnight office (variously called Vigil, Nocturns, or Matins) and ending with an office (called Compline) said immediately before going to bed. Since in most monasteries Matins was usually said rather later than midnight, a practice grew up of saying Matins immediately before the dawn office of Lauds, either as a night office or as a dawn office. (These two major offices provided the structure for the service which the Church of England established in the 16th century as *Matins*. Correspondingly, Vespers was the major evening office, and in the Anglican rite became *Evensong*.) Between the dawn office of Lauds and the office of Vespers said at nightfall and the lighting of candles (the time depending on the season of the year), four offices, called the Little Hours, are said at intervals of three hours – Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones – that is, the First, Third, Sixth, and Ninth hours, or 6 in the morning, 9 in the morning, noon, and 3 in the afternoon. Compline, the last office, is also one of the Little Hours, all five having the same simple structure.

Berryman's *Opus Dei* has a poem for each of the eight offices, but with two variations. He begins his sequence with Lauds and follows it with Matins, a change that suits his dramatic purpose: he begins with praise and then turns to horrified self-examination. Between Prime and Tierce he has inserted what he calls an "Interstitial Office." This corresponds to one or other of the two traditional "Supplementary Observances," one of which is the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the other the Office of the Dead.

The daily offices provide an intricate texture of thanksgiving, devotion, and penitential meditation; they are also traditionally seen as marking the successive crucial events in the day of the Crucifixion of Jesus: Matins for his being bound as a captive; Prime for the reviling of him; Tierce, the hour of his condemnation to death, and also the hour of the descent of the dove at Pentecost (in Mark and Luke the third hour was the hour of crucifixion): Sext is the hour of the crucifixion (according to John's narrative) and also the hour when darkness descended over the land; Nones, the ninth hour, is the hour of his death and the piercing of his side – a sacramental act; Vespers, the descent from the cross; Compline, the laying of his body in the sepulchre. In reading the poems of *Opus Dei* we need to keep in mind not only the content of the offices with their seasonal variations, but also this progress through the drama of the crucifixion.

Berryman's principal reference in *Opus Dei* is of course to the canonical hours. But other internal resonances are important, though they usually apply over a narrower range. Some of these are personal to himself, some refer to contemporary events, some draw upon unusual areas of knowledge and concern in his own mind. These also need to be unravelled so that we can take them in our stride – as he did – and not fuss over them.

We begin, then, with *Lauds* – the office of praise at first light. Particularly as said on Sundays, on feasts and in the octaves of feasts, through Christmas-tide and Easter-tide, Lauds is a sustained utterance of praise.

READER 2: The Lord is King, and hath put on glorious apparel:
the Lord hath put on his apparel, and girded

himself with strength.
He hath made the round world so sure: that it cannot be moved.
Ever since the world began hath thy seat been prepared: thou art from everlasting.

Praise him sun and moon: praise his all ye stars and light.
Let them praise the Name of the Lord: for he spake the word, and they were made, he commanded and and they were created.

O sing unto the Lord a new song: let the congregation of saints praise him.
O praise God in his holiness: praise him in the firmament of his power.
Praise him in his noble acts: praise him according to his excellent goodness.

Through the tender mercy of our God: whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death: and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

WHALLEY: In the first half of his poem *Lauds* Berryman writes –

READER 1: Let us rejoice on our cots, for His nocturnal miracles
antique outside the Local Group & within it
& within our hearts in it, and for quotidian miracles
parsecs-off yielding to the Hale reflector.

Oh He is potent in the corners. Men
with Him are potent: quasars we intuit,
and sequent to sufficient discipline
we perceive this glow keeping His winter out.

WHALLEY: The phrase "Oh He is potent in the corners" telescopes (from the psalms) "the round world" and the "four corners of the earth" that Isaiah and Ezekiel had both used, and John Donne too. But the ritual imagery of sun, moon, and stars, in his celebration of the power and presence of God in the world, has reflected into a knot of modern astronomical terms. And here we need a little help. The "Local Group" is the astronomer's usual term for the galactic cluster that our solar system happens to be part of. The largest galactic cluster that we know of is in Virgo, comprising 2500 galaxies; the Local Group is a cluster of only 16 galaxies. The galaxies are very old, yet God's miracles are "antique" in comparison. Berryman refers to "quotidian miracles parsecs-off." (The first edition complicates this point by misprinting *parsecs* as *parsees* –) A parsec is a standard unit of interstellar distance – the distance at which a star would have an annual parallax of 1 second of arc – a sizable unit, being a little over 3 light-years ("light-year" is a layman's term), and a light-year being nearly 6 million-million miles. But, as Berryman was doubtless aware, the parsec is a very *small* unit for measuring intergalactic distances; the common unit for that is the mega-parsec, a million parsecs. Yet the "nocturnal miracles" are present though immensely distant in time; and the quotidian miracles, immensely distant in space, yield to the "Hale reflector" – that is, the 200-inch reflecting telescope at Mount Palomar, designed by George Hale and named for him (he died in 1938), the largest and most sensitive optical telescope yet devised – in itself a little miracle.

And as for the "quasars we intuit." *Quasars* are quasi-stellar objects (the etymology of the word *is* a bit objectionable); they are blueish in colour (and therefore very hot), very distant, extragalactic and for that reason were originally called "interlopers." Quasars were first identified by radio-telescope – hence "intuited" by us – and only later were picked up by optical instruments. This was certainly ingenious, in human terms miraculous.

And as he goes on to write –

READER 1: and sequent to sufficient discipline
we perceive this glow –

WHALLEY: – the word "sequent" (which primarily means "following") is a play on what astronomers call the "main sequence," a series according to which the growth and decay of stars is considered; but here the term becomes an image of stages of spiritual growth and decay in man.

In the second half of the poem the tone changes to pathetic jauntiness. He rejoices that he has bought himself a new hat to make up for the few disappointing presents he had for Christmas.

READER 1: My marvellous black new brim-rolled felt is both stuffy & raffish.
I hit my summit with it, in firelight.
Maybe I only got a Yuletide tie
(increasing sixty) & some writing-paper
but ha (ha*ha*) I've bought myself a hat!
Plus-strokes from position zero! Its feathers sprout.
Thank you, Your Benevolence!
permissive, smiling on our silliness You forged.

WHALLEY: The "summit" he "hits" is indeed in modest contrast to the unimaginable distances sketched out in the first part of the poem as the compass of God's power; and is the forging of man's silliness another mark of God's power? Born in 1914, Berryman was indeed in 1971 "increasing (i.e. coming up to) sixty." The "plus-strokes from position zero" are small positive impulses of effort starting from nothing. And when he writes "Its feathers sprout" there may be a hint of renewal of strength – as the day is renewing itself with praise – but it's also a premonition of memorable words in the Compline psalm –

READER 2: Whosoever dwelleth under the defence of the most
High : shall abide under the shadow of the
Almighty …
He shall defend thee under his wings, and thou shalt
be safe under his feathers : …

WHALLEY: Since a listener cannot see the text, it may help to know that in all the poems in *Opus Dei*, Berryman consistently identifies his references to God by using initial capital letters – in, for example, "His nocturnal miracles," "Men with Him are potent," "keeping His winter out," "Your Benevolence," "our silliness You forged." This detail removes a number of possible ambiguities.

(PAUSE)

Matins. This office would be expected to come *before* Lauds, not after it, being originally a midnight office. And indeed the tone of the poem is dark, beset with the memory of dreams of horror, falling, abandonment, a besetting sense of guilt and sin, the deliberate

rejection – through self-preoccupation – of the sorrowful grace offered through the death of Christ. The self-mockery and belittlement heard at *Lauds* continues, but the penitential tone is deepened by several syntactical and verbal echoes (here as elsewhere) of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "terrible sonnets," as at the opening –

READER 1: Thou hard. I will be blunt. Like widening
blossoms again glad toward Your soothe of sun
& solar drawing forth, I find meself
little this bitter morning, Lord, tonight. –

WHALLEY: He had thought in his nightmare that –

READER 1: I was in private with the Devil
hounding me upon Daddy's cowardice –

WHALLEY: – a covert reference to his father's suicide when Berryman was in his early teens, as marked by at least three major passages in *The Dream Songs* and told in even more explicit detail in *Love and Fame*.

He quotes, from the 2nd book of Samuel, Shimei's condemnation of David:

READER 1: 'Behold, thou art taken in thy mischief,
because thou art a bloody man' –

WHALLEY: – and hears the words –

READER 1: with horror
loud down from Heaven.

WHALLEY: Then, as in the poem at Lauds, there is an abrupt transition, without so much as a break in the sentence –

READER 1:
but sudden' was received, – appointed even
poor scotographer, far here from Court,
humming over goodnatured Handel's Te Deum.
I waxed, upon surrender, strenuous
ah almost able service to devise.

WHALLEY: Technically, *scotographer* is the now-obsolete word for what *we* call a radiographer – a person who makes pictures from the shadows cast by opaque substances in a stream of X-rays. But the root of the word – *skotos* – means darkness, even the darkness of death; and Berryman is playing on both meanings.

His appointment is to a position "far from Court," not only a long way from the centre of influence but far also (? with relief) from the central tribunal whether human or divine. (The *Interstitial Office* reflects on an episode in court.)

He hums absentmindedly to himself – Berryman is after all a professor – the Canticle that belongs to Matins on festivals, called *Te Deum*.

READER 2:
We praise thee O Lord : we acknowledge thee to be
the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee : the Father
everlasting.
To thee all Angels cry aloud : the Heavens, and all
the Powers therein.

WHALLEY: The tune he hums it to is the *Dettingen Te Deum* which Handel composed in 1744 to celebrate the defeat of the French at Dettingen in the war of Austrian Succession by armies of England, Austria, and Hanover led by George II (the last time an English monarch was personally to lead his armies in battle). Handel is "goodnatured" (I suppose) because he could complacently celebrate even war in music of transcendent majesty. This perhaps looks forward to the trial of defenders of peace in the *Interstitial Office*, and to the statement in *Nones* –

READER 1: Me I'm grounded for peace.

WHALLEY: But as he accepts his "appointment," aware as he is of his inadequacies, the imagery turns again in an astronomical direction.

READER 1: I am like your sun, Dear, in a state of shear –
parts of my surface are continually slipping past others,
not You, not You.

WHALLEY: "Sun" in the first line is spelled s-u-n: it is not the pun that the Caroline Divines loved because it could turn the sun in the sky into the figure of the Sun of God; it is simply the sun that is the centre of our planetary system. What he means by being "in a state of shear" he describes accurately: "parts of my surface are continually slipping past others" – a condition that does in fact obtain in our Sun. Then he uses another simile that perhaps not everybody will immediately grasp –

READER 1: O I may, even, wave
in crisis like a skew Wolf-Rayet star.

WHALLEY: The Wolf-Rayet stars, so called because they were identified by Wolf and Rayet in about 1870, are very hot stars, and exceptionally short-lived. Because they move through the plane of the galaxy, astronomers can use them as tracers for purposes of measurement. They lie at the centre of planetary nebulae; their spectrum is peculiar, and since it does not fall within the "main sequence" they seem to represent a process or phase of development different from any other stars. Because of their exceptionally short life and intense heart, Berryman thinks of them as waving "in crisis," and "skew" because they are anomalous. All this taken together suggests what he takes his own spiritual condition to be. But the poem closes jauntily, as *Lauds* had done.

READER 1:

Hop foot to foot, hurl the white pillows about,
jubilant brothers: He is our overlord,
holding up yet with crimson flags the Sun
whom He'll embark soon mounting fluent day!

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: *Prime* opens with a stormy February dawn, the hour of Prime being six in the morning. The speaker in the poem first directs his intention for the whole day, echoing the Office Hymn "Now that the daylight fills the sky," yet painfully aware of his weakness and his proneness to error.

READER 1:

What fits me today
which work I can? I've to poor minimum
pared my commitments; still I'm sure to err
grievous & frequent before Evensong

WHALLEY: Considering the psalm that is said daily at Prime –

READER 2: Blessed are those that are undefiled in the way : that walk in the law of the Lord –

WHALLEY: – he gaily takes up a suggestion of Paul Claudel's – a poet whose work can be assumed to be sympathetic to Berryman's sardonic turn of mind –

READER 1: *if* You (God) and I make a majority
(as old Claudel encouraged) what sharp law
can pass this morning? –

WHALLEY: He takes heart then. "Zany enlivens" (as he puts it), and he declares that

READER 1: 'The specific gravity of iron
is one and one-half times the size of Switzerland.'

WHALLEY: He takes a cue from the Chapter for Septuagesima Sunday –

READER 2: Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? …
The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder: which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.

WHALLEY: – and echoes also one of the mottoes to the whole volume.

READER 1: People, pipe with pipes:
the least of us is back on contract, even

unto myself succeeding in sunrise
all over again!

WHALLEY: When he blesses the day as best he can –

READER 1: All customary blessings,
anathemas of the date (post-Lupercal,
and sure The Baby was my valentine), –

WHALLEY: The date is evidently 14 February. The anathemas (that go with the blessings) are presumably for the banal excesses now common to that date, even though it is "post-Lupercal" – after the time of the Roman rite of Lupercalia. Lupercalia was a purification and fertility rite enacted in Rome on 15 February – important enough that the name of the month February comes from *februa*, another name for the Lupercalia. 14th February is the day of remembrance for St Valentine, priest and bishop, martyred under Claudian in *c* 269 AD. Historically the two festivals have merged under the one name and date of St Valentine's Day: the association with courtship comes from the Lupercalia, not from any known detail of St Valentine's life or works. In this merging of pagan and Christian – as the wry tone of this passage hints – Valentine's Day can be other than pagan and secular: "The Baby" who was his valentine is – as for Robert Southwell – the Baby Jesus.
He continues now in self-mockery –

READER 1: I'm not Your beaver, here disabled, still
it is an honour, where some have achieved,
to limp behind along, humming, & keen
again upon what blue trumps, hazy, vainless glory.

WHALLEY: Here he has returned again to the Chapter for Septuagesima Sunday; it is the beaver that runs the good race. No Canadian needs to be reminded that the beaver is an animal renowned for obsessive industry. But some may not be aware of a superstitious belief recorded by Sir Thomas Browne in his *Vulgar and Common Errors* – but Berryman, I think, has this in mind – that when a beaver runs away to escape a hunter he deliberately castrates himself.

Now St Valentine was a martyr. At Prime there is regularly a reading from the Martyrology; and the poem closes abruptly on this theme.

READER 1:

In Alexandria, O Saint Julian
gouty, chair-borne, displayed then on a camel
through the insufferable city, and burned.
In other places, many other holy

bishops, confessors, and martyrs. Thanks be
to God.

WHALLEY: Saint Julian, an obscure bishop, was martyred in the persecution of Decius, 249-51 AD. A token of Berryman's learning is that all the circumstantial detail that he renders here with liturgical sorrow – that Julian was gouty, that he had to be carried in a chair, that he was then "displayed on a camel," and burned – all this is to be found in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. The clue is useful if we want to follow the thread a little farther. Eusebius tells us that Julian was beaten to death, and that his burning was in quick-lime, not (as we might have imagined) at the stake – for that was a luxury of persecution not yet at that time discovered.

(PAUSE)

Next comes the Interstitial Office, standing for either the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Office of the Dead – or both. This poem expresses an indignation so bitter that he cannot even kneel or pray – indignation at the trail of young men for burning and defacing military draft records. Berryman was evidently not present: his witness comes from one "Who sat thro' all three trials." Can it have been U.S. *v* Berrigan? A few details in the poem might identify the actual trials, but it doesn't matter – they were all much alike. But this is part of the fool-thick reality of the morning of the day that is now to be lived through. If one of the jurors was in fact a woman wearing blue, who "looked inconsolably sad, and hid her eyes," and so is a figure of the Virgin Mary, that would only be one of those coincidences of the actual with the symbolic that poetry feeds on, the invention being in the finding. If Mary can be so found in the mundane world, so can the Enemy. He cries out indignantly to God –

READER 1: Where slept then Your lightning?

WHALLEY: And yet – for even this is no doubt a mystery of God's will – he ends –

READER 1: Well. Help us all! Yes – yes – I kneel.

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: At *Tierce* – the third hour, 9 in the morning, the hour of the crucifixion – he takes up again the puzzle that he had declared in the *Interstitial Office*: that God – whose Son is the Reconciler – allows "the Enemy's paratus" to range abroad, allows to exist in the world sin, suffering, ugliness, loss of faith. He asks to be forgiven for

pitting his will – his insolence – against God's will. The world of his fervent childhood, when he served Father Boniface early each morning, was not the world he sees before him now. And, he asks –

READER 1: Has this become Thy will, Thou Reconciler?

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: At Sext – the sixth hour, noon, the hour when after the crucifixion darkness came over the land – he writes:

READER 1: High noon has me pitchblack, so in hope out,
slipping thro' stasis, my heart skeps a beat
actuellement,
reflecting on the subtler menace of decline.

WHALLEY: (*Stasis* is a stoppage of the blood.) The question is set by a psalm in the office –

READER 2: How many are the days of thy Servant? …
They had almost made an end of me on earth.

WHALLEY: Somebody in middle-age had advanced the proposition that

READER 1: 'Great Death
wars in us living which will have us all' –

WHALLEY: Such a belief, he says, had led to a rearrangement of the "domestic capital," putting Self-preservation at the top of the list. But was this right? Does life endorse this, now that the "dire age" is so far advanced? We do not know –

READER 1: if it's so, or mere a nightmare of one dark one,
Mani's by no means ultimate disciple.

WHALLEY: This needs a little glossing. Mani – or Manes – the founder of the Manichean cult, lived in Persia in the 3rd century AD; he was a great preacher who practised and enjoined severe asceticism. The Zoroastrians drove him out of Persia into India, and when he returned to Persia he was flayed alive and his disciples banished. His system – a confusion of many discredited heresies, a poetical rather than a theological or ethical system – was based on a supposed primaeval conflict between light and darkness. He taught that the object of religion was to release the particles of light which Satan had stolen from the world of Light and imprisoned in man's brain, and that Jesus, Buddha, the Prophets, and Manes himself had been sent to help in that struggle. The sect spread rapidly through the East, was in Rome in the early 4th century, and may well have had an influence on certain heresies that had to be suppressed with great cruelty in the 13th century. But the primordial spell of Manicheism persists obscurely. The nightmarish confusion of light with darkness, and darkness with Light, allows Mani's disciples to persist, even now, where they could least be expected; "the one dark one" is presumably Satan, in whatever plausible human form.

I would be well (the poem goes on) to be able to clear up the question whether personal identity survives death, or whether at death we go into the dark. Since there seems little prospect of clearing this up, the poem breaks off again laconically, saying that in the same way that the loss of blood in a blood-donation allows a person to "reel intact ahead," so he prays that God "of rare Heart" (that is, out of Love) will repair his breaking heart so that by

midnight neither his sin, nor his thought of sin, will drift away from him. The theme, proper to the hour, is darkness, and the mystery of light in darkness, and of grace through sin.
In this complex, even the image of blood-transfusion is not accidental. It comes from the Chapter read at Sext on Passion Sunday, from Hebrews 9.

READER 2: For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: The poem entitled *Nones* raises only a few difficulties as it utters a hesitant dedication in the face of doubt and fear. The theme –

READER 1: I cannot come among Your saints –

WHALLEY: – is suggested by the Antiphon for Septuagesima week:

READER 2: There are first which shall be last, and last which shall be first : for many are called, but few are chosen, saith the Lord.

WHALLEY: A few details need to be cleared up. At the beginning, where the poem reads –

READER 1: it's not in me – 'Velle' eh? – I will, and fail.

WHALLEY: – the Latin word *Velle* is the command "*Will* it," "Make an act of will." I cannot identify "Eleseus' grave" in the phrase –

READER 1: It's Eleseus' grave makes the demons tremble –

WHALLEY: – but we can guess when we find the trembling of demons in the Epistle of James:

READER 2: Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

WHALLEY: Again, when the poem says –

READER 1: Hearing Mark viii, though,
I'm sure to be ashamed of by. I am ashamed. –

WHALLEY: – we need to recognise that Mark 8 is the miracle of the Feeding of the 4000, and Jesus' explanation of miracles generally, and his declaration of his disciples' mission. The passage ends with these words:

READER 2: For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father, with the holy angels.

WHALLEY: The poem asks –

READER 1: In a twinkling can a man be lost? –

WHALLEY: – a wry inversion of 1 Corinthians 15:

READER 2: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

WHALLEY: And when the poem goes on to say –

READER 1: I was alone with You again: 'the iron did swim.'
It has been proved to me again & again. –

WHALLEY: – this refers to a passage in 2 Kings. When the sons of the prophets moved to the banks of the Jordan to build a new dwelling, one of the builders dropped into the river the head of a borrowed axe. When he told Elisha –

READER 2: – the man of God… cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim

WHALLEY: – another miracle; the impossible possible, over and over again: "it has been proved."
Again, when the poem says –

READER 1: He does *not* want me to be lost. Who does? The other.
But 'a man's shaliach is as it were himself':
I am Your person. –

WHALLEY: – "the other" can be the self in dialogue with God. If God does not want me to be lost, then only *I* could want to be lost. But (and here he quotes from a source I cannot find) "a man's spirit (or angel) is

really the same as himself." Therefore, because my angel cannot want to be utterly obliterated, "I am Your person."

At the end, seeing himself and his vulnerability as a loosely-garmented whirlpool of blood sheltered in bone – itself not much more solid than a whirlpool, and the balance so nice that a minute increase of sugar in the blood can induce coma or convulsion – nevertheless his heart beats to the terrible glory of God – at what must seem an excessive rate.

READER 1: I hit a hundred and twenty notes a second
as many as I may to the glory of confronting –
unstable man, man torn by blast & gale –
Your figure, adamantly frontal.

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: But he reflects on the long-delayed outcome of Jewish history – how Freud and Einstein forced us to be "sorry & free," free from the sense of guilt, free to use new power, sorry to have used it – and Jerusalem a city in the political state of Israel – and the young Jewish girl Anne Frank, obscure, pitiful, indomitable to the death becoming "a beacon to the weltering Gentiles." So to call up the mystery of the Jewish Dispensation is no accident of illustrative convenience: it is one of the central points of meditation in the office of Vespers.
The office of Vespers also dwells upon the searching of the heart, affirming that

READER 2: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All his commandments are true: they stand fast for ever and ever.

WHALLEY: The conclusion is inescapable, though a paradox.

READER 1: With so great power bitter, so marvellous mild even mercy?
It's not conformable. It must be so,
but I am lost in it, dire Friend.

WHALLEY: So the poem closes with a vision of the presence of God as the prophets saw it in the two huge cherubim in Solomon's temple, and Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the Lord, and the make of the veil of Solomon's temple with cherubim wrought on it.

READER 1: Only I remember
Of Solomon's cherubim 'their faces were inward.'
And thro' that veil of blue, & crimson, & linen,
& blue, You brood across forgiveness and
the house fills with a cloud, so that the priests
cannot stand to minister by reason of the cloud.

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: Now we come to the last poem in the sequence – *Compline*. Compline, the office said immediately before going to bed, is the last of the Little Hours, simple in outline and with very little seasonal variation, exceptionally stable. Of all the offices this is the most inward, personal, submissive; it stands for the placing of Jesus' body in the sepulchre; like the office of Prime it includes general confession; and the prayer for the dead which closes each of the offices –

READER 2: May the souls of the faithful through the mercy of God rest in peace –

WHALLEY: – has at Compline a peculiar force and poignancy. One of the set psalms ends with the words –

READER 2: Into thy hands I commend my spirit: for thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of truth.

WHALLEY: The brief Song of Simeon is recited:

READER 2: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word.

WHALLEY: The recurrent Versicle and Responses –

READER 2: Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of an eye. Hide us under the shadow of thy wings. –

WHALLEY: – keeps in mind the overarching comfort of the 91st psalm that dominates this office.

READER 2: Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the most High :
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say unto the Lord, Thou art my hope, and my
strong hold : my God, in him will I trust.
For he shall deliver thee from the snare of the hunter:
and from the noisome pestilence.
He shall defend thee under his wings, and thou shalt
be safe under his feathers : his faithfulness
and truth shall be thy shield and buckler.
Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night :
nor for the sickness that destroyeth in the

noon-day …
There shall no evil happen unto thee: neither
shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.
For he shall give his angels charge over thee: to
keep thee in all thy ways.

WHALLEY: All these elements are present in the last poem of *Opus Dei* – self-examination as he looks back towards "prime time" and the course of the day since dawn, submission, a sense of the mercy of God, resolution, and finally committal into the hands of God in turning to the sleep which is a sort of death and a sort of life. After the agitation of the poem at *Vespers*, the *Compline* poem is quiet, with none of the defensive jocularity that marked the two opening poems. The tone of the poem is commanding; yet a few details need to be expanded. When the poem says –

READER 1: O like Josiah then I heard with horror
instructions ancient as for the prime time –

WHALLEY: – the reference is to King Josiah, son of David, who in the 18th year of his reign discovered "the book of the law" when the Temple of Solomon was being reconstructed. The book had been long forgotten and the law grossly neglected. When Josiah was told that the book had been found – being a man who "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left" – he was appalled, and "rent his clothes," and sent at once to find how the inevitable wrath of the Lord was to be appeased. His priests brought him word that everybody would be strictly punished "according to all the words of the book"; but to Josiah

READER 2: "Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me…I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place."

WHALLEY: Josiah was a king's son. No ordinary person could expect such clemency. As a "child of God" a man may be technically "a king's son," yet unlike Josiah – who was the righteous son of a righteous king – an ordinary person is a king's son justly unrecognized. The poet now casts himself, as an extreme mark of humility, as a king's son in the condition of the beggar Lazarus.

READER 1:
I am the king's son who squat down in rags
declared unfit by wise friends to inherit
and nothing of me left but skull & feet
& bloody among their dogs the palms of my hands.

WHALLEY: Is this also the son of the motto who is lunitick and "ofttimes falleth into the fire, and oft into the water?" The poem turns abruptly from the old dispensation to the new: salvation is under the cross.

READER 1:
Adorns my crossbar Your high frenzied Son,
mute over catcalls. How to conduct myself?

WHALLEY: In spite of his indirections, dismay, and lapses, the mercy of God is simply present, is present in simplicity –

READER 1:
in the heart of a child – not far, nor hard to come by,
but natural as water falling, cupped

& lapped & slaking the child's dusty thirst!

If He for me as I feel for my daughter,
being His son, I'll sweat no more tonight
but happy hymn & sleep. I have got it made,
and so have all we of contrition, for

if He loves me He must love everybody
and Origen was right & Hell is empty
or will be at apocatastasis.
Sinners, sin on. We'll suffer now & later

but not forever, dear friends & brothers!

WHALLEY: Origen, the most brilliant and original of the early Fathers of the Church, was an Alexandrian biblical critic, theologian, and spiritual writer. The harsh asceticism of his life – which included self-castration – does not argue for an easy-going attitude towards sin. What Berryman refers to here is that most controversial doctrine about souls and the destiny of souls. All spirits (he held) were created equal, but through the exercise of free-will they develop in hierarchical order, some rising through grace, others falling into evil, so that they become either angels or devils imprisoned in their bodies. But (Origen held) death does not decide on uninterruptedly until the Apocatastasis, when all free moral creatures – angels, men, and devils – will share in the grace of salvation, and all will be redeemed. As the poem continues, the ascent and descent of souls turns into the figure of running a race, the figure used at *Prime*. At *Prime* it was a beaver – at *Compline* a long-distance runner.

READER 1: So may I run for You,

less laggard lately, less deluded man
of oxblood expectation
with fiery little resiny aftertastes.

WHALLEY: "Oxblood" – or "dragonsblood" – is a resin used by etchers to protect the edges of an image from being undercut by the bite of the acid. The image *is* a little obscure, but precise enough in spiritual terms.

And as the poem closes, in desolate but submissive peace, the image of fire returns to echo one of the mottoes to the book and one of the mottoes to *Opus Dei* – the fire of madness, the fire of eternal destruction, the purifying fire, the pentecostal fire of grace that "maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire." If he is (as he said in his introduction) a "layman," and (as he said at *Tierce*) a "pseudo-monk," and/if (as he said at *Nones*) his service is "a micro-micro-minor post-ministry," his house – this "house not made with hands," Christ's house "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end" – this house is in several conflicting senses "fireless."

READER 1: Heard sapphire flutings. The winter will end.
I remember You.
The sky was red. My pillow's cold & blanched.
There are no fair bells in this city. This
fireless house lies down at Your disposal as
usual! Amen!

WHALLEY: Given these few clues and hints – and in poems so allusive many more could be drawn, and I have said little about the resonances that flicker back and forth from poem to poem within the sequence – given these, we can forget all those details now, and listen – simply –

with an innocent ear to the whole sequence of nine poems that make up John Berryman's *Opus Dei*.

[Reading of nine poems of *Opus Dei*.]

(PAUSE)

WHALLEY: On 7 February 1972, in the morning when people were going to work, John Berryman took his life by jumping from a high bridge into the winter Mississippi. To the people watching he raised his arm in a gesture of greeting, or resolution, or – it may be – benediction.

(PAUSE)

ANNOUNCER: CBC TUESDAY NIGHT/ENCORE has presented "The Hours of John Berryman," by George Whalley, who read his own exegesis of the poems. The poems themselves were read by Douglas Rain. And the supplementary texts were read by Jon Granik. The program was directed and produced by John Reeves in Toronto, with technical operations by……..