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## ABSTRACT

Amy Jordan

### **“The Issue of Our Common Human Life”: Poetic Self and Public World in John Berryman’s Art**

This thesis challenges the critical codification of John Berryman as a “Confessional” solipsist that has to date excluded his oeuvre from efforts to contextualise historically the mid-century generation of American poets. Its exploration of both the literary and the sociopolitical concerns that have shaped his verse furthers current understanding of the work by placing a new emphasis upon the interdependence of poetic self and public world.

Through a chronological survey of Berryman’s published poetry, prose and manuscripts, I demonstrate his fears of marginalisation and the loss of individual agency to represent not an inner but an outward gaze, symptomatic of a wider malaise in post-war American society. Later chapters develop this framework by establishing parallels between the poems’ permeability to the flux of contemporary experience and their ambivalent depictions of Berryman’s growing literary fame. The result, I argue, casts fresh light upon the work as a movement towards a radical metapoetics that figures the persona as the simultaneous product of society and of the text’s public reception. Berryman’s staging of the symbiotic relationship between art and life foregrounds the central function of both self- and sociopolitical critique within his poetry: it highlights the impact of the failed American Dream upon public life and literary ambition.

The Introduction provides a detailed outline of the approach and contents of the thesis. Chapter 1 examines the poet’s apprentice work in The Dispossessed and Sonnets to Chris, and relates dissatisfaction with the New Critical literary school to his subsequent discovery of a “new and nervous idiom” for the post-war world. In Chapter 2, I trace the motifs of national and literary expatriation in Berryman’s first long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet to discuss the dispossessed poetic “I” as a vehicle for exploration of American tensions past and present. Chapters 3 and 4 present a sustained analysis of Berryman’s epic poem The Dream Songs. Whilst Chapter 3 focuses upon the work’s depiction of American dystopia, Chapter 4 addresses its performance of Berryman’s own literary success, arguing for the later Songs’ origins in an anxiety of reception that desires to cement the poet’s status in an uncertain world. My final chapter reads Berryman’s last volumes Love & Fame and Delusions, etc. of John Berryman in the light of these discussions, suggesting his conflicting perceptions of fame to function as a catalyst for renewed efforts to reconcile the poetic self with wider society.

“The Issue of Our Common Human Life”: Poetic Self and Public World in  
John Berryman’s Art

Amy Jordan

Thesis submitted for degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the  
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Durham University

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## Abbreviations and Notes on Texts

Unless otherwise stated, citations of Berryman's published poetry are sourced from John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937-1971, ed. and introd. Charles Thornbury (London: Faber, 1991). Texts are referenced with the abbreviation CP and identifying page number(s) except in the case of the long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, where stanza and line numbers are provided to assist the reader in locating specific passages.

All quotations from The Dream Songs, which Thornbury's volume does not include, are taken from 77 Dream Songs, 1964 (London: Faber, 2001) and His Toy, His Dream, His Rest: 308 Dream Songs, 1968 (New York: Farrar, 1969). Individual Songs are referenced with the abbreviation DS and identified by their numbering in the sequence.

Berryman's "Eight Poems", published in Poetry 75 (1950): 187-96 and uncollected elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> are referenced with the abbreviation Poetry and identifying page number(s).

All unpublished correspondence, poetry and prose of Berryman's is referenced in accordance with its categorisation in the archive of John Berryman Papers held at the Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The citation system is broadly hierarchical, prefixing individual works with the abbreviation JBPs before identifying them by material type and the box and folder numbers in which they are located (e.g. JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 2). Where no folder number is available, references instead give either the title of the piece contained (e.g. JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Development of Modern American Poetry") or a general description of the source (e.g. John Berryman Papers, Published Prose, Box 6, Yellow "Champion" Notebook).

Additional works cited frequently are referenced with the following abbreviations:

TFOTP        John Berryman, The Freedom of the Poet (New York: Farrar, 1976)

KJB            The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997)

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that two poems in this collection, "not him" and ["not him"] "2", were reprinted subsequently in His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt with the titles "from The Black Book i)" and "from The Black Book ii)" (CP 149-59). However, given that my discussion of these works locates them within their primary context, they are referenced with the abbreviation Poetry throughout.

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.



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The lovely friends, and friends the friends of friends,  
pursuing insights to their journeys' ends  
subtle & steadfast:  
the wind blows hard from our past into our future  
and we are that wind, except that the wind's nature  
was not to last.

(DS 282)

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## INTRODUCTION

### Roads in Unknown Regions, Partings Long Foreseen

#### i.

All the way through my work... is a tendency to regard the individual soul under stress. The soul is not oneself, for the personal "I", me with a social security number and a bank account, never gets into the poems; they are all about a third person. I'm a follower of Pascal in the sense that I don't know what the issue is, or how it is to be resolved – the issue of our common human life, yours, mine, your lady's, everybody's; but I do think that one way in which we can approach it, by the means of art, coming out of Homer and Virgil and down through Yeats and Eliot, is by investigating the individual human soul.<sup>1</sup>

It is no accident that this thesis opens with the same quotation employed by John Haffenden to introduce his seminal 1980 monograph John Berryman: A Critical Commentary. However, in seeking to place new emphasis upon the interdependence of poetic self and public world in Berryman's art, its homage to Haffenden's body of meticulous scholarly research on the poet must also function as a key point of departure. As we look back upon a critical era marked by more than forty years' efforts to recuperate the political and public vision of Berryman's contemporary and friend Robert Lowell,<sup>2</sup> an enduring reluctance to subject Berryman's verse to similar scrutiny is strikingly evident. And the most prominent illustration of this reluctance remains Haffenden's oft-cited assertion that "the soul under stress, and under observation, is Berryman's, and... the poet is everywhere at the centre of his work".<sup>3</sup> Echoed in recent publications from Adam Kirsch's book The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets to Justin Quinn's essay "Failed Vision?",<sup>4</sup> such readings of Berryman's oeuvre exemplify the prevailing tendency to subordinate the art to the biographical details of the life. Accordingly, they continue to reinforce the established critical codification of his poetry that locates it firmly within "the context of... the Confessional utterance of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, "Conversation with Berryman," interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 345.

<sup>2</sup> See Patrick Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell (London: Gollancz, 1970), Vereen Bell, Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) and William Doreski, Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors: The Poetics of the Public and the Personal (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999), among many other examples.

<sup>3</sup> John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (London: Macmillan, 1980) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Quinn's "Failed Vision?" appears in After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 71-3.

fifties and sixties”.<sup>5</sup> Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs, the works that established Berryman’s reputation, have been almost universally interpreted as a breakthrough into a “Confessional” (or, as A. Alvarez terms it, “Extremist”) style that locates the specifically personal agonies of a conflated poet-persona at the centre of its texts.<sup>6</sup> As Helen Vendler has observed, this designation takes its inspiration from post-war America’s increased familiarity with the “anecdotal psychiatric hour” of Freudian therapy:<sup>7</sup> art is placed upon the couch, offering a tantalising vision of the artist “pursu[ing] his insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it”.<sup>8</sup> The “Confessional” label, applied to Berryman, has thus worked to foreground both the subjective focus and the psychological instability of his art. The poem-as-life enacts its author’s neuroses in desperate quest for a return to health via the talking cure. It becomes, to quote Robert Phillips’ 1973 work The Confessional Poets,

a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his thirty-five year career, Berryman continued to sing the pain of “those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences”; in Alvarez’s words, he was a poet “more ruthless... the more unshockable the audience bec[a]me”.<sup>10</sup> The talking cure, it seems, failed him, and his detractors have seized upon this perceived failure as evidence for his ebbing significance within the American poetic canon. For if, as Vendler has proposed, the “Freudian poem” as typified by his oeuvre “finds aesthetic means to enact its analysis, and can go no further”,<sup>11</sup> the result is a resounding death-knell for Berryman studies. The “Confessional” breakthrough, according to this model, has exacted the cost of an authorial hermeticism, an inward vision that can possess no wider relational capacity. When one of Berryman’s most recent critics can roundly dismiss the poet’s work upon these grounds, describing it as “a kind of Grand Guignol that plays itself out in the cramped quarters of

<sup>5</sup> David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1987) 402.

<sup>6</sup> Whilst the expression “Confessional poetry” is widely acknowledged to have originated in M. L. Rosenthal’s 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies, the critic A. Alvarez preferred the adjective “Extremist”, coined in his 1965 volume Under Pressure and explicated further in the 1967 essay “Beyond All This Fiddle”. Given, however, that Alvarez tended to refer to the arts more generally with the term, and that the central features of literary “Extremism” he did identify (highly personal revelations, a preoccupation with mental illness and psychoanalysis, social alienation) were those employed subsequently by Robert Phillips and others to define the “Confessional” poem, this thesis uses Rosenthal’s designation throughout. For further information, see A. Alvarez, Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-67 (London: Penguin, 1968) 3-21 and Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Vendler, The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets (London: Faber, 1995) 31.

<sup>8</sup> Alvarez 13.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips 2.

<sup>10</sup> Alvarez 13.

<sup>11</sup> Vendler 50.

one man's cranium",<sup>12</sup> it is time to reassess its enduring literary value. Should we, in fact, cease the futile examination of such impenetrably personal confessions?

This thesis presents a sustained challenge to these established accounts of Berryman's poetry, contending that his ongoing "Confessional" codification has caused twofold damage to his reputation. Despite Berryman's reaction to the label "[w]ith rage and contempt!"<sup>13</sup> the dominant voices discussing his oeuvre have been those that explicitly relate his literary "self-probings and... exposures"<sup>14</sup> to his own life and tragic death: just two years after that event, Peter Stitt would declare, "Berryman's body of work leads us inexorably and inevitably to the point of suicide – and not just a literary suicide."<sup>15</sup> Michael Hofmann's 2004 edition of his verse provides further evidence of the unquestioning hegemony that continues to be accorded to the poem-as-life narrative. Asserting that "the poetic creed... [Berryman] did espouse... would have tended to disable whatever self-protective or life-prolonging mechanisms he did have", Hofmann goes on to provide a selection of texts intended to leave us in no doubt of their strictly biographical import. From 1948's "The Professor's Song" (a university professor of literature, like Berryman) to the posthumously published "He Resigns", the message is clear: this is "a self-destructive poetry" laying bare the "naked distress" of a man clad in the most transparent of masks.<sup>16</sup> Such representations, at their most facile, threaten to reduce a life of literary endeavour to a solipsistic suicide-drive. Moreover, they persist in functioning as sites of implicit resistance to the notion of Berryman as a poet of wider sociopolitical concerns. Read in this context, Justin Quinn's damning assessment that the work "does not let us see America... rather it tries to blot it out and proclaim that the poet's own ego is the only object of interest in the world"<sup>17</sup> is merely the most recent example of a criticism which has castigated Berryman for failing to transmute the personal into the public and universal. Indeed, Quinn's portrait of this all-encompassing "ego" cleaves firmly to the party line of Berryman-as-unhappy-recluse, expressed most succinctly in Joel Conarroe's statement, "Berryman's subject [in The Dream Songs] is Henry House, not the White House".<sup>18</sup> The effect is to relegate the poet to his ivory tower, rendering him the

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<sup>12</sup> Quinn 72.

<sup>13</sup> John Berryman, "The Art of Poetry," interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 21.

<sup>14</sup> Phillips 14.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Stitt, "John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet," Ohio Review 15 (1974): 66-74, at 74.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Hofmann, ed. and introd., John Berryman: Poems selected by Michael Hofmann, Faber Poet to Poet Series (London: Faber, 2004) viii, ix.

<sup>17</sup> Quinn 71.

<sup>18</sup> Joel Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry, Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry (New York: Columbia UP, 1977) 147.

simultaneous exploiter and victim of what Marjorie Perloff has termed a post-war “classroom civilization in which... there was precious little material to write poems about except the *self*”. There is no need, we are told, to interrogate Berryman’s oeuvre beyond these confines, for, faced with the boundless possibilities of Freudian self-analysis, “[w]hy, after all, should... [he] have cared about Europe”, America or cultural and political issues more generally?<sup>19</sup>

Through providing readings that seek to liberate Berryman’s poetry from this “limiting personalistic context”,<sup>20</sup> my thesis departs radically from the prevailing critical and canonical codifications. It instead makes a case for a re-assessment of his work that foregrounds its central concern with representing “the individual soul under stress” as it negotiates modern society: a case for these poems as “the issue of our common human life”,<sup>21</sup> as both the product and the critique of their surroundings. Such an approach calls into question the “Confessional” breakthrough template’s current status as sole interpretative lens through which Berryman’s verse can be profitably viewed. It also necessitates reconsideration of Perloff’s equation of mid-century America’s “classroom civilization” with solipsism. As an “academy” poet whose teaching activities “ke[pt]... relations with [the] bank going”<sup>22</sup> throughout his life, Berryman was an intensely literary man, a voracious reader and writer who honed his craft through long years of anonymity. Whilst his reluctance to compose “manifestos... on [his] intentions”<sup>23</sup> has been documented, however, critics have yet to acknowledge the anxious preoccupation with art’s potential for social responsibility evinced in private and published writings from the very outset of his career. As early as 1948, as the publication of his first full-length volume The Dispossessed beckoned, Berryman submitted a searing indictment of the situation facing the post-war artist to the periodical Partisan Review:

[M]en who can think and are moral must stand ready night and day to the orders of blind evil. What has created this is a usurpation which is not complete: usurpation of individual decision, which yet leaves the individual nominally free – and of course actually free if he happens to be a hero. But

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<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “*Poètes Maudits* of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman,” Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 99-116, at 113, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Brendan Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’: John Berryman’s Eliotic Inheritance,” Journal of American Studies 42 (2008): 1-18, at 6.

<sup>21</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>22</sup> John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 15.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1999) 10-11.

literary men are seldom heroes, and heroes of this sort, at present, as soon as they announce themselves, cease anyway to be literary men.<sup>24</sup>

“[L]iterary men are seldom heroes”. Indeed, are they always the specifically personal heroes of their texts? Reading Berryman’s poetry alongside his published and unpublished correspondence, manuscripts and prose, this thesis places new emphasis upon the poet’s work as the manifestation of his fears of marginalisation and the loss of individual agency; fears symptomatic not only of personal malaise, but also of the accumulated ills of an age riven by political and social upheaval. In seeking to restore the public aspect of Berryman’s poetic vision that has been elided through his near-ubiquitous “Confessional” designation, I aim to open the way for broader readings of his verse beyond the restrictions of the poem-as-life narrative. It is my contention that, from its faltering beginnings, Berryman’s poetry can be most effectively read not as “Professor’s Song[s]” of personal grief but as the ongoing exploration of a dispossession-trope that, he would note, “reaches deep into modern agony”.<sup>25</sup> From The Dispossessed’s meditations upon the Second World War’s atrocities to the late spiritual uncertainties of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman, his oeuvre refutes the boundary between the personal and the universal: its theme of loss, as Stephen Matterson has observed, also encapsulates the related theme of how both humanity and poetry may endure the trials of the contemporary world.<sup>26</sup>

## ii.

This thesis, which originated in a desire to trace the sociopolitical concerns that have shaped Berryman’s verse throughout his career, builds upon pioneering recent work in the field by Philip Coleman and Brendan Cooper. Both Coleman’s contributions to various books and periodicals over the past decade<sup>27</sup> and Cooper’s 2008 monograph Dark Airs:

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<sup>24</sup> John Berryman, “The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions” (symposium), Partisan Review 15 (1948): 855-60, at 857.

<sup>25</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 6, Yellow “Champion” Notebook. As Berryman would observe in this prose draft, revised for publication in Paul Engle and Joseph Langland’s 1962 volume Poet’s Choice, “Particularly bec[ause] I used [it] as title... for a book, I have been sensitive since (as indeed I was long before) to the word ‘dispossessed’... I have come on it not dozens but hundreds of times used in the specially emphatic & central way I tried myself to achieve.”

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 13.

<sup>27</sup> See in particular Coleman’s essays “The Scene of Disorder: John Berryman’s ‘Formal Elegy’,” Irish Journal of American Studies 8 (2000): 201-23, “‘The Politics of Praise’: John Berryman’s Engagement With W. B. Yeats,” Etudes irlandaises 28 (2003): 11-27, and “Love & Fame and the Self in Society,” After Thirty

John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry represent the first serious repudiation of “the persistence of narrow [C]onfessionalism in Berryman studies”, making a compelling case for the poet’s “acute awareness of the difficulties and responsibilities faced by the self in society”.<sup>28</sup> Of these commendable projects, Cooper’s remains the most problematic: his narrow focus upon the “political nature of [Berryman’s] religious engagements”<sup>29</sup> functions to exclude Berryman’s early and late works from consideration due to their insufficiently “religious” and “political” natures respectively. The effect is to reinforce implicitly the breakthrough narrative he contests, rendering Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs Berryman’s sole literary legacy. It is, nevertheless, against the backdrop of these crucial assertions of Berryman’s centrality as a “poet of socio-cultural... critique”<sup>30</sup> that my thesis locates itself. Taking as starting-point Coleman’s illuminating account of the early poems as subject to an endemic “‘inward’ expatriation and cultural displacement”,<sup>31</sup> the detailed readings provided in its chapters demonstrate that Berryman’s work does not “blot... out” but in fact stages the public world of American society. Through examining his representations of American identity, I aim to define the textual terrain of his poetry as one in which, as John Michael has stated, “Literary... sensibility is not only a necessary adjunct to moral and political philosophy but also its paradoxical and fractured ground.”<sup>32</sup> These “paradox[es] and fracture[s]” are of central importance to texts such as Dream Song 5, which portray the collapse of the post-war citizen’s faith in the traditional tenets of cultural unity, human rationality and moral and social order:

Henry sats in de bar & was odd,  
off in the glass from the glass,  
at odds wif de world & its god,  
his wife is a complete nothing,  
St Stephen  
getting even. (DS 5)

My research offers the first exploration of Berryman’s full oeuvre in this light, reading the work as a sociopolitical arena in which all is marked by loss, complete in and completing “nothing”. It foregrounds his art as a poetry not of closure but of process, constantly

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Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 225-40.

<sup>28</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 226, 228.

<sup>29</sup> Brendan Cooper, Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry (Oxford: Lang, 2009) 4.

<sup>30</sup> Coleman, “The Scene of Disorder” 204.

<sup>31</sup> Coleman, “‘The Politics of Praise’” 16.

<sup>32</sup> John Michael, Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008) 25.

questioning what can be perpetuated whole amid the beleaguered self's encounters with its environment.<sup>33</sup> Such a re-conception of the poetic self as a social entity counters the dominant "Confessional" codification of Berryman's work that continues to reinforce his critical reputation as a traumatised solipsist. Moreover, it seeks to establish Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs less as isolated breakthrough texts than as composite elements of a developing artistic vision: a poetics not inward- but outward-facing, the simultaneous product and critique of the vicissitudes of modern existence.

If this thesis acknowledges Coleman and Cooper's efforts to contextualise Berryman's verse, however, it diverges from their readings in its focus upon the relationship he constructs between the poetic self and the public world. What, I ask, are the consequences of his work's permeability to the contemporary sociopolitical climate for poetic identity? Through close textual analysis of Berryman's oeuvre, my thesis discusses his literary personae as vehicles for the exploration of American tensions past and present: inherently social subjects that, as such, are subject to society's "fracture[s]", losses and "paradox[es]". The result is a refutation of John Haffenden's claims that in Berryman's poetics "ideas and actions [are] effluents of a personality and a situation".<sup>34</sup> Personality itself becomes both contingent and disunified, the "effluent" of the "ideas and actions" prompted by each interaction with the world. This revised understanding of what Berryman termed his work's "ambiguous pronoun[s]"<sup>35</sup> functions to restore authority to the poet's own statements regarding his practice. I contend that his infamously "evasive" comments, dismissed by those critics favouring "Confessional" interpretations, offer a valuable insight into his construction of the poetic self:

I wish that [we]... had some persistent plan. Most of this is wedding of what we may be, later on this afternoon, next week, what we were on September 12, what you are in relation to your little boy. Okay. Out of these possibilities of I which I have given a new identity to... I let some flower.<sup>36</sup>

Berryman's model renders literary identity both reactive and relational, an interrogative exchange with past and potential selves: an exchange that throughout his career demonstrates a marked tendency towards identification with dispossessed and marginalised

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<sup>33</sup> Matterson 76.

<sup>34</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 1. As Haffenden notes, the phrase is a "borrowing" from Roy Pascal; see Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography (London: Routledge, 1960) 111.

<sup>35</sup> John Berryman, "One Answer to a Question," Shenandoah 17 (1965): 67-76. Rpt. as "Changes" in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic, 1966) 94-103, at 98. In the same essay on his own work, Berryman would declare, "If I were making a grandiose claim, I might pretend to know more about the administration of pronouns than any other living poet writing in English or American" (Berryman, "Changes" 98).

<sup>36</sup> John Berryman, "John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview," interview with William Heyen, Ohio Review 15 (1974): 46-65, at 63.



“social outlaw figures”. My thesis views Berryman’s verse from its origins in The Dispossessed, Sonnets to Chris and The Black Book suite of post-Holocaust poems as an ongoing attempt to voice these “other” identities inhabiting the public arena. As such, it makes a case for his work as evincing not just an “ethical”, as Coleman has suggested,<sup>37</sup> but an artistic interrogation, calling into question both the agency and the limitations of the persona. Within Berryman’s oeuvre, “socio-cultural... critique”<sup>38</sup> must also involve the critique of both narrator and text as the products of that society. The protagonist of his first published Black Book poem is doubly displaced from both self and world by the “blind light” which casts his memories into uncertainty:

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. (Poetry 192)

Through providing an original examination of Berryman’s art as a dual process of “othering” in which the persona is alienated both from its surroundings and from its own self as an entity evincing that world’s contradictions and elisions, my research seeks to further understanding of his complex poetic vision. This revised reading of literary identity in his work liberates the poetry from the “limiting personalistic context”<sup>39</sup> which has traditionally stood as a barrier to its close analysis. Proposing Berryman’s characteristically “nervous idiom” to signify not private psychological turmoil but the American *demos*’ language of multiple lives,<sup>40</sup> I aim to foreground his central concern with the responsible representation of both poetic self and public world.

Whilst I seek throughout this thesis to situate Berryman’s oeuvre within its historical, political and social contexts, my five chapters are structured around a chronological close reading of his poetry. The approach enables full engagement with the syntactic and thematic complexities of these works, and is based in my belief that analysis of the interplay of text and texture is crucial to their critical appreciation. In Berryman’s representations of “the individual soul[s] under stress”<sup>41</sup> encountering the flux of modern

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<sup>37</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 228.

<sup>38</sup> Coleman, “The Scene of Disorder” 204.

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 6.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After, Blackwell Introductions to Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 203.

<sup>41</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

experience,<sup>42</sup> the medium becomes the message and the aims must be derived from the means, as *Dream Song 305* insists:

Leaving the ends aft open, touch the means,  
whereby we ripen. Touch by all means the means  
whereby we come to life,  
enduring the manner for the matter, ay (*DS 305*)

The self-conscious “manner” of the poet’s work revealed by such close analysis has occasioned my research’s second major contribution to Berryman studies. I read his poetry’s frequent shifts not just in identity but in lexicon – absorbing, as Adrienne Rich suggests, influences as disparate as “[Eliot’s] Shakespeherian rag, Gerard Manley Hopkins... blues talk... bureaucratiana [and] pure blurted Anglo-Saxon”<sup>43</sup> – as evidence that its sociopolitical terrain is also highly metapoetic in nature. Cast in this light, Berryman’s representations of contemporary American existence betray a profound concern with his role in his nation’s literary tradition. Beginning with an examination of his growing sense of disinheritance not just from his society but from his New Critical mentors, my thesis establishes parallels between his protagonists’ “ransacking culture... to find a way of living in [the] world” and the poet doing the same to construct the text-as-world.<sup>44</sup> It draws upon Brendan Cooper’s formulation of “a generative hostility”<sup>45</sup> to explore Berryman’s dialogue with figures from Petrarch to Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, arguing that the poetry’s occupation and displacement of genre<sup>46</sup> highlights the problem of producing enduring art in a society comprised of elisions and losses. In its contention that Berryman’s verse, in its permeability to the public world, is also permeable to the poet’s public ambition, however, my research seeks to build upon Cooper’s efforts. Through fresh analyses of the late volumes *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc. of John Berryman*, I demonstrate that these texts composed in the wake of Berryman’s ascent to literary fame replace his earlier anxieties of influence with what I

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<sup>42</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>43</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Living with Henry,” *Harvard Advocate* 103 (1969): 10-11. Rpt. in *Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988): 127-32, at 130.

<sup>44</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (New York: Kennikat, 1978) 4.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper defines this “generative hostility” as “a postwar anxiety of influence in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction” (Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’” 3). Berryman’s public statements regarding his own and others’ work provide convincing support for this model, which is discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3; see especially the poet’s 1969 National Book Award acceptance speech, “I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*... I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry” (*JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”*).

<sup>46</sup> Gabriel Pearson, “John Berryman: Poet as Medium,” *Review* 15 (1965): 3-16, at 9.

term an “anxiety of reception”. Both persona and text, as the products of their society, have here become the perpetuations of their own acclaim: responding to prior criticism of Berryman’s oeuvre, they manifest a conscious desire to shape our future response as readers. Providing the first serious consideration of this neglected aspect of Berryman’s poetry, this thesis aims to highlight its central role within his representations of the failures and successes of the contemporary American Dream. Recognition of his mature work’s metapoetics cautions against its knee-jerk “Confessional” designation; assumed upon Berryman’s shifting literary stage, the confessional is merely another guise subject to critique.

### iii.

The first chapter of the thesis begins by locating Berryman’s apprentice work within the context of his student enthusiasm for the New Critical literary school, and suggests that the earliest poems of his 1948 volume The Dispossessed represent an ongoing attempt to reconcile the movement’s tenets with his own urge to depict the disorder of wartime existence. Its detailed readings relate the poet’s increasing sense of dispossession from nation and literary tradition to his development of a “nervous idiom” in which external chaos permeates the text to threaten the integrity both of poem and of persona. A section discussing Berryman’s Sonnets to Chris (1947) offers support for my argument, whilst seeking to dispel critical perceptions of this sequence’s strictly biographical import. I contend that Sonnets to Chris’ transformation of the love lyric into the vicissitudes of post-war American life signifies a descent from idealisation into the reality of a contemporary landscape characterised by losses and fractured memories.

Chapter Two examines the motif of inward expatriation in Berryman’s poetry of the early Fifties, and reveals the dispossessed poetic “I” to function as a vehicle for exploring sociopolitical tensions past and present. The first part of this chapter reads the “Eight Poems” Berryman published in a 1950 issue of Poetry alongside his prose writings of the period, arguing that their portrayal of mid-century strains necessitates a self-reflective consideration of the difficulties of representing the victim-as-Other. Subsequent sections analyse the 1953 long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet in this light.

Challenging established accounts of the work as a “redaction” of Sonnets to Chris,<sup>47</sup> I propose that the poet’s voicing of a seventeenth-century literary foremother can be viewed more accurately as manifesting a profound concern with questions of achievement and of legacy. This revised understanding of Homage foregrounds its simultaneous status as historical poem and as twentieth-century critique: connecting his nation’s lost past to its lost future enables Berryman to expose the broken promises of the American progress narrative.

Chapter Three considers Berryman’s struggles towards a new style in the 1959 chapbook His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, and demonstrates the influence of its colloquial poetics of “THINGS MADE EN ROUTE”<sup>48</sup> upon his second long poem The Dream Songs (1968). This is followed by a sustained examination of The Dream Songs’ depiction of the contemporary American *demos*. I discuss the work’s genesis as a post-war epic, before making a case for its translations of external events into the art of the dream as a condemnation of national hegemonies. Chapter Four develops and extends this study by exploring the consequences for poetic identity of The Dream Songs’ conscious fictionality. The readings this chapter provides argue that the Songs’ staged performances of marginalisation serve to evaluate the agency and function of the persona, becoming the means through which the work critiques its own representations. Such a radical re-conception of Berryman’s ambitious metapoetics offers a fresh insight into his oeuvre’s permeability to its growing literary fame. I show that in the last books of the sequence, The Dream Songs’ anxiety of influence is supplanted by an anxiety of reception in which the text, responding to its critics’ notices, also seeks to elicit our complicity as readers in its resistance to interpretative resolution.

The final chapter of the thesis reads Berryman’s last volumes of poetry Love & Fame (1970) and Delusions, etc. of John Berryman (1972) in the context of these discussions, and suggests that their conflicting perceptions of artistic success highlight the impact of the failed American Dream upon public life and literary ambition. Through examining the poet’s reaction against his prior achievements, I demonstrate that Love & Fame does not glorify “Confessional” excesses, but instead signifies an ongoing attempt to reconcile the compromised persona with wider society. The sections that follow relate Berryman’s increased reliance upon his contemporaries’ criticism during the composition process to his quest for a poetics enabling responsible dialogue both with other afflicted

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Sarah Provost, “Erato’s Fool and Bitter Sister: Two Aspects of John Berryman,” Twentieth Century Literature 30 (1984): 69-79, at 77.

<sup>48</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4.

identities and with God as the ultimate judge of man's endeavours. These efforts, Chapter Five concludes, must nevertheless culminate in Delusions etc.'s acknowledgment that some contradictions (words and world, "the soul" and "things" (DS 385)) cannot be reconciled.

**iv.**

Whilst this thesis rejects established accounts of the "Confessional" Berryman, its intention is not to provide a definitive critical codification of his oeuvre. It must nevertheless be acknowledged that my choice of terminology is attendant upon specific value judgements. Studies situating Berryman alongside his contemporaries have most frequently categorised their verse as "middle generation" poetry. Lending a title to publications including Bruce Bawer's The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell and Suzanne Ferguson's Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co.: Middle-Generation Poets in Context, the term describes these writers' "liminal status between the modern and the postmodern". More troublingly, as Thomas Travisano observes, it also suggests a body of work whose main achievement lay in paving the way for the "new" utterances that followed in its wake:<sup>49</sup> the voices of John Ashbery, Richard Howard and Robert Pinsky. Like Travisano, I opt instead to employ the epithets "mid-century" and "post-war", believing them to best represent the artistic and historical priority that Berryman and his peers asserted keenly. Indeed, when Berryman himself opined in one 1948 review-essay that "the middle generation... has gone to pieces", it was with reference not to his own cohort but to the preceding generation of literary "fathers" as immediate heirs to the modernist achievement:

As for the middle generation, it has gone to pieces. Tate has published one booklet in a decade, Crane died, MacLeish evaporated. Léonie Adams and Putnam fell silent, Louise Bogan nearly so, Van Doren and Warren developed no following... The young poets lately, in short, have had not fathers but grandfathers.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Travisano 22-3.

<sup>50</sup> John Berryman, "Waiting for the End, Boys," Partisan Review 15 (1948): 254-67. Rpt. as "Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys" in TFOTP 297-309, at 299.

It is swiftly apparent to the student of Berryman's verse that the problematic nature of its "middle generation" classification is symptomatic of a wider difficulty in locating his work within a linear narrative of poetic development. Berryman began his career in thrall to the prominent New Critics Richard Blackmur and Mark Van Doren, declaring "interest in circumstances [outside a poem]" to be "vulgar and unwarranted curiosity".<sup>51</sup> Standard accounts of his writing have related his subsequent divergence from the school to a growing "disagreement" with its cleavage to "[T. S.] Eliot's line – the impersonality of poetry".<sup>52</sup> The result has been a widespread conflation of Berryman's break from the New Critical theory founded upon Eliot's analytical prose with a corresponding break from the high modernism of Eliot, Joyce and Pound. Rendering modernism "a movement whose poems are easily characterized as traditional, impersonal, and hierarchical",<sup>53</sup> such readings necessitate a de-emphasis of the Eurocentric cosmopolitanism and the ellipses, fractures and narrative polyvalence that typifies its proponents' seminal works. Moreover, they have persisted in their function as a denial of these literary "grandfathers'" enduring influence upon Berryman's oeuvre, from Homage to Mistress Bradstreet's combative dialogue with The Waste Land to The Dream Songs' complex critique of the blackface voices of Sweeney Agonistes and Pound's Confucian Odes. This thesis, which provides an exploration of Berryman's evolving relationship with his literary inheritance, contends that his concern with the possibilities for art in the wake of modernism is not easily reducible to a rejection of "impersonality" and "tradition". The poet who could declare in 1948 "The word 'modern' now seems less important"<sup>54</sup> was also willing to propose a radical re-conception of Eliot's verse:

Perhaps we have not got it yet. Perhaps in the end this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal will prove to be personal, and will also appear then more terrible and more pitiful even than it does now.<sup>55</sup>

The incomplete nature of Berryman's break with modernism continues to frustrate critical efforts to situate his poetry definitively at either end of a single modernist/postmodernist continuum. Whilst Gary Q. Arpin describes him as having been

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<sup>51</sup> John Berryman, cit. Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 54.

<sup>52</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5. Such accounts are exemplified by David Perkins' chapter "Breaking Through The New Criticism" in A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After, which describes Berryman as "having internalized the New Criticism as a superego" prior to his breakthrough into a personal and "Confessional" id (Perkins 397).

<sup>53</sup> James Longenbach, Modern Poetry after Modernism (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 6.

<sup>54</sup> Berryman, "Waiting for the End, Boys," TFOTP 297.

<sup>55</sup> John Berryman, "A Peine Ma Piste," rev. of T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger, Partisan Review 15 (1948): 826-28, at 828.

“always a modernist poet”,<sup>56</sup> recent works by Philip Coleman, Brendan Cooper and Thomas Travisano have striven to assert his status as “a ‘postmodernist’ figure”:<sup>57</sup> a definition that in all cases requires acknowledgement of “[t]he embryonic, inconclusive, and problematically oppositional nature of present [poetic] appropriations of the term”.<sup>58</sup> Studies of this transitional period in American verse such as James Longenbach’s Modern Poetry after Modernism and Charles Altieri’s The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After have yet to consider Berryman’s work in detail. A full discussion of the shifting scholarly sands that constitute current notions of poetic postmodernism lies beyond the remit of this thesis. Applying the term in its most literal sense – as a “deep... aware[ness] of writing after the full flush of modernis[m]”<sup>59</sup> – it instead reads Berryman’s career-long dialogue with figures including Auden, Eliot, Pound and Yeats as the evolution of a poetics that resists the conflation of “post-modern” with “anti-modern”. The public world of Berryman’s poetry, absorbing and responding to the griefs of America’s dispossessed and marginalised “soul[s] under stress”, also involves a metapoetic response to the literary tradition it desires to both join and to eclipse. The poet’s interrogative exchange “with what is sent into individuals from the universe”<sup>60</sup> results in a verse of open-ended process, always engaged in the critique of its own representations. It is to be hoped that the analyses of Berryman’s oeuvre my chapters provide in this light will contribute to a revised understanding of his art which foregrounds its permeability to all aspects of contemporary existence. Through establishing Berryman as a poet whose vision always “lay in the middle of the world”, (DS 53) this thesis seeks to dispel restrictive readings of his achievement as the expression of an impenetrably personal malaise. His radical occupation and displacement of lexicon and personae can be most profitably viewed as the “only way for one kind of self-conscious man... to go”.<sup>61</sup> an ongoing attempt to represent responsibly the “common human life” of post-war America.

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<sup>56</sup> Arpin 6.

<sup>57</sup> See Coleman, “The Scene of Disorder” 204, Cooper, Dark Airs 8, and Travisano 6-13.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 193. Thomas Travisano’s 1999 study Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic provides the most comprehensive discussion of the term in relation to Berryman’s oeuvre currently available. His contention, however, that such an aesthetic “concerns itself principally with exploring the vicissitudes and displacements of the individual human self” remains sufficiently general in its focus to resist application to a specifically “postmodern” ideology: these same “displacements” might also be called upon to characterise works from “The Prelude” to Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (Travisano 9).

<sup>59</sup> Longenbach 7.

<sup>60</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 347.

<sup>61</sup> Pearson 9, 4.

## CHAPTER 1: THE DISPOSSESSED AND SONNETS TO CHRIS

### 1.1 “To an Artist Beginning [His] Work”: First Crises of Self and Society

After an undistinguished first year at New York’s Columbia University, John Berryman began his third undergraduate semester in September 1933 by enrolling in the poet-critic Mark Van Doren’s advanced composition course. The decision would prove a watershed in his nascent intellectual development, until then almost exclusively occupied with “extracurricular activities and... cutting classes”.<sup>1</sup> In Van Doren, Berryman found an attentive mentor for his earliest attempts at verse composition and, more crucially, an introduction to the work of his teacher’s contemporaries in the New Critical movement – a formidable roll-call of writers including Richard Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. The group’s commitment to the advancement of a formal and technically “difficult” poetry had its roots in Ransom and Tate’s membership of the Agrarian community from 1930. An economic, literary and political collective, the Agrarians had agitated for a return to the values of the antebellum South.<sup>2</sup> Their vision centred upon an organic subsistence community that would reunite play and work, abstract thought and physical labour in the individual whom they perceived to be hopelessly compromised by modern industrial life. When transferred to the literary medium, this aesthetic would evolve into the New Critics’ promotion of the poem as a similarly “unified sensibility”.<sup>3</sup> The writer’s craftsmanship, Tate emphasised, provided the means with which to balance and temper unchecked emotion: “Formal versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance to the reader and to the poet himself that the poet is

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, cit. John Haffenden, The Life of John Berryman (Boston, MA: Routledge, 1982) 59. Berryman would state in one of his last interviews, “If not for Van Doren, I might not have become a poet” (John Berryman, “Conversation with Berryman,” interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 342).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 39. The Agrarians themselves had a precursor in the Southern Fugitives, a literary and philosophical group based in Nashville, Tennessee, of which Ransom, Tate and Warren were also members; for further discussion of the relationship between these two bodies and the New Criticism, see Mark Jancovich, The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) and Thomas Daniel Young, ed., The New Criticism and After (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> The notion of a “unification of sensibility” in verse, in which “a poet’s mind is... constantly amalgamating disparate experience”, was first proposed by T. S. Eliot in his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” 1921, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2401-08, at 2406). Eliot’s prose criticism from the Twenties and Thirties, especially the seminal pieces “Hamlet and His Problems”, “The Metaphysical Poets” and “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, was to influence greatly the New Critics’ privileging of artistic impersonality, classical ideals and the objective correlative.



in control of the disorder both outside him and within his own mind.”<sup>4</sup> A poem’s beauty and resonance arose from the innate tension between denotation and connotation established within its lines; the effect, moreover, was conveyed not through the poet’s personality but through his tools of irony, metaphor and symbolism. From the mid-Thirties, the New Critical literary school would present a sustained challenge to the established American academy, accustomed to privileging the historical and linguistic scholarship surrounding a text over its close reading. And Berryman, who would recall decades later in the volume Love & Fame, “I had, from my beginning, to adore heroes”, (CP 185) was, it seems, “by then a bit completely with it”. (CP 172) Statements such as the following, taken from a 1936 Philosophy paper of his, support Thomas Travisano’s assessment that “of all the... [middle generation] poets, [Berryman’s] early relationships with... mentors were the most worshipful”:<sup>5</sup>

When a writer has given us satisfactory work – King Lear, say, or Moll Flanders or “Ode on a Grecian Urn” – we need nothing, properly, outside the work, and interest in circumstances or in the author as individual becomes recognizably what it in fact always is, vulgar and unwarranted curiosity.<sup>6</sup>

Bolstered by Van Doren’s guidance and support, Berryman was to acquit himself well by his Phi Beta Kappa graduation from Columbia in summer 1936. Besides winning the coveted Kellett Fellowship for two years’ graduate study at Clare College, Cambridge, the budding poet had by this time amassed a series of publications in The Columbia Review, and secured his first piece in a national magazine, The Nation, with an elegiac “Note on E. A. Robinson”:

He was forever walking  
A little north  
To watch the bare words stalking  
Stiffly forth,  
Frozen as they went  
And flawless of heart within without comment.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that this text’s description of one man’s (or is that two men’s?) quest “To watch the bare words stalking / Stiffly forth” pays homage not just to Robinson – a poet widely acclaimed for his representations of impersonal and objective states – but to the New Critical pantheon holding aesthetic sway over its author. Its end-stopped lines are

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<sup>4</sup> Allen Tate, “Poetry Modern and Unmodern,” Hudson Review 21 (1968): 247-61, at 256.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1999) 192.

<sup>6</sup> John Berryman, cit. Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 54.

<sup>7</sup> John Berryman, “Note on E. A. Robinson,” The Nation 10 Jul. 1935: 38.

proffered as lyrical monuments, “frozen” and immutable as Robinson’s place in the literary canon. For what has stopped here, Berryman stresses, is a “heart” perfectly unified in its sensibility, and the lessons it had to teach have been fully absorbed by the poem’s final, skilfully poised juxtaposition “within without comment”. The phrase verges on the contrapuntal, balancing the repetition of “with” (didn’t he still have so much to give?) with the conflict of opposites: a man has been lost with the ability to turn one fixed gaze upon his surrounds, and to seek further “comment” on the individual life would merely be “vulgar and unwarranted curiosity”.

History, however, has an unsavoury habit of marching on, despite man’s striving towards the monumental. Berryman set sail for England in September 1936, where he augmented his already extensive reading in Eliot, Pound and the Southern Fugitives with a growing appreciation of Auden, James, Swift and the “Great Master” Yeats – this last, he later confessed, “I didn’t so much wish to resemble as to *be*”.<sup>8</sup> The legacy of two years’ residence in a continent on the brink of war, as Austria was annexed, the Spanish Civil War raged and totalitarian forces continued their inexorable advance, would be his ongoing struggle for a responsible mode of being in an increasingly violent world.<sup>9</sup> And in his attendant struggle for a poetry capable of controlling and tempering this external disorder, of remaining strictly impersonal in the face of atrocity, it was perhaps only natural that Berryman should reach not just for Ransom’s tenets of “rational purpose and order”<sup>10</sup> in verse but for the prescription of the “Great Master” himself: what he needed above all for the trials to come, he explained to Van Doren and others, was “a mask for my life, a discipline, a stylized order”, “a single moral act of vision”.<sup>11</sup> Berryman’s work of the Cambridge period and its aftermath is collected both in James Laughlin’s 1940 New Directions anthology Five Young American Poets and in the solo pamphlet Poems (part of the New Directions “Poet of the Month” series) which followed less than two years later.<sup>12</sup> These early verses are, as Berryman’s preface to his section of Five Young American Poets suggests, the product of a “delight in craftsmanship” careful to guard itself against charges of adolescent self-indulgence; the craft in question, we are told, has been employed “rarely

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<sup>8</sup> John Berryman, “One Answer to a Question,” Shenandoah 17 (1965): 67-76. Rpt. as “Changes” in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic, 1966) 94-103, at 95.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, The Poetry of John Berryman (New York: Kennikat, 1978) 17.

<sup>10</sup> John Crowe Ransom, “New Poets and Old Muses,” American Poetry at Mid-Century, by John Crowe Ransom, Delmore Schwartz and John Hall Wheelock (Washington, WA: Library of Congress, 1958) 1-14, at 7.

<sup>11</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 62, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Laughlin’s anthology also includes selections from Mary Barnard, Randall Jarrell, W. R. Moses and George Marion O’Donnell; see Five Young American Poets, ed. James Laughlin (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1940). A total of 17 pieces from Berryman’s “Twenty Poems” in Five Young American Poets and Poems were subsequently reprinted in his first book-length volume, 1948’s The Dispossessed.

for its own sake, mainly as it seizes and makes visible its subject". (CP 287) But what, we might well ask, *is* the subject of a poem such as "The Apparition", first published upon Berryman's return to New York in June 1938? Whilst this text's first lines portray an external political chaos, the advent of an ambiguous and ambivalent dusk that "Binds Austria and England in / One indiscriminate place," its vision swiftly telescopes to a description of the "staring I" (or "eye") of the young intellectual sitting alone in his room. His sole desire is to imbue the disparate items surrounding him with a classical resonance, and thus to bridge the gap between a "familiar chair" and "the slight / Smile of a fresco god"; (CP 268) to summon a redemptive image of eternal beauty, the da Vinci-esque "face" of his beloved. Like in "Meditation", the piece that follows "The Apparition" in Five Young American Poets, the art of the poem transforms the trappings of everyday life into "Items to make a history". (CP 271) Yet even as its speaker labours desperately to "suspend" this image, it is evident that it rests on shaky ground. The "eye" may "advance", but the "face" it conjures threatens to

Withdraw... miles in an instant,  
Is quite gone, and the god  
Resumes his banishment  
To curtain mathematics: dry  
And bitter the brain is in my head. (CP 268)

"Could" this young man "suspend [his] sight", "could" he master his "instinct" and "blood": (CP 268) the repeated conditional tense of his longing in the text's subsequent lines also functions to acknowledge the ultimate transience of such an "[a]pparition". Fundamentally incompatible with human life, it is condemned to usurpation by even this "dry / [a]nd bitter" perceiving brain. The true subject of "The Apparition", it seems, is Berryman's struggle for artistic control, the quest for the marriage of beauty and craftsmanship, of emotion and cognition that recurs throughout these apprentice verses. The comparison with "Meditation" is particularly apt, for this latter work's first stanzas also pause briefly upon the horrors of a "fluent" blood-tide sweeping national borders before observing dismissively "Elegy that way". (CP 269) The poetic eye instead seeks refuge in "intelligent" craft, the "stylized order" of the image, which is here framed explicitly as a metaphor for escape:

Elegy that way. The intelligent eye  
Is tourist here and passes on, pausing  
Now with delight upon the symmetry  
And energetic poise of a grey wing  
In Channel flight against a heavy sky... (CP 269)

The evidence, indeed, suggests the escape-motif to be of key importance to Berryman's earliest works in Five Young American Poets in more ways than one. For, as Philip Coleman has proposed, the poet's acceptance of a more international canon of literary "masters" as a result of his sojourn in Cambridge was to mark the tentative beginnings of a "rejection of... American authority"<sup>13</sup> in the poetic and political arenas. Working with his supervisor at Clare, George Rylands, Berryman was compelled to consider his own country's verse tradition anew: could it be true that Robinson, Tate et al. were in fact "raw" in their own sensibilities, impossibly idealistic?<sup>14</sup> The works comprising his section of Five Young American Poets, as "Meditation" demonstrates, continued to proffer this "raw" sensibility as one mode of escape from the political disorder coming to dominate the late 1930s; to quote Stephen Matterson, it represented "the capacity to freeze and escape from time".<sup>15</sup> According to the New Critics, the literary act enabled recovery and redemption of a lost set of values and, more importantly, their eternal preservation. But uncertainty had set in for Berryman: could the ground beneath his feet *really* withstand portrayal as a fixed safe haven, as "Asylum thus for memory and praise"? (CP 269) Declaring that poetry, "as an *a priori* mode of the mind", enables us to "advance to the good society and to religion and beauty",<sup>16</sup> Ransom had based his vision of the poem upon the concept of morality as metonymy, in this case as representative of an entire cultural tradition. If a work was "a moral *situation*", then the poet was its "public functionar[y]", the text's *deus ex machina*. Exercising the "control or censorship of right reason" upon his unfettered imagination,<sup>17</sup> he was working simultaneously to assure his audience of a harmonious reading experience that would order and temper external chaos; within Ransom's paradigm, formal constraint (the "good of the meters")<sup>18</sup> is also an assurance of the inherent "goodness" of the world. Now, however, Berryman was forced to concede that unfolding global events served to call the very definition of "right reason" into question. With Austria annexed and much of Eastern Europe under Nazi threat, even America's national boundaries were exposed in their true natures – fictions, conceits, mutable as the night sky. As he noted in "Nineteen Thirty-Eight", "Across the frontiers of the helpless world / The great planes swarm, the carriers of death, / ...And blast our cities where we stand in talk": (CP 274) the lines owe a debt to both Yeats and Auden, but the

<sup>13</sup> Philip Coleman, "'The Politics of Praise': John Berryman's Engagement with W. B. Yeats," Etudes irlandaises 28 (2003): 11-27, at 12.

<sup>14</sup> John Haffenden, "John Berryman: the American poet at Cambridge," Cambridge Quarterly 8 (1978): 129-50, at 132.

<sup>15</sup> Matterson 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses" 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses" 8, 5, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses" 13.

sentiment is clear.<sup>19</sup> Suddenly Ransom's invocation of "morality" highlighted the limitations of America's intellectuals and writers, standing impotently in "talk" as chaos and violence swept the globe. This dilemma is central to "Winter Landscape", a poem originally published in July 1940's New Republic.<sup>20</sup> The text's regular five-line stanzas comprise a single sentence, presenting a seemingly objective transliteration of "Breughel's celebrated [painting] 'Chasseurs dans la Neige'".<sup>21</sup> At first glance it provides another lyrical monument, with the poet's ekphrasis affirming the painter's own ordering vision of

The three men coming down the winter hill  
 In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds  
 At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,  
 Past the five figures at the burning straw,  
 Returning cold and silent to their town... (CP 3)

Yet upon the poem's subsequent appearance in Five Young American Poets, Berryman's preface would take pains to emphasise that "the subject of 'Winter Landscape' is not really the painting". (CP 288) Whilst the "three men" described may be blissfully unaware that "in the sandy time / To come... / ...they will be seen upon the brow / Of that same hill" (CP 3) in open warfare, the poet's euphemistic re-titling of the piece is a deliberate self-deception, prompted by what he would later term a "governing emotion... [of] stubborn incredulity".<sup>22</sup> The figures' true occupation – hunting – is transformed to a mere pleasant stroll in the woods, their raised spears to innocuous "poles". The effect is to expose the subordinate clauses of this text as *insubordinate* clauses, referring obliquely to the violence and death past and to come that the poet refuses to accept.<sup>23</sup> And, crucially, their presence in "Winter Landscape" ushers in Berryman's growing, if reluctant, awareness that the craftsman's tools he inherited from Columbia may not be sufficient to hold back change and disorder; that, in fact, a poem's impact and resonance may rest upon not the unification of its sensibilities but the admission of what stubbornly resists unification, "a missing or misrepresented element in an agreed-upon or imposed design".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Compare especially Yeats' "Easter, 1916", "I have passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words" (W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916," W. B. Yeats: The Major Works, ed. and introd. Edward Larrissy, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 85-87, at 85) and Auden's "Consider this and in our time", "As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman: / The clouds rift suddenly – look there / At cigarette-end smouldering on a border / At the first garden party of the year" (W. H. Auden, "Consider this and in our time," The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977) 46-47, at 46).

<sup>20</sup> Originally included in Five Young American Poets, its revised form introduces The Dispossessed.

<sup>21</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 27.

<sup>22</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 97.

<sup>23</sup> Arpin 31. It is notable that in an early handwritten outline of the "general" themes of The Dispossessed, Berryman would identify "Winter Landscape" as manifesting "Dispossession as Evil" (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1A, Folder 1).

<sup>24</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 97.

It is perhaps, then, apt that Gary Arpin has indicated the value of Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents as a gloss to Berryman's poetry of the Second World War period. One key passage that Arpin quotes from Freud's text is especially worthy of recapitulation:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction... Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety.<sup>25</sup>

Unrest, unhappiness and anxiety: the adjectives certainly sum up Berryman's own experience of the era. As the Germans moved towards Paris, he would write despairingly to his mother, "This is the low water mark of human history or it is to come."<sup>26</sup> With the technological advances of modern warfare, combat had lost its human countenance, and man become a wolf to man; as telegrams poured in with news of the atrocities in Europe, his intellectual contemporaries merely continued to make small-talk before their own "doomed and comfortable fires". (CP 274) For Berryman, however, all had changed utterly, and poems such as "The Trial" gesture towards this shift in perspective. In this text's depiction of an ancestral house razed to ashes, the only "servant" to survive the apocalypse is the "Historian" who makes his way across "scorching field[s]". No items here remain "to make a history", for the old order has been vanquished by human brutality, and the task which falls to this would-be chronicler is instead that of reconciling himself to a savagery whose magnitude "[n]o man can say". Indeed, any attempt to impose narrative coherence upon such disaster, to incorporate it within the literary matrix of progress-tales that has endured with each "[p]rosperous generation", (CP 272) will ultimately, the poem suggests, render him as culpable as the aggressors themselves:

Intellectual sores raven among  
The faithful organs, corrupting from within;  
To scrape them but the fastidious tongue. (CP 272)

However "fastidious" the phrasing, there is no way to disinfect these "intellectual sores", for such wanton destruction cannot be ordered or unified; the "tongue" that worries them is implied to be animal, part of the sickness it spreads. In "The Trial"'s lines, Berryman was introducing a body-state metaphor that he would refine and develop over the coming years,

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<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962) 66. Cit. Arpin 23.

<sup>26</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 121.

reaching a climax in his declaration in the 1945 short story “The Imaginary Jew” that “social life [is] that from which political life issues like a somatic dream”.<sup>27</sup> It was no longer sufficient to be an intellectual alone in his room, meditating upon eternal beauty. As the poem “Letter to His Brother” – composed a year after “The Trial”, in 1938 – emphasises, the external disorder we refuse to acknowledge is nevertheless that for which we also share responsibility. “Sleep”, the distracting “sound of glasses” and the self-deception that “none works upon us” are temporary palliatives at best, for the dark “western guise of fate” is closing in. (CP 19) Searching for others to blame, the Patrick Barton character will be driven “out of his mind” by the full comprehension of his own culpability:

When Patrick Barton chased the murderer  
 He heard behind him in the wood  
 Pursuit, and suddenly he knew he fled:  
 He was the murderer, the others were  
 His vigilance. But when he crouched behind  
 A tree, the tree moved off and left  
 Him naked while the cry came on; he laughed  
 And like a hound he leapt out of his mind. (CP 19)

This, then, is the dark dual significance of Berryman’s phrase “Asylum thus for memory and praise.” (CP 269) His friend Robert “Bhain” Campbell would provide a perspicacious reading of the stanza that same year, taking it to represent “an expression of relativism. What is at one moment crime becomes at another moment justice, and the justification disappears, leaving madness”.<sup>28</sup> Patrick’s former blindness is juxtaposed against the sharp gaze of his pursuers; the forms of nature cannot shelter him, for his unconscious condoning of the Fascist advance has uprooted the very vision of order he intended to protect. If we are to retain a coherent grasp upon our surroundings, the poet questions worriedly, must we remain blind, fall in step with the political atrocities “done for us”?

It is not surprising that Arpin also observes a “tone of despair Audenesque” in “Letter to His Brother”.<sup>29</sup> With their ambiguous maps, dark woods, shifting frontiers and smouldering cigarette-ends, the works that would eventually be collected in Berryman’s first full-length volume The Dispossessed<sup>30</sup> are reminiscent of Auden’s poetry of the Thirties, from “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” (later “The Watershed”) to

<sup>27</sup> “The Imaginary Jew” was first published in Kenyon Review 7 (1945): 529-39. Rpt. in TFOTP 359-66, at 361.

<sup>28</sup> Bhain Campbell, letter to John Berryman, 1 Nov. 1938. Berryman conceded to Campbell in a reply of 2 June the following year, “Your interpretation of the Patrick Barton stanza is very ingenious and it may be right; certainly the guilt theme was important for me” (JBPs, Correspondence, Box 29, Folder “Bhain Campbell, dated”).

<sup>29</sup> Arpin 17.

<sup>30</sup> The Dispossessed was first published by William Sloane Associates in 1948.

“Consider this and in our time”, “September 1, 1939” and the long poem The Orators. Whilst “flying through” these works during his student days,<sup>31</sup> the young writer, it seems, had taken to heart Auden’s declaration in one 1932 essay, “At some time or other in human history... man became self-conscious; he began to feel, I am I, and you are not I; we are shut inside ourselves and apart from each other.”<sup>32</sup> Early Berryman poems such as “Letter to His Brother” and “A Point of Age” provide a crucial refutation of Ransom’s promotion of the pathetic fallacy as a metaphorical tool for the “human[izing]” – and thus ordering – of the natural world. They enact not “a wonderful epiphany, the vision of a ‘society’ in which nature seems to associate herself with the lonely moralists”,<sup>33</sup> but the lone self’s uncertain encounters with a hostile and indifferent terrain in which not even a tree can offer shelter. Indeed, it is notable that the concluding stanzas of “Letter to his Brother”, with their dark “dismay”, vanished guiding moon, and animalistic “leap” from rationality, echo most strongly the menacingly anonymous imperative of Auden’s “The Watershed”:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,  
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:  
This land, cut off, will not communicate,  
Be no accessory content to one  
Aimless for faces rather there than here.<sup>34</sup>

This newly unfamiliar landscape which can “[b]e no accessory” to the human ideals of morality, rationality and “the good society”<sup>35</sup> functions to isolate all inhabitants in their mutual guilt; the fallacy is reversed, for here “the disruptions of the outer world [have] produce[d] their analogues in the inner landscape”.<sup>36</sup> Standing at the “crux left of the watershed”, Auden’s “stranger” is only aware that no homecoming is now possible. All that was familiar – trees’ rising sap, cars’ headlamp beams, his own poised ears that “scent danger” – is rendered strange, the product of the thwarted desire for “communicat[ion]”.

Berryman would expand further upon the issues raised in “Letter to His Brother” almost a decade later, as part of a 1948 symposium held by the American literary quarterly Partisan Review:

So... men who can think and are moral must stand ready night and day to the orders of blind evil. What has created this is a usurpation which is not complete: usurpation of individual decision, which yet leaves the individual nominally free.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See for example Love & Fame’s “Shirley & Auden” (CP 170-3).

<sup>32</sup> Auden, “Writing,” The English Auden 303-12, at 303.

<sup>33</sup> Ransom, “New Poets and Old Muses” 11, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Auden, “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” The English Auden 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ransom, “New Poets and Old Muses” 4.

<sup>36</sup> Arpin 25.

<sup>37</sup> John Berryman, “The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions” (symposium), Partisan Review 15 (1948): 855-60, at 857.



This statement is particularly elucidatory, for it also implies what Stephen Matterson terms “a radical disassociation between self and world”:<sup>38</sup> that is, the external world’s fundamental independence from the individual will. The poems which Berryman would group that year into the first three sections of The Dispossessed express this sense of “disassociation” as a profound anxiety regarding the loss of personal agency. Witness, for example, “Boston Common” (subtitled “A Meditation upon The Hero”), which employs a distinctly Yeatsian eight-line stanza to juxtapose one “casual man” – “[s]lumped”, possibly drunken, certainly disenfranchised from the security of home and hearth – against the public memorial under which he sleeps. The work’s setting is “[Augustus] Saint-Gaudens’ sky”, (CP 42) specifically the sculptor’s 1897 tribute to the Civil War heroism of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his “Negroes without name”; one might expect Saint-Gaudens’ bronze panels to shelter our “possible hero”, even to provide him with a model for future conduct. But Berryman’s caution is immediate: each of Shaw’s “Negroes” has been denied his portion of glory, for the “crucible night” commemorated “all singularity, / Idiosyncrasy and creed, burnt out / And brought them, here, a common character”. (CP 42) The lines establish this text as another battlefield, enacting the struggle of each anonymous “Jack” to distinguish himself within the New Critical paradigm of art as the preservation of universal values, static and impersonal. To quote Michael North, in this enduring model of memorialisation, “[t]he imagination of the artist is like the war itself, in that they are both crucibles wherein the idiosyncratic is burnt out and refined to the immortal.”<sup>39</sup> War, it seems, can only “get a man of bronze”. (CP 42) Whilst the genitals of Saint-Gaudens’ looming charger are “impressive”, they can neither realise nor represent the true “defenders of our time”, those disenfranchised and imprisoned men who labour alone to “trace... the future on the wall of a cell”. (CP 45) The leaden pace of its pentameter aside, this last phrase might be charitably viewed as a metaphor for “Boston Common” itself. As the poet gropes towards the immortal, he is arrested repeatedly by a growing consciousness of its limitations. Poetry as public memory, as the preservation of lost values, has failed. What springs to mind most powerfully here is instead Berryman’s double-edged statement from the Partisan Review symposium: “literary men are seldom heroes, and heroes... at present, as soon as they announce themselves, cease anyway to be literary men”.<sup>40</sup>

Discussing his chosen title for The Dispossessed almost fifteen years after the volume’s publication, Berryman would affirm that “the notion of dispossession points to:

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<sup>38</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>39</sup> Michael North, “The Public Monument and Public Poetry: Stevens, Berryman and Lowell,” Contemporary Literature 21 (1980): 267-85, at 279.

<sup>40</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 857.

the miserable, put out of one's own".<sup>41</sup> The comforting old visions of order, whether moral, literary or sociopolitical, had been fatally undermined by the chaotic bloodshed of global combat; as "Boston Common" suggests, the poet had no choice but to work alone, as an outlaw from society, if a new relationship between self and world was to be forged. Despite recognising this "dispossession of an artist by his society"<sup>42</sup> as a central motif of Berryman's first book, however, Peter Stitt fails to acknowledge the defection from Eliot's line on the impersonality of poetry that Berryman's statement implies. Adopted enthusiastically by the New Critics, Eliot's insistence upon the absolute separation of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates", and that man's imperative to reflect "the mind of his own country",<sup>43</sup> had been put to the test by the late Thirties and Forties' crisis of moral and narrative coherence. For, as The Dispossessed proposed, was this not also a crisis of representation that could not help but reflect back upon the artist himself as he wrestled against the "usurpation of individual decision"?<sup>44</sup> "A Point of Age", composed in 1940 and first published in Poems, offers a dark retrospective of Berryman's quarter-century in which the desire "to move away" is countered by the weak plea: *but where?* There seems to be no other choice, for "The Apparition"'s desire for a fixed and ordering vision has here been supplanted by the poet's awareness that "Images are the mind's life, and they change". (CP 7) Alone and exhausted, the streets filled with "Strike and corruption" and his childhood friends "frozen back or slipt ahead", (CP 7) Berryman calls upon his own illustrious lineage of rebels and leaders for inspiration. The list is a long one, including both the eighteenth-century revolutionary Ethan Allen and the poet's great-grandfather and boyhood hero General Robert Glenn Shaver. Yet as the suffering mind ransacks the past for a paradigm, it is but a short semantic step from Ethan Allen, (fore)"father", to John Allyn Smith, Berryman's biological father, dead from suicide in the son's twelfth year. The noun "Father" conjures a distinctly *unholy* trinity in which rebellion functions as dislocation, and facilitates not the redemption but the dissolution of relationships. The spectre of dispossession stands between father and son, representing a gap in lineage, an absence that has supplanted filial memory itself. It is the source of the poet's shame, for he "know[s]" more about Ethan Allen than his own parent, and is thus reduced to begging Allen's distant and long-deceased figure for guidance:

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<sup>41</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 6, Yellow "Champion" Notebook; the piece was subsequently published as "The Dispossessed" in Poet's Choice, ed. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (New York: Dial, 1962): 134-36.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Stitt, "John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet," Ohio Review 15 (1974): 66-74, at 67.

<sup>43</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1920, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed.

M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2395-401, at 2398, 2397.

<sup>44</sup> Berryman, "The State of American Writing" 857.

Teach trust and disobedience to the son  
Who neither obeys nor can disobey One  
No longer, down the reaches of his longing, known.  
Speak from the forest and declare my blood  
Dishonour, a trick a mockery my name. (CP 8)

He can neither “trust” nor “disobey” what, for all his longing, he cannot access; the text’s opposing impulses towards movement and stasis cannot be unified, and, stuck, he can neither “move away” as promised nor retreat. As literary rebel declaring “I am prepared to start”, (CP 9) as son bearing another man’s name, he is “a trick a mockery”, product of the clashing and distinctly *unharmonious* syllables that embody him.<sup>45</sup> Berryman’s university mentors had preached poetry as a prescribed formula for the recovery and preservation of a threatened or compromised past. Yet in the case of “A Point of Age”, as “Fare Well”, another poem from The Dispossessed to address John Allyn Smith’s death, relates, “What has been taken away will not return”. (CP 12) The only place “to start” for Berryman, then, was with the loss of loss itself. Judith Butler has observed in her essay “After Loss, What Then?” that such a terrain might well prove more fertile than first supposed:

a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full “recovery” is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.<sup>46</sup>

## 1.2 Towards a New and Nervous Idiom: The Dispossessed as Epistemology of Loss

As the poems that would comprise The Dispossessed mounted, Berryman’s experience of the contemporary condition was coming to hinge increasingly on what Roger Luckhurst terms “aporia, or unresolvable paradox”.<sup>47</sup> The consciousness of a past missing or denied emerges as a dominant force in these works, animating and inhabiting every moment of the present. And, strikingly, the chief function of this new agency – described by Berryman himself in “The Ball Poem” as “[t]he epistemology of loss” (CP 11) – was as counter to his

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<sup>45</sup> Evidence of Berryman’s ambivalence regarding the adoption of his stepfather’s surname can be traced back to the Columbia years. See especially 1935’s “Ars Poetica”: “I stumble strangely over my name / In the level of speech; / Use and time should teach / A wisdom of word and canny step. Came / Nor comes the sound within my reach” (John Berryman, “Ars Poetica,” Columbia Review 16 (1935): 18).

<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?,” afterword, Loss: The Politics of Mourning, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2003) 467-73, at 467.

<sup>47</sup> Roger Luckhurst, The Trauma Question (Routledge: London, 2008) 4.

apprentice quest for a vision of the eternal and transcendent.<sup>48</sup> The long poem “At Chinese Checkers”, another of The Dispossessed’s texts previously published in Poems, manifests this dialectic struggle particularly aptly, presenting the artist’s dilemma via the metaphor of a “childish” game of checkers. Surrounded by friends, amidst the comforts of their “low and country room”, the poem’s speaker applies his mastery of the eight-line *abab* stanza “Towards the goal, the triangular blue aim / Of all my red ones, as it was before.” (CP 25) The tried-and-tested techniques of balance and harmony, the careful juxtaposition of “red” and “blue”, appear set to win him untroubled passage through both game and text. Yet the hard consonants of the lines that follow puncture audibly the idyll of the cosy home-world:

Sitting with strangers by a Northern lake  
I watch the opening and the shutting door,  
The paradigms of marble shift and break. (CP 26)

Berryman is exploding two “paradigms” here. This game is no conduit to a state of innocence, and cannot sustain its players’ ignorance of the turmoil outside their four walls; his old methods of play have failed to arrest time and keep uncertainty at bay. Despite the speaker’s desire to move each literary counter skilfully into place,<sup>49</sup> the image of the swinging and “shudder[ing]” front door that recurs throughout the poem provides a constant, barely-concealed reference to The Waste Land that functions to de-centre rather than to shore up the values of his text.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, its motion in “[t]he altering winds” establishes a new and distinctly *unharmonious* interplay of perspectives that lies at the “split heart” of Berryman’s epistemology of loss:

I triple over blue and yellow, sit  
Erect and smile; but what it is they say  
My ears will not accept, I mangle it,  
I see their faces change, I hear the wind  
Begin to whistle under the shut door,  
The door shudders, I cannot hold my mind,  
Backward, east, south it goes in the wind’s roar. (CP 27)

His protagonist’s choices are no longer mutually exclusive. As the closed door contains the semantic potential to open, so presence is shaped by its absence, “friends” by strangeness, and the clarity of the well-wrought verse by the “solitary dark” in which the

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<sup>48</sup> Matterson 37.

<sup>49</sup> Arpin 18.

<sup>50</sup> Compare T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, “‘What is that noise?’ / The wind under the door. / ‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’” (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, 1922, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2369-83, at 2373-74). Eliot’s own source for these lines, as his notes to the text detail, was John Webster’s The Devil’s Law Case.

artist must labour. (CP 27) The formal constraint of “At Chinese Checkers”, it seems, cannot provide its narrator with a fixed and redemptive vision. The fragmented memories and perceptions that emerge from the ruins of personal and political history are played out from line to line in a constant and constantly seeking motion that ultimately serves to disrupt textual coherence further. Berryman’s speaker cannot recall “the fox-like child I was or assume I was”; (CP 28) “the abstract” is all he retains as the unlockable mnemonic for the loss itself. Small wonder, then, that he “cannot hold [his] mind”. As “across the miles of table” his strange friends attempt to call his attention back to the game in hand, the poem’s verses instead flit from departed love to the Confederate forces’ defeat and the creative apathy of the “marvellous” poet Delmore Schwartz. The ambiguity of this protagonist’s cry “How shall we know / The noon we are to be in night we are?” (CP 28) is deliberate, for the dark night of the adult soul has invited in only greater uncertainty. The process of being in the world, Berryman emphasises, necessitates the dissolution of connections, the division of past selves from one another. Even childhood memories of boys at their marbles are called into question, with the sly pun embedded into the text here signalling a beckoning insanity – after all, might not the collapse of these images we believe to be set in stone lead to “Patrick Barton”’s malady in “Letter to His Brother”, the collapse of the psyche itself?

Having stared into the abyss of existential and temporal crisis, however, it is striking that “At Chinese Checkers” subsequently pulls back. The fallible human mind may capsize under “the sense of change” but, we are told, Simonetta de Vespucci – the model for Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” – “had a grave / Deeper than the dark cliff of any tooth, / Deeper than memory”. (CP 29) The poem’s greatest “aporia” is, perhaps, its own loss of conviction, for in a pen-stroke we return to a New Critical teleology in which the work of art serves to control and temper its creator’s disorder, standing as monument against the march of time. In the text’s final stanza, Berryman proffers the sea-foam of eternity as a panacea for all griefs, stating “Body will break and mend, the foam replace / For even the unconsolable his taken friend.” (CP 30) This rather improbable conclusion remains worthy of note, if only because just one year after its 1939 composition the lines would undergo their own sea-change. A revised version of stanza XVI forms the blackly ironic preface to Berryman’s 1942 pamphlet Poems:

*I told a lie once in a verse. I said  
I said I said I said ‘The heart will mend,  
Body will break and mend, the foam replace  
For even the unconsolable his taken friend.’  
This is a lie. I had not been here then. (CP 278)*

December 1940 had occasioned some news of a darkness Berryman “thought life w[ould never] bring me... again”.<sup>51</sup> The tragically early death of his friend, fellow-poet and Wayne University colleague Robert “Bhain” Campbell from cancer was to reduce the original passage to the “I say I say I say” of a music-hall joke, of empty, bombastic rhetoric. Quoted from the stark “here” that supersedes “then”, “At Chinese Checkers” repetition of “mend” merely serves to emphasise its opposite, the “break” of body and heart for which there is no answer. This “ultimate shaking grief” (CP 11) is also employed to different ends as the subject of “The Ball Poem”, perhaps the best known of Berryman’s works from The Dispossessed. Here, the quasi-comic situation of the schoolboy who has lost his ball is sobered by further development of “At Chinese Checkers” analogy between loss and initiation into adulthood. This boy (and proto-poet) is set apart from the external world and its pat reassurances that “O there are other balls” (CP 11)

As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
 All his young days into the harbour where  
 His ball went. I would not intrude on him,  
 A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now  
 He senses first responsibility  
 In a world of possessions. (CP 11)

Berryman later commented that “The Ball Poem” marked for him the “discovery... that a commitment of identity can be ‘reserved,’ so to speak, with an ambiguous pronoun”.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the slippage between “I” and “him” in the text blurs subject and object, narrator and protagonist in a “process of life and a process of art”<sup>53</sup> that also emerges as a process of memory – deep, dark and composed of ellipses, loss and forgetting. The dawning of “first responsibility / In a world of possessions” thus paves the way to a “discovery” of even greater importance to Berryman: that true “responsibility” lies in acceptance of our own dispossessed state.

In a 1964 review of 77 Dream Songs, the Pulitzer Prize-winning volume that would finally catapult Berryman to national recognition, his contemporary Robert Lowell would recognise the young poet of The Dispossessed to have been “a keen critic and a distinguished scholar... [who] vibrated brilliantly to all significant influences... His proper bent seemed toward an intense and unworldly symbolic poetry”.<sup>54</sup> This so-called “proper bent” is evinced most clearly, as we have seen, by early works such as “Winter Landscape” and “At Chinese Checkers”. These texts present their central symbols – whether painted

<sup>51</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 127.

<sup>52</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 98.

<sup>53</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 98.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Lowell, “The Poetry of John Berryman,” rev. of 77 Dream Songs, by John Berryman, New York Review of Books 28 May 1964: 3-4, at 3.

scene or foaming sea – as the quintessence of what Berryman’s New Critical mentors termed “whole knowledge”. Their struggle to unify their opposing sensibilities represents a near-heroic attempt to resist unsettling ambiguities whilst protecting the experience portrayed from the ravages of time.<sup>55</sup> Given this prior evidence, it is not surprising that so many critics have succumbed to the temptation to ascribe a fixed symbolic meaning to “The Ball Poem”. Thomas Travisano views the lost ball as “an object of... transference”, with specific reference to Freud’s passage on “a boy who repeatedly threw a ball away to reenact the experience of his mother’s... absences”.<sup>56</sup> Gary Arpin takes the analogy one step further, condemning the poem for having “had to bear more weight than it can carry... The loss of a ball is a poor objective correlative for the feelings engendered by the loss of a father, and so the ‘ultimate shaking grief’ rings false”.<sup>57</sup> Lost youth, lost innocence, the loss of John Smith, Senior: whatever the interpretation, the “[un]bear[able]” weight placed upon “The Ball Poem” might be more accurately traced back to a critical lust for symbolism itself. The text offers no clue as to the ball’s significance, for, smooth-faceted and shiny, its surface reflects only our own struggles towards comprehension. What is therefore most remarkable about “The Ball Poem” is its foray into a primacy of loss that must be marked, yet cannot be represented, and that fractures the very traditions of representation.<sup>58</sup> This is a break from Berryman’s literary mentors at Columbia, and even from Auden and Yeats’ “gorgeous and seductive rhetoric”,<sup>59</sup> that much of The Dispossessed, with its elegies for the eternal and static, is unable to achieve. The poem’s closing lines bring to the fore a narrative voice that is no builder of lyrical monuments, no impersonal unifying force. Defined by its sense of lack, its dispossession is, perversely, that which fits it to “the flux of experience”<sup>60</sup> constituting Berryman’s perception of life in “the decade of Survival”.<sup>61</sup>

Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark  
 Floor of the harbour . . . I am everywhere,  
 I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move  
 With all that move me, under the water  
 Or whistling, I am not a little boy. (CP 11)

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<sup>55</sup> Matterson 33.

<sup>56</sup> Travisano 113.

<sup>57</sup> Arpin 26.

<sup>58</sup> Butler 467.

<sup>59</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 97.

<sup>60</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>61</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 856.

“[M]y mind and my heart move / With all that move me”. The individual “who suffers”, it seems, *is* “the mind which creates”<sup>62</sup> – a mind that, having abandoned the solipsism of the “staring I” alone in its study, is left at the mercy of the chaos and disorder sweeping the globe.

A further gloss upon Berryman’s poetic development during the 1940s is provided by his short story “The Imaginary Jew”. First published in a 1945 Kenyon Review, it elaborates powerfully upon the themes of “A Point of Age” and “Letter to His Brother”.<sup>63</sup> Driven by restlessness to New York’s Union Square, the text’s protagonist enters a discussion regarding the merits of American intervention in the burgeoning Second World War conflict. However, not only are his comments ignored, but the “young Irishman” holding court unleashes a torrent of anti-Semitic abuse in his direction. As he tries to re-appropriate his own Irish Catholic heritage, declaring “you can’t make me a Jew by simply repeating like an idiot that I am”,<sup>64</sup> the tethers to his identity slip further with each insult. To the baying crowd he looks like a Jew, acts like a Jew, and therefore *is* a Jew: rational oration alone can no longer fix his place in history. His desperate appeal to a “serious-looking man of thirty, well dressed” is countered by the horrified recognition that this bystander, for all his officious appearance, is mentally unsound, and can only “wave his head” at every statement non-committally.<sup>65</sup> Groping for the lines of the “Apostles’ Creed” that might testify to his upbringing, our would-be crusader can find no path through “*visibilium omnium... et invisibilium?*”<sup>66</sup> The urge for collective discussion has disintegrated into a personal quest for verification, yet in the absence of concrete proof, “nothing is clear”. To identify with this “muscular” oppressor would be to identify with his abhorrent views, against the Christian doctrine of tolerance; to identify with the race he oppresses would be to betray his own genetic and religious heritage. Either way, he is a Judas, and all that remains are the images of guilt, self-laceration and running blood that overwhelm the story’s conclusion:

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<sup>62</sup> Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” The Norton Anthology of English Literature 2398, 2397.

<sup>63</sup> As John Haffenden notes, “The Imaginary Jew” is based upon an autobiographical “incident that occurred in Union Square, New York, in 1941” (Haffenden, Life 157). The lasting impact of this experience upon Berryman’s poetics and politics is evinced by his 1968 statement to a Harvard Advocate interview team, “I wrote a story once called ‘The Imaginary Jew’... the Negro business – the blackface – [in The Dream Songs] is related to that” (John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 9).

<sup>64</sup> Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” TFOTP 365.

<sup>65</sup> Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” TFOTP 365.

<sup>66</sup> Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” TFOTP 366. This early statement of Christian belief is set to music in the Credo, the longest sung Mass of the Catholic Church; the section Berryman cites translates as “all that is visible and invisible”.



My persecutors were right: I was a Jew. The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew. Every murderer strikes the mirror, the lash of the torturer falls on the mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow together.<sup>67</sup>

There is no coherent moral and no lesson to be learnt from “The Imaginary Jew”. Despite staying “a long time” at the edges of the discussion, the protagonist’s voice is finally usurped and dismissed by the roar of the crowd. When amplified and expanded in The Dispossessed, the story’s concerns instead function to cast an unrelentingly bleak gaze on the global political situation. To Berryman, this age was a (markedly Audenesque) dark night of the soul in which the individual had lost “the maps that [he] had yesterday” (CP 279) and war its human countenance. As a student, he had nurtured hopes of bearing the standard for a revived tragic literature, broadcasting “Gigantic, unspeakable but articulate disaster”.<sup>68</sup> Now, faced with the unrelieved “central featureless violence”<sup>69</sup> of global combat, only the adjective “unspeakable” came to the fore. His preface to two poems published in Oscar Williams’ 1945 War Poets anthology declares, “those affected most... will be most silent”.<sup>70</sup> It is certainly the case that the poems comprising The Dispossessed’s central sections share with “The Imaginary Jew” a tendency to lapse into silence, whether through exhaustion or a stunned inarticulacy: witness “Farewell to Miles” whispered benediction “[n]o one heard”, (CP 36) or the gesture of a glass eye dropped into an accuser’s hand which closes “White Feather”. (CP 38) Auden’s The Orators had cautioned against the “self-regard” inherent in “the treating of news as a private poem”,<sup>71</sup> and it would seem that the experience of life in this “decade of Survival”<sup>72</sup> was bringing the message home to Berryman. To attempt to make narrative sense of such disaster, even to accept full responsibility for the atrocities committed on a nation’s behalf, might well “curry disorder in the strongest brain”. (CP 21) Yet, if the alternative was silence, Berryman’s conclusion is explicit in “The Moon and the Night and the Men”: “History is approaching a speechless end, / As Henry Adams said. Adams was right.” (CP 37) Further elaboration is impossible, for nouns and verbs do not exist with which to describe the “here” of present reality. If “[w]hat has been taken away will not return”, (CP 12) then the ultimate paradox of the traumatic experience is, as Cathy Caruth

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<sup>67</sup> Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” TFOTP 366.

<sup>68</sup> John Berryman, cit. Haffenden, “John Berryman: the American poet at Cambridge” 141.

<sup>69</sup> John Berryman, letter to Delmore Schwartz, 26 Apr. 1939, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 4, Folder “1-4, 1939”.

<sup>70</sup> John Berryman, “On War and Poetry,” The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, ed. and introd. Oscar Williams (New York: Day, 1945) 29-30, at 30. The two poems in question are “Conversation” and “The Moon and the Night and the Men”, both reprinted subsequently in The Dispossessed.

<sup>71</sup> Auden, The Orators, 1932, The English Auden 59-110, at 73.

<sup>72</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 856.

suggests, “that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it”.<sup>73</sup>

The question, then, remained: how was the artist of the 1940s to stave off inarticulacy and the guilt-induced “pressure of inaction” (CP 28) as he laboured in solitude before his own “doomed and comfortable fires”? (CP 274) The challenge no longer lay in resisting the New Critics’ vision of art as an impersonal, static monument; having endeavoured to place the embattled personality at the forefront of his poetry, Berryman had also placed it under the spotlight. In his struggle towards a poetics encompassing the forgotten, lost and unknown, just how was he to fashion a subjective response to contemporary experience, “something wholly new, in relation to the age”<sup>74</sup> – and what would be the consequences for the newly “uncontrollable eye” (CP 270) / “I”? Declaring Berryman’s choice of title for The Dispossessed to imply “the dispossession of an artist by his society, so that he becomes an outcast”,<sup>75</sup> Peter Stitt demonstrates an understanding of the disassociated status conferred upon the Western writer by the “usurpation of individual decision”.<sup>76</sup> The end of the Second World War and the revelation of the Jewish genocide, the advent of the Cold War, and with it the possibility of further destruction, placed a burden of guilt upon the beholder which threatened to make Patrick Bartons of all. Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging the dark semantic opposite the volume’s title contains – referring “to possession rather than dispossession, as the sufferer is seen as tormented by various internal demons or ills”<sup>77</sup> – Stitt fails to reach the conclusion writ large in Berryman’s “Nervous Songs”, which form the fourth section of The Dispossessed: namely, that the dispossession from world and literary tradition that threatens the writer’s psychological condition also constitutes a threat to the physical condition of the text. In his preface to Five Young American Poets, Berryman had championed the poetic act as the medium through which experience is distilled and unified: “Poetry provides its readers, then, with what we may call a language of experience, an idiom, of which the unit may be an entire complicated emotion or incident.” (CP 287) Just three years later in “The Nervous Songs”, the “complicated emotion[s]” and internal torture wrought by “[t]he epistemology of loss” (CP 11) would translate into a tortured syntax. Begun in February 1943, this sequence of nine works employs a form comprising three six-line stanzas per poem.

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<sup>73</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Culture I,” American Imago 48 (1991): 1-12, at 3.

<sup>74</sup> John Berryman, letter to Kimon Friar, 4 Aug. 1947, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 8, Folder “20/6, 1947 – 9, 1947”.

<sup>75</sup> Stitt, “John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet” 67.

<sup>76</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 857.

<sup>77</sup> Stitt, “John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet” 67.

Berryman had experimented with the arrangement in the earlier work “White Feather”, where the four-foot lines followed the strict pattern *ababbc*; now, however, a variety of rhyme schemes proliferated, and were notable for a new (and decidedly “[n]ervous”) idiom.<sup>78</sup> “The Nervous Songs” feature a series of abrupt shifts in perspective marked by dashes, ellipses and blank spaces that work not to enhance but to disrupt narrative coherence. The grand narrative, the unified sensibility, has broken down, and the result is a verse as dynamic as it is dialectical, repeatedly arrested in its ongoing struggle towards articulation.<sup>79</sup> William J. Martz describes their composition process succinctly: “[Berryman’s] reaction to the world of the... 1940’s is to take its burdens upon himself... and, as a result, to enter into the abyss of himself”.<sup>80</sup> “Abyss” is exactly the word, for it is evident that the “Nervous Songs” realise not just what Stephen Matterson terms “a radical disassociation between self and world”,<sup>81</sup> but a radical disassociation between self and self. The immovable eye / “I” of the earliest apprentice works in Five Young American Poets and Poems is supplanted here by a series of poetic personae who lack any narrative context, based as they are on what has been lost and forgotten. In these unstable texts where every affirmation meets its counter, the speaking “I” has broken loose from a fixed model of identity:

I want that £3.10 hat terribly. –  
 What I am looking for (*I am*), may be  
 Happening in the gaps of what I know.  
 The full moon does go with you as you go.  
 Where am I going? (CP 49)

Songs of “A Professor”, “The Pacifist”, “The Demented Priest”: Berryman’s “Nervous Songs” betray a set of influences eclipsing those of his university mentors, primarily “gr[owing] out”, as he observed in an early draft preface for The Dispossessed, “of my love for the Stimmen of Rilke”.<sup>82</sup> The poet’s comment more than twenty years later on his use of the “ambiguous pronoun” during this period also remains worthy of note: “Rimbaud’s ‘*Je est un autre*’ may have pointed my way, I have no idea now”.<sup>83</sup> Once upon a time the aesthetic gaze with its “delight in craftsmanship” (CP 287) had lent

<sup>78</sup> In his 1948 review of The Dispossessed, the poet Randall Jarrell would single out “The Nervous Songs” as “fit[ting] Mr. Berryman’s knowledge and sensibility surprisingly well... [their style] ought in the end to produce poetry better than the best of the poems he has so far written in it” (Randall Jarrell, “Verse Chronicle,” rev. of The Dispossessed, by John Berryman, The Nation 17 Jul. 1948: 80-81, 14 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.thenation.com/archive/detail/13463723>>).

<sup>79</sup> Travisano 200.

<sup>80</sup> William J. Martz, John Berryman, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers 85 (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1969) 15.

<sup>81</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>82</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1A, Folder 1.

<sup>83</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 98.

order to its surrounds, fashioning its own mirror from world and poem. Amidst the chaos of global conflict, however, the mirror has shattered, and the result is a fragmentation of identity, history and memory that casts confused and broken reflections throughout these texts. If, as in the “Young Woman’s Song” quoted above, the affirmation of self – “(I am)” – takes place in parentheses, “the gaps of what I know”, (CP 49) then the poem itself is cracked open, a stage for multiple performances of identity in which the play of affirmation and negation constantly threatens disintegration.<sup>84</sup> It is by no means surprising that Robert Lowell would find in these works “so many breaks, anacoloutha (sic) etc. that the whole poem usually escapes me”.<sup>85</sup> “The Nervous Songs” are perhaps the ultimate manifestation of “The Imaginary Jew”’s “*visibilum omnium... et invisibilium?*”.<sup>86</sup> the “uncontrollable eye” (CP 270) slips from persona to persona where, finding no coherence or fixed truth “to hang to”, it can make no claim of its own for permanence. A clear parallel can be drawn with Roger Luckhurst’s description of the “modern subject” in The Trauma Question: “Self-identity... is uprooted from traditional verities and subject to a kind of permanent revolution: all that is solid melts into air”.<sup>87</sup> The protagonist of “The Song of the Tortured Girl” inhabits the heart of this “revolution” as she lies racked beneath her tormentors’ grasps. Imprisoned and demeaned, hers is the plight to which there is no answer or reason; she is losing the memory of a prelapsarian state, and the comprehension of her loss itself. She had thought “[n]othing worse... c[ould] come” than the death of a family member last winter, (CP 52) but come it has, and the effect is to render history itself inadequate, merely an unconnected series of catastrophes. All she now reports are her own disjointed perceptions:

After a little I could not have told –  
 But no one asked me this – why I was there.  
 I asked. The ceiling of that place was high  
 And there were sudden noises, which I made.  
 I must have stayed there a long time today:  
 My cup of soup was gone when they brought me back.

And then the strange room where the brightest light  
 Does not shine on the strange men: shines on me.  
 I feel them stretch my youth and throw a switch. (CP 52)

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<sup>84</sup> The effect is also reminiscent of Auden’s conflation of addressee and character through the second-person pronoun in “Consider this and in our time”, which functions to render each protagonist his “own enemy”, the *Antagonist* within; see Michael O’Neill and Gareth Reeves, Auden, Macneice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 32.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to John Berryman, 30 Aug. 1948, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 9, Folder “7, 1948 – 12/9, 1948”.

<sup>86</sup> Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” TFOTP 366.

<sup>87</sup> Luckhurst 20.

This “Tortured Girl” is illuminated by the poem’s second stanza, placed on stage for all to see as she enacts her displaced grief. It is the enactment of grief, just that, for it has lost its referent. An open lyrical movement, characterised not by causality but its lack, has supplanted the traditional modes of telling: all that remains, Berryman stresses, is the movement itself, the “flux” of modern experience.<sup>88</sup>

It is all too easy to follow Joel Conarroe’s lead in reading “The Nervous Songs” as “a clue to Berryman’s inability to find and sustain a tone for dealing with loss”.<sup>89</sup> Phrases such as “Through leafless branches the sweet wind blows” (CP 52) lend a sub-Romantic fluidity to “The Song of the Tortured Girl”, at jarring odds to the existential and narrative crisis the poet has laboured to create. Yet it is crucial at this point to recall that, for the Berryman of The Dispossessed, there *was* no sustainable tone for dealing with the private and public losses that surrounded him – losses excluded from history and memory, but perversely and anachronistically still persisting to haunt the present day. “The Nervous Songs” movement from one embattled persona to another can be more accurately traced back to an “obsession” Berryman himself dated as originating in “The Ball Poem”: “namely, the dissolving of one personality into another without relinquishing the original”. (CP 291) The subordinate clause of his statement would, arguably, have to wait until the 1953 long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet for realisation. The notion of self-dissolution, however, made manifest as Luckhurst’s “permanent revolution”<sup>90</sup> of identity that renders “I” simultaneously self and entirely other, would prove the driving force behind works such as “The Song of the Demented Priest”. Having sacrificed “[t]he emerald the azure and the gold” of his Church icons, the priest in question is possessed by (or is that *dispossessed* of?) not spiritual freedom but the conviction that “Someone interferes / Everywhere with me”. (CP 49-50) God has become “small”, his divine apparition illuminating only the “serpents and thin flowers” of an equally unsatisfactory secular life. Caught in a psychological fugue in which “dominion waved & glittered”, this priest is figured as both “king” of the ritual dance to which his “violent and formal” subjects move and a fellow-member of their oppressed and “pithless” ranks, another “dancer” following the empty beat. (CP 50)

As in the nightmare nightclub scenario of “The Enemies of the Angels”, many of Berryman’s protagonists from this period are fundamentally estranged from themselves by a denial of responsibility for the society that has shaped their actions. Striving for a

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<sup>88</sup> Matterson 39; see also Butler 470.

<sup>89</sup> Joel Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry, Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry (New York: Columbia UP, 1977) 37.

<sup>90</sup> Luckhurst 20.

coherent vision of identity, they cannot recognise what they see in the broken mirror of the morally compromised post-war world: “the heckling man and his embarrassed wife / Play us across the mirrored room. Where is my glass?” (CP 39) This is not my reflection in the mirror’s “glass”, not me; the sense of culpability evoked by identifying myself as a part of this scene would be too much to bear; best seek oblivion at the bottom of a bottle if one is not to risk insanity. The persona of “The Song of the Bridegroom” is well aware of this. His “single wish” is “to be laid away” as a fixed object (in this case a wedding-trinket), (CP 52) for to resist the impact of external disorder is to remain stable and unchanged. Yet, the poet suggests, he too is responsible for his own anxiety, and his desperate eyes are indistinguishable from the gaze of his pursuers:

A sort of anxiousness crystal in crystal has . .  
 Fragile and open like these pairs of eyes  
 All over all things move to stare at it. (CP 52)

“Analysands all”, then, “and the rest ought to be”. (CP 55) In 1948, Berryman would state, “criticism... has everything to learn from the science of the mind as that has developed from Freud forward”.<sup>91</sup> His own studies of the human psyche were coming to shape his work increasingly, providing insight into what he would throughout his career consider one of the most fascinating dichotomies: the ego’s quest for rationality and coherence versus the id’s overwhelming sense of primal loss, its “blind call / At midnight for the mother”. (CP 28) As the poet saw it, the chaos of contemporary existence had conspired to keep both parts of the consciousness in a constant state of flux. Accordingly, upon reading further in “The Song of the Bridegroom”, we discover a near-perfect example of what Thomas Travisano terms

moments of semiopaque psychological intersection, moments when repressed intimations of past traumatic loss emerge in the context of conscious recognition of actual (or threatened) losses in the present.<sup>92</sup>

To this reluctant bridegroom, his impending marriage is “like a journey home / Frightening after so distant years”. (CP 53) It requires dissolution into the lover/mother figure from whence all first experiences of separation originate; travelling up the aisle, he is also reclaiming the fall from the intrauterine state. This union prompted by fear and “fatigue” seems unlikely to result in happiness, but he has no choice but to “extend [his] hand” to his bride and thus “place it in the womb”. (CP 53) For in this new and uncertain world, the

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<sup>91</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 860.

<sup>92</sup> Travisano 113.

stylised order of the fixed image can offer no escape from time – and it is evident that not even Freud and his followers’ symbolic magic can fully soothe the loss at the heart of the post-war condition.

### 1.3 “The Thaw Alone Delays”: Writing Wrongs in The Dispossessed?

A retrospective examination of Berryman’s preface to The Dispossessed reveals the full significance of his comment that the titular poem’s opening line “occurs in Pirandello’s Six Characters [in Search of an Author]”. (CP 288) When our parts on the global stage have been adopted by the so-called political representatives acting on our behalf, individual responsibility is replaced by its parody, empty performance;<sup>93</sup> as “The Dispossessed” reminds us, when the agency is “theirs – no longer ours”, “no soul of us all [is] near”. (CP 66-67) The end of the Second World War, prompted by the United States’ devastating nuclear attacks upon the Empire of Japan, would confirm for the poet that his nation was capable of no “single moral act of vision”.<sup>94</sup> “[R]esentment & shame”, he declared subsequently in an unpublished essay from 1947, “are my dominant pay-emotions”.<sup>95</sup> Yet for Berryman, who throughout his life would describe himself as “completely against... war – I hate everything about it”,<sup>96</sup> dispossession from society paved the way not to what Marjorie Perloff has termed an “aesthetic of non-engagement”,<sup>97</sup> but to a literary possession of a very different kind. As late as 1965, John Crowe Ransom would continue to preach the New Critical doctrine of poetry as recovery, as the preservation of lost values: “Poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories.”<sup>98</sup> His former protégé, however, had discovered early on that the poem as unified verbal icon could not contain the chaotic and uncertain post-war world. Disjointed perceptions and fading memories were his only tools with which “to make a history”; (CP 271) the “original world” as whole entity was

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<sup>93</sup> A manuscript note to “The Dispossessed” dated 15 January 1948 emphasises the poem’s mood as “theatrical” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1A, Folder 2).

<sup>94</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 83.

<sup>95</sup> John Berryman, “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 22.

<sup>96</sup> John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 11.

<sup>97</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Janus-Faced Blockbuster,” rev. of The Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry, ed. Cary Nelson, Symploke 8 (2000): 205-13, at 209.

<sup>98</sup> John Crowe Ransom, God Without Thunder (Hamden, CT: Archer, 1965) 140. Cit. Matterson 21.

fundamentally inaccessible, for its origins lay in loss itself. And it is from Berryman's struggle towards the articulation of this loss that we can chart the beginnings of a true breakthrough – into a poetics capable of recording the motions of the embattled personality as it negotiated this new and newly compromised terrain.

The wealth of private allusions with which The Dispossessed's final section is studded is, perhaps, therefore less surprising – allusions to “a whisky-listless and excessive saint” (CP 63) among Berryman's colleagues at Princeton, to his first wife Eileen Mulligan, to his correspondence with Ezra Pound, then confined to “the massive sorrow” of a Washington “mental hospital”. (CP 62) The vast and learned lexicon of these poems is marked by a repetition of phrases that reaches a climax in the rhymed quatrain stanzas of “Rock-Study with Wanderer”:

Certainly in a few years call it peace  
The arms & wings of peace patrol us all  
The planes & arms that planes & arms may cease  
Pathos (theanthropos) fills evenfall (CP 56)

What is being created here is a world less “dense” but certainly “more refractory”, as the wandering and uncertain “I” struggles to negotiate the broken remnants of a lost order. “[I]n a few years”, Berryman suggests, we may believe the “arms & wings” of the patrolling Allied forces to have brought peace, but at present their control over “us all” undercuts the phrase's simultaneous implications of a military badge of honour, even protective angels' wings. The bringers of hope are also its potential destroyers, ravaging the undulating “planes” and industrious “arms” of the world's terrain. Accordingly, the “[p]athos” that fills this poem's evening setting signifies a deep pity at man's assumption of “theanthropos”, the divine power to mete out life and death via the harnessing of modern technology. We cannot help but note, however, that the covert sense of learned superiority its author implies by placing the word in parentheses refers not only to a facility with the dictionary: is he, too, guilty of the futile desire to impose unity (in this case, a pathetic fallacy) upon the scene?

“Rock-Study with Wanderer”'s poet-protagonist cannot, it seems, “[a]void” the “broken glass” (CP 56) of a landscape formerly ordered by his fixed gaze. Throughout the opening lines of this text of “refract[ions]”, it is thus all the more ironic that echoes of his modernist “hero” Auden's own meditation upon the Second World War's advent, “September 1, 1939”, should ring most strongly. In Auden's piece, too, the gay voices of drunken officers “pour [their] vain / Competitive excuse[s]” into the air as chaos and violence sweep the world; the elder poet's imperative certainty that “The lights must never



go out, / The music must always play”<sup>99</sup> has been substantiated more than nine years later by Berryman’s assurances that “the music & the lights did not go out”. (CP 56) Yet it is crucial to bear in mind that 1948’s “Rock-Study” is a product of the aftermath of global combat. Its chiasmic and cross-rhymed quatrain stanzas supplant Auden’s “blind skyscrapers” “proclaim[ing] / The strength of Collective Man”<sup>100</sup> with a post-apocalyptic vision of ruined cathedrals listing throughout Europe, their window frames buckled and empty. The earlier poem’s “mirror” reflecting impending “international wrong”<sup>101</sup> has been shattered, for, as Berryman emphasises, even “[t]he stained glass shies when the cathedral’s won”. (CP 56) As the world “rolls” on, the protagonist of “Rock-Study”’s vision can only flit from shard to shard, moving from a “tired and old man resting on the grass” to animals huddled together for warmth “in false attitudes / Of love”. (CP 57) Watching, the text also figures him as watched, the slippage from first to third person undermining his claims for permanence still further. He may try to “[d]ovetail” his observations “into a broken mirror”, but each disparate perception (“The flowers dream Crag shadows loom”) (CP 57) divides the resulting narrative further. “Dovetail[ing]”, it seems, does not constitute repair, for as he picks through the chaos we are reminded, “what can a wanderer know?” (CP 57) If “September 1, 1939” closes with Auden’s hopes for an “affirming flame”<sup>102</sup> rising phoenix-like from the ashes of humanity, however, “Rock-Study”’s speaker remains similarly reluctant to surrender his aspirations for mankind’s collective redemption. In one of the poem’s most striking passages, he voices his longing for an escape from humanity’s baser impulses:

When shall the body of the State come near  
 The body’s state stable & labile? When  
 Irriding & resisting rage & fear  
 Shall men in unison yet resemble men? (CP 56)<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, one suspects that he already knows the answer. The next stanza immediately counters with “The good life’s founded upon LST”, (CP 57) or “Landing Ship, Tank”: the military designation for naval vessels transporting troops and cargo directly to disputed shores. In “Rock-Study”’s depiction of the wartorn Forties, the forces for good are the most violent, and the most cherished values already lost, beyond articulation. The failure of the New Critics’ universally ordering gaze, and of Ransom’s paradigm of morality as

<sup>99</sup> Auden, “September 1, 1939,” *The English Auden* 245-47, at 245, 246.

<sup>100</sup> Auden, “September 1, 1939,” *The English Auden* 245.

<sup>101</sup> Auden, “September 1, 1939,” *The English Auden* 245.

<sup>102</sup> Auden, “September 1, 1939,” *The English Auden* 247.

<sup>103</sup> Joseph Warren Beach has noted that “according to Webster, *irrid* is obsolete for *deride*” (Joseph Warren Beach, “Secret Terror in the Heart,” *Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 91-96, at 96).

metonymy, has ensured that, as Judith Butler states, “subjectivity becomes untethered from its collective fabric, [and] individuation becomes a historical necessity”.<sup>104</sup> The ideals of one literary man can provide no template for heroism, and certainly no lyrical monument. All that remains is the lone personality under the spotlight, teetering on the brink of insanity as it clutches together the disjointed perceptions and memories comprising its own tenuous existence.

In his essay on “Boston Common”, Michael North equates the failure of the eternal and symbolic in the post-war works of The Dispossessed with the total cessation of literary output, proposing, “making himself just a man... with no particular relationship to a transcendent world, makes [Berryman] no longer a poet”.<sup>105</sup> Granted, it is irrefutably the case that the disenfranchisement of self from world and literary tradition that marks Berryman’s poetic development in The Dispossessed serves to question the possibility of sustained artistic production. The poems that conclude the volume are the manifestation of the lone and “sick will raving in the voice” (CP 9) – the individual will usurped, denied and ultimately dispossessed of itself by the moral vicissitudes of 1940s American society. And one of the final section’s most memorable texts, “A Winter-Piece to a Friend Away”, goes so far as to caution just where this “sick[ness]” can lead – namely, “the massive sorrow of the mental hospital”.<sup>106</sup> The Dispossessed’s recurrent motifs of night, winter and tangled woods reach a fevered zenith in these six stanzas. A blizzard rages, “filling strange air” with “icy spiculae”; inmates race “barking” past empty houses, presided over by Hölderlin, ringmaster of “insane and dead” lyric poets; from the agony of this “grown grief” even “good friends hide”. (CP 62) Yet here in the abyss of the self, not all is lost. The poet’s “orchard heart” (CP 62) may be the site of corruption, but its broken fragments, the phrase suggests, are also a potential stage (the only stage) for renewal. In what Berryman described as “the decade of Survival”,<sup>107</sup> the literary act enables the individual to possess the dispossessed state, even entertain within it the possibility of a more responsible mode of contemporary existence. The revelation prompts the speaker of “A Winter-Piece” to respond to a fellow-sufferer’s letter rapturously:

Foul sleet ices the twigs, the vision frays,  
Festoons all signs; still as I come to name  
My joy to you my joy springs up again the same, –

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<sup>104</sup> Butler 468.

<sup>105</sup> North 281.

<sup>106</sup> It seems likely that “A Winter-Piece to a Friend Away” refers in part to Berryman’s correspondence with Ezra Pound, begun in early 1947 during the older poet’s imprisonment at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the Criminally Insane on charges of treason. Further discussion of the relationship between the two men is provided in Chapter 2.

<sup>107</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 856.

The thaw alone delays, –  
Your letter came! (CP 63)

The burgeoning “joy” of this third line quoted is reflected from subject to subject, altered in emphasis as it slips between the two identities “me” and “you”. What is emerging here is a poetics based upon “the gaps of what I know”, (CP 49) and representing the potential for movement from lone meditation to an active, collective mourning – a mourning for the losses that can never be fully acknowledged, but that might nevertheless reanimate the presence of an evacuated world; a mourning characteristic of a new mode of artistic relation to human society.<sup>108</sup> Whilst Charlotte H. Beck cites the Eurocentric and liberal ideologies of periodicals such as Partisan Review – first publisher of poems from The Dispossessed including “Young Woman’s Song”, “The Song of the Demented Priest” and “The Long Home” – as a key influence on Berryman’s work from this period, the evidence suggests his changing conception of the poetic self to have ultimately “constituted that ‘Other’ with which to oppose the parental presence of Warren, Tate, and Ransom”.<sup>109</sup> The break with the early formalism of his apprentice verses, though prompted by a growing awareness of global chaos and disorder, continued to demonstrate an ongoing “commitment to aesthetic over political values in poetry”;<sup>110</sup> a “commitment” that required Berryman first to challenge, then to break through the influence of his mentors in order to reach a poetics capable of recording the flux of post-war life.

In February 1948, some three months before the commercial issue of The Dispossessed, Berryman would publish “Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys” in Partisan Review. The piece comprises both an essay on the contemporary scene in American poetry and a review of new verse collections by, among others, John Ciardi, Robert Duncan, Jean Garrigue and Henry Reed. Read retrospectively, the irony of its pronouncement, “Yeats’s personality is so distinct and powerful that few writers have cared to submit to it in the hope of coming out themselves”<sup>111</sup> is unmistakable. Berryman had begun his career in thrall to the impersonal New Critical literary school before submitting to the personalities of the “Great Master[s]” Yeats and Auden. By the close of

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<sup>108</sup> As Judith Butler has observed, such mourning signifies “the relation to the ‘object’ only under the conditions in which history, and the narrative coherence and direction it once promised, has been shattered” (Butler 471).

<sup>109</sup> Charlotte H. Beck, “‘Solely The Southern Review’: A Significant Moment in the Poetic Apprenticeship of John Berryman,” Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 113-124, at 123.

<sup>110</sup> Travisano 197. Gary Q. Arpin’s observation that “Auden’s political poems were the basis for some of Berryman’s least successful work” is also worthy of note here (Arpin 15).

<sup>111</sup> John Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” Partisan Review 15 (1948): 254-67. Rpt. as “Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys” in TFOTP 297-309, at 299. In fact, one early table of contents for The Dispossessed evinces Berryman’s own anxieties regarding Yeats’ influence upon his work of the period: “How many show Yeats? who else?” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1A, Folder 1).

The Dispossessed, however, he had emerged with a voice not so much his own as the property of both Everyman and no man: the voice of the mourning and the dispossessed. It is perhaps, then, not surprising that, writing in 1962 of his continued “(moderate) liking” for his volume’s title-poem, Berryman would recall “my sense at the time of succeeding in some degree with the job I set myself”.<sup>112</sup> In the new world of “The Dispossessed”, identity is not only relegated to “the gaps of what I know”, (CP 49) but can be violently re-appropriated at any moment. The symbolic value of the “perishing sun” in this text’s final lines cannot endure, for the home-world of its author’s heritage is lost, an “old thing” receding into the distance:

The race  
is done. Drifts through, between the cold black trunks,  
the peachblow glory of the perishing sun  
  
in empty houses where old things take place. (CP 67)

Small wonder that Berryman chose to open “Waiting for the End, Boys” with the controversial remark “The word ‘modern’ now seems less important. It is not easy now to imagine a poet attempting to be modern.”<sup>113</sup> His was an age “when for many attentive to the developments of science the future has ceased to exist”,<sup>114</sup> and when the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the revelation of the Nazi death-camps had created a permanent schism in the old narratives of progress and rationality. “[W]e did, *ach* / We did not, *They* did”; behind the curtain each nation’s leaders were pulling the strings, setting the scene for a mere parody of collective participation in which the atomic mushroom cloud was represented by an innocuous “umbrella”, and only the distant and “evil” sky need shoulder responsibility. (CP 67) Even the title of Berryman’s piece – the phrase that closes each stanza of William Empson’s mockingly parodic poem “Just a Smack at Auden”<sup>115</sup> – suggests the poet’s ongoing movement away from the old guard of his modernist forefathers. In an era where the return to form in poetry was marching inexorably to its close, and in a society witnessing the collapse of traditional values, the artist could find succour in neither his craftsman’s tools nor Auden’s “affirming flame”<sup>116</sup> of common humanity. To accept one’s own culpability as a bystander to the “central

<sup>112</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 6, Yellow “Champion” Notebook.

<sup>113</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 297.

<sup>114</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 305.

<sup>115</sup> See William Empson, “Just a Smack at Auden,” The Complete Poems of William Empson, ed. and introd. John Haffenden (London: Lane-Penguin, 2000) 81-82.

<sup>116</sup> Auden, “September 1, 1939,” The English Auden 247.

featureless violence”<sup>117</sup> sweeping the globe might prove impossible, unbearable, but as the poet would also declare in 1948, literary talent remained the individual’s sole medium for redemption, “a ‘gift’ ... for which one has somehow to be responsible, as best one can”.<sup>118</sup>

Struggling towards articulation through a field of blank spaces, ellipses and missed beats, the poems that conclude The Dispossessed bear witness to what the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard terms a “break... with the cognitive regimen of phrases”; they “do... not say the unsayable, but say... that [they] cannot say it”.<sup>119</sup> But Lyotard’s second phrase, with its urging repetition of the word “say”, nevertheless encapsulates the drive towards expression, the desire to share the weight of mourning, that continues to spur on the creative act in the poet’s first book-length volume. It remains all too easy to criticise Berryman’s apprentice work in The Dispossessed; this is also a literary landscape of stranded syllables and laboured metaphor, where the resonant line is frequently countered by the trite. It is, however, indisputable that the collection constitutes a vital document of the process by which the poet not only exploded the paradigm of self as unified and continuous, but embarked upon a lifelong exploration of the consequences for “the nature of the way one views reality”.<sup>120</sup> Such a process, as Philip Coleman notes, necessitated both “interrogat[ing] the idea of Americanness and... highlight[ing] the precariousness of identity – personal and national – in the emerging new world (dis)order”.<sup>121</sup> At Columbia, the young Berryman had been struck by a passage of Richard Blackmur’s in Poetry magazine, which outlined the elder poet’s vision of a “fresh idiom” for American verse composed of “language so twisted and posed in a form that it not only expresses the matter in hand but adds to the stock of available reality”.<sup>122</sup> His own evolving vision of this idiom would by the close of The Dispossessed have expanded to embrace the oppositional qualities of such a language, at once “twisted”, twisting and “posed”. Lines such as “abrupt & dominant. They gesture how / fings really are” (CP 66) and “(Our loss of Latin fractured how far our fate, – / Disinterested once” (CP 63) gesture towards a new and unique syntax “[c]rumpling... at a sudden need”, (CP 94) a syntax already at work shaping

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<sup>117</sup> John Berryman, letter to Delmore Schwartz, 26 Apr. 1939, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 4, Folder “1-4, 1939”.

<sup>118</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 858.

<sup>119</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 57 and Jean-Francois Lyotard, Heidegger and “the Jews”, trans. A. Michel and M. Roberts (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 47. Cit. Luckhurst 5, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Thornbury, “A Reckoning with Ghostly Voices (1935-36),” Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 77-111, at 82.

<sup>121</sup> Philip Coleman, “His Eyes Remained Wide Open on His World’: John Berryman and World War II,” Tales of the Great American Victory: World War II in Politics and Poetics, ed. Diederik Oostdijk and Markha Valenta (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1997) 37-46, at 42.

<sup>122</sup> R. P. Blackmur, Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (London: Allen, 1954) 364. Cit. Mariani, Dream Song 157. Berryman would stress the impact of Blackmur’s words upon him in Love & Fame’s “Olympus” (CP 179).

the agonies of the poet's secret Sonnets to Chris. If adding to "the stock of available reality", however, it was also from this "stock" itself that Berryman would source his narrative voice, for it was shaped and defined by "[t]he epistemology of loss" (CP 11) he had come to know both personally and politically.

#### 1.4 "Whether Wickedness / Was Soluble in Art": Sonnets to Chris' Fraud of the Law

Amid the fractured and morally compromised literary landscape of the poems Berryman was composing in the wake of the Second World War, unfettered communication between individuals had come to seem impossible. The Dispossessed, contracted for publication by William Sloane Associates in November 1947, would encapsulate the concerns of an artist increasingly alienated from both his nation and the violent military and political acts it had committed. To Berryman, this "usurpation of individual decision"<sup>123</sup> had functioned to promote not patriotic unity but further "disturbance of the... communal life",<sup>124</sup> rendering each marginalised citizen subject to a growing sense of culpability for the atrocities carried out on his behalf. It is not, then, surprising that "Canto Amor", one of the poet's few works of the period to address his first marriage,<sup>125</sup> offers less of a celebration than a "trial" of "anxious love": festivity is overshadowed by a burgeoning political "storm [that] worries the disordered wood / grieving the midnight of my thirtieth year". (CP 48) As the poem's title suggests, the literary act of song is now its author's only means of sharing the "multiform" perceptions of this "heavy soul... / struck suddenly & dark down to its knees". (CP 46) The mirror of the "round world" (CP 47) has shattered, but the speaker finds reflection of his own uncertain self in poetic communion with his wife as love-object:

If (Unknown Majesty) I not confess  
praise for the wrack the rock the live sailor  
under the blue sea, – yet I may You bless

always for hér, in fear & joy for hér  
whose gesture summons ever when I grieve  
me back and is my mage and minister. (CP 47)

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<sup>123</sup> Berryman, "The State of American Writing" 857.

<sup>124</sup> Freud 66. Cit. Arpin 23.

<sup>125</sup> The others are "Rock-Study with Wanderer" and "The Lightning", the latter of which enjoyed a brief popularity upon first publication largely based upon the line "My love loves chocolate, she loves also me" (CP 55).

The terza rima stanzas of “Canto Amor” are the first among Berryman’s published work to employ the ampersand. The text’s diacritical marks and telescoped syntax demonstrate an awareness of the poem as both static and dynamic force, written and spoken entity, that enables him to “work with optimum freedom within the tight constraints of a difficult form”.<sup>126</sup> Its effect, moreover, is to re-cast the poem from the New Critics’ verbal icon “which the masters make / out of their minds” into a “flowing ceremony of trouble and light” (CP 48) – yet we cannot shake the suspicion that the word “trouble” is key here. For as long as the “fear & joy” of union is based upon the mourning of its absence in the wider world, the “ancient wound” of separation and fall, (CP 47) “Canto Amor” will continue to betray a deep unease regarding this marriage’s true potential for renewal. Though the speaker’s wife “[d]ance[s]” to his music, her response can stave off despair only temporarily; her voice, we learn, has the power to “spell” the approaching “tempest”, (CP 49) yet the text allocates her no words of her own. With its final, desperate imperative “Sigh then beyond my song: whirl & rejoice!” (CP 49) “Canto Amor” implies that the longing of the embattled self for succour and companionship that characterises Berryman’s engagements with contemporary society throughout The Dispossessed has yet to be salved fully. However, the attentive scholar cannot help but observe that, as he revised its lines in 1947, his declaration that “Marriage is the second music” (CP 48) would be further undermined by the concurrent enactment of this desire for the union of “I” and “you” on a far more private stage. The Sonnets to Chris that Berryman was composing feverishly alongside the concluding works of his first book evidence not just his continued exploration of the possibilities for expression “within the tight constraints of a difficult form”<sup>127</sup> but an earlier breakthrough into what he termed a poetics of “personality” than is commonly critically supposed.<sup>128</sup> Though overlooked frequently throughout the history of Berryman studies,<sup>129</sup> these sonnets verse a compelling account of yet another violent

<sup>126</sup> Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry 44.

<sup>127</sup> Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry 44.

<sup>128</sup> See for example Berryman’s comment to a Harvard Advocate interview team in 1968 on “my strong disagreement with Eliot’s line – the impersonality of poetry... I’m very much against that; it seems to me on the contrary that poetry comes out of personality” (Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5). Sarah Provost and Luke Spencer have argued that Berryman’s 1953 long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet represents his first breakthrough into the “personal” (Sarah Provost, “Erato’s Fool and Bitter Sister: Two Aspects of John Berryman,” Twentieth Century Literature 30 (1984): 69-79, at 69; Luke Spencer, “Mistress Bradstreet and Mr. Berryman: The Ultimate Seduction,” American Literature 66 (1994): 353-66, at 353-54).

<sup>129</sup> John Haffenden’s influential book John Berryman: A Critical Commentary directs the reader seeking information about Sonnets to Chris to his own authorised biography of the poet, “since Berryman’s life and the writing of that sequence unfolded *pari passu*... [and] a critical analysis of the sonnets *qua* sonnets is beyond my immediate interest” (John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (London: Macmillan, 1980) 3-4). More recently, Brendan Cooper “make[s] no apology” for their absence from his study of Berryman’s “major contribution[s] to twentieth-century American poetry” (Brendan Cooper, Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry (Oxford: Lang, 2009) 10); the

“storm” in the poet’s literary life: the struggle between “Loyalty and Art”, (CP 78) manifested as a quest to determine the extent of art’s independence from both the literary and the moral tradition.

Berryman’s 117-poem sequence Sonnets to Chris chronicles an adulterous love affair that unfolded with the summer of 1947, during its author’s tenure as Associate in Creative Writing at Princeton. The extant original manuscript indicates the main body text to have been composed over an intense five- to seven-month period, with the final draft of Sonnet 111 completed on September 30. The collection, however, was subsequently laid aside until its publication as Berryman’s Sonnets in April 1967 – twenty years to the month the sexual relationship began.<sup>130</sup> Berryman’s decision to publish on the eve of the anniversary would appear to represent a vindication of his comment just a few months after finishing the sequence: “Man is redeemable *in time* if not in history or eternity.”<sup>131</sup> Time, without doubt, had informed his willingness to make the liaison public. The poet had divorced his then-spouse Eileen in 1956, and since borne children of two subsequent wives; the decades had seen him ascend the ranks of American letters to take the Pulitzer Prize for 77 Dream Songs. And it is, appropriately, the Dream Song medium – which Berryman would continue to work in until 1968’s His Toy, His Dream, His Rest – that provides the reader’s first insight into his lingering ambivalence about offering such an intensely private verse for public consumption. Affixed to the bundle sent to his publisher, Robert Giroux, in August 1966, the epigraph to Sonnets to Chris is pure Dream Song in its accents and ampersands:

*He made, a thousand years ago, a-many songs  
for an Excellent lady, wif whom he was in wuv,  
shall now he publish them?*

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sequence also merits no mention in Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993).

<sup>130</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 187. As Charles Thornbury has observed, the composition history of Sonnets to Chris presents “a Joycean puzzle for... editors”. Two versions of its text are held in the JBPs: a handwritten manuscript (TS-1) prefaced “Sonnets to Chris and ‘John Berryman’ with the... date 1947” and featuring handwritten emendations from the period (Charles Thornbury, ed. and introd., John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937-1971 (London: Faber, 1991) 303); and a carbon typescript of this original (CTS-C), which Berryman would use as copy-text in August 1966. Preparing the volume for publication, Berryman made some thirty-two changes to the CTS-C, mainly principal characters’ names (most notably the substitution of “Lise” for “Chris”) and the names of places, none of which were based upon his changes to TS-1. He also composed an epigraph and seven new sonnets for the sequence (107 and 112-17 in CP), two of which (115 and 116 in CP) were not included in the 1967 Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition of Berryman’s Sonnets due to their being sent to the publisher too late for printing. In John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937-1971 Thornbury incorporates these 1966 pieces but chooses to use TS-1 as copy-text, believing this arrangement to best represent “the artistic integrity” of the work (Thornbury, CP 304). Given that my primary focus in this chapter is upon Berryman’s literary evolution during the late 1940s, it is to Thornbury’s version of the sequence that I refer throughout, including the title Sonnets to Chris that Berryman gave the poems at the time of their composition.

<sup>131</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196.



*Has he the right, upon that old young man,  
to bare his nervous system  
& display all the clouds again as they were above?*

*As a friend of the Court I would say, Let them die.  
What does anything matter? Burn them up,  
put them in a bank vault.  
I thought of that and when I returned to this country  
I took them out again. The original fault  
will not be undone by fire. (CP 70)*

The mytho-heroic intimations of “*a thousand years ago*”, the courtly reverence for this “*Excellent lady*”, are swiftly punctured by a mocking baby-talk characteristic of Berryman’s Dream Song protagonist, Henry.<sup>132</sup> What these sonnets in fact reveal, their epigraph suggests, are the spasms of a naïvely juvenile “*nervous system*”, sub-Wordsworthian in its Romantically cloudlorn gaze. No use to any true “*friend of the Court*” (whether, it seems, the divorce-court or “Arthur[’s]... at Caerlon” (CP 94)) their only worth is as money in a “*bank vault*”, cashing in upon the commercial success of Berryman’s later work.<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, with the poet’s concession in the lines that follow that still the command has been issued to “*let boys & girls with these old songs have holiday*”, (CP 70) it is evident that this text functions to invite scrutiny in spite of its own warning. Berryman’s epigraph to Sonnets to Chris extends a deliberate invitation not just to lovers but to scholars, for what the sequence also evinces is a growing distance from his former literary models. His first full-length volume The Dispossessed, published in May 1948, would manifest the writer’s struggles to first incorporate, then evade the New Critical influences of his mentors at Columbia and beyond; its earliest poems rely upon the fixed and impersonal gaze of the poet-as-craftsman to order the trappings of everyday life into “Items... to make a history”. (CP 271) Sonnets to Chris, by contrast, ushers in new intimacies of subject matter. With their secretive porch trysts and bar-room despairs, these texts relinquish the meditative-descriptive mode in favour of a poetics employing a *personality* from which “to make a history” – in short, a poetics with the potential to transform personal experience into art, and the art of the love lyric into a conduit for the vicissitudes of post-war American life.

As Gary Arpin has stated, “[Berryman’s] choice of the sonnet sequence was a clear... move toward finding his own form – a step backward in order to take two steps forward.”<sup>134</sup> But why “step backward” to the sonnet sequence in particular? The oeuvres

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<sup>132</sup> Compare for example Dream Song 5: “Henry sats in de bar & was odd, / off in the glass from the glass, / at odds wif de world & its god” (DS 5).

<sup>133</sup> For full discussion of the financial motivations behind the publication of Berryman’s Sonnets, see Thornbury, CP 304-6.

<sup>134</sup> Arpin 36.

of those American modernists of his own century he admired, such as Pound and Williams, suggest that they had little time for the form; almost a year before his birth, the influential Poetry editor Harriet Monroe had declared the sonnet “an exhausted form, whose every shade of cadence has been worked out and repeated until there are no more surprises left”.<sup>135</sup> Berryman’s 1947 diary notes on Sonnets to Chris, however, highlight the perverse aptness of the choice. The futile affair, “[a] bone sunned white”, (CP 71) is commemorated and ritualised through repetition of the dead form, a form whose prime original employment was as love lyric.<sup>136</sup> As the poet observed:

I had several things in mind. I wanted *one form*... in order to record (form, master) what happened. Well, but not an invented form – I wanted a *familiar* form in which to *put* the *new*. Clearly a sonnet sequence. And this gave me a wonderful sense of continuity with lovers dead.<sup>137</sup>

“[C]ontinuity with lovers dead”: just the phrase. The Petrarchan sonnet form Berryman adopted for his sequence dates from the thirteenth century,<sup>138</sup> and the poet spans a still wider breadth of history in praise of his beloved’s beauty; the early sonnets place Chris atop a podium that includes the Sumerian Queen Shub-ad, (CP 103) Tristan’s Isotta and Helen of Troy. (CP 74) The lost literary past serves as a context against which he can define his own personal experience.<sup>139</sup> Sonnet 15, the only text to cite its source explicitly, continues the trend. A re-working of Wyatt’s “My galley charged with forgetfulness” (itself a sixteenth-century translation of Petrarch’s Sonnet 189), Berryman’s poem assimilates The Dispossessed’s recurrent motifs of nightfall, storm and winter into the content of both its parent texts. Like in the Wyatt piece, the proliferating weather images here function repeatedly as objective correlative, evoking their emotive referents “Rain of tears, real, mist of imagined scorn”.<sup>140</sup> (CP 78) Berryman, however, has replaced this earlier work’s end-stopped lines with a run-on lineation in the octave that emphasises the “Endless” mental torment of this liaison. For where Wyatt and his fellow Renaissance writers viewed romantic love as a dangerous fall from order and self-control, in which

<sup>135</sup> Harriet Monroe, cit. Ian Hamilton, The Little Magazines: A Study of Six Editors (London: Weidenfeld, 1976) 52.

<sup>136</sup> John Fuller, The Sonnet, The Critical Idiom 26 (London: Methuen, 1972) 6.

<sup>137</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 177.

<sup>138</sup> Berryman’s “Petrarchan” model in fact also owes a great deal to the Tuscan poet Guitone d’Arezzo, who introduced the closed octave rhyme *abbaabba*, now an established feature of the Italian sonnet (Fuller 4).

<sup>139</sup> David K. Weiser, “Berryman’s Sonnets: In and Out of the Tradition,” American Literature 55 (1983): 388-404, at 396.

<sup>140</sup> Compare Wyatt’s line “A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain, / Hath done the wearied cords great hinderance” (Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, “My galley charged with forgetfulness,” The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2000) 528).

“[d]rowned is reason that should me comfort”,<sup>141</sup> Berryman can find no “clear signs” to direct or categorise his actions. His indecision over the affair and its chronicle in verse leaves him quite literally all at sea:

No rest accords the fraying shrouds, all thwart  
Already with mistakes, foresight so short.  
Muffled in capes of waves my clear signs, torn,  
Hitherto most clear, – Loyalty and Art.  
And I begin now to despair of port. (CP 78)

Loyalty, we might well ask, to a wife and publishable work – or to the transporting passion of a locked drawer of secret sonnets? The conjunction of the text’s penultimate phrase functions simultaneously as a division, and the teasing ambiguity that results is just one reason why, as David Weiser states, “[a]s a psychological study of the lover’s changing mood, [Berryman’s] poem is the most effective of the three”.<sup>142</sup> Yet Weiser’s comment also reminds us that it is in the context “of the three” poems that Sonnet 15 gains much of its impact. The capitalisation of nouns and the archaic diction of “all thwart” and “love’s fret” reinforce the fact that however anguished the poet’s “sighs and veering hopes”, (CP 78) his central conceit – of love as tumultuous sea-voyage – is a borrowing from Petrarch-through-Wyatt. Indeed, the paradox inherent within Berryman’s “[l]oyalty” to the literary past poses a major dilemma for his sequence. He wishes to avoid “cloying” his lady’s contemporary ear (she is not, after all, a reader of poetry) with the old love-tropes; (CP 82) they are empty clichés, their conventions as fatigued as his modernist forefathers believed the sonnet form to be. Despite this, as Sonnet 23 concedes, the lexicon of the romance-tradition remains the lovelorn poet’s only tool, the yardstick against which both writer and reader will measure any individual experience:

Also I fox ‘heart’, striking a modern breast  
Hollow as a drum, and ‘beauty’ I taboo;  
I want a verse fresh as a bubble breaks,  
As little false . . . Blood of my sweet unrest  
Runs all the same – I am in love with you –  
Trapped in my rib-cage something throes and aches! (CP 82)

To accede to Weiser’s description of Sonnets to Chris as a “process of creative imitation”<sup>143</sup> on this basis would, nevertheless, be something of a simplification.

Berryman has read Petrarch’s story, yes, but after doing so, he notes, “Anew I studied

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<sup>141</sup> Wyatt, “My galley charged with forgetfulness,” The Norton Anthology of English Literature 528.

<sup>142</sup> Weiser 402.

<sup>143</sup> Weiser 388.

mine.” (CP 108) Sonnet 75’s sestet mounts an explicit comparison with the Italian poet’s enduring infatuation:

Also there was Laura and three-seventeen  
Sonnets to something like her . . . twenty-one years . . .  
He never touched her. Swirl our crimes and crimes.  
Gold-haired (too), dark-eyed, ignorant of rimes  
Was she? Virtuous? (CP 108)

Swirl our crimes and *c*-rimes; Berryman *has* touched his own not-so-“[v]irtuous” paramour, and his remorse over the guilty months to follow is inextricably tangled with the bragging pride that leads him to question the honour of even Petrarch’s Laura. Whilst these sonnets draw heavily upon more than eight centuries of love lyrics past, it is equally clear that, as Edward Brunner states, “Berryman, as a poet-protagonist, position[s] himself as restlessly moving between past and present, measuring each in terms of the other.”<sup>144</sup> The morally compromised terrain of post-war America, with its cocktail-parties and consumerist gratifications, has been superimposed upon the star-crossed lovers template. The poet may present himself as bookishly aloof from his surrounds, “*Ermite-amateur* in the midst of the boobs”, (CP 97) but his complex and highly personal idiom of Latinate erudition and Forties slang is a nativised model betraying his true cultural situation. A juke-box plays as he sits alone in “[a]n ice-cream-soda jag”; (CP 97) his beloved has a dangerous “[a]mour with Scotch”, (CP 89) forcing him to deliver her “sky-high” to her unsuspecting husband. (CP 80) He reminds himself that, whilst disapproving tongues may “trill malice”, (CP 96) modern law permits one to dissolve a marriage, but nonetheless is left paralysed as the sequence unfolds, compulsively questioning the assertion: can such “*wickedness*” ever be justified in the name of love? Sonnet 3 illustrates neatly the conflict of values with which Berryman is confronted. For all “those ages” past, the theft of a rose “through its fence” had incurred the penalty of “blood”, fingers lacerated by thorn. In the newly post-war world, as mass consumerism began to escalate and social strictures to relax, the “bare stems” are laid temptingly on display for any taker with money in his pocket. “[T]he peppery apple” of forbidden knowledge, it would seem, has been made “good / With boredom”; (CP 72) unlike Eve, Chris in these sonnets does not offer the forbidden fruit to her paramour, for it has already been eaten down to the rotten core.<sup>145</sup> However, as the octave of Sonnet 3 draws to a close, the poem’s volta brings to the fore

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<sup>144</sup> Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Chicago, IL: U of Illinois P, 2001) 124.

<sup>145</sup> J. M. Linebarger, “Berryman’s Sonnets: Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Concerning Poetry* 6 (1973): 19-29, at 20.

the recurrent images of guilt and fall that continue to “ghost” these texts. Alone in the storm-tossed night of the soul, the adulterous scholar cannot escape his conscience:

We think our rents  
Paid, and we nod. O but ghosts crown, dense,  
Down in the dark shop bare stems with their Should

Not! Should Not sleepwalks where no clocks agree! (CP 72)

The lacuna that divides octave from sestet and “Should” from “Not” functions to highlight Berryman’s predicament; man may be “redeemable *in time*”,<sup>146</sup> but in eternity, “where no clocks agree”, the interdiction “Should Not” persists. The liaison with Chris offers a tantalising glimpse of a new Eden which is also, conversely, a dispossession from its grounds.

Sonnets to Chris, then, could be said to enact the motions of a fundamentally divided personality, vacillating between “Loyalty and Art”, (CP 78) marital and natural law and reason and passion. Where the earliest poems of The Dispossessed would rely upon the fixed New Critical vision to order their chaotic external surrounds, this sequence posits Berryman’s own compromised mind as the only available source of coherence. The result is an ideological and narrative uncertainty that, as the sonnets progress, works to inhabit and destabilise the trajectory of the recorded affair. Arpin observes succinctly that the poet “has allied himself with the side of disruption rather than integration”<sup>147</sup> in these songs of adulterous love that “dance to disannul”. (CP 87) Sonnet 45 describes the consequences for the formerly static first-person pronoun; “I am this strange thing I despised; you are. / To become ourselves we are these wayward things.” (CP 93) The anxious persona has fractured under the weight of its own indecision; it can find no succour in the Forties’ “wayward” moral landscape.<sup>148</sup> Its sole comfort therefore lies in identification with the source of its crisis, the beloved. Berryman’s duplicitous behaviour renders him unrecognisable, even contemptible, to himself, but Chris is his broken mirror, affirming and reflecting his image amidst and as part of the chaos: if “I am” “strange”, “despi[cable]”, “you are”; I am you; we are. Sonnet 45 proposes a metaphysical union with its love-object, a process of total assumption that transcends the physical to the syntactical plane. In following the likes of Donne, however, Berryman is also the butt of

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<sup>146</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196.

<sup>147</sup> Arpin 39.

<sup>148</sup> Berryman would, in fact, question in one “memo” affixed to his early Sonnets to Chris papers, “how much change is compatible with a continuous identity?” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 4).

that poet's old joke, *undone*,<sup>149</sup> for Sonnet 36 has already revealed his method to be by no means infallible:

Unsleeping, I implore you (dear) pursue  
In darkness me, as I do you again  
Instantly we part . . . only me both then  
And when your fingers fall, let there be two  
Only, 'in that dream-kingdom': I would have you  
Me alone recognise your citizen. (CP 88)

The poem's active pursuit of its "dear" is emphasised by the double-stressed internal rhyme "I do you again"; the desire for union is a simultaneous pledge of commitment to the "incredible marriage" (CP 98) such passion could occasion, bringing together "I" and "you" permanently. Yet the following line's statement "Instantly we part" serves to bring its author's most ardent hopes back down to earth. As Berryman approaches his beloved, she retreats with equal haste, her absence creating an ellipsis in the text; on the other side is the lone poet, "only me", playing out both parts of the dialogue. The vision of two souls as one is relegated to a "dream-kingdom", that of the literary past his post-war present has irreversibly modified. Sonnet 36's strenuous enactment of this idealised union has, it seems, only raised further questions about the semantic gap it strives to cover, and invited further uncertainty in: after all, to what extent is it possible to define the self in and through another if that other is so rarely present?

If, then, as Robert Mazzocco suggests, Berryman's sonnet sequence functions as its own "heart-shaped irony",<sup>150</sup> the greatest irony of all lies in its portrayal of Chris. The poems locate her "high fire" (CP 89) at the centre of every song and every despair. Composing her, they are composed of her, and her tantalising promises to fuse the lovers' two selves permeate each line; Berryman explains, "Double I sing, I must, your utraquist, / Crumpling a syntax at a sudden need."<sup>151</sup> (CP 94) This "[c]rumpling" occurs at the semantic level, too, with Sonnet 27's fervent wish that "my synchrisis / Teases you". (CP 84) His sin Chris is; his sin is moral crisis; the poet's syncretism amalgamates the word's various inflections, from the Latinate to the vernacular. Worthy of note here, however, is Alex

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<sup>149</sup> Sonnets 45 and 89 allude explicitly to the seventeenth-century poet John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, describing the young Berryman as "in Donne" (CP 93) and "Donne-mimetic" (CP 115); compare the former's punning upon his name in "A Hymn to God the Father": "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more" (John Donne, *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1996) 348).

<sup>150</sup> Robert Mazzocco, "Harlequin in Hell," rev. of *Berryman's Sonnets*, by John Berryman, *New York Review of Books* 29 Jun. 1967: 12-16, at 12.

<sup>151</sup> As the *Oxford English Dictionary* states, the word "utraquist" signifies both one "insisting on, or advocating the receiving the Communion in both kinds" (i.e. the cup as well as the bread) and "one who composes in both Latin and the vernacular" ("Utraquist, n. and adj.," *OED Online*, June 2012 (Oxford UP) 6 Sep. 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/220796?redirectedFrom=utraquist>>).

Runchman’s observation that each of the obscure appellations he so gleefully juggles in Sonnets to Chris “is liable to disrupt this [text] preoccupied with breakages by sending its readers to the dictionary”.<sup>152</sup> Berryman’s manuscript posits Chris as its implied reader, a woman who, he is forced to concede, “poetry... / less than music stir[s] to”. (CP 82) Her retreat from these sonnets’ nervous idiom is inevitable, much as her repeated withdrawal from the union Sonnet 36 proposes. For what her “utraqvist” is really composing here, it would seem, are “Lies” – an implication contained within the pseudonym (“Lise”) he would give her upon the volume’s 1967 publication. It is impossible for Berryman to capture Chris in verse; her identity slips and wavers, from Astrophel’s Stella to that of an oilman’s tomboyish daughter (CP 113) and a “SS woman” (CP 125) who tortures her mate and takes pleasure in his cries. Whilst Mazzocco attributes her “vaguely theatrical presence”<sup>153</sup> to poor characterisation alone, the evidence suggests her blurred and largely absent figure to represent a deeper instability at the heart of Sonnets to Chris’ post-war romance. The poet and his beloved “should have been together seething years”, (CP 113) but the years lost to them are fundamentally irretrievable. In Sonnet 91, Chris’ confession of a past indiscretion has the effect of shaking his assumption of a mutual “we” to its core:

Itself a lightning-flash, ripping the ‘dark  
Backward’ of you-before, you harrowed me  
How you and the wild boy (larcener-to-be)  
Took horses out one night, full in the stark  
Pre-storm midnight blackness, for a lark,  
.....

How can we know with whom we ride, or soon  
Or later, ever? You . . what are you like? (CP 116)

The “larcener-to-be” is also a “larcener”-to-me, making off with a piece of history Berryman cannot share. Nevertheless, this resented “wild boy” figures simultaneously as a vehicle for further revelation: the poet’s own literary “ride” with Chris is the profoundest betrayal of all their wicked acts, for he has subsumed her personality beneath his desire to find a reflection of his uncertain self in the external world. Where Petrarch captured “something like” Laura, (CP 108) the twentieth-century writer can only shake his head, muttering “what are you like?” The ellipsis in the sestet’s second line divides Chris’ true self insurmountably from its enchanting and chameleonic literary “like[ness]”. As the affair plays out in verse it is increasingly evident that the most important “fall” Berryman

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<sup>152</sup> Alex Runchman, “‘Continuity with lovers dead’: Berryman, Lowell, and the Twentieth-Century American Sonnet,” After thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 29-44, at 39.

<sup>153</sup> Mazzocco 14.

will suffer in his love-throes is a descent from idealisation to realisation.<sup>154</sup> Having failed to “make a history” (CP 271) of his own compromised and unstable personality, or to construct its self-affirming reflection through semantic union with a fantasy beloved, his sonnets confront him with a history based upon ellipses and lacunae, and a mnemonic process based upon irretrievable loss. The “dream-kingdom” has failed; Chris/Lise emerges in these poems as less Berryman’s Muse than “a sort of anti-Muse”<sup>155</sup> of a text which pivots upon her absence. As the poet waits alone for his lady to arrive, the days of lack “devour” rather than stimulate memory. (CP 91) Concluding with not a vision of Chris’ beauty but a series of dislocated allusions to Penelope’s suitors in Ithaca, Sonnet 91, Milton Gilman summarises, “look[s] like pieces of shrapnel from major wars the meanings of which were long ago forgotten”.<sup>156</sup>

From Petrarch and Wyatt as influences, then, to the myth-mad Don Quixote (CP 114) and Kafka’s officer denied epiphany “In The Penal Colony”. (CP 73) Chris’ fleeting figure in the sonnets calls Berryman’s authority over his own past into question. Her absence-in-presence, moreover, invites a re-vision of the sequence in which repeated “fraud of the Law” (CP 93) betrays a wider preoccupation with *Freud’s* law – that is, the conscious and unconscious drives governing the motions of the human personality in society. Sonnet 79, as Paul Mariani has observed, supports this reading. The poem sings a dream remembered, and is accordingly composed of fractured images and missing semantic connections; set in an asylum, its subject is Berryman’s guilty theft of “a quart of milk”. Panicked, he attempts to conceal the item “among some worm- / shot volumes of the N.E.D. I had / On the top shelf”, yet his efforts are in vain: Chris materialises, this time “in a matron’s uniform”, to take it from his hands. (CP 110) Paraphrased thus, this sonnet’s Freudian implications verge upon the comic. Chris becomes “a substitute for [Berryman’s] mother, a way of approaching the forbidden”;<sup>157</sup> the sexual theft translates into a poetry that, for all its high-toned literariness, is smutty top-shelf material. The conflicting urges of guilt and lust this affair provokes, it seems, have the potential to threaten its chronicler’s grasp upon reality. And it remains notable that Berryman’s motives for escaping the reality of his relationship with Chris are fully understandable. Sonnets such as 79 continue to ghost the narrative trajectory of the sequence with a dream-world that offers succour in the form of “calenture for the boiling brain”.<sup>158</sup> (CP 90) Where the fantasy of union persists,

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<sup>154</sup> Milton Gilman, “Berryman and the Sonnets,” Chelsea 12 (1968): 158-169, at 162.

<sup>155</sup> Provost 72.

<sup>156</sup> Gilman 163.

<sup>157</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 193.

<sup>158</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines “calenture” as “[a] disease incident to sailors within the tropics, characterized by delirium in which the patient, it is said, fancies the sea to be green fields, and desires to leap



the fevered metaphors of the romance-tradition enable the poet to share the burden of transgression; it is Chris who takes the stolen milk from Berryman, Chris who cast “the spell” on him, fulfilling the ancient trope of the “witchwife” seductress. (CP 119) However, as he wakes in Sonnet 103 to yet another day of helpless longing, it is evident that the chaotic post-war world can no longer sustain the old fictions. He may claim “a ‘broken heart’”, but his own experience calls the cliché into question; it is his *arm* that acts as repository for the psychological agonies engendered by Chris’ absence. The text’s deliberate disruption of the figure of speech highlights the divided personality’s sense of strangeness to itself. The stricken limb no longer figures as “my arm” but as “[a] piece of pain joined to me, helpless dumb thing”. (CP 122) It serves as a goading reminder of Berryman’s inability to take decisive action regarding the liaison:

After four months of work-destroying love  
 (An hour, I still don’t lift it: I feel real alarm:  
 Weeks of this, – no doctor finds a thing),  
 not much; and not all. Still, this is something. (CP 122)

“[T]his is something” indeed; Sonnet 103’s “pain[s]” represent The Dispossessed’s “epistemology of loss” (CP 11) made flesh, the absence-in-presence of an infatuation with what is unattainable. Yet its off-kilter pentameter, crucially, also contains the first seeds of a wry self-mockery: what gravitas can we award our battle-scarred hero when we learn that he is ultimately suffering from nothing more serious than tennis elbow?

The evidence suggests that neither “wayward” Forties society nor the poet’s darling herself can be held fully accountable for the “wickedness” that Sonnets to Chris so lovingly records. In August 1966, as the affair’s twenty-year anniversary beckoned, Berryman would compose an epigraph and seven additional sonnets for the sequence, which he forwarded to his editor Robert Giroux in the wake of the work’s 1947 carbon typescript.<sup>159</sup> Taken as a whole, these new poems provide a newly measured response to their precursors’ “throes and aches”. (CP 82) Charles Thornbury elaborates:

Once we know that [numbers 107 and 112-17] were written in 1966 (by not capitalising the initial letter of each new line in the 1967 edition, Berryman alerted readers that these poems are in some way set apart), we may read them as a coda to the narrative and a re-vision of his younger self.<sup>160</sup>

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into it” (“Calenture, n.,” OED Online, June 2012 (Oxford UP) 6 Sep. 2012

<<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/26323?rskey=cCO5sV&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

<sup>159</sup> Two of these 1966 poems (115 and 116 in CP) were omitted from the Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition of Berryman’s Sonnets “because they were sent to the publisher after the collection was in press” (Thornbury, CP 304).

<sup>160</sup> Thornbury, CP 304.

1947 had seen Berryman employ the forms and values of the lost literary past to portray his contemporary situation. Twenty years later, a more experienced present informs his perception of his own personal history. He had hoped man to be “redeemable *in time*”,<sup>161</sup> but what emerges in these postscript sonnets is not redemption but deft, gleeful mockery of that “*old young man*” (CP 70) the sequence’s epigraph introduces: a figure steeped in love-tropes and unwilling to accept that “the future” of his summer romance was already written, “with & in us” all along. (CP 126) Sonnet 107 offers a succinct parody of the couple’s so-called “knock-down-and-drag-out love”. (CP 119) The young poet’s overblown angst at waiting “O for your footfall” (CP 124) is re-assessed and found wanting, for, it seems, the end of this affair was no blow but a “[s]oft [k]nock”:

The University of Soft Knocks

will headlines in the *Times* make: Fellow goes mad,  
crowd panics, rhododendrons injured. Slow  
will flow the obituaries while the facts get straight,  
almost straight. He was in love and he was had.  
That was it: he should have stuck to his own mate,  
before he went a-conning across the sea-O. (CP 124)

Berryman may have weathered metaphorical storms with Petrarch, but now only the bare facts remain: “[h]e was in love and he was had”. The sestet recalls Sonnet 70’s prior lamentation “Vize and woe worked us this perfect image!” (CP 105) and as the volume draws to a close, that line’s full range of semantic implications is played out. The performance of love’s “perfect image” was central to Berryman’s poetic vision in the 1947 sonnets. Ritual repetition of a traditional form provided a platform for intensely private song, whilst fulfilling simultaneously the poet’s urge to “record (form, master)”<sup>162</sup> a chain of events over which he had little control.<sup>163</sup> In order to win Chris’s heart, he made all the right moves, “play[ing] the friendly joker”; (CP 85) in the throes of their passion, he is her “clown”, dancing for joy on the stage of his text. In Sonnet 100, however, we find an early intimation of the reality that underlies the guise:

Burnt cork, my leer, my Groucho crouch and rush,  
No more my nature than Cyrano’s: we  
Are ‘hindered characters’ and mock the time... (CP 120)<sup>164</sup>

<sup>161</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, *Life* 196.

<sup>162</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, *Life* 177.

<sup>163</sup> Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* 62.

<sup>164</sup> As Conarroe notes, the “[b]urnt cork” reference here may feasibly be construed as an early gesture towards the genesis of *The Dream Songs*’ Henry, “another ‘hindered character’” who performs in his various guises (including that of a blackface minstrel) upon the American stage (Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* 67-68).

Like *Cyrano*, the French dramatist who gained fame through his fictionalised autobiography, Berryman in his Sonnets to Chris is a “hindered character”, his vision of self reliant upon false hope. Whilst his and Chris’ secretive car-seat couplings are a *vice*, they have also necessitated the donning of a *visor* – the mask of the committed lover, shoring up the divided post-war “I” even as it whispers the interdiction “Should Not!” (CP 72) Twenty years’ distance has enabled the mask to slip, and Berryman to acknowledge the role of his own self-deception in the affair’s final, futile months. As Arpin observes:

[Chris] is, the affair is, a vehicle for self-knowledge, a way for the poet, almost against his will, to see himself. [Chris] directs the poet’s gaze, not toward a far-removed ideal beauty, but inward, toward a more painful and unpleasant vision.<sup>165</sup>

In Sonnets to Chris, Berryman looked in his heart and wrote; the “original fault” (CP 70) described in the work’s epigraph perhaps lay in his supposing that chronicling an adulterous affair in verse might constitute some sort of atonement.<sup>166</sup> What survives both Chris and their mutual “*wickedness*”, nevertheless, is the poetry. The sequence begins as an extended lament for the “work-destroying love” (CP 122) that has brought these sonnets into being; their covert accumulation is a further source of guilt, and further cause of the poet’s neglecting his proper labours. Yet the concluding poems of the volume represent Berryman’s first steps towards not just re-vision but inversion of this early phrase. Whilst work may not “destroy” love, its enduring legacy in verse has the potential to eclipse a temporary passion; to convey both the weight of what has been lost (a love-affair, yes, but also a faithful marriage) and the individual’s sense of responsibility for the chaos that surrounds him. In Sonnet 117’s account of the poet’s final vigil for his lady, the objective correlative is employed to a new purpose:

The weather’s changing. This morning was cold,  
as I made to the grove, without expectation,  
some hundred Sonnets in my pocket, old,  
to read her if she came. Presently the sun  
yellowed the pines & my lady came not  
in blue jeans & a sweater. I sat down & wrote. (CP 129)

The torrid heat of the summer months has cooled beyond recognition; Chris will “c[o]me not”, returning instead to her husband and child. Left alone in their lovers’ grove, the poet’s thoughts turn with the sonnet’s volta from the past to the future, from erotic to textual conquests: “I sat down & wrote”. Sonnets to Chris’s re-vision of departed love,

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<sup>165</sup> Arpin 41-42.

<sup>166</sup> Runchman 38.

one might conclude, functions ultimately as not a moral but a literary redemption; the collection posits a re-conception of the poem as epistemological interrogation, in which the dead forms of the past inform and inhabit the present day. It is often stated that a key feature of the Italian sonnet is its lack of terminal couplet,<sup>167</sup> and it is with no surprise that we learn in the volume's last works that the figure of Chris has ghosted the poet "for years, above, below, / & through to interrupt my study". (CP 127) The breakthrough into the personal that this homage "to something like her" (CP 108) represents, its ongoing preoccupation with "the modern world, and memory, and wants",<sup>168</sup> was to have repercussions for Berryman's oeuvre reaching far beyond Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, the long poem he began less than six months after completing the original sonnet sequence. Chris is the ideal "text", the fixed New Critical vision that his work has "broken down". (CP 127) The poet could not sustain the old love-tropes and the chivalric visor; without them, what comes to the fore is not a real human woman but a lacuna composed of absence, loss and uncertainty. If Berryman could not capture Chris in verse, he was forced instead to write what remained of himself, producing a volume that upon its eventual publication in April 1967, would be, tellingly, re-titled Berryman's Sonnets by Robert Giroux.

Worthy of final note here is Roy Pascal's characterisation of the "artist[ic]" life-narrative, as described in his seminal work Design and Truth in Autobiography:

[It] becomes possible and distinctive when... the personality is marked not so much by its private adventures as its peculiar eager response to the impacts of experience, when at all moments we see the *how* as much as the *what* of this response.<sup>169</sup>

The sum of Berryman's sonnets is, evidently, far more than a confession of "wickedness" – as he was to inform Peter Stitt in one of his last interviews, "I personally haven't been to confession since I was twelve years old."<sup>170</sup> What Sonnets to Chris instead affirms is the poet's mission in society: to chronicle the motions of the divided post-war personality as it struggles to navigate "[t]he epistemology of loss" (CP 11) comprising its own existence, and to record that personality's "peculiar eager response to the impacts of experience". With a syntax not so much "crumpl[ed]" as tortured in order to accommodate their formal

<sup>167</sup> See for example Fuller 3-4.

<sup>168</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 102.

<sup>169</sup> Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography (London: Routledge, 1960) 147.

<sup>170</sup> John Berryman, "The Art of Poetry," interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 21.

constraints, these texts comprise a “stumbling breakthrough”,<sup>171</sup> to be sure. The reader’s repeated trips to the dictionary cannot help but cost a degree of emotional intimacy; whatever their claims, they do not “hunt the whole / House” (CP 114) of humanity through. Yet the best poems of the sequence break through to us all the same, offering a startlingly fresh perspective on Berryman’s career-long struggle for a responsible mode of being in an increasingly chaotic world.

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<sup>171</sup> Mazzocco 14.

## CHAPTER 2: “EIGHT POEMS” AND HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET

### 2.1 “The Future has Ceased to Exist”: Sociopolitical Dissatisfaction in “Eight Poems”

As the galleys of The Dispossessed moved through the press, the culmination of a dozen years’ poetic labour was prompting John Berryman to reconsider the terms of his own relationship to literary tradition. His review-essay “Waiting for the End, Boys”, first published in February 1948’s Partisan Review, had opened with the combative statement “The word ‘modern’ now seems less important. It is not easy now to imagine a poet attempting to be modern... one certainly has a sense that some period is drawing to a close.”<sup>1</sup> Six months later, in a symposium on “The State of American Writing” arranged by the same periodical, the poet was more specific in articulating his grievances. If, as Partisan Review’s editors proposed, “*the general opinion [was] that, unlike the twenties, this is not a period of experiment in language or form*”,<sup>2</sup> then to Berryman it followed that

the return-to-form in poetry during the last ten years wants general study. Now the inevitable bias, in an academic criticism, against “experiment” and in favor of “form,” is wretched equipment for this task. In poetry, too, the process of steadying has been assisted – not to its gain – by wide academic instruction in the hands of writers...<sup>3</sup>

Coming from a writer who had just agreed to a further year’s tenure as Resident Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton (on Richard Blackmur’s recommendation, no less), this latter statement was particularly audacious; indeed, it was intended to be so. In the years since his own graduation, Berryman had seen the New Critical literary school – as exemplified by the work of his former mentor Mark Van Doren, and Van Doren’s contemporaries Blackmur, Ransom and Tate – rise to unprecedented prominence in America’s universities. The New Critical vision centred upon what James Longenbach terms an “implicit equation of modernism with formalism, mere craft, and... hierarchy”; the texts it promoted manifested a sensibility carefully shaped by nominated specialists in verse to be harmonious and unified.<sup>4</sup> With a manifesto that stated persuasively, “Formal versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance to the reader... that the poet is in

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” Partisan Review 15 (1948): 254-67. Rpt. as “Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys” in TFOTP 297-309, at 297.

<sup>2</sup> John Berryman, “The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions” (symposium), Partisan Review 15 (1948): 855-60, at 855.

<sup>3</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 859.

<sup>4</sup> James Longenbach, Modern Poetry after Modernism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 6. Chapter 1 provides a full discussion of the New Criticism’s influence upon Berryman’s apprentice work.

control of the disorder both outside him and within his own mind”,<sup>5</sup> the movement sought to re-conceive the poem as a self-contained microcosm, the enactment of its own metrical laws. It remains crucial, however, to note that for the American academy during the post-war enrolment boom, “whose attainments involved instilling critical thinking skills”<sup>6</sup> within increasingly diverse learning communities, “a great deal of cultural weight depend[ed] on the choice of poetic form”.<sup>7</sup> What were the advantages of promoting such an approach to a new generation of readers? As tensions mounted between the Soviet Union and the West in the years following the Axis forces’ surrender, a heightened fear of communist infiltration was beginning to spread a deep mistrust of the foreign and “un-constitutional” across the nation. To the fervent supporters of President Truman’s policies of containment, the growing range of texts available to the public might, at worst, plant seeds of dissent among untutored minds and become further vehicles of civic and mental “disorder”. The onus, then, fell upon the arbiters of literary standards to provide an appropriate interpretative framework with which to approach these works. Cast in this light, the New Critics’ verses of formal constraint mirrored America’s domestic efforts to keep potentially explosive ideologies outside national frontiers.<sup>8</sup> By reverting “to stanza, rime, versification”,<sup>9</sup> by discounting a poem’s wider historical resonances, the academies of the late Forties were equipping their students with a prescribed formula for understanding a text that guaranteed a controlled and harmonious reader response. Once mastered in the classroom, the poet’s tools of metaphor, irony and symbolism would serve to unlock any questions he or she had posed; doing so, the work functioned as a self-contained artistic monument, an assurance of its own quality.

However, the poetry generated by such a stance – the formal, impersonal short lyric, derided by Partisan Review editor William Barrett as a mere “caricature of modern poetry in its bleakness”<sup>10</sup> – was also suggestive of a darker purpose. Was the object here to “democratize... the reading site”<sup>11</sup> or to nationalise it? America’s readers were being steered towards so-called “objective” works that nevertheless fulfilled neatly the imperatives of national security. It was safe to approach these works of constraint because they functioned to keep one safe, reinforcing predefined limits of interpretation. Indeed, re-writing the American academy had entailed for the New Critics a radical constriction of

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Tate, “Poetry Modern and Unmodern,” Hudson Review 21 (1968): 247-61, at 256.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Brunner, Cold War Poetry (Chicago, IL: U of Illinois P, 2001) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Longenbach 8.

<sup>8</sup> Brunner 6.

<sup>9</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder 77.

<sup>10</sup> William Barrett, cit. Brunner 11.

<sup>11</sup> Brunner 6.

not just textual but geographical boundaries. It involved de-emphasising the elliptical, fragmentary narratives and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism of their modernist forefathers Eliot, Joyce and Pound, and the establishment of a canonicity focused solely upon Eliot's critical tenets of impersonality and the sense of "tradition".<sup>12</sup> And, crucially, it defined the enterprise of the poet-professor in terms Berryman himself would deride as "similarly limited and comparatively abject":<sup>13</sup> resistant to change, to the external disorder of life in the midst of global upheaval and the threat of imminent nuclear apocalypse. It is not, then, surprising that 1948's Partisan Review symposium also occasioned Berryman's declaration, "recent criticism... is almost as interesting as fourteen classrooms in one building, all carefully constructed, all empty". Yet his contribution to "The State of American Writing" ends on a doggedly hopeful note: "Could not the criticism be simply more thoughtful... perhaps more penetrating, capable of making larger connections?"<sup>14</sup> This, of course, was Berryman's ultimate hope for the reception of The Dispossessed, the volume he believed would establish his poetic career. As its publication date drew closer, his mounting anxiety manifested itself "in extravagant parades of defiance", most notably a vicious public attack upon the critic Yvor Winters.<sup>15</sup> Much as expected, Winters' review of the book offered no succour when it finally appeared in fall 1948's Hudson Review. Whilst recognising Berryman's "single all-inclusive topic: the desperate chaos, social, religious, philosophical, and psychological, of modern life", the elder critic took him firmly to task for his failure to toe the national literary line: where was the impersonality, the craftsman's careful efforts to control external disorder? Berryman needed "to understand and discipline his emotions", to "learn to think more and feel less, and to mitigate, in some fashion, his infinite compassion for himself and for the universe".<sup>16</sup> It was easy for the poet to throw off Winters' comments; if such criticism was a product of its age, then, as Berryman had observed earlier that year, "[a]ll I want is *time* & I will be a great poet still".<sup>17</sup> But the notice of his contemporary and fellow-poet Randall Jarrell in The Nation was more difficult to ignore. Praising The Dispossessed's efforts to overcome "the effects of half a dozen contemporary poets", Jarrell was to concede, crushingly, that

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Eliot's 1920 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which declares that "Poetry... is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality", and that "a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" (T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1920, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2395-401, at 2401, 2396).

<sup>13</sup> John Berryman, "The Poetry of Ezra Pound," Partisan Review 16 (1949): 377-94. Rpt. in TFOTP 253-69, at 259.

<sup>14</sup> Berryman, "The State of American Writing" 859-60.

<sup>15</sup> John Haffenden, The Life of John Berryman (Boston, MA: Routledge, 1982) 197-8.

<sup>16</sup> Yvor Winters, cit. Haffenden, Life 198.

<sup>17</sup> John Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 197.



“[d]oing things in a style all [their] own sometimes seems the primary object of the poem[s], and [their] subject gets a rather spasmodic and fragmentary treatment”.<sup>18</sup> The possibility was emerging that not just contemporary criticism but Berryman’s verse itself had failed to make “larger connections”. Despite his bluster, the poet’s first full-length book sold just 400 copies in its first weeks of distribution, the meagre financial gain cancelled against his advance on royalties.<sup>19</sup> Not even receipt of the 1948 Shelley Memorial Award for verse could cheer his spirits, for, as the year dragged on, his conviction was growing that “[m]y poetry has not yet made a world, I realise this”; he resolved to “*Submit*, as soon as I’ve a chance again, to my subjects & to my actual heart, to find it”.<sup>20</sup>

Berryman’s renewed quest for “subjects”, however, would initially be realised through a series of compulsive returns to the literary terrain of The Dispossessed. Throughout 1948 and 1949 he continued to compose short poems fitfully, eight of which were published as a group in a January 1950 issue of Poetry magazine. At first glance, these works echo and amplify the themes of his first volume: this is the world of those alienated from and marginalised by mid-century society, and struggling to articulate their experiences of combat, persecution and holocausts both genocidal and nuclear. Yet what is particularly striking in opening poems “The Cage” and “Elegy, for Alun Lewis” is Berryman’s introduction of a new dialogue: a humbler public self-positioning beside his beleaguered fellow-writers, inviting his own comparison with those others dispossessed from age and literary tradition. John Pikoulis attributes the development to the poet’s dented self-confidence in the wake of The Dispossessed’s subdued reception, stating “Berryman was always a divided being... and it is to other poets he turned for images of himself.”<sup>21</sup> But is this reading a simplification? “The Cage”, an account of Berryman’s 1948 visit to Ezra Pound at a Washington hospital for “madm[e]n”, provides a telling document of a relationship conducted under far more ambivalent terms. The two men had first corresponded in January 1947, following Berryman’s declaration in a Nation review that “Pound, in spite of some of his literary judgments, had shaped the direction of much modern English verse.”<sup>22</sup> And the letters had continued from both Pound and his wife Dorothy, despite the younger poet’s resistance towards their efforts to co-opt him into the

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<sup>18</sup> Randall Jarrell, “Verse Chronicle,” rev. of The Dispossessed, by John Berryman, The Nation 17 Jul. 1948: 80-81, 14 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.thenation.com/archive/detail/13463723>>.

<sup>19</sup> Haffenden, Life 206.

<sup>20</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>21</sup> John Pikoulis, “John Berryman’s ‘Elegy, for Alun Lewis’,” American Literature 56 (1984): 100-01, at 101.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 180. See also John Berryman, “A Scholarly History,” rev. of A Critical Study of English Poetry, by Herbert J. Grierson and J. C. Smith, The Nation 19 Dec. 1946: 733-34.

polemical vanguard of “the Modernist Revolution in the New World”.<sup>23</sup> In providing the historical context of Pound’s earlier incarceration in Italy, however, “The Cage” invites us to participate in a form of literary parallax whereby the poet imprisoned in a US Army detention camp after his Fascist wartime broadcasts is described as “Roofless the old man with a blanket yes”. (Poetry 187) The “blanket” offered by the Americans is a dubious concession on their part, for Pound has been reduced to a bestial position at odds with his age and frailty. Yet the opening word of Berryman’s phrase gestures simultaneously towards its dark semantic opposite, *ruthless*. This first stanza’s *abab* quatrain illustrates neatly the differing ideological stances from which the writer views his would-be mentor. On the one hand, as he would later comment in a piece composed to introduce the New Directions volume Selected Poems of Ezra Pound: “Does any reader who is familiar with Pound’s poetry really not see that its subject is the life of the modern poet?”<sup>24</sup> The “modern poet”, that is, as alienated victim of a culture poised to topple, like the Pisan tower that overlooks Pound in his cage; the Italian *partigiani* who come to imprison him carry American “tommy-guns”, for the frontiers of the old world have dissolved in the chaos of global combat, along with its last vestiges of compassion. On the other, as “The Cage”’s penultimate stanza demands, quoting Pound directly, just “[w]ho is seeryus now?” (Poetry 188) The insane society, Berryman observes, ultimately functions to destroy its own prophets. From a reputation as founding father of the Twenties’ brand of cosmopolitan modernism, Pound has declined to his present status of hospitalised “madman”, his talk “digress[ing]” to “‘Bankers’ and ‘Yids’ and ‘a conspiracy’ / And of himself no word, the second worst”. (Poetry 188) Harry Thomas finds much to criticise in these lines, stating, “[Berryman] was always seemingly unaware of all that is objectionable in Pound’s life and work... How easily [“The Cage”] moves from noting Pound’s antisemitism to remarking on Pound’s impersonality.”<sup>25</sup> The poem, however, demonstrates that for the author of the 1945 short story “The Imaginary Jew” these two aspects of Pound’s character were inextricably linked. The loss of the personality in all its compassions and contradictions that comes with slavish adherence to a totalitarian political framework is precisely what Berryman finds most “objectionable”: as long as Pound is unable to accept his own part in the Second World War’s gruesome drama, the text implies, he deserves to remain in a cage.

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<sup>23</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 187.

<sup>24</sup> Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 260. Rejected by James Laughlin at New Directions, the piece was subsequently published in April 1949’s Partisan Review.

<sup>25</sup> Harry Thomas, “Berryman and Pound,” Michigan Quarterly Review 45 (2006): 613-16, at 616.

The final quatrain of “The Cage” underscores the futility of Berryman’s attempts to connect with his erstwhile hero. Pound has receded from the work, and all that is left is a bleak vista in which

the empty cage  
Sings in the wringing winds where winds blow  
Backward and forward one door in its age  
And the great cage suffers nothing whatever no (Poetry 188)

“Backward” or “forward”, the effect of the swinging door is the same, the dactyl that opens the second and third lines serving to mirror and amplify the internal rhyme scheme. Only the cage-as-external-system endures, and, crucially, it cannot “suffer” because its size permits the abnegation of individual responsibility. Berryman had first explored this notion in August 1948’s Partisan Review symposium:

‘It was done for us’ – your modern intellectual is astonishingly fatalistic... So that men who can think and are moral must stand ready night and day to the orders of blind evil. What has created this is a usurpation which is not complete: usurpation of individual decision, which yet leaves the individual nominally free.<sup>26</sup>

If we are to move towards a re-assessment of the “Confessional” Berryman, to cast him as a poet engaged actively with his culture and his age, then such statements gain fresh importance, for they betray his awareness that to escape the boundaries of America’s sociopolitical system, too, requires one to assume “the responsibilities of freedom and independence”.<sup>27</sup> These “responsibilities” are the central subject of “Elegy, for Alun Lewis”. In this text, the “strange” (and possibly self-inflicted) death of a fellow-writer in combat prompts the poet’s “Grie[f] for a stranger made strangely a friend”. The repetition of “strange” highlights the alien nature of both men’s surroundings; this is a world ruled by the “universal furnace” of strife and upheaval, indifferent to the actions of its “restless and careless powers” as they “club” each citizen from “wall to wall ahead of them”. (Poetry 189) Like in “The Cage”, the poem unites both men in a sense of victimisation by a period hostile, even “inimical to poetry”.<sup>28</sup> For Berryman, though, the development of a sense of personal otherness, the introduction of a first-person “I” in dialogue with Lewis’ “You”, has here resulted in a far more horrific revelation. *He* has stood by, has consented “to the orders of blind evil”; his own hand is the “white hand of this age”; (Poetry 189) furthermore, it is stained with Lewis’ blood. These examples from Berryman’s Poetry selection alone

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<sup>26</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 857.

<sup>27</sup> A. Alvarez, Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967 (London: Penguin, 1968) 12.

<sup>28</sup> Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 260.

contradict Thomas' assertion that the poet believed writers to be "always superior to society".<sup>29</sup> Poems of what has been lost and what mankind has wrought, their sole imperative appears to be the acknowledgement of responsibility for their own suffering. Yet, as "Elegy, for Alun Lewis"' final stanza urges, "amends" cannot be all. The interjection of Lewis' responding voice calls his living representative to arms as the chronicler of an as yet uncertain future. Hope survives, however threatened, for a new poetic schema, manifested through the pen and not the sword:

Only the death to come can make us friends.  
But hesitate (soul quicks) grotesque amends  
To the dissolving slain. Take up your nature for  
The future which these strangers from their minds  
– Clouding – dismissed with horror and courage. (Poetry 189)

The question nevertheless remained: what would this new schema, this "nature", consist of? It seemed clear that it must necessitate what A. Alvarez has described as the paradox of "accepting corrupted reality as being both inescapable and unchangeable... [and] accepting... new areas of experience, without any illusions as to their ultimate value".<sup>30</sup> Such a process required, in turn, a rupture of the New Critical paradigm with its "exaggerated and codified poetics of tradition and impersonality".<sup>31</sup> And for Berryman, his ambivalent relationships with his fellow-poets, facilitated by an awareness of the "corrupted reality" they shared, would provide the vehicle for his growing antagonism towards his country and literary tradition. Throughout 1949, public controversy had mounted over the award of the Bollingen Prize in Poetry to Pound's (as yet incomplete) Pisan Cantos. The opposition reached a climax in June with two articles published in the Saturday Review of Literature by Berryman's former Harvard colleague Robert Hillyer. Hillyer's pieces mounted "a righteous attack in the name of patriotism" upon modern poetry; their proposition was "namely, that poetry which the 'common man' cannot understand is undemocratic".<sup>32</sup> Roused into action, Berryman circulated a letter of protest among his contemporaries that would attract eighty-four signatures before its submission to The Nation.<sup>33</sup> The letter opened with its author's returning shot, "The literary and

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas 615.

<sup>30</sup> Alvarez 18.

<sup>31</sup> Longenbach 7.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Marshall, "The Saturday Review Unfair to Literature," The Nation 17 Dec. 1949: 598, 2 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.thenation.com/archive/detail/13464087>>.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Stefanik notes, "Although authorship of the letter is not certain, it was [John Berryman] who circulated it for signatures" (Ernest Stefanik, John Berryman: A Descriptive Bibliography (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1974) 214). Given that both John Haffenden and Paul Mariani's biographies attribute the piece to Berryman (Haffenden, Life 211-12; Mariani, Dream Song 225-26), whilst Thomas Daniel Young describes it as a joint composition by Berryman and Allen Tate (Thomas Daniel Young, "The Little Houses

political values of the poetry of Ezra Pound offer wide latitudes of support and opposition, as all poetry does in one degree or another.”<sup>34</sup> Wasn’t this quality, it demanded, the very basis of a true democracy? Despite his abhorrence of Pound’s political views, Berryman had at this time just completed his long-overdue introduction to James Laughlin’s *New Directions* volume of Pound’s poetry. Laughlin’s response to the work, however, when it came with the close of the year, was not as he expected. With its close intellectual argument for Pound as “his own subject *qua* modern poet”,<sup>35</sup> the introduction would not do for the academy audience. It was “too difficult and too profound” for the purpose; it had been tried out on “a couple of kids” who’d been unable to make head nor tail of it; best, Laughlin concluded, that he find some “popularizer” to get the job done instead.<sup>36</sup> What had worried Laughlin most, one might surmise, was less Berryman’s emphasis upon Pound’s personal life than his celebration of the elder poet as a writer “born”, as he quoted approvingly from Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, “[i]n a half savage country, out of date”. This, he stressed, was the poetry of “an expatriate... of a failing culture”.<sup>37</sup> Positioning himself in company with the expatriate Pound and the Welsh Lewis, Berryman was also positioning himself in public opposition to his nation. As Philip Coleman reminds us, “In the nineteenth century, Whitman, in common with many other American writers... [had] defined a sense of the American literary and cultural self in terms of nationalistic difference and prowess”.<sup>38</sup> Writing from an exceptionalist perspective, the American artist had sought to compose a new narrative distinct to his country and fellow-citizens. Yet as the Cold War loomed upon the horizon, Berryman was forced to entertain the possibility that the grand narrative had, in fact, failed. Was the legacy of Whitman, Emerson et al. classrooms full of students but empty of understanding, and a nation in thrall not to free-thinking democracy but to “an organized and powerful anti-intellectual culture”?<sup>39</sup> One set of unpublished essay notes from the period, entitled “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”, outlines his hostility towards his mother-country with ferocious clarity:

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against the Great,” Sewanee Review 88 (1980): 320-30, at 325), this chapter treats the letter as Berryman’s work.

<sup>34</sup> John Berryman, “A Prepared Attack,” The Nation 17 Dec. 1949: 598-99, 2 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.thenation.com/archive/detail/13464088>>.

<sup>35</sup> Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 263.

<sup>36</sup> James Laughlin, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 217.

<sup>37</sup> Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 263, 265-66. See also Ezra Pound, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, 1920, The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al., 6<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. D (New York: Norton, 2003) 1288-96, at 1288.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Coleman, “‘The Politics of Praise’: John Berryman’s Engagement with W. B. Yeats,” Etudes irlandaises 28 (2003): 11-27, at 14.

<sup>39</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”.

I despise living here, any place else seems better, the grossness & ugliness & emptiness & pretentiousness of A[merica] make me sick daily; resentment & shame, instead of the acceptance and pride with wh[ich] presumably one ought to respond to the idea of one's home-country, are my dominant pays-emotions.<sup>40</sup>

To Berryman the “idea of one’s home-country” remained just that, an idea. These notes voice a profound sense of inward expatriation, an ideological and semantic absence in which the concept of “home” cannot be lost because it never existed.<sup>41</sup> But they also demonstrate, crucially, the continued influence of the Eurocentric-expatriate tradition – as exemplified in its various facets by Auden, Pound and Yeats – upon his poetry of the late Forties, even as he struggled to locate “my subjects &... my actual heart”:<sup>42</sup> what, after all, is Berryman’s America if not Auden’s England, “this country of ours where nobody is well”?<sup>43</sup>

The works published in Poetry magazine certainly evince Berryman’s literary ambitions for the future: the poet’s rebirth as responsible chronicler of his age, reaching beyond the limitations of the constrained text and the constraining society. Nevertheless, as “brightening darkness”, (Poetry 189) blast-lit, approached, the very possibility of “accepting... new areas of experience”<sup>44</sup> was called into question. “The Wholly Fail” portrays a post (or, indeed, pre-) war America condemned to “an age when for many attentive to the developments of science the future has ceased to exist”.<sup>45</sup> Composed as the Red Scare spread through the streets and the Soviet Union announced its first successful nuclear test, the text manifests the poet’s horrified anticipation of yet more unprecedented destruction. Yet it is swiftly evident that this is no ordinary McCarthyite polemic; the destruction here will be born of paranoia, and it comes from within, from “our Best”. “Sir Partofall” and his “[w]izards of Oak Ridge and Los Alamos” (Poetry 191) subvert the punning title’s quest-motif, not noble knights but participants in the Allied Manhattan Project for nuclear development. Their secretive activities take place in ellipses and parentheses, for they seek not the Grail of eternal life but its unspoken opposite. With its off-kilter meter, irregular line lengths and interrupted, interrupting phrases, it seems that the anxieties and suspicions of the Cold War era have infected “The Wholly Fail” to word-level.<sup>46</sup> The result is a reverse semantic alchemy which transforms “physicist” to dubious

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<sup>40</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”.

<sup>41</sup> Coleman 15.

<sup>42</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>43</sup> W. H. Auden, The Orators, 1932, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977) 59-110, at 62.

<sup>44</sup> Alvarez 18.

<sup>45</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 305.

<sup>46</sup> Compare Brendan Cooper on the poet’s final coda to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet: “a diseased poetry, contaminated by a surrounding reality of corruption, decay and destruction towards which the intervening

“questrist” and de Troyes’ chivalric hero “Perceval” to a man both “part of all” and part of the general “fall” from innocence. As our quack apothecary doses “[h]is own” family, “[h]is own” coffee, the gesture of unity also conveys its capacity for total destruction:

‘A livens wife’s and mother’s and son’s coffee  
His own, therewith one holy night; next day  
None descends, if the silence in the house  
Is unusual and complete, like a curtain,  
He will know (or will not, will he) he has failed. (Poetry 191)

The reiteration of “will” in this final line quoted brings the poet’s message home literally and figuratively: “the consent of the will is the sin”.<sup>47</sup> Berryman’s syntax is deliberately ambiguous (does our “good Doctor” ultimately “will” the escape, or the consummation, of his fate?), emphasising the mind’s triumph at the point of its collapse: “Where Partusall, transfigured, white with joy, / Smiles thro’ the blast and fiery wind spreading out from zero –”. (Poetry 191) This is no divine revelation but the final “curtain” of nuclear apocalypse: the national advance “[p]artusall” in its terrifying fruition. Expanding and accelerating like the atomic cloud it refers to, the poem’s concluding phrase is rendered all the more shocking by its abrupt cessation. The legacy, “The Wholly Fail” suggests, of scientific rationalism and of a politics of national containment will be the void of the empty page, a void that reaches beyond the full stop and even beyond “zero”.

But was “any place else” really “better” than America?<sup>48</sup> “The Wholly Fail”’s appearance in Poetry precedes four sections of a sociopolitical work begun by Berryman in summer 1948. Titled The Black Book, the piece took as its subject the Jewish genocide in the Second World War’s extermination camps. Berryman intended this gruesome “suite of poems” to “parody [the] Mass of [the] Dead”, taking a “Mass-form” or even a “Requiem form”,<sup>49</sup> soon after its inception, he selected a former Harvard student as illustrator, and found a publisher at the Banyan Press. The poet’s ambition for his nascent project was clear: The Black Book would be “a diagnostic, an historical survey”, a work positioned beside and informed by the many “Black Books” that emerged in the wake of the war to enumerate Nazi crimes against humanity.<sup>50</sup> Gazing beyond his country’s frontiers, he

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three centuries have descended” (Brendan Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’: John Berryman’s Eliotic Inheritance,” Journal of American Studies 42 (2008): 1-18, at 9).

<sup>47</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 10.

<sup>48</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”.

<sup>49</sup> John Berryman, cit. Matthew Boswell, “The Black Book: John Berryman’s Holocaust Requiem,” After thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 11-27, at 14.

<sup>50</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 205. J. M. Linebarger also suggests Thomas Middleton’s Blacke Booke of 1604, an “allegorical narrative describ[ing] Lucifer’s descent to London”, as a possible source for

would engage with the larger issues of history and responsibility in the aftermath of what Edward Brunner terms “an enormous rupture in the traditions of Western civilization”.<sup>51</sup> However, as the published parts of Berryman’s sequence demonstrate, the problems of representing such trauma were immediately apparent. Could this unspeakable wickedness, so great as to deny its victims a tongue, really be articulated in verse? “not him”, the two-part poem that opens Poetry’s selection from The Black Book, provides a description of one family’s persecution in which, as Matthew Boswell comments, “the time frame... is the recent past, but a vagueness about the temporality of the action complements the otherworldliness of the space”.<sup>52</sup> The “[g]randfather” who seldom leaves his room has, we learn, been “tript down” by Nazi troopers. “Later” he is brutalised, “dr[awn] silly & odd-eyed” by his tormentors’ actions; later still, he will be “trucked... home”, where in his battered state “He howled a night and shook / Our teeth before the end”. (Poetry 192) Small wonder, then, that the “light” Berryman’s text casts upon him is “blind”. The poem’s vision, whether that of the brother with inside knowledge, the narrator or the reader, is necessarily limited: speaking for the victim, voicing “him”, it is simultaneously “not him”, for the traumatic experience has created a schism between the internal and the external perspective that reaches beyond human language. What springs to mind most powerfully upon reading The Black Book’s works is Brunner’s assessment of “The Wholly Fail”: “In shock, we are so disoriented that previous structures of thought have become proportionately disabled.”<sup>53</sup> The afflicted Jews call to Abraham, founding patriarch of the Israelites, to “what we have seen / Write, I beg, in your Book”, (Poetry 192) yet it is evident that the holy books have no authority here:

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. (Poetry 192)

“not him”’s new “call”, it seems, is the inarticulate moan of a suffering at once communal and linguistically exclusive. What has been lost cannot be written into lineage, for as the victims insist upon their torments “here here” their very existences are revealed to be precarious, threatening to “shatter” and disappear. If the ambiguities, ellipses and parentheses of “not him” have a “diagnostic”<sup>54</sup> function, it is to illustrate the “permanent,

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Berryman’s title (J. M. Linebarger, John Berryman, Twayne’s United States Authors Series 244 (New York: Twayne, 1974) 76).

<sup>51</sup> Brunner 199.

<sup>52</sup> Boswell 14.

<sup>53</sup> Brunner 200.

<sup>54</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 205.



disabling paradox” of representing trauma.<sup>55</sup> Susan Gubar describes such “deliberate placement of words in lines that do not necessarily accord with semantic breaks” and “suppression of logical, narrative links” as the hallmarks of a process of “proxy-witnessing” in which writers “take factual material... [and] use their imagination to make it more palpably real”.<sup>56</sup> However, Berryman’s Black Book texts evince less the “palpabl[e] real[ity]” of the Second World War than “a self-reflective consideration of encounter”.<sup>57</sup> To what extent, they ask, is it possible for non-victims to relate to these atrocities when “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it”?<sup>58</sup>

It is thus that in the published sections of the Black Book sequence the identity of the “not him” in question is able to slip with ease from “Grandfather” to Abraham and even the absent God. The subjective experience of horror – “a scurry, a sigh, retching”– (Poetry 193) is placed in perpetual conflict with the poet’s limited “blind light”. (Poetry 192) For, as Berryman suggests, the poems’ “paling sky” heralds the dawn of a new world in which identity may be violently re-appropriated at any moment and the only enduring state is that of our own uncertainty. Clear parallels can be drawn between these works and the Audenesque terrain of The Dispossessed, which described national frontiers as mere “fiction[s]” and the would-be chronicler as having lost “the maps that [he] had yesterday”. (CP 279) Warsaw’s Lazienki Palace, a monument to “king able and callous” Jan III Sobieski and his defence of Vienna against invading Ottoman forces, has become “[f]or foreigners, now, a sort of theatre”: (Poetry 194) it is overrun by the German soldiers who have turned on their former protectors. “waiting”, the poem that concludes Poetry’s Black Book extracts, sees the nine-, eight- and six-line stanzas and varied line lengths of the preceding texts shrink down to a tight *abab* quatrain form. If Berryman’s speaker seems less “real” than the “tissue & ash” of both his cigarette and his concentration camp experiences, it is with good reason; as he loiters by the concrete barrier which divides him from home and family, it is evident that the “mystery” of its “iron door” denotes a fundamental absence at the core of his representation. (Poetry 195) Only the home-place beyond the wall’s heavily guarded “frontier posts” can embody his identity, enable “heart through the ribs [to] return”. But, conversely, any attempt at such a “return” will render him “starless & heartless”, provoking his destruction under a hail of snipers’ bullets. (Poetry

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<sup>55</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Culture I,” American Imago 48 (1991): 1-12, at 3.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Gubar, Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2003) 149-50.

<sup>57</sup> Boswell 23.

<sup>58</sup> Caruth 3.

196) The transgression that defines identity figures simultaneously as its surrender; this narrator cannot return home, for it has been irretrievably lost to him in the chaos of global combat.

One might surmise that in failing to capture these individuals' fates in verse fully, Berryman was also to presage the ultimate fate of his Black Book project. On 1 April 1949, reading about the murder of professors in The Black Book of Poland, the poet broke down and wept; as he would later state, "I just found I couldn't take it... I wasn't able at this time... to find any way of making palatable the monstrosity of the thing which obsessed me."<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding occasional attempts to return to it in the decade that followed, the sequence was abandoned.<sup>60</sup> And, despite gaining recognition for his Poetry publications in the form of the magazine's 1950 Levinson Prize, Berryman found himself stalled once more. Gazing beyond America's shores, he had broken no boundaries; faced with an abyss of pain, he had skimmed its surface, raising not a fitting elegy but glib metaphors for the unspeakable horrors that lay beyond his reach. What had emerged was what he most feared, a poetry akin to what Edward Brunner has described as the "meaningless amplification" of the TV broadcast, at once "voyeuristic *and* alienating".<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the eight poems which bridge Berryman's development from The Dispossessed to the 1953 long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet remain a crucial document of a period marked by Berryman's profound ambivalence towards his literary tradition and nation. Adopting the pose of the Other – baffled onlooker, poet, victim – they represent an ongoing challenge to Ransom and Tate's view that the poet "perpetuates in his poem an order of existence",<sup>62</sup> questioning just what can be created whole when both reader and writer are in a state of constant flux.

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<sup>59</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 205-06.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew Boswell notes that Berryman revisited The Black Book in 1954, 1955 and 1958 (Boswell 11-12). Both parts of "not him" were subsequently reprinted in the poet's 1958 chapbook His Thoughts Made Pockets & the Plane Buckt, this time accompanied by an eleven-line part (iii).

<sup>61</sup> Brunner 3.

<sup>62</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," The World's Body, 1938 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1968) 327-50, at 348.

## 2.2 An American Rebellion: Breaking Boundaries in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet

As Berryman awaited the publication of The Dispossessed, his journals of the period recorded an increasing preoccupation with the application and direction of his poetic talent. Read retrospectively, they offer an illuminating insight into the subjects both “general” and “specific” which overwhelmed him: “a collapsing society, worst in the best individual” and the 1947 affair he had chronicled in Sonnets to Chris in all of its “obsession – ‘possession’ & betrayal & dominatedness (so the political analogue is omnipresent)”.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it is Berryman’s concern with society and the “political analogue” in these notes that offers the best clue to what John Haffenden terms the “bemusing departure”<sup>64</sup> to come in his work. Rather than the group of pastoral verses he had anticipated composing, “[o]ne man’s story [of] crime & return”,<sup>65</sup> April 1948 saw him “ma[ke] up the first stanza of a poem to be called Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and the first three lines of the second stanza”.<sup>66</sup> The eleven introductory lines of this work he believed he could complete “in fifty” read as follows:

The Governor your husband lived so long  
moved you not, restless, waiting for him? Still,  
you were a patient woman. –  
I seem to see you pause here still:  
Sylvester, Quarles, in moments odd you pored  
before a fire at, bright eyes on the Lord,  
all the children still.  
‘Simon...’ Simon will listen while you read a Song.

Outside the New World winters in grand dark  
white air lashing high thro’ the virgin stands  
foxes down foxholes sigh... (1.1 – 2.3)

“Still” and “patient”, “paus[ing]” and “por[ing]”, Berryman’s text presents an allusive and dense vision of the old “New World” of Puritan America. Anne Bradstreet, first poetess of this as-yet-nascent country, had emigrated from England on the flagship *Arbella* to participate in the 1630 founding of the Massachusetts Bay colony. In her people – a “self-declared people of the Book” – lay the origins of the nation as figurative Promised Land, its semantic significance asserted by the Word of God. Sacvan Bercovitch elaborates further in his work The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America:

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<sup>63</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196.

<sup>64</sup> Haffenden, Life 197.

<sup>65</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196-97.

<sup>66</sup> John Berryman, “One Answer to a Question,” Shenandoah 17 (1965): 67-76. Rpt. as “Changes” in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic, 1966) 94-103, at 99.

Confronted with the uncertain meaning of their locale, the Puritans discovered the New World in Scripture – not literally (in the way Columbus discovered it), as the lost Eden, but figurally (in the way the church fathers discovered Noah in Moses...), as the second paradise foreseen by all the prophets.<sup>67</sup>

The Puritans' religious symbology too, however, contained a "political analogue".<sup>68</sup> Berryman's account of the "virgin stands" colonisation also suggests these new church fathers' establishment of a rigidly theocratic system of self-government. Promoting the marriage of rhetoric and fact, event interpreted and interpretation become event, the colony leaders were both writing the American cultural narrative and investing within it the notion of a people's "progress".<sup>69</sup>

Easy to surmise the fascination for a poet who, despite his professed "resentment & shame" towards his home country,<sup>70</sup> would concede more than twenty years later, "all my people have been here since the Revolution – that's a long time".<sup>71</sup> Wasn't he, after all, great-grandson of the Confederate hero (and erstwhile Ku Klux Klan commander) General Robert Glenn Shaver; hadn't The Dispossessed seen him cry out for lessons in "trust and disobedience" (CP 8) from his eighteenth-century ancestor Ethan Allen? But again, with the first eleven lines of this new poem completed, Berryman ground to a halt; they alone, it seemed, would be the legacy of yet another unfinished *magnum opus*. The four-and-a-half years that followed would see him resume work upon the Black Book sequence and a verse play, Mirabeau (both never completed), publish a biographical and psychological study of Stephen Crane, and take up a position at the University of Cincinnati, where he would give lecture courses on modern poetry and Shakespeare. However, throughout this period the Homage project was not abandoned entirely, for Berryman continued to "accumulate... materials and sketch... fleshing out the target or vehicle".<sup>72</sup> Its lines, he was coming to realise, had true potential as his "subject &... actual heart":<sup>73</sup> wasn't the sum of more than eighteen years' poetic labour on his part an ongoing struggle to articulate the difficult burden of the past from a specifically American perspective?<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America (New York: Routledge, 1993) 76.

<sup>68</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196.

<sup>69</sup> Bercovitch 69.

<sup>70</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "The American Intellectual and the American Dream".

<sup>71</sup> John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 10.

<sup>72</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 100.

<sup>73</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich, "Berryman Saved from Drowning," John Berryman, ed. and introd. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea, 1989) 149-63, at 150.

Berryman would amass more than a hundred pages of notes and draft lines for his Homage to Mistress Bradstreet throughout 1952, poring over Helen Campbell's biography Anne Bradstreet and Her Times alongside first colony governor John Winthrop's Journals.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, as the year wore on, he was compelled to consider the particular means of achieving his poetic goal. To admit the epistemological and temporal disorder that would result from active present-day engagement with another place and time required the poet to break the barriers of the text as microcosm, as static artistic monument. What he needed was not the New Critics' steadily impersonal gaze but a sense of personal otherness: the first-person "I" in dialogue with "You" that he had explored with some success in "Elegy, for Alun Lewis". Berryman later described the decision "to insert me, in my own person, John Berryman, *I*, into the poem" as a "crucial" afterthought, the "great exception" to "one whole plan".<sup>76</sup> It remains notable, however, that when he finally resumed composition of the work in 1953, the concept of dialogue would play an integral role in its opening stanzas. In this "exordium... spoken by the poet", (CP 147) he "seem[s] to see" (1.4) Bradstreet through the centuries and through his text, but the qualification "seem" implies a tentative summoning at best. It is not surprising that he fears she "won't stay", (3.4) for the poem's short clauses evoke not a communal and communing "lovers' air" but an overwhelming uncertainty which cracks and re-makes each line under the weight of "or not":

How do we  
linger, diminished, in our lovers' air,  
implausibly visible, to whom, a year,  
years, over interims; or not;  
to a long stranger; or not; shimmer & disappear. (3.4-8)

Only by the fourth stanza, as his voice prepares to "modulat[e]" (CP 147) into Bradstreet's, is Berryman able to fully articulate the motivation behind this literary liaison: "When the mouth dies, who misses you?" (4.2) As Deanna Fernie suggests, his is "the shared perspective of an American poet anxiously concerned with questions of poetic reputation and achievement, in his own case and in general".<sup>77</sup> Vocally "miss[ing]" Bradstreet, acknowledging her canonical status, Berryman is proposing a written alliance with her in which neither figure will pass forgotten from history. His Homage, however tentative, is

<sup>75</sup> See Sergio Perosa, "A Commentary on Homage to Mistress Bradstreet," John Berryman Studies 2 (1976): 4-25, at 9. Bradstreet's husband Simon "was not Governor until after her death" in 1672, as Berryman would stress in his elucidatory notes to the poem (CP 147).

<sup>76</sup> John Berryman, "The Art of Poetry," interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 33.

<sup>77</sup> Deanna Fernie, "The Difficult Homages of Berryman and Bradstreet," Symbiosis 7 (2003): 11-34, at 12.

therefore also a self-conscious attempt to cement his presence within the American verse tradition, a reminder that, as he had quoted approvingly from Fenollosa in “The Poetry of Ezra Pound”, “the chief work... of poets especially, lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance”.<sup>78</sup>

Nonetheless, the question remained – wasn’t this “boring high-minded Puritan woman”<sup>79</sup> rather an improbable poetic forefather (or mother) for Berryman? Throughout the years of probing interviews that followed the work’s September 1953 publication,<sup>80</sup> he would confess with repeated insouciance, “I was concerned with her... almost from the beginning, as a woman, not much as a poetess.”<sup>81</sup> Upon a first reading, the text of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet certainly appears to substantiate this assertion. Even Bradstreet’s husband Simon can spare little time “from his rigour” (2.6) for her writing. In the twelfth stanza, faced with “all this bald / abstract didactic rime I read appalled”, (12.5-6) the poet is moved to interject and upbraid her personally; as her “quaternion” compositions such as The Four Monarchies evidence, she is a “mistress neither of fiery nor velvet verse”. (12.8) He is “harassed for [Bradstreet’s] fame” (12.7) even as he pays it homage, bemused by her receipt of the success that has so far eluded him. Yet this sense of ‘harassment’ has its roots in his comprehension that Bradstreet, as the first woman to articulate her experience of the Puritan settlers’ “second paradise”,<sup>82</sup> is less “a poetess” than America’s ur-poet, and as such “a sort of mother to the artists and intellectuals who would follow her and play a large role in the development of the nation”.<sup>83</sup> To Berryman, a self-confessed inward expatriate to whom “any place else seem[ed] better”,<sup>84</sup> hers was an ultimately monstrous birth. The gradual conversion of a cosmopolitan modernist poetics to the Fifties’ academy formalism had, he complained five years earlier in the essay-review “Waiting for the End, Boys”, sent the generation of writers preceding his own “to pieces”:

Tate has published one booklet in a decade, [Hart] Crane died, MacLeish evaporated. Léonie Adams and Putnam fell silent, Louise Bogan nearly so, Van Doren and Warren developed no following... The young poets lately, in short, have had not fathers but grandfathers.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: An Ars Poetica,” The Chinese Written Character as a Medium For Poetry: A Critical Edition, ed. Ezra Pound, 1936 (USA: Fordham UP, 2008): 41-74, at 54. Cit. Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 265.

<sup>79</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

<sup>80</sup> Homage to Mistress Bradstreet first appeared in September 1953’s Partisan Review; the work was subsequently published as a single volume, featuring woodcut illustrations by Ben Shahn, by Farrar, Straus & Cudahy in 1956.

<sup>81</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100. See also Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33: “The idea was not to take Anne Bradstreet as a poetess – I was not interested in that.”

<sup>82</sup> Bercovitch 76.

<sup>83</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33.

<sup>84</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”.

<sup>85</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 299.

When Berryman “finally woke up to the fact that [he] was involved in a long poem”,<sup>86</sup> it thus seemed only natural that he should turn to the practitioners of the art among his literary “grandfathers”: Pound, Stevens, even “the deplorable Eliot”.<sup>87</sup> In his Homage, however, it was this last figure who would provide a further target to rebel against, serving as evidence that Berryman’s “hostility” towards his national literary tradition “ke[pt] on going” throughout the centuries.<sup>88</sup>

In “One Answer to a Question”, Berryman’s response to a list of queries posed by Shenandoah to ten American writers in fall 1965, the poet recalled his “first thoughts” towards Homage to Mistress Bradstreet as long poem: “Narrative! let’s have narrative, and at least one dominant personality... In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT The Waste Land, the best long poem of the age.”<sup>89</sup> His harassment for Eliot’s fame might easily be interpreted as echoing his harassment for Bradstreet’s fame (and, by implication, the fame of the American verse tradition as whole entity). After all, hadn’t the elder poet’s line on the importance of impersonality and tradition in modern poetry been seized by the New Critics as both justification and manifesto for their static works of formal constraint? However, when examining Berryman’s statement it is crucial to bear in mind that, as Brendan Cooper states, “the combativeness of the language nevertheless contains a request to consider the Berryman and the Eliot poem simultaneously”.<sup>90</sup> The younger poet’s relationship to this literary “grandfather” was evidently more ambiguous than his later comments in Shenandoah would have us think. To toe Eliot’s line – the line of the universities – would also be, as Berryman had suggested in a 1948 review, to “disinfect [him] by ignoring his disorderly and animating associations”.<sup>91</sup> Entering into dialogue with The Waste Land, Berryman was making his wishes explicit: to be considered among the best, yet to be as unlike its critically acknowledged “best” qualities as possible. If this is “hostility”, it is, as Cooper expands, “a generative hostility, a postwar anxiety of influence in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction”.<sup>92</sup> Berryman’s long poem pays homage to The Waste Land in its portrayal of a blank and spiritually arid landscape waiting for meaning to be inscribed upon its terrain; simultaneously, its provision of “narrative” and depiction of two souls’ communion

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<sup>86</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 99.

<sup>87</sup> Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 256. Sergio Perosa, in fact, cites Pound’s 1917 poem Homage to Sextus Propertius (“similar in its purpose of an identification with the ancient poet”) as a possible influence upon Berryman’s choice of title (Perosa 4).

<sup>88</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 99.

<sup>89</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 99.

<sup>90</sup> Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 3.

<sup>91</sup> John Berryman, “A Peine Ma Piste,” rev. of T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger, Partisan Review 15 (1948): 826-28, at 826.

<sup>92</sup> Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 3.

throughout the centuries is a deliberate rejection of that earlier text's impersonal and incoherent "I". The attitude Berryman's text displays towards both Eliot and Bradstreet enabled him to advance a poetics based upon opposition, the "contradictory energies of rejection and acceptance":<sup>93</sup> a poetics which would prove essential to his exploration of "my subjects &... my actual heart"<sup>94</sup> in Homage.

Whilst Bradstreet functions in Berryman's poem as "a sort of mother to the artists and intellectuals who would follow her", she is also, of course, the "pioneer heroine" of its narrative.<sup>95</sup> Disembarked from the *Arbella* with their "board-pieces, boxes, [and] barrels", (9.5) she and her fellow colonists would shape the American landscape not just physically but through the administration of its symbols and tropes. The Puritan settlers were encouraged by their leaders to view history rhetorically, as a form of postdated prophecy; as Sacvan Bercovitch explains, their journey itself had attained a cultural symbolism, announcing "the imminent renovation of all things in 'a new heaven and a new earth'".<sup>96</sup> Yet for the young Bradstreet depicted in the work, transplantation from her English home figures as an "Atlantic wound". (8.1) Waiting to find herself written into (and thus possessing) America leads to contemplation of her dispossessed state, a contemplation that prompts Stanza 8's confession, "Strangers & pilgrims fare we here, / declaring we seek a City. Shall we be deceived?" (8.4-5) The Biblical allusion, sourced from her own work, is doubly significant. Referring to Peter's warning to his congregation to "abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul", the lines also compare the Massachusetts Bay settlers to the "strangers and pilgrims" of Hebrews 11, "desir[ing] a better country, that is, an heavenly".<sup>97</sup> God's word, though, Berryman suggests slyly, has here provided not clarification but further uncertainty. Might seeking heaven on this new tract of earth result only in "[f]actioning passion", (24.8) or worse, the demise of the colony itself? The reviewer Joseph Bennett, praising Homage to Mistress Bradstreet's "authenticity", would note, "[such] roots cannot be stuck in from above the soil". One might argue, however, that this forced sticking-in of roots "from above" is precisely the subject of the poem's first section. Berryman's New World is less what Bennett terms a "[s]elf-consciously Yankee"<sup>98</sup> terrain than another of The Black Book's re-appropriated battle sites. The colonists' Scriptural progress-narrative has deprived the continent's native American

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<sup>93</sup> Cooper, "We Want Anti-Models" 10.

<sup>94</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>95</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33.

<sup>96</sup> Bercovitch 66.

<sup>97</sup> See KJB, 1 Pet. 2.11 and Heb. 11.13-16.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Bennett, "Sawdust and Wine," rev. of The Minute and Longer Poems, by John Holloway, Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, by John Berryman, In the Rose of Time, by Robert Fitzgerald, Green with Beasts, by W. S. Merwin, and The Form of Loss, by Edgar Bowers, Hudson Review 10 (1957): 126-31, at 127, 128.



inhabitants of their indigenous view of history; moreover, it has severed their own concrete connections to a specifically English past.<sup>99</sup> It is appropriate, then, that the physical world beyond the Word that greets them upon disembarking from their ship is hostile and alien, its “white air lashing”.<sup>100</sup> (2.2) No amount of Puritan symbology, the poet implies, could have prepared Bradstreet and her companions for “wolves & storms”, (9.4) a summer of “ruinous heat” (7.1) and a winter “than summer worse... like a file / on a quick, or the poison suck of a thrilled tooth”. (9.1-2) The stress patterns of Berryman’s line are emphasised by the internal rhymes of “worse” and “first”, “quick” and “suck”. What is most distressing here, we surmise, is the threat to the body, whether as physical entity or nascent nation-state. “[C]lams & acorns stomaching” whilst learning that “the Governor’s last bread / was browning in his oven”, (7.2-6) it is not surprising that Bradstreet comes to view her English “pities” as “the weary drizzle of an unremembered dream”. (15.5-6) The “[f]angs of a wolf” (16.4) at the door are also those of her neighbours, threatening to disrupt her linguistic claim on this unfamiliar landscape still further.

It is Bradstreet’s very sense of dispossession from the Massachusetts Bay colony at Newtown, Berryman’s exordium intimates, that will facilitate their dialogue through the centuries: they must be “on each other’s hands / who care”, for “Both of our worlds unhandled us.” (2.7-8) The phrase is well-chosen, its balance of the opposites “on each other’s hands” and “unhandled” serving “as a direct statement of alienation and of affiliation”.<sup>101</sup> Bradstreet, too, is a victim of what Margaret Marshall in December 1949 would describe as “the rift between the artist and the public that has existed since the Republic was founded”,<sup>102</sup> she understands “the almost insuperable difficulty of writing high verse at all in a land that cared and cares so little for it”.<sup>103</sup> Among the clapboard houses that rise from the ground and the settlers’ “passionless dicker”, (18.1) her only source of Scriptural self-identification is “Ruth / away”. (9.7-8) She refers to her poetic labours as a “shroud”, the means of both concealing her true emotions from others and committing herself to the European verse “dynasties” left behind:

Versing, I shroud among the dynasties;  
 quaternion upon quaternion, tireless I phrase  
 anything past, dead, far,

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<sup>99</sup> Bercovitch 73.

<sup>100</sup> As Brendan Cooper observes, “There is also a more broadly political message present here... the verb ‘lashing’ connotes the system of slavery that was to become a central facet of colonial American economy” (Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 8).

<sup>101</sup> John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980) 20.

<sup>102</sup> Marshall 598. The piece, defending the award of the Bollingen Prize in Poetry to Pound, prefaced Berryman’s letter “A Prepared Attack”.

<sup>103</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

sacred, for a barbarous place. (12.1-4)

Four compositions of four parts apiece, Bradstreet's "quaternions" comprise "a patchwork of popular history... seventeenth-century science and pseudoscience".<sup>104</sup> Concerning such subjects as The Four Elements and The Four Seasons, they pay direct tribute to "Her Most Honoured Father" Thomas Dudley and his work On the Four Parts of the World, whilst drawing upon additional English sources from Raleigh's own History of the World to Quarles' Emblems. Read alongside Bradstreet poems including "Elegy Upon That Right Honourable and Renowned Knight Sir Philip Sidney" and "In Honour of Du Bartas", these works evidence "her working out a relationship to tradition that Berryman himself was doing at a later date".<sup>105</sup> Name-checking these "quaternions", then, enables the contemporary poet to identify with her efforts to place herself within a larger verse tradition – in this case a Jacobean past "dead, far" yet nonetheless "sacred" to memory as she struggles to acclimatise to her new and "barbarous" terrain.

However, it is worthwhile at this point to observe that the full significance of Bradstreet's "quaternions" may not have escaped Berryman: employed mathematically, the word denotes a complex number that unites real and imaginary units. His mistress' early homages, re-imagining poetically the culture she has lost, also serve as the vehicle for her real antagonism towards the New World and its religiopolitical framework. Palming "vellum", Bradstreet projects the myths of England's "unremembered dream" (15.6) upon the American landscape until her memories of her birth country "die... / to greensward, privets, elms & towers, whence / a nightingale is throbbing". (10.1-3) The allusion to the rape of Philomela is no accident.<sup>106</sup> In Stanza 8 of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, she affirms her trust in a God who "is able to / keep that I have committed to his charge". (8.7-8) Yet the lacuna Berryman inserts between her words works simultaneously to suggest otherwise: it emerges as a semantic gap, erasing the specific terms of their covenant. The progress-narrative that has failed Bradstreet also threatens to overwhelm and subsume her dissenting voice, relegating it to mere parentheses by Stanza 10. Small wonder, for her insinuation is blasphemous: how can this New World be a second paradise when "(Something keeps on not happening; I shrink?)" (10.5) In his 1965 piece "One

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<sup>104</sup> Perosa 11-12.

<sup>105</sup> Fernie 21.

<sup>106</sup> Ovid's version of the Greek myth of Philomela – the Athenian princess raped by Tereus, who cut out her tongue, before her transformation into a nightingale – is also referenced in Eliot's The Waste Land; compare Eliot's lines, "yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice / And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, 1922, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2369-83, at 2373).

Answer to a Question”, Berryman would expand further upon the importance of Bradstreet’s “rebellions” to his long poem:

An American historian somewhere observes that all colonial settlements are intensely conservative, *except* in the initial break-off point (whether religious, political, legal, or whatever). Trying to do justice to both parts of this obvious truth – which I came upon only after the poem was finished – I concentrated upon the second and the poem laid itself out in a series of rebellions. I had her rebel first against the new environment and above all against her barrenness (which in fact lasted for years)...<sup>107</sup>

Confronted with the “starvation burnish[ing] our fear”, (8.2) the “dyings” that accompanied the colonists’ landing at Newtown, Bradstreet’s “heart rose” in anger. (7.3) By the settlers’ first spring, which brings only confirmation of “her barrenness”, this same heart remains truculent, “O seasoned heart / God grudged his aid.” (17.2-3) Berryman’s concession, however, that “[e]ach rebellion [of the text] is succeeded by submission”<sup>108</sup> implies that he is employing her hostility in the service of a far more contradictory “energ[y] of rejection and acceptance”.<sup>109</sup> The figure of Bradstreet is the perfect symbol of the Puritan’s continual struggle and the test of faith implicit in the admission of – and subsequent triumph over – doubt. “[R]evolt[ing] from” the “savage foresters” that surround her, (17.9) acknowledgement of her own inner savagery will ultimately prompt her redemption within their community. As Bercovitch elaborates:

The believer cultivates the inner wilderness in prescribed stages of spiritual growth; the church as a whole wins the world back from Satan in a series of increasingly terrifying and triumphant wars of the Lord. Continuous conflict, then, and gradual fulfillment become mutually sustaining concepts.<sup>110</sup>

Berryman’s 1965 discussion of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet is nevertheless notable for one key admission: “in the moment of the poem’s supreme triumph – the presentment... of the birth of her first child – rebellion survives”. The “triumph” in question belongs most fully, one might conclude, to the eight-line stanza Berryman “invented here after a lifetime’s study, especially of Yeats’s, and in particular the one he adopted from Abraham Cowley for his elegy ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’”.<sup>111</sup> As befits this poem of ambivalent and multifaceted homages, though, the relationship to yet another literary “grandfather” remains driven by a poetics of “generative hostility”.<sup>112</sup> Berryman would take pains to stress in the Shenandoah piece that his own Homage stanzas

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<sup>107</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

<sup>108</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 101.

<sup>109</sup> Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’” 10.

<sup>110</sup> Bercovitch 78.

<sup>111</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 101, 99-100.

<sup>112</sup> Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’” 3.

differed from Yeats' in "break[ing] not at midpoint but after the short third line; a strange four-beat line [then] leads to the balancing heroic couplet of lines five and six, after which seven is again short... and then the stanza widens into an alexandrine".<sup>113</sup> In fact, this "strange" arrangement was not so strange after all: a cursory glance over Berryman's oeuvre from the late Forties reveals sustained experimentation with the eight-line stanza form, from The Dispossessed's "Fare Well" and "The Long Home" to the abortive Black Book poems (of which "not him" is particularly significant, combining two four-beat lines with a final alexandrine).<sup>114</sup> He had evidently spent several years searching for a form for his long poem "at once flexible and grave, intense and quiet, able to deal with matter both high and low".<sup>115</sup> And it is the section of Homage addressing Bradstreet's parturition that stands as greatest testament to his achievement:

So squeezed, wince you I scream? I love you & hate  
off with you. Ages! *Useless*. Below my waist  
he has me in Hell's vise.  
Stalling. He let go. Come back: brace  
me somewhere. No. No. Yes! everything down  
hardens I press with horrible joy down  
my back cracks like a wrist  
shame I am voiding oh behind it is too late (19.1-8)

Holding the antinomies of acceptance and rejection, affiliation and alienation in lurching tension, Stanza 19 also highlights its author's anxieties regarding literary production; the enjambed lines strive towards a permanence that must be composed from its very lack, their syntax repeatedly cracked and re-made beneath an onslaught of contrary impulses. As Berryman's heroic couplet drives the scene inexorably towards its consummation, the result is a profound semantic dislocation that threatens to shatter Bradstreet's grasp upon her unsettled identity. Exposed in the throes of labour, the humiliation of voiding her bowels functions simultaneously to void all shame, and with it all personal singularity. It is "too late" to preserve her dignity, much as it is "too late" to resume her former life in England. Faced with the prospect of "blossom[ing]" like Abraham's wife Sarah, (21.7) Bradstreet's dialogue with her new society's Scriptural framework is also a dialogue with her own rebellious self, manifested as a fear of its loss beneath her pressing biological fate: "now I all muscles & bones concentrate". (20.2) Yet, John Ciardi has suggested, it is the very sense of self-division and encroaching disorder engendered by these stanzas of

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<sup>113</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 100-01.

<sup>114</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, The Poetry of John Berryman (New York: Kennikat, 1978) 50-51. Arpin's chapter on Homage to Mistress Bradstreet offers the most useful discussion of the poem's metrical schema currently available.

<sup>115</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 100.

Homage that will ultimately enable Bradstreet to extend her geographical and literary boundaries, for “there are clues enough, and more, for putting all the elements not only in order, but in various possible simultaneous orders”.<sup>116</sup> The final, cohesive birth-rush of Stanza 20’s alexandrine transforms her alienated and rebellious “I” into a coruscating declaration of rooted presence:

I can *can* no longer  
and it passes the wretched trap whelming and I am me  
  
drencht & powerful, I did it with my body!  
One proud tug greens Heaven... (20.7–21.2)

The second paradise is “greened” and the covenant fulfilled through “[c]ontinuous conflict”, the believer’s struggle with “the inner wilderness”.<sup>117</sup> Only as the new body leaves the body text is Bradstreet able to write herself into America, and her chronicler to fully break the boundaries of the text as microcosm, an entity fixed and static.

### 2.3 “I Hear a Madness”: Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and the Dangers of Transgression

Berryman, it seems, had broken through into the pastoral after all, composing one *woman’s* story of “crime & return”.<sup>118</sup> In a 1970 interview with Peter Stitt, he would recount his burgeoning hopes for Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. His first long poem was to be “highly concentrated”, “the equivalent of a 500-page psychological novel”. Its depiction of Bradstreet’s compromised and uncertain self would “attempt... more” than Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, and rival even “Anna Karenina, which I think is the best portrait of a woman in world literature”.<sup>119</sup> Following the work’s September 1953 publication, Robert Lowell paid his own tribute to the sheer ambition of his old friend’s literary couvade: “[Homage] is wonderfully wrung and wrought. Nothing could be more high-pitched, studied and enflamed... [It] reproduces the grammar, theology, and staid decor of the

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<sup>116</sup> John Ciardi, cit. Perosa 14.

<sup>117</sup> Bercovitch 78.

<sup>118</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196-97.

<sup>119</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 35.

period.”<sup>120</sup> “Reproduction”, however, is not quite the term for Berryman’s achievement. The jagged tones and discordant half-rhymes of his stanzas establish their own contrapuntal rhythm above the “formal Jacobean metrical façades” of Bradstreet’s quaternion poems,<sup>121</sup> amalgamating her voice with that of the ellipses and syntactical compressions characteristic of his work from The Dispossessed onwards. We are reminded again that this is the poet who five years ago in “Waiting for the End, Boys” had declared: “What do poets do? They do things *again*. I will *do things again*, as they have never been done before...”<sup>122</sup>

Yet it is crucial to note that the ambition which drives Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’s narrative – the quest for a poetics “feeling back along the ancient lines of advance”<sup>123</sup> in order to re-write them, and placing the personality at the forefront of the text – also represents a danger to its subjects. If the cross-century dialogue between Berryman and Bradstreet is facilitated by their mutual sense of being “unhanded” by society, it remains clear that, as Gary Arpin states, the greatest threat to both parties lies within their own rebellious, vacillating selves.<sup>124</sup> Small wonder, then, that Bradstreet clings to her early vow, “I must be disciplined, / in arms, against that one, and our dissidents, and myself,”<sup>125</sup> (11.7-8) even as she assumes her new role among the Massachusetts Bay colonists as “the mother of Samuel”. (22.2) As Puritan leader John Cotton “rakes” towards an orthodoxy sanctified by the first synod of Cambridge, survival within the Newtown community has become dependent upon a confirmation of Scriptural prophecy manifested through a negativistic relationship with identity; its inhabitants are defined by what they are not (not the devil’s servants, not dissenters). This final line of Stanza 11, however, is of particular significance due to its containing Ciardi’s “clues” “for putting all [its] elements... in various possible simultaneous orders”.<sup>126</sup> Affecting to accede to society’s demands, it also gestures towards a distinctly *unholy* trinity uniting its three objects: devil, “dissidents” and self. Bradstreet, it seems, is her own devilish dissenter as she mulls darkly over “who / in meeting smiled & was punisht”. (16.5-6) When

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Lowell, cit. Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1999) 220. Travisano also notes that, composing Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, “Berryman had certainly read and been impressed by Lowell’s Jonathan Edwards’s poems from Lord Weary’s Castle [1946], which versify extracts from Edwards’s own writings and recreate him in modern terms” (Travisano 218).

<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Wade Wright, rev. of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, by John Berryman, New England Quarterly 29 (1956): 545-48, at 547.

<sup>122</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 307.

<sup>123</sup> Fenollosa 54. Cit. Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 265.

<sup>124</sup> Arpin 58-59.

<sup>125</sup> Berryman’s notes to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet define “that one” as “the Old One”, i.e. the Devil (CP 147).

<sup>126</sup> John Ciardi, cit. Perosa 14.

her fellow “[b]itter sister” (25.2) Anne Hutchinson is publicly exiled from the colony, her kindred sense of otherness once again threatens her ties to neighbours and surrounds. Overwhelmed by the vicious “chop-logic” (22.8) of Cotton’s nascent nation-state, she withdraws from the scene until only the physical body that has swelled its ranks remains.<sup>127</sup>

Forswearing it otherwise, they starch their minds.  
Folkmoots, & blether, blether. John Cotton rakes  
to the synod of Cambridge.  
Down from my body my legs flow,  
out from it arms wave, on it my head shakes. (24.1-5)

In contrast to the triumphant parturition-scene three stanzas earlier, here physical presence alone can no longer root Bradstreet to New England. And it is this very sense of untetheredness to a lost past and a hostile present, Berryman suggests in his elucidatory notes to Homage, which enables the modern poet “to speak, at last, in the fortune of an echo of her – and when she is loneliest... as if she had summoned him”. (CP 147) “[A]s if” she had summoned him: the qualification is telling. For Bradstreet’s response to this initial interjection is swiftly followed by the poet’s reply, which both echoes her phrasing and extends the plea for mutual “kindness” into imperative:

– I hear you. Be kind, you who leaguer  
my image in the mist.  
– Be kind you, to one unchained eager far & wild

and if, O my love, my heart is breaking, please  
neglect my cries and I will spare you. Deep  
in Time’s grave, Love’s, you lie still.  
Lie still... (25.6–26.4)

Stanzas 25 and 26 represent, then, the climax of Berryman’s ambition for his first long poem. His Homage to Mistress Bradstreet would require neither Yeats’ masks nor the dramatic personae of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or Auden’s The Orators. Allying his own “far & wild” perspective with Bradstreet’s from across the centuries, he intended to re-conceive America’s cultural and literary history as metahistory,<sup>128</sup> “unchain[ing]” the bounds of time in order to enter into a dialogue with this poetic foremother as she strove towards a national verse tradition. What emerges,

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<sup>127</sup> As Berryman noted in one early handwritten note to the manuscript, “[Cotton & Anne Hutch[inson] are props withdrawn ∴ openness]” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 10).

<sup>128</sup> Perosa 6.

however, is less what W. J. Martz terms “a symbolic marriage or consummation”<sup>129</sup> than a far more tentative summons. In his Shenandoah piece of fall 1965, Berryman would recall a key “problem” arising from the central dialogue of Homage: “how to make [both parties] in some measure physically present to each other”.<sup>130</sup> The first stanzas of their colloquy, moreover, do little to remedy the situation: the twentieth-century poet’s heart may be “breaking” under the weight of the grief he shares with his mistress, but her keen responding mind lies under “soft bodiless hair”. (26.6) Surveying the naked body that she has “wicked[ly]” permitted her chronicler to access, Bradstreet’s remark “A fading world I dust, with fingers new” (27.5) is particularly apt, implying a poor “tactical solution”<sup>131</sup> to Berryman’s problem at best. His text’s new covenant of “lawless holds [and] annihilations of law” (28.5) depends upon a new semantic fluidity, an uncoupling of affiliation to place and time that has infected the poem to word-level. A simultaneous declaration of absence and presence, of worlds lost and worlds renewed, Bradstreet’s statement could, in fact, belong to either speaker, and in uniting both parties also functions to distance them further. As the poet reaches into “Time’s grave” to possess his mistress, his repetition of “Lie still” (26.3-4) heightens the dilemma, for here the ambiguity of the command is sufficient to call his relationship to tradition into question. Has Bradstreet lain “still” eagerly awaiting his summons through the centuries or is he “leaguer[ing]” her image for his own gain, distorting history into a self-serving tissue of lies?

If we are to consider the nature of Berryman’s relationship with American history in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet more fully, the definition of “a long poem” he was to provide twelve years after its composition offers a degree of retrospective illumination:

Let us suppose:

- (1) a high and prolonged riskiness,
- (2) the construction of a world rather than the reliance upon one already existent which is available to a small poem...<sup>132</sup>

His endeavours of 1953 had required a “high and prolonged riskiness” indeed. As he stitched Homage’s lines into stanzas on “an erasable, glassine-covered wax pad”,<sup>133</sup> the poet was enacting a rebuttal of the Puritan cultural narrative, resituating the origins of a nation within not the Scriptural Word but his own uncertain phrases. The result was a

<sup>129</sup> William J. Martz, John Berryman, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers 85 (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1969) 27.

<sup>130</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 101. In his notes to the text, Berryman describes this dialogue as the “second section” of Homage, running from 25.3 (“– I miss you, Anne”) to 39.3; “his voice however ceasing well before it ends at 39.4, and hers continuing for the whole third part, until the coda (54-57)” (CP 147).

<sup>131</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 101.

<sup>132</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 103.

<sup>133</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 254.



conflation of fact and rhetoric which, like the Puritan forefathers' before him, served to further Berryman's political analogue: if his post-war society was threatened by "[f]actioning passion" (24.8) then so, too, would be Bradstreet's. Reaching towards her as "a sort of mother"<sup>134</sup> to the home country he despised, striving to access the body that had engendered the "wretched" American literary corpus whose ranks he nevertheless longed to join, it was not, therefore, surprising that he would shape his own ambivalent Homage into a prolonged lyrical "movement of seduction".<sup>135</sup> Berryman had read the facts in Helen Campbell's biography, but as he would later explain to Peter Stitt, his decision to subvert them was deliberate: "It is a historical poem, but a lot of it is invented, too. I decided to tempt her. She was unbelievably devoted to her husband... I decided to tempt her."<sup>136</sup> As Stephen Matterson elucidates, the poem's account of this "tempt[ing]" both resists the New Critical paradigm of the text as an inherently "moral" structure<sup>137</sup> and, crucially, "place[s] emphasis on the fictionality of history":

The act of seduction becomes analogous to the act of creating history, and relates that act also to the act of making poetry. The present seduces the past, and in leading it away brings it to the present. This is precisely what Berryman does in the whole of Homage... History's meaning is relational.<sup>138</sup>

If the effect of Berryman's Homage is to render "[h]istory's meaning... relational", it remains throughout the text a relationship that the historical Anne Bradstreet cannot comprehend. Tellingly, she is unable to recognise her self as it materialises beneath the poet's gaze: "Veiled my eyes, attending. How can it be I?" (27.1) As his imaginative recreation, her true identity is "veiled"; in communing with and "caring" for him, she is also required to "attend" upon his instructions. Moving between the past and the present, measuring each in terms of the other,<sup>139</sup> it is evident that Berryman's commitment to Bradstreet has its origins less in her particular seventeenth-century existence "as a woman"<sup>140</sup> than in the ambivalent homage to their shared national literature that she engenders within him. And this "concern... with questions of poetic reputation and achievement",<sup>141</sup> moreover, also necessitates a renewed consideration of his own

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<sup>134</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 71.

<sup>136</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 34.

<sup>137</sup> See for example John Crowe Ransom's statements, "[By poetry] we advance to the good society and to religion and beauty" and "[T]he occasion of a poem is a moral *situation*. The moral is never to be emphasized as if the poem existed just for its sake, but must stay implicit in the situation" (John Crowe Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses," American Poetry at Mid-Century, by John Crowe Ransom, Delmore Schwartz and John Hall Wheelock (Washington, WA: Library of Congress, 1958) 1-14, at 4, 8).

<sup>138</sup> Matterson 71.

<sup>139</sup> Brunner 124.

<sup>140</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 100.

<sup>141</sup> Fernie 12.

apprentice work. It is no coincidence that, in Stanza 32, Bradstreet echoes words from the mouth of another reluctant literary paramour, “Chris” from the poet’s (as yet unpublished) 1947 sonnets: “I *want* to take you for my lover.”<sup>142</sup> (32.5) The present is revising and seducing the past as written entity once again. But the effect here in Homage is not to fuse Bradstreet’s world with that of the contemporary scene, but to incorporate it within a more metahistorical vision of America. Acknowledging his Sonnets to Chris’ textual terrain of automobiles, cocktail-parties and suburban despairs, Berryman is stating his intention to eclipse that work’s achievement, layering poetic progress past into a palimpsest of “Spring’s New England[s]” (31.1) which subverts the ordering principles of space and time. His self-quotation, conversely, affords Homage less of a “limiting personalistic context” than is commonly critically supposed,<sup>143</sup> for its textual presence evinces neither “the sexual love of the sonnets... transmuted”<sup>144</sup> nor what Sarah Provost terms a straightforward “redaction of [Chris]”.<sup>145</sup> What emerges instead is a distinctly Whitmanic song of the self’s sense of unchained rootlessness, composed of antinomial heights and depths (“Venus” at the sky’s summit, fish “shift[ing]” on the ocean floor) (31.6-7) and constantly threatened by re-writing or even erasure:

Milky crestings, fringed  
yellow, in heaven, eyed  
by the melting hand-in-hand or mere  
desirers single, heavy-footed, rapt,  
make surge poor human hearts. Venus is trap –  
the hefty pike shifts, sheer –  
in Orion blazing. Warblings, odours, nudge to an edge – (31.2-8)

As Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich has observed, Berryman’s “ventriloquist-identification with the Puritan woman” in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet is a clear attempt at “self-rescue from the... (time- and gender-bound) self and... its limitations as poetic subject”.<sup>146</sup> However, it is equally striking that in this text characterised by contrary tributes and rebellious oppositions, the body he re-imagines in his long poem’s central dialogue also functions as a major force of resistance. The Bradstreet presented here is increasingly “afraid” of the contemporary poet as he “crouches outside” the social and temporal bounds

<sup>142</sup> Compare Sonnet 42: “I *want* to take you for my lover’ just / You vowed when on the way I met you: must / Then that be all (*Do*) the shorn time we share?” (CP 91).

<sup>143</sup> Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 6.

<sup>144</sup> Martz 27.

<sup>145</sup> Sarah Provost, “Erato’s Fool and Bitter Sister: Two Aspects of John Berryman,” Twentieth Century Literature 30 (1984): 69-79, at 77. Similarly “personalistic” readings are offered by Luke Spencer (Luke Spencer, “Mistress Bradstreet and Mr. Berryman: The Ultimate Seduction,” American Literature 66 (1994): 353-66, at 353-54) and Edward Brunner (Brunner 128-31).

<sup>146</sup> Aldrich 157.

of her community, simultaneously “flamboyant, ill, [and] angelic” in his role as tempter. (32.1-3) The antagonistic act of seduction, it seems, represents less of a “self-rescue” than a further threat to the integrity of both the poem and its personae. Berryman’s New Critical mentors had promoted verse composition as a self-contained and self-fulfilling microcosm, “the finished thought... formed so that it affirms its shape as a necessary part of its meaning”.<sup>147</sup> But Homage’s very articulation of its ordering principles, its quest to shape narrative resolution from the meaning realised in two souls’ metahistorical communion, serves simultaneously to call these principles into question. Bradstreet’s response to the poet’s springtime love-aria of “[p]ussy willows” and “[m]ilky crestings” (31.1-2) affirms nothing but its own “intensely compacted and forward moving” rhythm,<sup>148</sup> composed of and composing ambiguities, chiasmi and ellipses: “– I hear a madness. Harmless I to you / am not, not I? – No.” (32.6-7) No longer “I”, her departed historical self, she doubts her capacity to “harm” her summoner. Nevertheless, the elided syntax and missed beat of Berryman’s three-foot line insist otherwise, and cast further doubt upon the possibility of true “concord of... thought” (32.8) between these parties. As Berryman’s seduction-dialogue reaches its peak in Stanza 33, the poet’s voice mounts a sudden, desperate prayer for the acquisitive “lust” which has driven his Homage to be “refrain[ed]”. (33.1-2) Rewriting “Spring’s New England” (31.1) as metahistorical palimpsest has, conversely, enabled him to connect nothing with nothing. He has unchained his vision from the boundaries of space and time to the extent that no image can be fixed or rooted, and the result is not a triumph of literary ambition but a chaotic “drowning” in four centuries’ past:

– Wan dolls in indigo on gold: refrain  
 my western lust. I am drowning in this past.  
 I lose sight of you  
 who mistress me from air. Unbraced  
 in delirium of the grand depths, giving away  
 haunters what kept me, I breathe solid spray.  
 – I am losing you! (33.1-7)

If Bradstreet functions as ur-poet in Berryman’s text, “a sort of mother to the artists and intellectuals who would follow her”,<sup>149</sup> she is also, as dictated by her Puritan forefathers’ progress-narrative, the Scriptural manifestation of the maternal prophecy, at once “blossom[ing]” Sarah and Blessed Virgin. In Stanza 33’s lines, the religiosymbolic imagery is in turn overlaid with that of the Byzantine Madonnas, “[w]an dolls in indigo on gold” who stare mutely through the ages as their territories are annexed. “[M]istress[ing]”

<sup>147</sup> Brunner 7.

<sup>148</sup> Arpin 53.

<sup>149</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33.

the poet “from air” alone, it is clear that his Bradstreet is no physical presence: she is a mere “haunter” from an irretrievable past, one fading ghost among many. The text’s promised “concord of... thought” (32.8) has been supplanted by an amplification of its previous antinomies, in which Berryman, as a disoriented deep-sea diver, cannot help but “lose sight of” his reluctant mistress. And the effect is to awaken us to the full dangers of this act of seduction, as the poet in his eidetic delirium divests himself of what has until this point enabled his uncertain self to find its reflection in past ages, “kept me” – both the concept of Bradstreet as a real historical figure dispossessed by society and his own ties to his 1953 surrounds.<sup>150</sup>

It is nevertheless Bradstreet’s “maize & air” (3.1) presence in Berryman’s poem that gives him a means of vocalising his text’s true story of crime: that of the “lawless holds, annihilations of law / which Time and [God] and man abhor”, (28.5-6) and which his protagonists’ rebellious, distinctly unholy desires have brought into being. His Bradstreet is all too aware that “Women have gone mad / at twenty-one” under lesser pressures, but still her “Ambition mines, atrocious, in”. (15.7-8) Her vision of Heaven seems doomed to remain “[h]ard and divided”, (36.1) for her guilt at social and temporal transgression with the contemporary poet also betrays her doubts regarding the Puritan settlers’ vision of a second paradise in New England. Could this really be “a new heaven and a new earth”,<sup>151</sup> riven as it was by “[f]actioning passion” (24.8) and physical hardship and forcing her to seek solace in another “unchained eager far & wild”? (25.8) More than ten years after Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’s composition, Berryman would describe his mistress’ continued insubordination in the wake of the poem’s seduction-dialogue as a revolt “against her... life of illness, loss, and age” to come.<sup>152</sup> Yet, as she throws “hostile glances towards God”, (36.3) the evidence points towards a far deeper rebellion on her part: rebellion against the foundations of America itself, against a people unwavering in their vision of the future as postdated prophecy, pre-interpreted for consumption. In Newtown’s community of “starch[ed] minds”, (24.1) which rewards not intellectual endeavour but “[i]nsectile unreflective busyness”, (50.2) her sin, one might conclude, is knowledge itself. Bradstreet is cursed above all with consciousness of her compromised self as “cross & opposite, wherein I survive / nightmares of Eden”: (36.5-6) her “nightmares” are also the Pilgrim forefathers’ dreams of a Promised Land. Her comprehension of the central antinomies comprising Puritan life – eternal fulfillment achieved through the embracing of an unbearable present, God as both “unforbidding Majesty” (21.3) and judgmental patriarch

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<sup>150</sup> Aldrich 156.

<sup>151</sup> Bercovitch 68.

<sup>152</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

– will as she enters her second long illness threaten to destabilise her surviving “I” once more in a clear echo of the twentieth-century poet’s experiences. Dispossessed from her own “unreflective” society, Anne, too, is left “drowning... in *senses*, in the past”.<sup>153</sup> Stanza 37’s fevered and hallucinatory phrases juxtapose guilty fear of “Hell’s hammer-wind”<sup>154</sup> against her defiant “black joy” as death beckons, (37.1-3) serving as vehicle for a plethora of cultural and Scriptural allusions in which “a male great pestle smashes / small women” yet the “enchanted cries” of a female voice are granted power to “fool the horns of Adam”. (37.5-8) This latter image of Berryman’s is especially worthy of note in its reference to the original cautionary tale of seduction: what is Adam if not the first man to be seduced by forbidden knowledge and knowingly betrayed by his desires, and as a result to be barred forever from the innocence of Paradise?

John Haffenden in his Critical Commentary explicitly relates the progress of Bradstreet’s “sufferings” in the poem to her creator’s deep shame at “his own adultery in 1947”:

Berryman is in fact treating his own guilt feelings by shedding them in the person of Anne Bradstreet. Her phases of rebellion and submission, and her consequent sufferings, are correlative to his own sense of remorse.<sup>155</sup>

Yet even the most cursory reading of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet establishes the contemporary poet’s “guilt feelings” as a distinguishable entity from his mistress’ seventeenth-century fears of “the cruel spread Wings black with saints”. (38.1) In his dislocated delirium, “losing” his grip upon Bradstreet’s presence as four centuries’ history presses in unchecked upon him, it is to his own crimes and his own perspective he turns. The reassurances projected by his literary lover can neither absolve him nor “[s]traiten” his hold on her past, for, as he cries:

– I suffered living like a stain:

I trundle the bodies, on the iron bars,  
over that fire backward & forth; they burn;  
bits fall. I wonder if  
I killed them. Women serve my turn.  
– Dreams! You are good. – No. (33.8 – 34.5)

These are dire straits indeed: it is evident, moreover, that the guilt these lines depict reaches far beyond the bar-room despairs that had shaped Berryman’s Sonnets to Chris.

<sup>153</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 30.

<sup>154</sup> Compare KJB, Jer. 23.29: “Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?”

<sup>155</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 10-11.

The poet's faltering phrases heap one horrific subordinate clause upon another, extending the limits of the bearable, and in doing so rendering the experience portrayed both personal and more widely inclusive. He is constructing a vision of American existence as "hellish dream-life",<sup>156</sup> writing the history of a society that, as he would explain to Richard Kostelanetz in 1970, "would drive anybody out of his skull, anybody who is at all responsive".<sup>157</sup> For not all of history was vulnerable to seduction, as Berryman's abortive work four years earlier on The Black Book had taught him. Seeking America's origins, his studies had confronted him with the persistent images of civil and international wars and genocides, a series of stark horrors resistant to interpretation or resolution. And if, as Stephen Matterson asserts, "[h]istory's meaning is relational"<sup>158</sup> in Homage, it is Berryman's attempt to relate to these atrocities through narrative that ultimately sets his "guilt feelings" in the poem apart from Bradstreet's. The sense of mutual affiliation with another figure dispossessed from society is not, it seems, enough to salve his agonies. Faced with the issue of his own responsibility for "the bodies, on the iron bars" – the unthinkable brutality of his nation and fellow men to which he, in standing by, has consented – all that remains for the twentieth-century poet is a profound sense of abandonment and loneliness, and a persona fundamentally other to itself.

One might say, then, that Berryman cannot "feel myself God waits" as Redeemer (35.1) amid the literary terrain of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet because he can no longer "feel [him]self" to exist in the poem as whole entity. The communing metapoetic "I" his text attempts, an "I" shored up by dialogue with Bradstreet as a similarly dispossessed foremother, has failed. What remains could not be further from A. Alvarez's description of "the modern artist" who "knows what he knows, [and] has his own vision steady within him".<sup>159</sup> The old tenets of this "vision" – a steady moral compass, the resistance of disorder through faith in "the good society"<sup>160</sup> and its enactment in verse – have crumbled, and the poet instead associates his overwhelming uncertainty with a sense of his own fragmentation.<sup>161</sup> In the aftermath of his impassioned seduction-aria, his self is left divided, "a man of griefs & fits / trying to be my friend" (35.5-6) – and it is this curious phrase which offers an insight into Berryman's oft-cited declaration from Stanza 34, "Women serve my turn". (34.4) Bradstreet, John Haffenden suggests, is "the type" (or

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<sup>156</sup> Arpin 57.

<sup>157</sup> John Berryman, "Conversation with Berryman," interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 344.

<sup>158</sup> Matterson 71.

<sup>159</sup> Alvarez 15.

<sup>160</sup> Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses" 4.

<sup>161</sup> Linebarger 72.

prototype) “of Berryman’s desubstantiated self”<sup>162</sup> in Homage, even if she is no Chris/Lise. As his subjective re-creation, she is at liberty to be summoned, tempted and punished, as he himself is tempted and suffers throughout the course of his long poem. By projecting his voice into Bradstreet’s mouth, however, Berryman is also exposing her more vital function; the act ensures that “his fear of destroying a woman” (or, through the “usurpation of individual decision”,<sup>163</sup> a race, even a nation) is “transformed into the more acceptable form of self-destruction”.<sup>164</sup> Trying to be Bradstreet’s friend, the poet is, indeed, trying to be his own friend too, attempting to shed his former “griefs & fits” through the assumption of a coherent “I” able to bear up to its historical and social responsibilities. Yet the result is a work which also serves as a bleak warning: is such “friend[ship]” only possible through Berryman’s putting his mistress’ voice to death, his empathetic destruction of the seductively inaccessible body which has birthed his body text? Stanza 35 renders the matricidal impulse explicit in a striking reversal of Homage’s earlier parturition-scene:

And the brown smock splits,  
down the pale flesh a gash  
broadens and Time holds up your heart against my eyes. (35.6-8)

The image is less than savoury, describing not just an evisceration but a deliberate literary autopsy; the post-war poet is plundering both physical corpse and written corpus for his own gain. Nevertheless, all is not lost, for as “Time holds up your heart against my eyes”, Berryman betrays his reluctance to abandon his poetic paramour entirely. His line re-emphasises her centrality to the American verse tradition: she is the beating heart at the heart of his “generative hostility”.<sup>165</sup> As Aldrich states perspicaciously, however, “we sense not so much a hungering vision filled as rather a blank one *screened*”.<sup>166</sup> Bradstreet cannot absolve her summoner’s guilt, but the myth of seduction her presence creates enables him to shield his eyes, albeit temporarily, from the wreckage of the American Dream. And, crucially, amid a Godless contemporary landscape scarred by war’s casualties and “foxholes”, where “spiritual redemption can only appear as a savage mockery of itself”,<sup>167</sup> Berryman’s antagonistic homage permits him to take his place alongside her in the national literary canon, restoring what has been marginalised to centre stage.

<sup>162</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 32.

<sup>163</sup> Berryman, “The State of American Writing” 857.

<sup>164</sup> Provost 78.

<sup>165</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 3.

<sup>166</sup> Aldrich 158.

<sup>167</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 8.

All the same, the trials that Bradstreet undergoes in Berryman's long poem are also necessary to her recuperation within the Massachusetts Bay colony. Her delirious glimpses of "Death's blossoms" (37.2) function to highlight "the powerful visionary dynamic behind the Puritan concept of errand".<sup>168</sup> Lamenting the corrupt ways of her fledgling society, Bradstreet is also writing herself into the American Puritan jeremiad, the first English-language genre developed by the New World settlers. As Sacvan Bercovitch elaborates, according to this model, "God's afflictions were like a 'refining fire', intended to purify and strengthen, or like the punishment meted out by a loving father, the token of His special care."<sup>169</sup> The jeremiad-narrative will ultimately replace her "vellum"-clad dreams of England's "greensward, privets, elms & towers" (10.1-2); acknowledging her own rebellious nature, she is subsumed into the Pilgrim forefathers' religiopolitical framework of progress-as-prophecy. Stanza 39, with its extra middle line "signaling a broad transition", (CP 148) as Berryman observed in his notes to the work, charts her recovery and reassimilation into the everyday minutiae of colony existence:

Tribunal terrible & pure, my God,  
mercy for him and me.  
Faces half-fanged, Christ drives abroad,  
and though the crop hopes, Jane is so slipshod  
I cry. Evil dissolves, & love, like foam;  
that love. Prattle of children powers me home... (39.2-7)

"[M]ercy" for both Bradstreet and her twentieth-century seducer, it seems, can only be granted through the "dissol[ution]" of the transgressive impulse – "cross & opposite" (36.5) in nature, composed of intermingled "[e]vil" and "love", it must be washed away like dish-soap down a sink. Whilst Sergio Perosa argues in his "Commentary on Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" that the historical woman "probably turn[ed] to poetry as an oasis of consolation from endless material difficulties, the care of eight children, and the privations and tensions of [her] new surroundings",<sup>170</sup> Berryman's text, in fact, suggests the opposite to be true. The poem's later stanzas are particularly notable for their account of Bradstreet's self-imposed restriction of her geographical and literary ambitions. Returning to a domestic narrative of loose teeth, childish "rashes" and offspring "fishing for shiners", (45.4) she is clear about just where her priorities lie:

When by me in the dusk my child sits down  
I am myself...  
.....

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<sup>168</sup> Bercovitch 79.

<sup>169</sup> Bercovitch 78-80.

<sup>170</sup> Perosa 5.



How they loft, how their sizes delight and grate.  
The proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate.  
And they publish them  
away in brutish London, for a hollow crown. (42.1-8)

It is evident from these lines that the reluctant literary lover given voice by Berryman's ambivalent Homage is concerned with herself, too, "from the beginning, as a woman, not much as a poetess".<sup>171</sup> Establishing a new life in "a barbarous place" (12.4) just twenty-three years after the English Pilgrims' initial settlement in Jamestown, she figures less in this work as ur-poet than as ur-mother, the bodies which leave her body text "green[ing]" the promise of America as nation-state. Compared with this great "work [God] hast begun" (44.8) in Bradstreet, the 1650 publication of her first volume in England cannot help but seem "spiritless", "a hollow crown" of laurels at best.<sup>172</sup> And, crucially, by inserting verbatim into his text her own epithet – "brutish London"<sup>173</sup> – Berryman is also dissolving any final doubts regarding the extent of her assimilation into this New World. What could be more "hollow", more "brutish", his mistress now implies, than the pomp of the Stuart crown and coinage which preceded the Commonwealth, having dispatched its subjects to the disease, famine and hardship of the American wilderness?<sup>174</sup>

If it is through her genealogical role as mother and daughter that this "pioneer heroine"<sup>175</sup> finds herself as rooted presence in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, it is nevertheless a "sourcing" based upon the comprehension of loss as written into history, and unable to be fully seduced or recovered by the present. The death of her father (and former colony Governor) Thomas Dudley may cause Bradstreet to "grind... her teeth / a little", (44.5-6) but her rebellious cry for his mourners' silence is swiftly quelled by a renewed religious conviction. "Agh, he is gone!"; but "Where? I know. Beyond the shoal"; (44.3-4) the voice of the twentieth-century poet has here faded along with her uncertainty, and she is finally able to answer her own questions. Dudley's passing, furthermore, serves to cement her linguistic claim upon an unfamiliar terrain, for now "This *our* land has ghosted with / *our* dead: I am at home." (44.6-7, emphasis added)

Berryman's phrase does not imply, as Sarah Provost has claimed, a self-destructive desire

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<sup>171</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 100.

<sup>172</sup> Bradstreet's first poetic work was, as Perosa notes, "published without her knowledge and anonymously in London in 1650 by her brother-in-law John Woolbridge, under the title of The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, or Several Poems, Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning" (Perosa 5-6).

<sup>173</sup> Berryman's elucidatory notes to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet locate the phrase within "a kindly passage about the Great Fire"; (CP 148) however, as Perosa observes, "[i]t is not found" in The Works of Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannie Hensley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967) (Perosa 6).

<sup>174</sup> Compare also Shakespeare's Richard II, 3.2.160-62: "for within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps Death his court" (William Shakespeare, Richard II, The Collins Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Susan Anthony, Robert Cummings et al. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994) 478-512, at 497).

<sup>175</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 33.

for “kinship with the dead”<sup>176</sup> so much as an inherent relational symmetry: the loss of the dead establishes mnemonic roots for the living in the soil. It is no coincidence, one might surmise, that as an “old woman” in the “great new house” provided by her husband’s council position, Bradstreet’s deathbed window “gives on the graves” outside. (50.7-51.1) “Lingering” in her last illness, she attributes to her failing, fleshy heart a “redskin calm” native to its adopted land:

A haze slips sometimes over my dreams  
and holiness on horses’ bells shall stand.  
Wandering pacemaker, unsteady friend,  
in a redskin calm I wait:  
beat when you will our end. Sinkings & droopings drowse. (51.3-8)

Not God but this “unsteady friend”, the seat of her rebellions and submissions, is the lower-case “you” that will dictate her physical “end”; she whose dispossessed “I” once resisted even “Hell’s hammer-wind” (37.1) will be forced to “budge” in the definite “article of death”. (47.4) It remains significant, however, that these lines’ allusion to Zechariah 14 enables the poet to subtly emphasise the “fictionality of history”<sup>177</sup> upon which such resignation depends. Whilst Bradstreet is secure in the knowledge that after her death “holiness on horses’ bells shall stand”, we are reminded that this also is the book of the Lord’s promise to “smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem”.<sup>178</sup> The parenthetical aside “(how many burned?)” (51.2) Berryman permits her from her window betrays the poet’s awareness of not just the Newtown colonists’ sacrifice, but “the invasion of white colonials into America and their subsequent persecution of Native Americans”.<sup>179</sup> an awareness, that is, of all that has been lost through the Puritan settlers’ re-interpretation of a country’s indigenous history.

As Bradstreet “pass[es] out” (55.2) of mortal existence in the final stanzas of Berryman’s text, the triumphant “I am” of her first parturition is echoed once more in the enactment of identity’s closure. Amid a hail of dashes and detached adjectives, she is divested from the self reflected in and tied to her surrounds:

I’ll – I’ll –  
I am closed & coming. Somewhere! I defile  
wide as a cloud, in a cloud,  
unfit, desirous, glad – even the singings veil – (53.5-8)

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<sup>176</sup> Provost 75.

<sup>177</sup> Matterson 71.

<sup>178</sup> KJB, Zech. 14.12. Compare Zech. 14.20: “In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD; and the pots in the Lord’s house shall be like the bowls before the altar.”

<sup>179</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 8.

Simultaneously absent and infinite, “defiled” and purified as she is brought forth into her own death, Bradstreet’s central antinomies are ultimately dissolved into the void of the blank page. However, the contemporary poet suggests, this is by no means the end of his mistress’ legacy: “[h]ungry throngs” already “collect” for autopsy, ready to “sword into the carcass”. (54.8) The metaphor is an appropriate one, for Bradstreet’s demise, like her status as America’s first poet, has been made indirectly possible through the destruction of many other selves. Figuring Bradstreet as the American body text, Berryman’s ambivalent homage also figures her as a battleground, for theirs is a nation founded less upon “redskin calm” (51.8) than upon the violent re-appropriation of history and terrain.

## 2.4 Homage to Mistress Bradstreet as Twentieth-Century Critique

In his fall 1965 contribution to Shenandoah, Berryman would take pains to stress that his first long poem, for all of its existential uncertainties, was based upon a carefully schematised structure: “three large sections... are preceded and followed by an exordium and coda, of four stanzas each, spoken by the “I” of the twentieth-century poet”.<sup>180</sup> In fact, perusal of his notes from early 1953 reveals this conception of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet as tripartite work to have existed from the outset of his second attempt at its composition. The poet maps the progress of each of his “large sections” with considerable accuracy:

- 1) her life – towards close of (1) allow high spirits, wit.
- 2) my black love
- 3) her resistance and (hatred? and) anti-religion, e.g. and modern life (war) and my penitent love and her death.<sup>181</sup>

Nevertheless, as Berryman “commit[t]ed” his mistress “down”, allowing her to “Pass, / as shadow gathers shadow in the welling night”, (54.1-2) the question of the poem’s final “coda” remained. Just what was Bradstreet’s legacy to the post-war artist and his age? One clue is provided by Stanza 54’s description of her interment, in which “the collective tones of a distant past”<sup>182</sup> are replaced by the lone and lonely “candle” of one would-be seducer:

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<sup>180</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

<sup>181</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 20.

<sup>182</sup> Fernie 16.



(2.2) is darkened by the “wounded” souls scattered over its terrain.

The intellectually and spiritually arid landscape of Berryman’s coda to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, one might conclude, represents the post-war poet’s personal Waste Land. And by extending the “generative hostility”<sup>187</sup> driving his long poem beyond his modernist “grandfathers” works to enter into dialogue with his own previous verse publications he would illustrate the aptness of the comparison. Homage’s closing stanzas recall Berryman’s first full-length collection, 1948’s The Dispossessed: the former present yet another world in which the individual must carry the unbearable weight of atrocities committed on his behalf, for “the cam [has] slid, the great lock // lodged, and no soul of us all was near”. (CP 67) Yet it is the text’s deliberate allusion to another early work of his – “The Wholly Fail”, published in January 1950’s Poetry magazine – that enables Berryman to articulate the specific direction of his fear. The “yellowing days” of Bradstreet’s demise in which her fellow-colonists’ “faces wholly fail” (53.1) may also, it seems, signify the ultimate fate of the American progress-narrative her body text has “green[ed]”. As Brendan Cooper expands:

[Homage’s] “reactor piles” which themselves “wage” like a war on the modern world embody the descent of man into the paranoia and anxiety of the Cold War, an era of history incorporating the unprecedented prospect of mankind’s entire self-destruction.<sup>188</sup>

“[R]eactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime”: (55.8) Stanza 55’s heavy, sluggish alexandrine has cast out “The Wholly Fail”’s “Sir Partofall” persona, (Poetry 191) along with its extended quest-metaphor. Adrift in a historical and literary palimpsest, Berryman can only connect his mistress’ lost past to his nation’s lost future. The indelible legacy of the “wounded flying” (55.5) stands as his narrative’s event interpreted, and its interpretation become event. Refusing to be seduced, contemporary history in Homage stands as its own grimly postdated prophecy in which the “wet brain rime” of Bradstreet’s fatal illness functions as the precursor to the endless frost of nuclear winter. It is not, then, surprising that Berryman’s phrase also implies the “rime” of his text to be infected with the same malady, “wet”, booze-soaked and reeling.<sup>189</sup> The guilt-ridden fatalism evinced by this “elaborate simile of atomic processes”<sup>190</sup> and the twentieth-century poet’s sense of dispossession from the society that carries out such atrocities in his name cannot be contained – and, moreover, lie at the split heart of Homage’s literary landscape.

<sup>187</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 3.

<sup>188</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 9.

<sup>189</sup> An early draft of Berryman’s elucidatory notes to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet reveals his connection of the “[d]ropsical... complication[s] of [Bradstreet’s] last three years” to a more general notion of “edema, the final (dropsical) alcoholic condition” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 7).

<sup>190</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 19.

Berryman might “pretend to leave” (56.1) his re-conjured literary lover, but the ambiguous phrasing with which he does so serves as a wry acknowledgment of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’s central pretence: that of making “the seventeenth-century woman and the twentieth-century poet... in some measure physically present to each other”.<sup>191</sup> It is his voice alone that has summoned Bradstreet “from the centuries”, (3.3) and in claiming authority, however tentative, over her past he is his text’s only authority:<sup>192</sup> “I say you seem to me / drowned towns off England, / featureless”. (56.2-4) *I say* “you seem to me”; qualification follows qualification, and the jarring English mannerism further highlights the distance that this “resourceful historical poem” cannot span.<sup>193</sup> For, as one early reviewer has observed, the true achievement of Berryman’s Homage is its function not as historical but as diagnostic survey. The work is above all “[a]n anatomy of analysis, a psyche dispersed in fragments of bone and sharp iron”.<sup>194</sup> All that remains of Bradstreet is all that remains of the American self as coherent, stable and unified entity: “fire-ash, fossils, burlled / in the open river drifts” (56.5-6) of the old New World from which the dispossessed twentieth-century poet strives to reclaim her. Berryman’s growing awareness of the impossibility of true “concord” between his poem’s protagonists enables him to concede finally of his mistress

O all your ages at the mercy of my loves  
together lie at once, forever or  
so long as I happen. (57.1-3)

As Bradstreet is again subjected to the poet’s gaze, it is evident that the dubious “mercy” of his literary act has been realised through the “fictionality of history”.<sup>195</sup> It is the “lie” of seduction, and of communication between “ages” made possible by mutual “unhanded[ness]”, which has driven this “cross & opposite” (36.5) Homage. And the consequence, it seems, is a re-definition of “forever” as the eternally *uncertain*, existing only “so long as I happen”. The immortality granted to Bradstreet by her chronicler’s text is entirely dependent upon Berryman’s own ambition to feel “back along the ancient lines of advance”.<sup>196</sup> Cementing her presence in the American verse tradition, his primary aim was to cement himself beside her. It is thus that, doomed as she is to remain “a sourcing

<sup>191</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 101.

<sup>192</sup> As Joseph Mancini notes, “[Homage is] ‘entirely voiced’ – quotation marks implied at both ends – so that [Berryman] is speaking the entire poem, including [Bradstreet’s] words” (“John Berryman’s Couvade Consciousness: An Approach to His Aesthetics,” Recovering Berryman, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 169-78, at 175).

<sup>193</sup> Robert Lowell, cit. Berryman, “Changes” 101.

<sup>194</sup> Bennett 129.

<sup>195</sup> Matterson 71.

<sup>196</sup> Fenollosa 54. Cit. Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” TFOTP 265.

whom my lost candle like the firefly loves”, (57.8) Berryman is unable to access the historical Anne Bradstreet: she whose “bald / abstract didactic rime” (12.5-6) met with such bewildering success, ur-mother to the nation and intellectual climate he despised. Yet his antagonistic Homage, which permanently divides his uncertain post-war “I” from her fading ghost, should by no means be regarded as a poetic failure on these grounds. Projecting his voice into the re-created Bradstreet’s mouth to explore her feelings of betrayal by the American progress-narrative, Berryman’s 1953 long poem was also the vehicle for a more difficult homage still to his profound sense of inward expatriation. His “subjects &... [his] actual heart”<sup>197</sup> are contained within Stanza 57’s final lacuna, which powerfully enacts the dispossession-trope of being not at home in the home-place, distanced from one’s “sourc[e]”: *this* was how it felt to be a responsible and responsive individual in a Promised Land which had broken all of its promises.

The tripartite structure of Berryman’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet certainly lends itself well to the interpretative model that John Haffenden proposes of “scene-setting; crisis; resolution”.<sup>198</sup> However, as Philip Coleman has suggested shrewdly, the poet himself might have favoured Fredric Jameson’s contention that “the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological work in its own right”.<sup>199</sup> For if Homage has an ideological function, it must lie in the resistance of solutions: its text enacts “[*o*]ne man’s story [of] crime”<sup>200</sup> as returned on both the individual and the national psyche, and reverberating throughout the modern world. Rupturing the formal Jacobean facades that his poetic foremother had bequeathed to American letters, Berryman’s ultimate sin in Homage, one might conclude, was his doubt. His text’s contradictions, lacunae and syntactical compressions expose the loss and violence at the heart of his country’s Scriptural progress-narrative; Robert Lowell would aptly describe its lines as “harnessed to a subject and trial that strain them to the limit”.<sup>201</sup> However, it is crucial to note that Berryman’s Homage, preceding Lowell’s own Life Studies by six years, could not be further from that work’s so-called “Confessional” paradigm in which “Psychic and political health... could be achieved by breaking the pentameter.”<sup>202</sup> Indeed, Berryman had not done so entirely. Escaping the boundaries of the text as self-contained microcosm, he had absorbed its strictures into a new poetic

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<sup>197</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>198</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 17-18.

<sup>199</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (London: Methuen, 1981) 79. Cit. Coleman 17.

<sup>200</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 196-97.

<sup>201</sup> Robert Lowell, cit. Travisano 220.

<sup>202</sup> Longenbach 5.

schema. The result was an eight-line stanza possessed of a distinctly nervous idiom, in which seventeenth-century archaisms are merged with modern Princeton inflections in lines such as “Pioneering is not feeling well”. (23.2) Homage represents an artistry born of the contemporary poet’s experiences, the legacy of all that he has witnessed. It tells the “*story*” of the fragmented post-war self as it attempts to shore itself up with all that has been lost. As such, it also fails as W.J. Martz’s “poem of personal caring”,<sup>203</sup> for Berryman’s message appears to be that there is nobody left to care: all that remains, as he would later comment, is “the individual soul under stress”<sup>204</sup> in a country where nobody is, or can be, well.

Recent discussions of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet have made much of J. M. Linebarger’s 1974 statement that “the modern poet and his age are as important to the poem as Anne Bradstreet and the Massachusetts colony”.<sup>205</sup> Linebarger’s comment, however, is rarely considered in terms of the fundamental ambivalence with which Berryman regarded his country and his age. In Homage’s radical scheme of influence “that centralizes hostility as the most productive means of ingesting and developing... (anti-) models”<sup>206</sup>, the poet’s 1947 declaration “I hate America”<sup>207</sup> is cast into new light. It demands a reading that acknowledges his desire for dialogue with the despised nation, for an interaction with which to fill the void at the heart of the inward expatriate’s concept of “home”. The antagonism that has driven Berryman’s Homage to this “boring high-minded Puritan woman”,<sup>208</sup> it seems, also manifests a profound desire for her Puritan society’s “collective tones”<sup>209</sup> of belonging. These opposing urges are evinced in his attempt to write himself into the American body text. For, as Alan Golding expands:

By celebrating the margin, Berryman inserts himself at the center... [into] the most established narrative in American literary history, that of the major writer in conflict with his or her culture.<sup>210</sup>

Breaking the boundaries of Bradstreet’s rigid society and equally rigid metrical facades,

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<sup>203</sup> Martz 26.

<sup>204</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>205</sup> Linebarger 72. See for example Deanna Fernie’s observation, “it is the condition of the modern poet in juxtaposition with his American ancestor that Homage explores” (Fernie 13). Philip Coleman declares that the poem “engages with American history and the Cold War crisis in the conception of the American self” (Philip Coleman, “Nightmares of Eden: John Berryman’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,” Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos 10 (2004): 57-70, at 62), a reading supported by Brendan Cooper in his essay ““We Want Anti-Models’: John Berryman’s Eliotic Inheritance” (Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 7).

<sup>206</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 4.

<sup>207</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “The American Intellectual and the American Dream”.

<sup>208</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 100.

<sup>209</sup> Fernie 16.

<sup>210</sup> Alan Golding, From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1995) 69.



the post-war poet is centralising his own position: that of one gazing from both within and beyond his country's verse tradition. There is an ambitious promise, too, in the failure of the dream. This ambition would certainly strain Berryman's poetic in Homage to the limit; the work's uncertain textual terrain depicts a world in which "nothing is given, everything begins and ends with [the artist], and his job becomes proportionately more difficult, tentative... [and] risky".<sup>211</sup> The poet's 1953 vision of America renders all of its citizens "Strangers & pilgrims", (8.4) for the old values – "concord" between like-minded parties, human rationality, religious faith – have irretrievably broken down. Berryman would come ultimately to regard "every word" of this text of national beginnings and endings as "either a murderer or a lover and I am not much less avid ab[ou]t every mark of printing as destructive of or loving to the subject".<sup>212</sup> The phrase, taken from a letter to his former mentor Allen Tate, is particularly striking. It establishes his Homage as a battle between poetic progress past and literary future, the legacy of the war he has waged upon Bradstreet's seventeenth-century corpse and corpus. And there is, it seems, no clear victor at present. The enduring impression of Berryman's first long poem is that of a double textual displacement in which the speaker's attempt to seduce the fossil-records of a lost past merely alienates him further from his contemporary surroundings.<sup>213</sup> Berryman's failure in Homage to transform his mistress' historical life into art, however, rewards consideration to this day. The piece stands as its own wryly self-conscious homage to his apprentice work from The Dispossessed onwards, granting that volume's stiffly academic phrases new life. Moreover, it is the art of Homage, "in which everything flowers for Berryman",<sup>214</sup> that enabled the poet to articulate the specific difficulties of his national stage: "this most American of poems in verse"<sup>215</sup> is achieved, paradoxically, through the desire to be as un-American as possible.

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<sup>211</sup> Alvarez 5.

<sup>212</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 26.

<sup>213</sup> Aldrich 163.

<sup>214</sup> Robert Lowell, cit. Travisano 220.

<sup>215</sup> Aldrich 163.

## CHAPTER 3: HIS THOUGHT MADE POCKETS & THE PLANE BUCKT AND THE DREAM SONGS

### 3.1 The Search for a “New Rhythm of Life”: His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt

Short reviews of Saul Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March, of Randall Jarrell’s Poetry and the Age and of various minor verse collections: in three years spent awaiting the appearance of his “intolerably painful, exalted creation”<sup>1</sup> Homage to Mistress Bradstreet in book form, John Berryman would publish no further poetry at all. This interval, which also encompassed his divorce and re-marriage, ignominious expulsion from a teaching position at Iowa and subsequent appointment to the University of Minnesota’s Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, provided ample opportunity for meditation upon what he later dubbed a “humiliating and profoundly gloomy period”<sup>2</sup> for both the national and his personal life. As Berryman prepared lectures upon “the Iliad and why the 20<sup>th</sup> century is so unpleasant to live in”,<sup>3</sup> he was compelled repeatedly to revisit the problem of his own poetic voice. Homage had placed the marginalised post-war artist upon the literary stage occupied by America’s first poetess, Anne Bradstreet, paying grudging tribute to her fame whilst asserting simultaneously his right to stand beside her. However, could such a *sui generis* work, commended by Edmund Wilson for its “intensity of expression & language... in contrast to most current verse”,<sup>4</sup> really win Berryman a significant audience when, as he bemoaned in the unpublished fragment “Artists & The Broken Mind”, the New Critical stranglehold upon America’s academies and the “defeat of look-for-meaning in [the] press, radio, films” flooding the mass-market had created an average reader who “supplies all the understanding himself, so he learns not to rely on [the] artist for it”?<sup>5</sup> Edward Brunner has observed that the New Critics’ promotion of the poem as a series of “formalist devices” that required “a distinct set of interpretive procedures” for mastery ensured in effect that

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, letter to Jill Berryman, 12 Apr. 1953, We Dream of Honour: John Berryman’s Letters to His Mother, ed. Richard J. Kelly (New York: Norton, 1988) 244-45, at 244.

<sup>2</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 2.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 300.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Wilson, letter to John Berryman, 27 Apr. 1953, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 10, Folder “1, 1953 – 6, 1953”.

<sup>5</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 9.

obscurity in poetry was no longer a virtue but a symptom of a particular failure: a mark of the incomplete work of the poet whose poems had not been suitably revised and polished. In the properly completed poem, all the elements... [would have] been placed in the service of communicating to the reader.<sup>6</sup>

In an intellectual climate that was in any case distinguished by a declining readership for lyric poetry, it was not therefore entirely surprising that Berryman's first long poem did not garner the universal acclaim he had anticipated when the volume eventually emerged in 1956. Whilst his fellow poets Conrad Aiken, James Dickey and Robert Lowell were unqualified in their praise of Homage as "the most daring and successful rendering of human experience ever to appear" in American verse,<sup>7</sup> even Aiken was forced to concede of its compressed and elliptical syntax that "there are some things I don't fully understand".<sup>8</sup> Other critics, such as Stanley Kunitz and John Frederick Nims, offered a more ambivalent assessment of the work, declaring, "whatever effect of magnitude [the poem] achieves has been beaten into it".<sup>9</sup> In his labours to re-situate the margin at the centre, Nims asked, had Berryman succeeded only in creating a language forbiddingly obscure and forced in its effects, "lashed sadistically, racked and hip-sprung, broken on the wheel"?<sup>10</sup>

Despite public recognition of Berryman's achievement in the form of the Partisan Review Rockefeller Fellowship and the Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize for 1957, these divided perceptions of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet would contribute to its missing the Pulitzer Prize upon which he had set his sights. In a dispiriting re-run of events surrounding The Dispossessed's publication, he was reduced to querying the promotional skills of Robert Giroux, his editor at Farrar, Straus & Cudahy:

I am not able to believe that the selling of eight copies a month, throughout the whole United States, is a reasonable matter, in view of the attention the book had, and has... I am wondering what is businesslike and what is not; I am not expecting the American people to be interested in poetry. If 8 copies a month is businesslike, there's no problem.<sup>11</sup>

Privately, however, Berryman also blamed his tendency to produce "b[oo]ks that are not real b[oo]ks":<sup>12</sup> slim volumes that hit shelves years after their composition in a distinctly

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Brunner, Cold War Poetry (Chicago, IL: U of Illinois P, 2001) 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> James Dickey, "In the Presence of Anthologies," The Sewanee Review 66 (1958): 294-314, at 314.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad Aiken, cit. John Berryman, JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 7.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Kunitz, "No Middle Flight," rev. of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, by John Berryman, Poetry 90 (1957): 244-49. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 110-16, at 112.

<sup>10</sup> John Frederick Nims, "Screwing up the Theorbo: Homage in Measure to Mr. Berryman," Prairie Schooner 32 (1958): 1-7. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 117-126, at 119.

<sup>11</sup> John Berryman, letter to Robert Giroux, 18 May 1958, JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 2.

<sup>12</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Miscell".

un-“businesslike” manner, there to be overlooked by anthologists and award committees alike. He was, in fact, wondering increasingly whether writing for posterity was even possible in the prevailing national climate. Could any of his contemporaries weather the political storm of the Cold War when the “suicide of the human race”<sup>13</sup> was just the flick of a switch away? Composed in April 1955, Berryman’s unpublished work “The Stone Empires” stands as testament to this pessimism. Whilst the world’s “littlest islands”<sup>14</sup> have announced their non-aligned stance towards the burgeoning conflict, the poem’s speaker is left meditating upon his own great nation’s resolute “oblivio[n]”:

Is grainy & grey today and unreal (Chinese  
politeness & honour we who are old recall)  
on the Lake of the Isles ice, yesterday so white.  
Dim in a weird first light  
of an era of silent tyrants, sleepy houses  
oblivious Belsen dream (what dream discloses  
from these false showers of cold

the polar sons of Belsen?)...<sup>15</sup>

Belsen’s “polar sons” here represent a polar opposite reality, the horrific fate of those extinguished by the Nazi death-camps a decade ago and an ocean away. Nevertheless, amid the moral and political stasis of the text’s frozen American landscape, this vital knowledge is buried within the assonantal lull of its “sleepy houses[?]... dream[s]”. Our lone protagonist, Berryman implies, is unique in his ability to discern the Chinese and Soviet threat that now threatens to destroy all established national values. Yet as he stands uncertainly on the “thawing strand”, the weak rhetoric of his poetic manifesto highlights just as strongly his failure to transform the revelation into action. The poem’s climactic assertion “As a man followed, followed no longer, knows, / I come,”<sup>16</sup> serves only to confirm that his awakening is partial. Having for so long “followed” and been “followed” by the watchful eyes of the “silent tyrants” who both guard and menace his country, he lacks the resolve to utter the imperative – follow *me!* – to others. This speaker’s relief at freedom from “oblivio[n]” is inextricably commingled with the sense of abandonment occasioned by his release; he has “come” alone, but, unable to affix his declaration of arrival to any object, where will he go?

As the Warsaw Pact, the Hungarian Revolution and the Vietnamese Communist insurgency rolled by with no sign of the political deadlock breaking, the question of the

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<sup>13</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>14</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>15</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>16</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1.

individual's responsibility for what Berryman would term "our common human life, yours, mine, your lady's, everybody's"<sup>17</sup> remained uppermost in the poet's mind. Since November 1954 he had been engaged in a rigorous analysis of his own dreams, producing a thick manuscript titled "St. Pancras Braser". Three years later, in the wake of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet's subdued reception, he was moved to consider its publication: "[S]ome mere record of the (necessarily imperfect) thing ought to have value... to improve in one direction our vision of the human mind." For, he mused, in "record[ing]" the motions of a personality "not 'adjusted'" nor in the habit of "see[ing] things schematically",<sup>18</sup> he was surely chronicling Everyman's dilemma: that of the dazed onlooker seeking purchase upon "The Stone Empires'" shifting shores, as distrustful of the official dictum in "press, radio, films"<sup>19</sup> as he was fearful of awakening into full consciousness of his culpability as consenting bystander to further acts of violence. Expediency, however, was set to intervene, as Berryman's early anxieties regarding his tenure at Minnesota were compounded by intra-faculty conflict over the future of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies. Aware of the vulnerability of his position, and complaining of neglect by the English Department in which he held a nominal joint appointment, he was convinced that "2 or 3 books w[oul]d make a hell of a difference".<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, when Claude Fredericks' Vermont-based Banyan Press raised with Berryman the prospect of a hand-set pamphlet in a limited edition, the request was met with barely qualified enthusiasm. The collection, which he planned to archly title "Beloved, Do Not Think of Me", would represent "modest, interim work"<sup>21</sup> but visible work all the same, a sign that the years following Homage's composition had not been wasted. Moreover, its selection of "THINGS MADE / EN ROUTE"<sup>22</sup> would be both broader in range and less solemnly literary in tone than the Bradstreet poem, demonstrating Berryman's equal command of the short lyric form: the aim here was to stage "our common human life"<sup>23</sup> in all its facets through a verse written, as he cautioned himself, "AS SHORT AS YOU CAN".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John Berryman, "Conversation with Berryman," interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 345.

<sup>18</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "St. Pancras Braser".

<sup>19</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>20</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 251. Although the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies was formally disestablished by vote in March 1958, Berryman would retain the rank of Associate Professor with joint tenure in Humanities and English.

<sup>21</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 337. Fredericks' print run was in fact limited to just 526 copies. However, a larger sense of obligation may also have motivated Berryman's acquiescence: he had initially engaged the Banyan Press in 1948 to publish his (ultimately aborted) Black Book suite.

<sup>22</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>23</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>24</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4. This imperative, a marginal note to Berryman's list of poems for inclusion in His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, would be developed further in Dream Song 54; compare that text's "Write as short as you can, / in order, of what matters" (DS 54).

When Fredericks' pamphlet emerged in December 1958, it was nevertheless evident that its compilation also owed a debt to a further imperative of the "St. Pancras Braser" project: "Analyzing my old poems! discovery, amusement, confirmation."<sup>25</sup> Of the twelve poems printed under the revised heading His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, five pieces in fact predated Homage to Mistress Bradstreet.<sup>26</sup> And it comes as no surprise that these early works – "Venice, 182-" and "The Mysteries", for example, first published in 1948 and 1951 respectively – should reflect the themes of Berryman's major poetic endeavours of that period: 1948's The Dispossessed and his (as yet unpublished) 1947 Sonnets to Chris. With its pervading "sex-horror and self-horror",<sup>27</sup> the Byronic, ironic "Venice, 182-" provides a distinct echo of the Sonnets' dismantling of love's "perfect image". (CP 105) Berryman's protagonist may go through all of the usual amorous motions, but as his vision of his "breathing lady" telescopes, this text of "speech & politeness" (CP 151) rejects the possibility of exalted union between two souls to a level that verges upon the cellular:

a heavy lock was pulling . . . I kiss it,  
 lifting my hopeless lids – and all trace  
 of passion's vanisht from her eyes & face,  
 the lip I bit  
 is bluer, a blackhead at the base

of her smooth nose looks sullenly at me,  
 we look at each other in entire despair... (CP 151)

From "[h]ell chill young widows in the heel of night" (CP 151) to their "bluer" lips and "blackhead[s]", the grim "passion" of this speaker's gaze receives only the prosaic and ugly in return. This is an awakening, too, into the fallen world of The Dispossessed, in which caresses have been replaced by "howl[s]" and the desire for union breeds a heightened awareness of both parties' alienation from the scene. Yet "Venice, 182-" also remains notable for its simultaneous gesture towards the lexicon Berryman was engaged in developing for Homage; the latter work's textual terrain would be marked by a similar disintegration of marital and social "concord", prompting Bradstreet to observe her husband "snoring lit by fountaining dawn / when my eyes unlid, sad". (15.1-3) Recurring throughout His Thought,<sup>28</sup> these intertextual echoes of Berryman's first long poem

<sup>25</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "St. Pancras Braser".

<sup>26</sup> The poems in question are "Venice, 182-", The Black Book parts i) and ii) (originally titled "not him"), "Scots Poem" and "The Mysteries"; these works were first published, variously, in American Letters, Poetry and the dedicatory volume Erich Kahler between 1948 and 1951.

<sup>27</sup> John Thompson, "A Poetry Chronicle," Poetry 95 (1959): 107-16, at 108.

<sup>28</sup> Compare for example "The Poet's Final Instructions" "I might not lie still in the waste of St Paul" (CP 154) with Homage to Mistress Bradstreet: "Deep / in Time's grave, Love's, you lie still. / Lie still" (26.3-4)

culminate in “Not to Live”, a piece subtitled “Jamestown 1957” and composed in the wake of that festival celebrating 350 years since the first successful English mainland settlement of America. The linguistic and thematic correspondences with Homage have become striking here, indicating Berryman’s continued preoccupation with his mother country’s origins in “phantoming uneases”. (CP 157) Where his Bradstreet watched her shawl “flap... like a shooting soul”, (11.3) and “[a]ll things else soil like a shirt”, (17.4) the doomed soldier-protagonist of “Not to Live”, marooned in the Virginia wilderness, “cannot wring, / like laundry, blue my soul – indecisive thing”. (CP 157) As in the former text, the message is clear: starchy resolve and military colours alone cannot found a second paradise in a fledgling society riven by “flux” and starvation. Confronted with the death of friends and the “shaming” failure of his hopes for the colony, Berryman’s vacillating speaker finds instead that in this New World “ghost / on ghost precedes of all”. And this macabre procession is led by the fading “ghost” of the commands dictated by a distant King and a lost homeland; the settlers’ attempt at linguistic possession, their very English nouns, are rejected by the “odd birds” and “secret, far air” of this alien terrain. (CP 157)

Whilst constituting no real “discovery”, the inclusion of such pieces in His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt certainly provides the “confirmation”<sup>29</sup> of poetic vision that Berryman had sought. For if Homage to Mistress Bradstreet had involved revisiting his nation’s literary past, the Banyan Press volume can be viewed as a potted history of his own artistic development. From “Venice, 182-” and the Black Book poems<sup>30</sup> to “Not to Live”, the expression grows more exact, but a single overarching theme endures: the predicament of the embattled personality “[f]air & strengthless... / Under a deserted sky”, (CP 156) fundamentally other to its surrounds and unable to find like-minded souls with which to share its agonies. As Berryman compiled his final selection of texts for Fredericks’ pamphlet, however, it was becoming increasingly apparent to him that “for poetic purposes, history is not enough”.<sup>31</sup> In a draft introduction to the first British edition of his work, he had taken pains to “assure any gentle English reader that the metrical stuff here reprinted is by a foreigner, who was not writing for him except as he is a human

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and “A Sympathy, A Welcome”’s epithet “wild bad father” (CP 157) with Homage’s “one unchained eager far & wild” (25.8).

<sup>29</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “St. Pancras Braser”.

<sup>30</sup> Of the three poems His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt includes from Berryman’s abortive 1948 Black Book project, the first two were originally published as the conjoined piece “not him” in Poetry 75 (1950): 187-196, at 192-94. For discussion of these works, see Chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Donoghue, “Berryman’s Long Dream,” Art International 13 (1969): 61-64. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 152-66, at 156.

being, and who cares nothing for his patriotic opinion of it”.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the advice he would give himself that same year in the unpublished essay “The American Writer, 1958” would make his equal disregard for the current “patriotic opinion” of his nation crystal clear:

A period of joke rewards has begun. You will always be moving anyway against the national current or apart fr[om] it; so never mind. As for politics, we are bound sooner or later to have a President again... As for the suicide of the human race, that’s up to them. Put word after word, & into word, as well as you can, & take it easy.<sup>33</sup>

But was “tak[ing] it easy” really compatible with movement “against the national current” and the struggle of the artist’s “craft-sense”<sup>34</sup> to evade both academy formalism and the Cold War climate’s restriction of civil liberties? “The Poet’s Final Instructions”, a poem published for the first time in His Thought, places the Fifties writer’s dilemma at centre stage: here, now, “near Cedar Avenue in Minneap”. (CP 154) The “[i]nstructions” regarding his speaker’s demise, Berryman intimates, constitute this individual’s public legacy, and as such must function as both epitaph and self-promotion:

Dog-tired, suisired, will now my body down  
near Cedar Avenue in Minneap,  
when my crime comes. I am blazing with hope.  
Do me glory, come the whole way across town.

I couldn’t rest from hell just anywhere,  
in commonplaces. Choring & strange my pall! (CP 154)

J. M. Linebarger elucidates, “the portmanteau word ‘suisired’ could mean ‘self-born,’ [or] ‘self-destroyed’”,<sup>35</sup> either way, the implication is that of a personality sacrificed, at once comprised of and consumed by its art. In this rather bombastic opening, the “crime” of the exhausted and suicidal protagonist against his allotted span of mortal “time” (the pun lurking beneath the text’s surface) also figures as a crime against the anti-intellectual society that his retreat from the world will permit to triumph. Nevertheless, the tone of self-importance is swiftly deflated, for, as we learn, *this* poet’s literary moment has never arrived; his own paltry “glory” will reside in the show of a few mourners, coming “the whole way across town” to pay their respects. It is not, then, surprising that the “pall” cast

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<sup>32</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 1. The introductory material Berryman supplied would be rejected by Eliot at Faber when Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and Other Poems (the “[o]ther poems” in question being thirty-nine poems from The Dispossessed and seven poems from His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt) was published in April 1959.

<sup>33</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>34</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>35</sup> J. M. Linebarger, John Berryman, Twayne’s United States Authors Series 244 (New York: Twayne, 1974) 78.



by Berryman's blackly ironic modified sonnet is "[c]hoiring & strange". A product of American ambition and boosterism, his speaker's vision of eternal life evokes not "[c]hoiring" angels but gathered manuscript leaves,<sup>36</sup> the amassing of secular successes. Yet, conversely, taking leave of the living "hell" of his struggle for recognition can only have the effect of rendering him still more incomprehensible to his "passioning... countrymen / unable to read, rich, proud of their tags". (CP 154) The circumstances conspire to reduce any notion of poetry as social legacy to a mere "joke reward":<sup>37</sup> as Berryman suggests, it cannot be otherwise for the post-war artist who desires to forge new paths in the absence of an assured and receptive audience.

Despite its rather incongruous situation in His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt – after "They Have", a slight piece opining that insects "have things easy", (CP 154) and before three extracts from Berryman's Black Book project of 1948 – "The Poet's Final Instructions" represents the collection's first significant gesture towards future poetic progress. Whilst the ambiguities, ellipses and semantic inversions of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet remain, they are tempered by the colloquialism of terms such as "used cars" and "DAD'S root beer". (CP 154) Putting "word after word, & into word",<sup>38</sup> Berryman was relocating the failure of the American Dream to a contemporary era and locale. Moreover, the poem's "[t]echnical control masquerading as offhandedness, sincerity mixed with irony, humor with sadness"<sup>39</sup> allowed for the expression of not just the pity and terror but the ennui, irony and black comedy that characterised the artist's existence in Cold War America.<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Flatley has commented perspicaciously in Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism, "an image of the total system in which one is located is... a crucial element in establishing one's confidence in one's ability to live in the world".<sup>41</sup> For Berryman, this "image" of an ideologically unified nation in which all shouldered responsibility for their actions had shattered both poetically and politically. If the writer must live and work in this world "like a knife", in which even the birth of a child elicits "[s]ympathy" before "[w]elcome", (CP 157) then his medium would have to be the

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<sup>36</sup> It seems likely that Berryman is punning on "quiring" here, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "[t]o arrange in quires or leaves... a small book or pamphlet" ("Quiring, n.," OED Online, June 2012 (Oxford UP) 9 Sep. 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/156750?rskey=gAvuV2&result=2&isAdvanced=false>>).

<sup>37</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>38</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>39</sup> Linebarger 78.

<sup>40</sup> In the months following Homage to Mistress Bradstreet's composition, Berryman had made notes on various potential projects, including a resumed version of The Black Book and a religious poem to be called "The Cross". All, however, were to be distinguished by "Wit – far more... than AB had" (JBPs, Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 3).

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Flatley, Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008) 76.

message: a “process... of accretion and palimpsestic rewriting”<sup>42</sup> comprised of fragmented phrases, sudden revelations and cultural jetsam picked up “EN ROUTE”.<sup>43</sup> Such a revised “image of the total system”<sup>44</sup> is the central trope of “American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad”. Composed in the turbulent days following Russia’s launch of the first Earth-orbiting satellite, the poem contemplates the three million square miles of United States terrain that twinkle beneath the impassive Soviet gaze. Yet, strikingly, Berryman’s panorama reveals not a united network of crisp, green “Dollartown[s]” (CP 157) but a chaotic “blue”-lit scene that flickers with the despair and panic precipitated by the crisis:

I worry like a madwoman over all the world,  
affirm the lights, all night, at State

I have no plans, I mean well,  
swear the lights of Georgetown

I have the blind staggers  
call the lights of Niagara

We shall die in a palace  
shout the black lights of Dallas (CP 158)

The text’s three- and four-foot couplets are dissonant and fractured, belying the template it has borrowed from the English nursery rhyme “Oranges and Lemons”.<sup>45</sup> This, the poet suggests, is a great nation undone by its childish naivety, its “fritter[ing]” habits and its “shots & pills”. (CP 159) And, crucially, each blazing city’s insistently personal pronoun, and the clashing antinomies of the various “cr[ies]”, “hope[s]” and “sneers” with which each fills the air, prevents collective awareness of the fall to come. Hollywood may insist that “Nebuchadnezzar” himself never “had it so good”, (CP 158) but the allusion to the Babylonian ruler also contains a veiled reminder that his pride was punished with insanity and the ruin of his dynasty. “American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad”, one might surmise, presents less Flatley’s “image of the total system”<sup>46</sup> than a series of individual stages set for tragedy. As its excoriating stanzas mount, the former President, “brave old So-and-so” Harry Truman, has been relegated to narrative parentheses, whilst Eisenhower’s nuclear smile and aggressive foreign policy invest the poem with their own driving trochaic meter: “Both his sides are all the same / glows his grin with all but shame”. (CP 158) The work’s final couplet, however, displaces the cacophony of voices

<sup>42</sup> Flatley 78.

<sup>43</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>44</sup> Flatley 76.

<sup>45</sup> Compare especially “Oranges and Lemons” opening couplet, “Gay go up and gay go down, / To ring the bells of London town” with Berryman’s own in “American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad”: “Blue go up & blue go down / to light the lights of Dollartown” (CP 157).

<sup>46</sup> Flatley 76.

abruptly with the poet's own crushing assessment of the situation: "Here comes a scandal to blight you to bed. / 'Here comes a cropper.' That's what *I* said." (CP 159; emphasis added) Not a candle to guide a frightened child but the permanent "blight" of a scandal; not "Oranges and Lemons" "chopper" but a country "com[ing] a cropper" through catastrophic political mismanagement. Moving "against the national current or apart fr[om] it"<sup>47</sup> to deliver his disturbing prophecy, the narrator of "American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad" is as much a satellite to the United States as Sputnik 1. He may as well be speaking from outer space, and accordingly his echo of Walter de la Mare's "The Song of the Mad Prince" in the poem's final phrase is deliberate; so long as he remains surrounded by insanity, he has no hope of breaking "[l]ife's troubled bubble"<sup>48</sup> to puncture the dream of a happy ending.

Reviewing His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt in 1959, John Thompson's assessment of its concluding poem "Note To Wang Wei" could be applied without difficulty to any of the volume's works composed in the wake of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet: "Its phrases sound as familiar and flat as can be, except that the shapes of their sounds as phrases are crowded or racked here in rhyme and in a stress-system which... holds them in an unalterable grip, I am sure."<sup>49</sup> A poetry, then, "racked" but not "broken on the wheel",<sup>50</sup> and a "stress-system" testing the poet's phrases to the limit but nevertheless "hold[ing]" together each text's constituent parts. This was not the future of "confident contemporary [verse]" that Berryman had envisaged in his 1957 lecture "Development of Modern American Poetry". Yet the "music of the nerves & brain" his lecture-notes identified in his own work and traced back through Elizabeth Bishop's "Roosters" and Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" represented a "new rhythm of life"<sup>51</sup> unmistakably: a rhythm that he and his contemporaries had inherited from their modernist forefathers but remade anew in its transposition to the post-war American landscape. The fragmented syntax of poems such as "American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad" and "The Poet's Final Instructions" offer a portrait of Fifties existence in which all is overshadowed by losses and "for many attentive to the developments of science the future has ceased to exist".<sup>52</sup> Consequently, "[t]he only distinction that is relevant is the

<sup>47</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>48</sup> Compare de la Mare's final stanza: "Who said, 'All Time's delight / Hath she for narrow bed; / Life's troubled bubble broken?' – / That's what I said" (Walter de la Mare, The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare, ed. Leonard Clark (London: Faber, 1969) 187).

<sup>49</sup> Thompson 109.

<sup>50</sup> Nims 119.

<sup>51</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Development of Modern American Poetry".

<sup>52</sup> John Berryman, "Waiting for the End, Boys," Partisan Review 15 (1948): 254-67. Rpt. as "Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys" in TFOTP 297-309, at 305.

distinction between those few fragments and the other thing; nothing, Nil”.<sup>53</sup> Whilst the “new rhythm” of these texts might stand between the individual and defeated silence, however, it was clear to Berryman that they could provide no measure of comfort; the New Critics’ assertion that “[Through poetry] we advance to the good society”<sup>54</sup> had failed beneath the weight of four centuries’ bloodshed. Navigating an unfamiliar terrain, the alienated and marginalised personae of His Thought possess for their only guide an unreliable mnemonic of distant lights in the sky and lost connections. They are strange to themselves indeed, which, as Jonathan Flatley has argued, is a crucial function of their representation in verse:

[this] self-estrangement... allows one to see oneself in relation to one’s affective environment in its historicity, in relation to the relevant social-political anchors or landmarks in that environment, and to see the others who inhabit this landscape with one.<sup>55</sup>

In light of Flatley’s statement, it is notable that Berryman’s poetry after Homage to Mistress Bradstreet would continue to manifest his desire to voice these “others” inhabiting the American landscape and to establish his own relationship to the nation’s literary “anchors or landmarks”.<sup>56</sup> The result, however, was not just the short poems of His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt but a renewed engagement with “the greatest poem so far written by an American”.<sup>57</sup> The essay ““Song of Myself”: Intention and Substance”, published posthumously in the 1976 Farrar, Straus & Giroux collection The Freedom of the Poet, collates material from a series of acclaimed lectures delivered by Berryman from spring 1952 onwards. Responsible in its various incarnations for numerous undergraduate “Whitman revival[s] at a time when [Walt Whitman] was regarded as mouthy, formless, and a poor risk in terms of New Critical analysis”,<sup>58</sup> the piece’s recuperative efforts also function to set out Berryman’s critical stance. Its title alone provides a swift rebuttal of the New Critics W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley’s “intentional fallacy,” encapsulated in their 1946 declaration, “[t]he design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”.<sup>59</sup> Choosing to read “Song of Myself” to his audience

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<sup>53</sup> Donoghue 63.

<sup>54</sup> John Crowe Ransom, “New Poets and Old Muses,” American Poetry at Mid-Century, by John Crowe Ransom, Delmore Schwartz and John Hall Wheelock (Washington, WA: Library of Congress, 1958) 1-14, at 4.

<sup>55</sup> Flatley 80.

<sup>56</sup> Flatley 80.

<sup>57</sup> John Berryman, ““Song of Myself”: Intention and Substance,” TFOTP 227-41, at 227.

<sup>58</sup> Haffenden, Life 239.

<sup>59</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” Sewanee Review 54 (1946): 468-88. Rpt. in W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington: U of

through a scaffold of the nineteenth-century poet's statements of "[d]eclared purpose", Berryman was suggesting this "most important achievement" in American verse to be "a work of *life*" expressly designed as such; moreover, he proposed, however dedicated one's analyses of its metaphors and metre, it remained "by [no] means an easy poem to understand".<sup>60</sup> "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance" attributes to Whitman's speaking "I" a complex rhetoric of physical and temporal estrangement in which "being is either associated with, or precisely dissociated from, time, or is both".<sup>61</sup> The effect is to re-imagine the poet as not a unified and unifying "*maker*"/makar but as an acquisitive, inquisitive and essentially relative voice: a "spiritual historian – only the history must be, as we'll see... of the Present".<sup>62</sup> The parallel with the poetics Berryman was engaged in developing for his short works of the late Fifties is clear. Wasn't Whitman's intention in "Song of Myself" ultimately similar to his own – that of a desubstantiation of personal identity, of the "self-estrangement that allows one to see oneself in relation to one's affective environment"?<sup>63</sup> However, when we reach the specific definition of "voice" at the centre of Berryman's essay, a troubling semantic ambiguity emerges:

A voice, then, for himself and others; for others *as himself* – this is the intention clearly... What others? – Americans, man. A voice – that is, expressing (not creating) – expressing things already in existence.<sup>64</sup>

"[F]or others *as himself*". The "others" in question are like the poet, in a similar situation, and they perform a similar function; performing *as him*, they threaten to render him still more other to himself, and thus to limit the capacity for relation. If we are to agree with Berryman's reading of "Song of Myself", it follows that Whitman's unconditional public "I", his open-form poetics of the *demos*, must also manifest "the profound dissatisfaction... that aims at *loss of identity*".<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, including as it does the most

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Kentucky P, 1954) 3-19, at 3. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley's assertion, "[I]f the poet succeeded in [his aim], then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem" (Wimsatt 4). See also Gareth Reeves, "Songs of the Self: Berryman's Whitman," *Romanticism* 14 (2008): 47-58, at 48.

<sup>60</sup> Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," *TFOTP* 227-8.

<sup>61</sup> Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," *TFOTP* 229.

<sup>62</sup> Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," *TFOTP* 230. Berryman had previously employed the poet-as-historian motif in his 1938 poem "The Trial", which implied sardonically that composing a coherent history of war-torn Europe was an impossible (and even morally reprehensible) endeavour; further discussion is provided in Chapter 1.

<sup>63</sup> Flatley 80.

<sup>64</sup> Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," *TFOTP* 230.

<sup>65</sup> Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," *TFOTP* 232.

lowly and vile of existences, those of beggars, “larcen[ers]”, murderers and “mutineers”,<sup>66</sup> the poem’s process of identification does not – and indeed cannot – include God. Man is curtailed in his development, left “very much on his own”, and whilst Whitman may be, as we are told, “incurious and at peace with this idea”, Berryman’s tone here verges upon the plaintive.<sup>67</sup> Denis Donoghue summarises the difficulty that confronts the reader of “‘Song of Myself’: Intention and Substance”, for all its inspired analysis of Whitman’s “self-*wrestling*... and wonder”:<sup>68</sup>

This is not Whitman’s way. Whitman’s aesthetic implies that the self is the sum of its experiences, not the sum of its dissociated fragments. In Whitman the self is not dissociated, the self is deemed to be whole at any and every moment. The experiences are diverse; as one experience follows upon another, the receiving self is enlarged. But the self is never understood as a fraction; it is always a whole number.<sup>69</sup>

Declaring Whitman to be “a voice... for himself and others”, it seems that Berryman was also co-opting his poetic forefather as a voice “for others *as himself*”,<sup>70</sup> in an act that highlights his and his contemporaries’ dilemma. The piece’s employment of the inclusive “we” as narrative pronoun establishes Berryman’s generation as hopeful heirs to Whitman and his great work. Nevertheless, its implicit suggestion of Whitman’s support for their late endeavours is the result of a performative antagonism that further estranges twentieth-century poet from literary ancestor, and ensures that Whitman-as-Berryman can only exist as fundamental other to himself.

Whilst of value to scholars as further testament to the anti-academy vein evinced in Berryman’s prose writings from the late Forties onward,<sup>71</sup> the greater significance of “‘Song of Myself’: Intention and Substance”, one might conclude, lies in its foreshadowing of his poetic struggles within the verse that followed 1953’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. From the literary criticism of Berryman’s essay to the wryly self-critical persona of “The Poet’s Final Instructions”, the urge towards an ever-expanding and ever-relating “I”, a poetics of the *demos*, is undermined repeatedly by the post-war poet’s destabilised and fractured vision. Denied “an image of the total system”<sup>72</sup> by the Cold War’s vicissitudes, estranged from both home-place and self, his speakers are reduced to the dubious sum of the dissociated fragments of experience accrued in “this world like a

<sup>66</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 1881, Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems, ed. Francis Murphy, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1986) 63-124, at 107.

<sup>67</sup> Berryman, “‘Song of Myself’: Intention and Substance,” TFOTP 232.

<sup>68</sup> Berryman, “‘Song of Myself’: Intention and Substance,” TFOTP 233.

<sup>69</sup> Donoghue 63.

<sup>70</sup> Berryman, “‘Song of Myself’: Intention and Substance,” TFOTP 230.

<sup>71</sup> See for example John Berryman, “The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions” (symposium), Partisan Review 15 (1948): 855-60, and Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 297-309.

<sup>72</sup> Flatley 76.

knife”. (CP 157) Yet, as Berryman emphasises, the quest for a means of versifying the chaos must continue – what option remained for the artist but to “[a]ssemble all [his] bags” (CP 154) and sing? The poet’s conflict over his dual status as marginalised outsider and as public spokesman is played out in “Note to Wang Wei”, the short lyric that concludes His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt. First published in the New Yorker some four months before the volume’s appearance, the piece addresses another esteemed literary figure. Specifically, it presents Berryman’s meditation upon the Tang Dynasty poet’s own lines from “In Response to Vice-Magistrate Zhang”: “As the years go by, give me but peace, / Freedom from ten thousand matters.”<sup>73</sup> Berryman’s speaker has turned from his home country’s garbled politics of “Basketball in outer space” (CP 158) to the Eastern masters in his search for guidance. But what he finds there is stranger still to his sensibilities:

How could you be so happy, now some thousand years  
disheveled, puffs of dust?  
It leaves me uneasy at last,  
your poems tease me to the verge of tears  
and your fate. It makes me think.  
It makes me long for mountains & blue waters.  
Makes me wonder how much to allow.  
(I’m reconfirming, God of bolts & bangs,  
of fugues & bucks, whose rocket burns & sings.)  
I wish we could meet for a drink  
in a ‘freedom from ten thousand matters.’  
Be dust myself pretty soon; not now. (CP 159)

For Wang Wei, death and its dissolution of one’s remaining shards of identity has provided the ultimate satisfaction. Ruffled, “tease[d]”, by the paradox that underlies his text’s playfully insouciant internal rhyme scheme, the bewildered poet contemplates the monastic existence in which Wang’s last years were “fate[d]” to be spent. Such “th[ought]”, however, paves the way to the poem’s volta, for it is swiftly apparent that this figure’s solitude is not automatically correlative with alienated solipsism. Instead, it “Makes me wonder how much to allow.” In this world, Berryman suggests, there is as “much to allow” as there are definitions of the word “allow” itself: much to concede, take into consideration, and forgive and much more still to assert. And if the superficial naturalism of Wang’s work conceals the careful preparation of a path to enlightenment,<sup>74</sup> the true revelation of “Note to Wang Wei” is relegated to parentheses within the main text: “(I’m reconfirming, God of bolts & bangs, / of fugues & bucks, whose rocket burns & sings.)”

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<sup>73</sup> Wang Wei, “In Response to Vice-Magistrate Zhang,” The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary, introd. and trans. Pauline Yu (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1980) 197.

<sup>74</sup> Pauline Yu, introduction, The Poetry of Wang Wei 1-42, at 18, 19.

The art of being in the world, it seems, necessitates a “reconfirm[ation]” of its constituent parts in the light of not eighth-century Puzhou’s “mountains & blue waters” but the chaotic cityscapes of post-war America. If there is a God here, his powers are manifested through the “bangs”, “bucks” and “rocket[s]” of the Sputnik crisis and Khrushchev’s calls for a missile shooting match. Assigning the term “fugue” to this dubious deity, the poem’s debt to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’s textual terrain is clear. Amid these insane surroundings, too, God is “fl[y]ing / nearer a kindly world; or he is flown”. (35.1-2)

However, an alternative reading also lurks beneath “Note to Wang Wei”’s surface: “fugue” as a contrapuntal melody composed of interwoven parts. As a contemporary record of “THINGS MADE / EN ROUTE”,<sup>75</sup> Berryman’s text overwrites Wang’s pastoral visions of enlightened “freedom” with the “uneas[e]” manifested in its fragmentary sentences, staccato mechanical imagery and syntactical compressions. Whilst his protagonist might well wish he could meet this Tang Dynasty muse “for a drink”, thirteen hundred years’ distance has ensured that full assumption of Wang’s ideology is impossible. As the poem comes full circle, the “now” of Wang’s death and satisfaction is emphasised as the “not now” of his own: he must be satisfied with the endurance of his dissatisfaction if he is to have any voice at all.

“[H]arsh, wry, broken, a speech that seems all fragments or symbolist dissociation, but in the end coheres strongly”: whilst few would dispute John Thompson’s assessment of His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, it is more difficult to cede to his statement, “[t]hese short poems... are more successful than the long Homage [to Mistress Bradstreet]”.<sup>76</sup> Lacking the sheer audacity which had driven Berryman’s assumption of Anne Bradstreet’s national stage, these pieces composed over almost a decade also lack the impassioned heights of Homage’s dialogue between poetic progress past and literary future, despite sharing many of its thematic concerns. Nevertheless, in their investigation of the difficulties inherent in voicing not just one but a multiplicity of “others”, and in their articulation of the post-war poet’s attempt to versify the *demos* whilst continuing to “move... anyway against the national current”,<sup>77</sup> they would appear at the time “remarkable” to Berryman.<sup>78</sup> And, upon receipt of the published pamphlet, his contemporary and friend Robert Lowell had to agree:

Your poems (shall I say it?) have a strange heart-cutting poet maudit [quality]... I wonder if you need so much twisting, obscurity, archaisms, strange word orders, &-signs for and, etc.? I guess

<sup>75</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>76</sup> Thompson 108.

<sup>77</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>78</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 2.



you do. Surely, here as in the Bradstreet, you have your voice. It vibrates and makes the heart ache.”<sup>79</sup>

“[S]omething curious twisted and against the grain about the world poets of our generation have had to live in”,<sup>80</sup> Lowell concluded in his letter, might well require a literature similar in kind. Had the texts of His Thought, in fact, fulfilled Richard Blackmur’s 1935 vision of “a fresh idiom” for American letters through their refusal to source comfort in “the stock of available reality”<sup>81</sup> and their quest instead to shape the chaos of post-war existence into art? Yet, as Berryman boasted to Robert Giroux, “I don’t really see how expression can become more exact... I thought my Bradstreet style was as short as you could get; but I was wrong”,<sup>82</sup> he was referring not just to the modest, interim works comprising His Thought, but to a further project which had absorbed him since late 1955. Despite their “un-done & un-known” status,<sup>83</sup> the Dream Songs he had begun to compose would lend both title and epigraph to Fredericks’ Banyan Press pamphlet at the post-galley stage:

*Henry sats in de plane & was gay.  
Careful Henry nothing said aloud  
but where a virgin out of cloud  
to her Mountain dropt in light  
his thought made pockets & the plane buckt.  
'Parm me, Lady.' 'Orright.' (CP 149)*

A Marian apparition upon a hilltop, viewed through the bathetic lens of “Note to Wang Wei”’s twentieth-century “fugues & bucks”; a suggestively “buck[ing]” plane, its turbulence indicating the covert presence of the taboo sexual fantasy. It seems that the “process... of accretion and palimpsestic rewriting”<sup>84</sup> that had marked Berryman’s engagement with his nation and literary tradition in His Thought was also a process to which these short poems themselves were subject. Affixing what would become the second stanza of Dream Song 5 to his volume, Berryman was acknowledging it to represent less a measure of poetic progress than a literary promise as yet unfulfilled: a mere gesture towards the “real b[oo]k”<sup>85</sup> to which it would pave the way.

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to John Berryman, 15 Mar. 1959, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 16, Folder “15/3, 1959 - 5, 1959”.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to John Berryman, 15 Mar. 1959, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 16, Folder “15/3, 1959 - 5, 1959”.

<sup>81</sup> Blackmur 364. Cit. Mariani, Dream Song 157.

<sup>82</sup> John Berryman, letter to Robert Giroux, 18 May 1958, JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 2.

<sup>83</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “Miscell”.

<sup>84</sup> Flatley 78.

<sup>85</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “Miscell”.

### 3.2 “But There is Another Method”: The Dream Songs as Post-War Epic

On 10 November 1958, as the publication of both His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt and his first British verse collection approached, Berryman declared in a scrawled note, “His Tho[ugh]ts (sic) and my Faber vol. wind up the first, ineffective, stage of my career.”<sup>86</sup> A strange reaction, given his eagerness the previous year to cement his tenure at Minnesota with visible work. One might surmise this self-deprecation to stem from the poet’s growing awareness that the academic agonies of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, despite garnering significant critical acclaim, had made little impact upon the wider reading public. Indeed, as he would bemoan in a 1959 essay, the problem remained that of “a society where the attention paid to poetry [was] so very slight... [and] the American conception of a poet [was] of a man dead, or in his eighties (Frost, Sandburg)”.<sup>87</sup> Along with his university colleagues Ralph Ross and Allan Tate, Berryman was at the time engaged in the composition of The Arts of Reading, a literary primer supplying “some elementary tools necessary to education”. The book’s introduction would provide a forum for the further development of his point, launching a near-apocalyptic denunciation of the consequences of “uninformed... *mere* literacy”:

The merely literate man[’s]... knowledge of life and the world is a homogenized mess of stereotypes and delusions. His motto is: I get by. And so he does when the machines of society grind smoothly. But in catastrophe and crisis, he becomes bewildered. For the world is more than the moment he knows, and he has never been prepared for disaster.<sup>88</sup>

If such criticism was at distinct odds with the book’s broad aim of supportive dialogue with its audience, its true brunt was, however, reserved for the Fifties writer negotiating Cold War America’s “catastrophe[s] and cris[es]”. From his alienated position, this figure had failed to “prepare” his disinterested public “for disaster”. No longer Yeats’ “King of the Cats”,<sup>89</sup> he was, as a later essay in The Arts of Reading emphasises, not even king of himself. The legacy of four centuries’ human endeavour had served only to diminish him

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<sup>86</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.1. The British volume in question was Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and Other Poems (London: Faber, 1959).

<sup>87</sup> John Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” The American Scholar 28 (1959): 384-90. Rpt. in TFOTP 310-15, at 311.

<sup>88</sup> Ralph Ross, John Berryman and Allen Tate, The Arts of Reading (New York: Crowell, 1960) 3, 2. Whilst the authors eschew “individual responsibility” for the book’s sections, it seems prudent to attribute at least half of its original material to Berryman on the basis of his “primary responsibility for Part II”; I include with this the Introduction, which bears marked stylistic similarities to Berryman’s critical work of the late Fifties (Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading ii).

<sup>89</sup> Upon hearing of the death of Swinburne in 1909, Yeats is reported to have announced to his sister, “Now I am the King of the Cats.” See for example R. F. Foster, W. B. Yeats: A Life, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 616.

astronomically (“in a suburb” of the universe), biologically (“continuous with the animals”) and, finally, psychologically, so that he “stood at the mercy of gigantic unconscious forces”<sup>90</sup> within his own mind.

As Berryman continued to agonise over the role of the contemporary poet, it was perhaps, then, unsurprising that his rereadings of both 1953’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and the texts comprising His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt were coming to resemble what he would later term “*walking up and down somebody else’s stairs*”<sup>91</sup> – relics of another lifetime, before his first hospitalisation<sup>92</sup> and second divorce, and before the advent of the Cuban Revolution and Khrushchev and Nixon’s “Kitchen Debate”. From the very “week after Homage ended”, he had begun to outline plans for a project “greater” in range and “stranger” than his Bradstreet, “a piece-poem, in sep[arate] parts”.<sup>93</sup> Whilst failing to fulfil this aim, the manuscripts of His Thought that followed evince the extent of the poet’s struggles to break from his prior work’s shadow, their marginal notes questioning anxiously “too like AB? or OK?” If Berryman’s cross-century dialogue with his literary foremother Anne Bradstreet in Homage was the result of a “generative hostility, a postwar anxiety of influence”,<sup>94</sup> this same hostility, it seems, was also fuelling his profound sense of dispossession from “the first, ineffective, stage of my career”.<sup>95</sup> His prose notes from as late as 1958, which continue to celebrate the marked “transition } a climax! and NEW” of Homage’s nine-line stanzas,<sup>96</sup> betray a powerful implicit desire to eclipse that same “transition”. How was Berryman to go about a further rendering of human experience that would pay homage to his apprentice efforts whilst simultaneously being as unlike them as possible?

By the publication of His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, however, Berryman’s uncertainties regarding his poetic future were wholly academic in more ways than one. He was already involved in another “piece-poem”, derived from origins predating even Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. Composed in August 1955, “The Jolly Old Man is a Silly Old Dumb” was inspired by the poet’s ransacking his work of the late

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<sup>90</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 344.

<sup>91</sup> John Berryman, “John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview,” interview with William Heyen, Ohio Review 15 (1974): 46-65, at 60.

<sup>92</sup> For “exhaustion”: as Paul Mariani observes, “a euphemism for alcoholic poisoning” (Mariani, Dream Song 332).

<sup>93</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 3. Berryman had in mind at this time the resumption of his abandoned “Black Book” suite of poems, begun in summer 1948.

<sup>94</sup> Brendan Cooper has characterised this “generative hostility” as an ongoing absorption of artistic influence “in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction” (Brendan Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models’: John Berryman’s Eliotic Inheritance,” Journal of American Studies 42 (2008): 1-18, at 3). Chapter 2 provides a full discussion of its central importance to Homage to Mistress Bradstreet.

<sup>95</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.1.

<sup>96</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 7.

Forties for potential verse-models: specifically, both The Dispossessed's "Nervous Songs" and his plans for a series of (ultimately unrealised) Eclogues chronicling artistic and political treachery amidst the urban-pastoral setting of post-war New York.<sup>97</sup> Yet what emerged was a work informed by a far wider sense of treachery, infecting the text at the semantic level:

The jolly old man is a silly old dumb,  
with a mean face, humped, who kills dead.  
There is a tall girl who loves only him.  
She has sworn: – Blue to you forever.  
Grey to the little rat, go to bed.  
– I fink it's bads all over.

Goguel says nobody knew where the christ they buried him  
anyway but the Jewish brass.  
No use asking the rich man.  
A story. Stories??  
One of these bombs cost a fortune.  
So at sweet dawn was he gone?<sup>98</sup>

"Something old... new, borrowed + blue", as Berryman would describe in a manuscript note.<sup>99</sup> In "The Jolly Old Man"'s syntactically clotted marriage of personal, historical and theological allusion, all is coloured "[b]lue... forever" for the "humped" protagonist, who is figured simultaneously as harmless fool, crippled Quasimodo and "satirical depiction of military violence".<sup>100</sup> His "tall" lover (a statuesque proto-Statue-of-Liberty, allied with the American Civil War's victorious Union forces) has banished the "little rat" clad in Confederate "[g]rey", but all that remains are disconnected narrative fragments, a palimpsest of "story. Stories??" in which Christ's sacrifice for our sins forms a dark analogue to the "cost" of dropping the atomic bomb, and the "rich man" reigns supreme as unreliable witness.<sup>101</sup> Whilst its three six-line stanzas echo the form of "The Nervous Songs", "The Jolly Old Man" represented for Berryman "a much 'rougher' & more 'brilliant' ... outline" that also owed a debt to the "majestic Shade" (DS 312) of Yeats and his "Crazy Jane" poems.<sup>102</sup> He came rapidly to envisage the text as the first of a collection forming "a whole book, or the major part of one... 25-30, or more". "Inevitably semi-

<sup>97</sup> John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (London: Macmillan, 1980) 41.

<sup>98</sup> John Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 299. "The Jolly Old Man" was first published under the heading "Dream Song" in Noble Savage 1 (1960): 119.

<sup>99</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 5.

<sup>100</sup> Brendan Cooper, Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry (Oxford: Lang, 2009) 121.

<sup>101</sup> Berryman is most likely alluding here to KJB, Matt. 19.24: "And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

<sup>102</sup> As Berryman would explain of his Dream Song form in 1969, "That I got from Yeats – three six-line stanzas. His songs don't really resemble mine, but I did get that from him" (John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 12).

contrapuntal”, these “NEW” Songs would derive their effect from the relationship they sought to establish not just between anapaest and anapaest but between “anabranch” and anabranch,<sup>103</sup> each a diversion from one main channel or stem.

Less than two weeks after completing “The Jolly Old Man”, Berryman affixed a title to his work in progress, considering “The Apple Songs” before settling upon The Dream Songs. Though testifying to the influence of the “consumingly personal task of dream-analysis” upon Berryman’s poetry of the period (by August 1955, his “St. Pancras Braser” manuscript exceeded 650 pages),<sup>104</sup> one might deduce that the moniker held still greater attractions for him. The ritual repetition of the dream-as-song – each styled as the personality’s unconscious response to its surrounding environment – served to facilitate what the poet termed “the construction of a world rather than the reliance upon one already existent which is available to a small poem”.<sup>105</sup> As Edward Mendelson explains succinctly, such a world “depends *from* the kind of events that happen there, the verbal events that translate the dream”.<sup>106</sup> Small wonder, then, that Berryman’s earliest notes pertaining to The Dream Songs describe this “series of dreams” as “partly, a sort of history of narr[ative]”.<sup>107</sup> And, like the earliest human narratives – the creation “story. Stories??”<sup>108</sup> – his piece-poem’s genesis would lie in a fall from grace and favour. Song 1, one of the first Dream Songs to be published,<sup>109</sup> is concerned with establishing the impact of this “departure” upon its protagonist. The character introduced as “Huffy Henry” has suffered a loss that is amplified by its lack of context, and remains “hid[den]” in ellipsis and resistant to signification in words:

Huffy Henry hid the day,  
unappeasable Henry sulked.  
I see his point, – a trying to put things over.  
It was the thought that they thought  
they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.  
But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover  
once did seem on Henry's side.  
Then came a departure.  
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.  
I don't see how Henry, pried

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<sup>103</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 5.

<sup>104</sup> Haffenden, Life 252.

<sup>105</sup> John Berryman, “One Answer to a Question,” Shenandoah 17 (1965): 67-76. Rpt. as “Changes” in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic, 1966) 94-103, at 103.

<sup>106</sup> Edward Mendelson, “How to Read Berryman’s Dream Songs,” American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1973) 29-43, at 30.

<sup>107</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder 6.

<sup>108</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 299.

<sup>109</sup> Song 1 first appeared in the Times Literary Supplement 6 Nov. 1959: 18, as part of a published group that also included Songs 5, 67, 75 and 77.

open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long  
wonder the world can bear & be.  
Once in a sycamore I was glad  
all at the top, and I sang.  
Hard on the land wears the strong sea  
and empty grows every bed. (DS 1)

Berryman observed early on in The Dream Songs' composition process that Song 1's central "story" was that of "a man (hero) deprived, & insulted, w[ith] enemies inside as well as on his side & against his side".<sup>110</sup> "[T]he thought that they thought / they could *do* it", the doubly imaginative construction that takes its authority from fantasy,<sup>111</sup> forms the basis of the "insult" and the podium from which to launch the dream-war. The parallel with epic figures from Milton's Satan to Achilles in The Iliad is clear.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, in his ongoing attempts from the late Fifties to schematise The Dream Songs, the poet would consider modelling his work's major "actions" upon "pieces of a novel... or Books of The Iliad, or Canto's" (sic), setting himself a formidable reading-list upon the epic form which also included seminal books by Bowra and Tillyard, The Aeneid and "Faust even".<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, however attractive the prospect of portraying his hero as a globe-straddling "Cat of the Ships",<sup>114</sup> it was evident that the childishly "[h]uffy" figure of Henry – "pried / open", not king of his post-war world, not even king of himself – made a poor subject for epic verse. "Once", at the top of his "sycamore", Henry was able to "s[i]ng" the bard's coherent song. But now a profound sense of epistemological doubt has permeated the dream, and he can only "say... a long / wonder the world can bear & be". "[N]othing", we are told, has "f[allen] out as it might or ought", and the ambiguity of the phrase extends to his own uncertain role as spokesman for the loss. Henry may still be clinging to his tree, but all that confronts him is his alienation from what was previously familiar, a vision of "empty... bed[s]".

Song 1's very alienation from the literary tradition it seeks to assume, however, and the darkly comic distance it works to establish between model and man, invites a reading of The Dream Songs' failure to conform to the epic-heroic convention as a radical contemporary interrogation of that genre. Whilst "a poetics based on an ideal of sincerity simply ha[s] to ignore the many ironic factors that might undercut the pose of self-

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<sup>110</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>111</sup> Helen Vendler, The Given and The Made: Recent American Poets (London: Faber, 1995) 52-3.

<sup>112</sup> As Paul Mariani notes, Berryman would lecture on The Iliad as part of the University of Minnesota's Humanities Programme in September 1958 (Mariani, Dream Song 339). The comparison with Achilles is developed further in Song 14, in which Henry states of himself, "Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes / as bad as achilles" (DS 14).

<sup>113</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>114</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 6.

mastery”,<sup>115</sup> Berryman’s lay of “[h]uffy”, “[s]eedy” Henry, mastered by many and master of none, might admit the falseness of its rhetorical postures through their tenuous basis in dream. Song 1 incites us to view the outset of Henry’s verse-voyage as “not a preparation for future effort”, to quote Edward Mendelson, “but a record of loss, a Postlude, or the decay of the poet’s world”.<sup>116</sup> Thus constructed, Berryman’s version of the “EPIC (modern, subjective)” is granted the freedom to commingle “prayer” with “satire”,<sup>117</sup> the sacred with the lustful and the eternal and transcendental vision with that of the mechanised post-war world:

Henry sats in de plane & was gay.  
 Careful Henry nothing said aloud  
 but where a Virgin out of cloud  
 to her Mountain dropt in light,  
 his thought made pockets & the plane buckt.  
 ‘Parm me, lady.’ ‘Orright.’ (DS 5)

In Song 5, first drafted in March 1958, the (sweet?) “nothing said aloud” by Henry upon the apparition of the Blessed Virgin threatens both the integrity of the dream-narrative and his own survival. The non-event as implied omission has penetrated the text, producing its analogue in the verbal event of the air “pockets” that prompt the plane’s sexually suggestive (if distinctly unnerving) “buck[ing]”.

It is certainly tempting in any consideration of Berryman’s evolving Dream Song style – a style, like that of his 1958 volume His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt, characterised by fragmented phrases, sudden revelations and cultural jetsam picked up “EN ROUTE”<sup>118</sup> – to follow Jerold M. Martin’s lead in approaching these works “from a cultural materialist perspective”. Nonetheless, reading Henry’s dreams as “a mere reflection of the multidimensionality or heteroglossia of culture”<sup>119</sup> runs the greater risk of losing sight of their origins. Begun in “departure”, they are the simultaneous products of “a sense of total LOSS” (DS 101) of tradition, personal significance and the old “glories of the world”. (DS 26) The Dream Songs’ ellipses and paratactic syntax might in this light be more profitably interpreted as an ongoing exploration of the relationship between external stimulus and textual response: a process in which poet and persona are “[always] engaged in

<sup>115</sup> Charles Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After, Blackwell Introductions to Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 5.

<sup>116</sup> Mendelson 35.

<sup>117</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>118</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>119</sup> Jerold M. Martin, “Things Are Going to Pieces: Disintegration Anxiety in The Dream Songs,” Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 189-201, at 190.

valuing”,<sup>120</sup> and what is valued most is always what has been lost. Berryman’s attitude towards the composition of his accumulating piece-poem is expressed most fully in one fragment of unpublished Dream Song dating from March 1959:

where thought, word kiss,  
what makes Henry hard is due  
rei magnitudine, doctoris  
imperitia, audientis durita.<sup>121</sup>

The articulation of dream-as-text here is, as John Haffenden describes, explicitly “comparable to St Jerome’s task in biblical commentary: obscurity [is] due to the enormity of the task, the teacher’s lack of skill, and the indifference of his listeners”.<sup>122</sup> Yet Berryman’s incorporation of St Jerome’s original Latin phrases, “mak[ing] Henry hard” to comprehend amid his lines’ scholarly impenetrability, also foregrounds the work as a dialogue not just between “thought [and] word”, but between thought and world. The gradual loss of a body of knowledge has become “the paradigm for creation and creativity”,<sup>123</sup> a *felix culpa* in which the implied difficulty of the given materials is also imbued with the colloquial suggestion of an erection. Taken in its entirety, the manuscript fragment “project[s] the incompleteness of vision in a world inescapably permeated with desire”:<sup>124</sup> desire to make lost connections, to interpret coherently the fragments of contemporary human experience even as such coherence is acknowledged to be impossible. If Berryman feared his early Dream Songs falling “unspent across so flying barren ground”, (DS 57) however, it was clear that the breadth of linguistic material at his disposal, much as his growing enthusiasm for the project, remained undiminished. Adrienne Rich’s article “Living with Henry”, published in the wake of The Dream Songs’ completion, summarises concisely the situation facing the aspiring poet of the late Fifties:

English is not a language any more; there is no standard American language. Over and against... the security of a native tongue, of a Dictionary, we have this mad amalgam of ballad-idiom (ours via Appalachia), Shakespearean rag, Gerard Manley Hopkins in a delirium of syntactical reversals, nigger-talk, blues talk, hip-talk engendered from both, Miltonic diction, Calypso, bureaucratiana, pure blurted Anglo-Saxon.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Jo Porterfield, “The Melding of a Man: Berryman, Henry, and the Ornerly Mr. Bones,” Southwest Review 58 (1973): 30-46, at 32.

<sup>121</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 35. Berryman’s source here was, as Haffenden notes, Robert Payne, The Fathers of The Western Church (New York: Viking, 1951) 137.

<sup>122</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 35.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 85.

<sup>124</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 9.

<sup>125</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Living with Henry,” Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 10-11. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 127-32, at 130.



Nevertheless, as Berryman drew upon his scattered resources to perfect The Dream Songs' argot, one vital question remained. If, as his "(modern, subjective)"<sup>126</sup> inversions of the epic form suggested, this burgeoning work which located authority in its status as "dream" was founded upon a "sense of total LOSS" (DS 101) of both "the security of a native tongue" and a fixed, objective relationship between "thought" and world, just what would constitute the unifying force of his second long poem?

A notebook page of Berryman's from 1957 provides a summary of the experiences his dubious hero, "ol' Henry", would undergo as part of his oneiric voyage through the contemporary landscape. This "mod[ern] Amer[ican] divorced[,] wandering[,] not young, not old, but both" was to progress from an initial position of "separated... hopelessness" to "re-marr[riage]" and fatherhood.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, as a further draft sheet states, such a journey would necessitate encounters with "treachery & malice, & goodness, & insipidity, & failure of communication... & envy & generosity; & love(s)".<sup>128</sup> What was emerging from these scribbles was a poetic model that took for its plot "the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world";<sup>129</sup> a plot, crucially, in which the world depending from Henry's dream was also the archetypal world of the modern Everyman, comic in its failures and tragic in its hopes. In placing at centre stage what he would later term "the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined",<sup>130</sup> moreover, Berryman was recognising a key aspect of his poetics in The Dream Songs. The process of determining Henry as a character who freely "thought up all these things over all the years"<sup>131</sup> also enabled the poet to determine his own relationship to the American verse tradition. Declaring in a 1968 interview, "it seems to me... that poetry comes out of personality", Berryman would identify the influence he desired from the outset of his Dream Songs to eclipse, "my strong disagreement with Eliot's line – the impersonality of poetry".<sup>132</sup> Maybe, then, "hostility ke[pt] on going", as Berryman had opined previously of his first long poem, Homage to Mistress Bradstreet:<sup>133</sup> hostility towards his modernist forefathers Auden, Eliot and Yeats, invoked so frequently in his descriptions of his

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<sup>126</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>127</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>128</sup> JBP's, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 59.

<sup>129</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 7.

<sup>130</sup> JBP's, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder "National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969".

<sup>131</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Berryman, "Changes" 99.

apprentice work as a struggle to “get free” from their authority.<sup>134</sup> Yet it remains the distinctly ambivalent nature of this *soi-disant* hostility that is manifested most powerfully in Berryman’s first Dream Song compositions. Song 20 (“The Secret of the Wisdom”), the earliest-written text selected for inclusion in the 1964 volume 77 Dream Songs,<sup>135</sup> promises with its striking supertitle to unlock good judgement, knowledge and understanding, a strategy for ordering the chaotic post-war world. What follows, however, is no celebration of the poet’s achievement as fastidiously aloof artificer, but an excoriating vision of epistemological doubt in a world where the commonplace and the common phrase have been turned upside down. The first line’s epithet “worst” has captured all “things”:

When worst got things, how was you? Steady on?  
 Wheedling, or shockt her &  
 you have been bad to your friend,  
 whom not you writing to. You have not listened.  
 A pelican of lies  
 you loosed: where are you?

Down weeks of evenings of longing  
 by hours, NOW, a stoned bell,  
 you did somebody: others you hurt short:  
 anyone ever did you do good? (DS 20)

It is instructive at this point to consider a remark of Berryman’s from The Arts of Reading regarding Yeats’ “Byzantium” poems: “What is desired is unitary... abolishing change, and almost abolishing personality... as if consciousness were for this poet, as for [Eliot’s] “Prufrock,” a *burden*, desired to be got rid of.”<sup>136</sup> Paying homage to the persistence of the modernists’ desires in the mid-twentieth century, Berryman in Song 20 is rejecting them simultaneously as a sufficiently unifying poetic device. Things have changed, irrevocably, and the effect is to dismantle Yeats’ “artifice of eternity”<sup>137</sup> from its component “weeks”, “evenings” and “hours” to a series of intolerable “NOW[s]”: the ringing of the “stoned bell” beneath which the speaker in his drunken melancholy awaits the answer to his crimes. Consciousness is incontrovertibly a “*burden*” to self-accusatory Henry in this Song, but it cannot be dispensed with, for imaginative craft alone is, it seems, no longer constitutive of

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<sup>134</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5. See also Berryman’s declaration to William Heyen in 1970, “It took me a *long* time to catch on to Eliot... I had to get there through a *forest* of objections. I hated all of his *opinions*” (Berryman, interview with William Heyen 57).

<sup>135</sup> A manuscript note dates Song 20 to 4 December 1955 (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 157).

<sup>136</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 353.

<sup>137</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works, ed. and introd. Edward Larrissy, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 94-95, at 95.

value.<sup>138</sup> The extent and severity of his offences, the information omitted from the telescoped syntax of the phrase “you did somebody”, must, Berryman suggests, remain the ultimate “[s]ecret”. Unable to provide a universal moral judgement, this new world of relativism finds its analogue in the dream-text’s proliferation of non sequitur metaphors that do not cohere or offer resolution: not a collection but a “pelican of lies” which feeds its offspring upon its own blood.

“Hostility”, then, but a hostility always generative in its nature. Brendan Cooper’s description of Berryman’s work as manifesting “a postwar anxiety of influence in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction”<sup>139</sup> here casts useful light not just upon alienated, unheroic Henry as he “moves on”<sup>140</sup> through the American landscape, but upon the poet’s negotiation of the Fifties and Sixties’ literary terrain. Admitting his forefathers’ desires to order the fragments of modern experience whilst emphasising the centrality of the beleaguered and compromised “individual soul under stress”,<sup>141</sup> flaunting the ungovernable “squalor beneath... [the] convention”,<sup>142</sup> The Dream Songs chart both an artistic and a critical journey for Berryman. If the influence of society upon the “individual soul” could not be resisted – much less contained and restricted by academy formalism, as the New Critics who took their cue from Eliot’s prose writings continued to insist – then the onus fell upon the poet to translate the world of the American Dream to the reading public. Indeed, Berryman’s recognition of A. Alvarez as one of the “best reviewers of poetry in English”<sup>143</sup> renders it unlikely that a 1959 statement from the British critic could have failed to strike a chord with him:

Because the critic knows literature, he knows man; hence his responsibility extends directly and continually from writing to society... The critics, with their painfully acute awareness of language, have become the intellectual guardians of the national conscience.”<sup>144</sup>

For Berryman, however, who remained most acutely aware that, as he had remarked more than ten years previously, “for many attentive to the developments of science the future has ceased to exist”,<sup>145</sup> the “national conscience” was no longer an entity easy to define. As

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<sup>138</sup> Charles Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s (Cranbury, NJ: Assoc. UP, 1979) 22.

<sup>139</sup> Cooper, “We Want Anti-Models” 3.

<sup>140</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 7.

<sup>141</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>142</sup> Vendler 38.

<sup>143</sup> John Berryman, “The Art of Poetry,” interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 21.

<sup>144</sup> A. Alvarez, “American Critics,” Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-67 (London: Penguin, 1968) 269-73, at 272.

<sup>145</sup> Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” TFOTP 305.

the Cold War continued to loom menacingly, its threat of further atrocities carried out on the nation's behalf also threatening to strip American citizens of all political agency, it was clear that this conscience was subject to the flux of external experience,<sup>146</sup> and comprised of a series of momentary "NOW[s]". In his position as writer and critic – one impelled, that is, to translate the phenomena of contemporary American existence into Henry's dreams – Berryman was forced to concede the dependency of his own text upon "the kind of events that happen"<sup>147</sup> in the world. As he would reveal to Peter Stitt, the result was a striking analogy between the artist and his art: "Henry to some extent was in the situation that we are all in in actual life – namely, he didn't know and I didn't know what the bloody fucking hell was going to happen next."<sup>148</sup>

That the structure of such an "EPIC (modern, subjective)"<sup>149</sup> as The Dream Songs would pose difficulties for Berryman was, given the work's thirteen-year composition process, perhaps unavoidable. As early as March 1958, he would enter "a dozen sections of a long poem in progress called The Dream Songs" into the annual Wallace Stevens Award poetry contest, comparing each of its eighteen-line "section[s]" to a single stanza of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. His instruction to the judges that these texts would "have to be read more or less as separate stages of a journey and a structure that cannot be clear – and wouldn't anyway be available" was, with hindsight, unlikely to have inspired confidence.<sup>150</sup> Yet the true extent of Berryman's struggles to compose a schema for his "long poem in progress" is revealed by the mass of handwritten sheets that the poet amassed upon the subject during the late Fifties. These notes propose a bewildering variety of structural models for the accumulating Songs, from "a temporal arrangement" following the year's seasons to close correspondences with the books of The Iliad and The Odyssey, Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote and the history of America "then" and "now".<sup>151</sup> Whilst rigorous scholarly work has explored a number of these provisional templates profitably,<sup>152</sup> the increasingly frustrated scrawls which pepper the margins of

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<sup>146</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>147</sup> Mendelson 30-31.

<sup>148</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 30.

<sup>149</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>150</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 10. Paul Mariani notes that, alongside "The Jolly Old Man is a Silly Old Dumb" (which at this point Berryman regarded as "the first Dream Song" of his sequence), the selection "included versions of what would become [Songs] 67, 75, and 77" (Mariani, Dream Song 332).

<sup>151</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 1 and Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>152</sup> See for example Douglas Dunn on the significance of Byron's Don Juan to The Dream Songs (Douglas Dunn, "Gaiety and Lamentation: The Defeat of John Berryman," Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP: 1988) 139-151, at 141). This section of my argument is indebted to the discussions of Berryman's Dream Song organisation provided by John Haffenden (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 34-66) and Jack Vincent Barbera (Jack Vincent Barbera, "Shape and Flow in The Dream Songs," Twentieth Century Literature 22 (1976): 146-62).

Berryman's pages ("ugh – so many schema", "all adventures bad")<sup>153</sup> serve as a reminder of the ambivalent dialogue that characterises The Dream Songs' relationships with its literary forebears. In the poet's oneiric translations of mid-century American life, which render their protagonist dependent upon the chaotic flux of external events for his continued survival, each potential literary model assumed by the text must undergo a fresh interrogation. Narratives and tropes borrowed from ancestors must be measured against the contemporary situation, and be judged in terms of which of their values are no longer relevant and which have been irrevocably lost. John Haffenden's statement that Berryman "desire[d] to construe the poem by analogy with more than one epic format"<sup>154</sup> is therefore crucial to an understanding of the work. Whether appearing in the guise of one "as bad as achilles", (DS 14)<sup>155</sup> Odysseus lashed to his mast or "Sir Bones, or Galahad", (DS 2) Henry's mock-heroic postures in these Songs might be best described with reference to a further comment of Berryman's in The Arts of Reading. Like the subject of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" – a man who invites his (distinctly humbling) comparison with "Prince Hamlet"<sup>156</sup> through the very act of declaring it impossible – such representations suggest

a man – desperate, in his ordeal – ransacking the past for help in the present, and *not finding it* – finding only ironic parallels, or real examples, of his predicament. The available tradition, the poet seems to be saying, is of no use to us. It supplies only analogies and metaphors for our pain.<sup>157</sup>

Nevertheless, in his ambition to publish a "real b[oo]k"<sup>158</sup> surpassing the achievement of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, it was clear that Berryman could not dispense with his literary tradition's "analogies and metaphors" entirely. Placing "a man... deprived, & insulted"<sup>159</sup> by his countrymen at centre stage, he was demanding his own consideration alongside the mainstays of the Western poetic canon: the quest for "personality" manifested through Henry's parodic adoption of established identity-templates also emerges as a quest for plot which is highly metapoetic in nature. Read in this light, the poet's railing against a "deliberate indifference or inattention to the work of

<sup>153</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1A, Folder 11.

<sup>154</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 58.

<sup>155</sup> At a July 1967 reading in Spoleto, Italy, Berryman would explain to his audience that the name "achilles" in Song 14 was deliberately "spelt with rage with a small letter at the beginning" (Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 56).

<sup>156</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1915, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2364-67, at 2367.

<sup>157</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 348.

<sup>158</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Miscell".

<sup>159</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 6.

personality”<sup>160</sup> within the American academy serves to make his wishes explicit: to be counted amongst those writers judged to be “best” by the nation’s critics, whilst being as unlike their critically-acceded “best” qualities as possible. Song 75, first printed in a Times Literary Supplement of November 1959, functions to announce publicly the “book” Berryman would “put forth” from his protagonist’s twentieth-century ordeals:

Turning it over, considering, like a madman  
Henry put forth a book.  
No harm resulted from this.  
Neither the menstruating stars (nor man) was moved  
at once.  
Bare dogs drew closer for a second look  
  
and performed their friendly operations there.  
Refreshed, the bark rejoiced. (DS 75)

At first glance, the influence of the epic tradition is manifested here as no more than an “ironic parallel”.<sup>161</sup> The rosy fingers of a Homeric dawn have been supplanted by an apocalyptic vision of “menstruating stars” in which the ellipsis dividing the phrase highlights its incongruity: in this world, the tides of creation and fertility also figure as harbingers of death, raining down blood and fire. However, it is notable that by drawing upon the envoy-genre in Song 75 – specifically, what Bernd Engler has termed the “go, little book” *topos*<sup>162</sup> – Berryman is guaranteeing his protagonist’s survival amid such “barren ground”. (DS 57) In a society where “the attention paid to poetry is so very slight”,<sup>163</sup> and in a text dependent upon the events which unfold both beyond and within its lines, the public release of Henry’s tale can (indeed, must) cause “[n]o harm”. There is no need for the “apologies for possible flaws of the poetic work” supplied by volumes from the Latin classics to Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, and continuing to emerge in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century envoys of Morris, Swinburne, and Pound.<sup>164</sup> For, whilst Berryman’s employment of this *topos* suggests his book’s forthcoming “journey into a hostile world of... ill will”,<sup>165</sup> it also highlights the necessity of such a journey to the fulfillment of his piece-poem’s ambition: to be judged as a work at once part of and apart

<sup>160</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder “The Old Criticism”.

<sup>161</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 348.

<sup>162</sup> Bernd Engler, “Literary Form as Aesthetic Program: The Envoy in English and American Literature,” Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 7 (1990): 61-97, at 61.

<sup>163</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 311.

<sup>164</sup> Engler 72. See especially Chaucer’s envoy in Troilus and Criseyde V.1786-92: “Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye, / Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye, / So sende myght to make in som comedye! / But litel book, no makyng thow n’envie, / But subgit be to alle poesye; / And kis the steppes, where as thow seest pace / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace” (Geoffrey Chaucer, The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 471-585, at 584).

<sup>165</sup> Engler 75.

from the verse tradition it ransacks, and as a substantial literary achievement.

Song 75 serves, then, to expose the “generative hostility”<sup>166</sup> towards both the Western literary canon and its arbiters that fuels the progress of Berryman’s second long poem. America’s critics appear as feral “[b]are dogs” who with their “friendly” (or not so friendly) “operations” threaten to debase this text with piss or worse. Yet, amid the poet’s deliberate blurring of referents, their celebratory “bark” at a job well done figures simultaneously as the “bark” from which The Dream Songs’ pages originate, “[r]efreshed” through their subjection to public debate. In “Envoy from D’Aubigné”, published in the 1970 volume The Carrier of Ladders, W. S. Merwin would address his fears regarding his own “little book”’s reception, querying “Child / how will you / survive”.<sup>167</sup> Berryman’s Song 75, however, which appeared almost a decade earlier, provides one answer to the question. This “EPIC (modern, subjective)”,<sup>168</sup> enabling Henry’s survival, also enables its texts to survive both the poet and his protagonist. Indeed, the comparison of The Dream Songs with a tree is apt, for, absorbing the fragmented remains of the Western literary past and present, the work replaces prevailing critical and poetic urges towards unification with a branching model in which nothing of Henry’s experience of the contemporary world is shed. Here contradictions, incongruities and ironies must exist side-by-side, as unmoved by changes in artistic fashion as by the changing seasons:

Seasons went and came.  
Leaves fell, but only a few.  
Something remarkable about this  
unshedding bulky bole-proud blue-green moist

thing made by savage & thoughtful  
surviving Henry  
began to strike the passers from despair (DS 75)

Admiring the vast “bole” of this tree’s trunk, we recall that the word also denotes a soft clay with astringent properties, able, presumably, to cauterise even the bleeding of “menstruating stars”. These early Dream Songs, demanding and difficult, insistent upon the distinctly unfashionable subversion of their strict six-line stanza format with prose “irregularities”,<sup>169</sup> invite loss and chaos in with their protagonist. Nevertheless, as Song 75 emphasises, they aim to “strike the passers from despair”; if much has been lost, Henry remains with his uncertain “sing to shay”, (DS 35) offering his services as translator of the American Dream to the post-war reading public. This “farthest push”, as Berryman would

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<sup>166</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 3.

<sup>167</sup> W. S. Merwin, The Carrier of Ladders (New York: Atheneum, 1970) 155.

<sup>168</sup> JBS, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>169</sup> Berryman, cit. Mariani, Dream Song 340.

remark in an unpublished essay from the period, was born of a new “duty” to both “the nation [and] the lang[uage]”,<sup>170</sup> an ambivalent poetic patriotism that demanded inclusion within the tradition it sought simultaneously to eclipse. Whilst he might have declared confidently in one notebook, “I’m going to give [The Dream Songs] 10 yrs”,<sup>171</sup> it is thus perhaps unsurprising that Berryman’s anxieties regarding his piece-poem’s reception coloured much of its initial composition. Could such a work really “hope for... [a] hearing in the present stage of our national destiny”?<sup>172</sup>

### 3.3 The *American Dream Songs*: Versifying Dystopia

As early as 1958, Berryman considered dedicating his few completed Dream Songs to “the miserable men and women who have dared to practise the art of poetry for the United States of America”. Returning to his notes three years later, he would emphasise with a pencil scrawl the “comradely” nature of the dedication.<sup>173</sup> These contemporary writers, “miserable” in their “dar[ing]”, would have to take comfort in the mutuality of their efforts. Struggling to capture the national sensibility, they had no choice but to move against it, for, as Berryman remarked to Richard Kostelanetz, “The current American society would drive anybody out of his skull, anybody who is at all responsive... It doesn’t treat poets very well.”<sup>174</sup> The poet was, in fact, perceptive in his initial fears that many works evincing such dubious patriotism “[could] hope for no hearing in the present stage of our national destiny”,<sup>175</sup> his first Songs would depend almost exclusively upon British hospitality for their publication, appearing variously in Encounter, Observer, Poetry and the Times Literary Supplement throughout the early 1960s. The distinct national character of these Songs, however, remains difficult to dispute. Ernest Smith has observed, crucially, that in The Dream Songs’ translations of the American Dream of inclusion, democracy and prosperity, “the political or historical element [is] often intertwined with or at least difficult to distinguish from the focus on [Henry’s] self, even

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<sup>170</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 16.

<sup>171</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.1.

<sup>172</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>173</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11. Cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 46.

<sup>174</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 344.

<sup>175</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.



when that self [is] examined as historical or cultural entity”.<sup>176</sup> As Henry encounters a Special Election, reads newspapers, mourns dead friends and travels to India, the “plot” of the work’s opening Songs appears frequently to depend less upon “[his] personality... as he moves on in the world”<sup>177</sup> than the world that moves on with him, the external phenomena that influence the verbal events of the text.

In Song 13, it is evident that Henry’s own profession of his attributes and personal agency as a “human being” is not enough. His nation, as a global leader in the fields of scientific and sociological research, seeks concrete proof of his status:

Henry was not a coward. Much.  
He never deserted anything; instead  
he stuck, when things like pity were thinning.

So may be Henry was a human being.  
Let's investigate that.  
... We did; okay.  
He is a human American man.  
That's true. My lass is braking.  
My brass is aching. Come & diminish me, & map my way. (DS 13)

Sticking at his endeavours doggedly, Henry, as Berryman implies, might well prefer to remain “stuck”, yet the scientists in their drive for progress will not let him: fed into their investigative machine, he emerges as a “human American man”, his membership of first species and then country eclipsing his value as an individual. Whilst Luke Spencer reads Song 13 as an assertion that “Human beings, especially American male human beings, are not to be mapped and diminished”,<sup>178</sup> its mounting allusions function more convincingly as a dark reminder that the post-war world is no stranger to the denial of personal significance. Henry’s financial and sexual failures as a social nonentity, his “braking” “lass[es]” and “aching” brass[es]”, reference subtly the popular Jewish joke about a navel-gazing German who, applying “a screwdriver to the object of his gaze”, removes (or breaks) his own ass.<sup>179</sup> The reductive sociological investigations ridiculed here have already been put to the test historically: causing Henry’s marginalisation, they also gesture towards modern man’s capacity to “diminish” or even to extinguish an entire people.

As “a personality”, then, Henry’s responses in The Dream Songs are shaped by his inhabiting a certain type of world: a dream of an America in which poets are left “out in

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<sup>176</sup> Ernest J. Smith, “Approaching Our Maturity: The Dialectic of Engagement and Withdrawal in the Political Poetry of Berryman and Lowell,” Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co.: Middle-Generation Poets in Context, ed. Suzanne Ferguson (Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 2003) 287-302, at 288.

<sup>177</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 5.

<sup>178</sup> Luke Spencer, “‘The pieces sat up & wrote’: art and life in John Berryman’s Dream Songs,” Critical Quarterly 29 (1987): 71-80, at 74.

<sup>179</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 87-8.

the cold” whilst women talk not of Michaelangelo but of their “psychiatrist[s]” at cocktail parties, (DS 3) and where rightful individual gains are “eaten out already by the Government & State”. (DS 19) Elucidation of this piece-poem’s sense of dispossession from an unfamiliar sociopolitical terrain is aided by a parallel reading of “The Other Chicago”, a work composed by Berryman in 1963 for a Chicago Daily News contest. Despite sharing first prize with a piece by Hayden Carruth, the poem was never published, perhaps to its author’s benefit. For, though born of an eagerness to demonstrate that he could “still write outside [The Dream Songs]’ framework”,<sup>180</sup> Berryman’s nine-stanza lament for yet another city in which “maybe there are rats” reinforces its own debt to the Songs as parent text. This bitter commemoration of a postlapsarian landscape “whose Garden’s unrecalled” is pure Dream Song in its lexicon of “ofays”, “operation[s]”, and “plaining”.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, taking words directly from Henry’s mouth – such as the question ““What are the Holy Cities of America?””, composed originally as Song 210’s opening line the previous year<sup>182</sup> – “The Other Chicago” could be said to function as a synopsis of Berryman’s America in that work. Here, too, is the ever-present threat of the Cold War’s international tensions, converting Song 21’s sardonic phrase “My radar digs. I do not dig” (DS 21) into a vision of nuclear apocalypse in which “The towers melt. Our radar scrubs and ends.”<sup>183</sup> Here, too, is a society which can no longer maintain faith in its impending salvation, for if God exists, then he has “withdraw[n] / his guidance”:<sup>184</sup>

... so that the city as it might have been  
stands somewhere in his accounts in another continum (sic).  
Whether he comes back surely will depend  
on the nature & sweetness of his interest there.<sup>185</sup>

Not just Chicago, but the national dream of all American citizens’ right to happiness and prosperity is “[o]ther” to the speaker of these lines; it belongs to “another continu[u]m” in which God’s “accounts” and “interest[s]” result in profit, not loss, and extend beyond the monetary. In its co-option of Henry’s voice, “The Other Chicago” fails as an independent poem. However, it is viewed more profitably as evincing a crucial realisation for Berryman: whether “[h]uffy”, “[s]eedy” or “duded... up”, (DS 77) Henry’s “individual soul

<sup>180</sup> Mariani, Dream Song 393.

<sup>181</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 30.

<sup>182</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 30. Compare Song 210: “– Mr Blackmur, what are the holy cities of America? / Sir Herbert’s son, who lives near Canterbury, / precocious, asked my friend” (DS 210).

<sup>183</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 30.

<sup>184</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 30. Compare also Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’s lines “– I cannot feel myself God waits. He flies / nearer a kindly world; or he is flown” (35.1-2).

<sup>185</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder 30.

under stress”<sup>186</sup> is also that of a “human American man”, (DS 13) both Everyman and *noman* in his diminished position. Joining the “miserable men and women who have dared to practise the art of poetry for the United States”<sup>187</sup> and defining what might constitute “patriotism” amid such a terrain necessitated the poet’s consideration of his own status as an American citizen. And, as he would confide to Jane Howard in a 1967 interview, this provided ample “reason to be afraid. This is a terrible place... I wake up every morning terrified”.<sup>188</sup>

The historical and cultural basis of the “terror” that The Dream Songs manifest is emphasised by one early handwritten note in which Berryman outlined the work’s “prime facts”. “[N]ature’s fixed laws?” now had a question-mark superimposed upon their former certainty, for they had been shaken by post-war civilisation’s social and technological advances:

H-bombs...  
 mech[anical] brains  
 > space-travel?  
 the 2 ideologies – resurg[ence] of Asia...  
 wealth; war; horror.<sup>189</sup>

Versifying the results of such civilisation, the poet’s Songs of the late Fifties and early Sixties also serve, however, to interrogate a “fixed law” far less natural in origin: that of America’s faith in its global hegemony, its “perpetual self-laud / as if everything in America had wings”. (DS 280) A sense of the country as Promised Land, it seemed, was increasingly difficult to maintain when those responsible for its administration were breaking all of their promises. In Song 216, the nation’s pride in its troops stationed in Europe to resist the Soviet advance is undercut by Berryman’s dark suggestion that, beyond the Berlin Wall, “[t]he tanks of the elders” also “roll, in exercise, on the German plain”. The United States’ spyplane missions over enemy territory, we are reminded, have led only to the U-2 incident of 1960, in which pilot Francis Gary Powers “the fêted traitor, became so in hours”. (DS 216) Nonetheless, the full brunt of the poet’s venom is reserved for the man at America’s helm, for, accepting credulously Powers’ story of being shot down at altitude, “the President, ignorant, didn’t even lie”.<sup>190</sup> (DS 216) In The Dream

<sup>186</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>187</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11. Cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 46.

<sup>188</sup> John Berryman, “Whiskey and Ink, Whiskey and Ink,” interview with Jane Howard, Life 63 (1967): 67-76, at 76.

<sup>189</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.2.

<sup>190</sup> Upon Powers’ expatriation to the United States in 1962 (the most likely date of Song 216’s composition) it would emerge that his plane in fact crashed almost fully intact; whilst he was exonerated of any

Songs' vision of a country where "Fools elect fools", (DS 46) Henry's status as "a human American man" (DS 13) was not applicable to all of his nation's leaders. Song 23 ("The Lay of Ike") launches "an explicit and vicious attack on the Eisenhower administration":<sup>191</sup>

This is the lay of Ike.  
 Here's to the glory of the Great White – awk –  
 who has been running – er – er – things in recent – ech –  
 in the United – If your screen is black,  
 ladies & gentlemen, we – I like –  
 at the Point he was already terrific – sick

to a second term, having done no wrong –  
 no right – no right – having let the Army – bang –  
 defend itself from Joe...

.....  
 – Breaking no laws,  
 he lay in the White House – sob!! – (DS 23)

Composed in the aftermath of General Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower's election to a second term in office,<sup>192</sup> this Song's punning title implies a survey of "the lay of the land" under Republican party rule. Yet Berryman's self-consciously contemporary text, employing the motif of the televised campaign broadcast, just as swiftly emerges as a subversive inhabitation of its medium, sounding a death-knell for the White House's confused political rhetoric. The tribute it ventures to the "glory of the Great White – awk –" is punctured repeatedly by a failing TV signal; the word "United" is the last straw, opening a cleavage between rhetoric and reality which is highlighted by Henry's parodic adoption of the public newscaster's voice.<sup>193</sup> The reel of history, it seems, has been broken, for Song 23 functions above all to emphasise the impossibility of reconciling Eisenhower's "Great White" hopes for America with the "black" screen confronting its populace: the enduring oppression and segregation of African-Americans as the Civil Rights movement raged, and the nationalist legacy of McCarthyism's aggressive investigations. Publically doing "no wrong", this President has done "no right – no right", for his crusade against corruption has widened the lacuna between the "rights" of the State and those of individual citizens.

The source of Berryman's ire in Song 23 is clarified further when read in the light of the text that immediately precedes it in The Dream Songs. Song 22 ("Of 1826"), another overtly "Political Song", was identified by the poet in his early structural plans for

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wrongdoing the same year in a Senate Armed Services Select Committee hearing, public suspicion remained regarding his failure to activate the aircraft's self-destruct charge before capture (Richard Lee Miller, Under the Cloud: The Decades of Nuclear Testing, rev. ed (USA: Two-Sixty, 1991) 326; see also Linebarger 87-8).

<sup>191</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 146.

<sup>192</sup> As Berryman would observe in a manuscript note, "(Henry refers to him as 'Eisenhower,' w[ith] the averted eyes of one who caught on during the [Second World] war)" (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 9).

<sup>193</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 146.

the volume as “Prob[ably] stand[ing]... at the climax of this theme”.<sup>194</sup> This “sort of State of the Union address”,<sup>195</sup> moreover, demonstrates the extent of Berryman’s divergence from his Columbia mentors’ concept of the poem as a self-contained microcosm resistant to the flux of political and social experience.<sup>196</sup> Figured simultaneously as Everyman and *noman*, Henry the “human American man” (DS 13) is reduced to “a shell, through which the [nation] speaks”.<sup>197</sup> The result is a plurality of voices that jostle for supremacy beneath the umbrella term “democracy”:

I am a government official & a goddamned fool.  
I am a lady who takes jokes.

I am the enemy of the mind.  
I am the auto salesman and love you.  
I am a teenage cancer, with a plan.  
I am the blackt-out man.  
I am the woman powerful as a zoo  
I am two eyes screwed to my set, whose blind –

It is the Fourth of July.  
Collect: while the dying man,  
forgone by you creator, who forgives,  
is gasping 'Thomas Jefferson still lives'  
in vain, in vain, in vain.  
I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly. (DS 22)

The true enemies of the state, this Song suggests, are the “enem[ies] of the mind” visited by civilisation upon America’s terrain. Here, again, are the television junkies “screwed” in their subservience to the party line broadcast by their screens; here are the “blackt-out”, marginalised men and women and the “government official[s]” from whom, as Berryman would later state, are expected both ignorance and “lies, and we get them in profusion”.<sup>198</sup> John Haffenden is certainly correct to regard Song 22 as a “lament” for “the reduction of the ideals of Republic to automatism”.<sup>199</sup> the mechanical repetition “I am” serves to foreground both the “blind” pride and the unquestioning hegemony of the post-war years’ mass-culture boom. Read thus, the text’s “Collect” (or short prayer) for its two founding fathers represents not a celebration of their mutual vision of a land united in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but a mourning of that vision’s disintegration. Yet it remains crucial to note that if Henry Pussy-cat, as the mass-product of his age, must sing the loss of America’s “[c]ollect[ive]” ideals of equality and justice, his concluding self-assertion also

<sup>194</sup> JBP’s, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>195</sup> John Berryman, The Poet’s Voice: Poets reading aloud & commenting upon their works, sel. and ed. S. Haviaras, audiocassette (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978).

<sup>196</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>197</sup> Donoghue 155.

<sup>198</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 344.

<sup>199</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 89.

emphasises the erasure of these statesmen from the contemporary cultural narrative. As Berryman bemoaned in 1967, “no national memory but ours could forget the fact John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the same day”.<sup>200</sup>

In a 1965 Shenandoah symposium, Berryman would declare that The Dream Songs “concerns the turbulence of the modern world, and memory, and wants”.<sup>201</sup> These texts, however, frequently demonstrate not just the “turbulence” of memory but its complete destitution in a country distinguished by what the poet had termed in The Arts of Reading “uninformed... *mere* literacy”.<sup>202</sup> Henry may be an entity both cultural and historical in nature, but as the world moves along, he alone is “schlaft in his historical moode”. (DS 217) New York’s “Bloody Angle” massacre and the final battle of Grant’s Union Forces at Cold Harbor have fallen from prominence, and been overwritten by events within living recall. How could it be otherwise when, as Song 217 states, “Three like terrifying political murders / have cast, as Adams sighed, no shadow on the Whites’ House”? Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley: this Song’s sub-textual roll-call of Presidents assassinated in office, composed in 1958, illustrates the lost sense of national history as a linear progression of cause and effect. For the modern American, who must navigate the unfamiliar post-war terrain with its fragmentary mnemonic of consumer riches, impending “H-bombs”<sup>203</sup> and propagandist broadcasts, has been denied the revelation that – as Berryman would later assert – “the world is more than the moment he knows”.<sup>204</sup> The ignorance of this citizen’s belief that the mid-century present alone constitutes “my country” is manifested in Song 217 as a textual ellipsis that prevents full comprehension of the situation: “it is my country in my country only”, where failure to absorb the lessons of the past has already “cast... our lot”. (DS 217) It is, of course, a blackly ironic aspect of the “turbulen[t]” and fractured national memory The Dream Songs presents that Song 217 is preceded by a text dating from 1963 in which Henry states, “My wife’s candle is out / for John F. Kennedy”. (DS 200) The assassination of Eisenhower’s Democratic successor in Dallas, Texas that year forms a shadowy backdrop to a number of Berryman’s Songs, whether in the guise of Song 200’s humble commemoration or Song 245’s sly digs at the Kennedy administration’s “diarrhea about Democracy”. (DS 245) Small wonder, perhaps, for with the three further “terrifying political murders”

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<sup>200</sup> Berryman, interview with Jane Howard 74.

<sup>201</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 102.

<sup>202</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 2.

<sup>203</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.2.

<sup>204</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 2.

encapsulated by the event, it seemed that America's "lot" had been indisputably "cast" in favour of chaos, mob rule and violence.<sup>205</sup>

Full explication of the Kennedy assassination's contribution to The Dream Songs' ambivalently patriotic poetics, however, requires recourse to Berryman's "Formal Elegy", a work commissioned by Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber for inclusion in the 1964 volume Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and Death of John F. Kennedy.<sup>206</sup> Whilst paying lip service to what Charles Thornbury describes as "the necessity for our scientific age... [of] myth which embodies the truths of a culture, in this case America",<sup>207</sup> the poem functions to highlight the collapse of this myth in the face of hard evidence, the all-too-objective truth of the blood on Dallas' streets. Kennedy with his "splendid hair kept not wholly real" (CP 164) may have embodied America's dream of progressive prosperity, but the vision has turned out to be based upon "wigs" and false postures, for one gunman's actions have proved sufficient to "Scupper... the yachts, the choppers, big cars, jets." (CP 163) More significant still, though, is the text's concomitant subversion of the myth of the poet as a similarly "smiling public man",<sup>208</sup> "tak[ing] his importance from the aura of central grief"<sup>209</sup> to offer guidance and direction to his stricken society. As its fourth stanza warns, such expectations are

Too Andean hopes, now angry shade. –  
I am an automobile. Into me climb  
many, and go their ways. Onto him climbed  
a-many and went his way. (CP 163)

"Into me climb / many, and go their ways": isn't this the precise function of Everyman Henry Pussy-cat (or "House", or "Hankovitch") in The Dream Songs? Berryman would defend "Formal Elegy"'s sobriquet before a Harvard Advocate interview team more than three years after its composition with the riposte "The title isn't wrong, it's right."<sup>210</sup> "Right", one might surmise, in its concession to the "wrongness" of the way things now were. This rather *informal*, unorthodox elegy for Kennedy – a man sanctioned by the Electoral College to convey citizens safely along America's superhighways – also emerges

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<sup>205</sup> Kennedy's death from the fatal shot fired by Lee Harvey Oswald was followed by Oswald's murder of a Dallas police officer ("Formal Elegy"'s "Patrolman Tippitt" (CP 163)) whilst resisting arrest; two days later, whilst being escorted to the Dallas County Jail, Oswald himself was killed by nightclub owner Jack Ruby.

<sup>206</sup> John Berryman, "Formal Elegy," Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and Death of John F. Kennedy, ed. and introd. Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber (New York: Basic, 1964) 44-47. Rpt. in CP 163-66.

<sup>207</sup> Charles Thornbury, "The Significance of Dreams in The Dream Songs," Literature and Psychology 25 (1975): 93-107, at 106.

<sup>208</sup> Yeats, "Among School Children," W. B. Yeats: The Major Works 113-15, at 113.

<sup>209</sup> Ann Stanford, "The Elegy of Mourning in Modern American and English Poetry," Southern Review 11 (1975): 357-72, at 360.

<sup>210</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 11.

as an elegy for the poem as a static monument of formal versification, able to subdue external chaos through application of the artist's "craft-sense".<sup>211</sup> Amid the "scene of disorder" "Formal Elegy" depicts, the text's ten stanzas of between two and twenty lines' length are riven by awkward enjambments and the "br[oken] rule[s]" of form and metre. (CP 165) Berryman, it seems, might well declare that the "education" of American intellectuals (placed, tellingly, within distinctly ironic quotation marks) has "peter[ed] to a nailing of us". (CP 165) The old convictions have become crucifixions, the ultimate screwing-over, for in the wake of Oswald's crime imaginative craft alone can no longer shore up the grieving nation. Read in the light of the previous year's events, Berryman's belated prophecy in the poem's penultimate stanza, "I do all-wish the bullets swim astray / sent to the President", (CP 165) represents less a "change [wrought] through the poet's imagination",<sup>212</sup> as Ann Stanford has claimed, than the self-consciously impotent failure of just this faculty. The dream of the communal "we" as signifier for the American populace, coerced by Kennedy's "splendid hair" and commercial optimism into "[going] his way", is rendered more impossible than ever by his violent death. Called upon to provide direction in a time of crisis, the poet can only deflate his countrymen's overblown "hopes" by stating, "If you want me to join you in confident prayer, let's / not." (CP 163)

Ernest J. Smith has observed in his account of "Formal Elegy" that "Whitman's great elegy for Lincoln reverberates in the background".<sup>213</sup> It would be more accurate, however, to say that in Berryman's work, which enacts the disintegration of prevailing New Critical visions of the text as verbal icon, Whitman's open-form poetics of the *demos* is acknowledged as another potential literary model that must be tested against the current situation. The climacteric recognition of the statesman's death at the heart of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" ("Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail, / And I *knew death*")<sup>214</sup> is replaced in "Formal Elegy" by a fractured vision of "Black foam. A weaving snake", (CP 164) the unanchored mnemonic tokens of trauma. Whitman's unified "voices of children and women" amid one "large unconscious scenery"<sup>215</sup> have been drowned out by those of the "schoolgirls in Dallas" raised as good Republicans to "cheer" the news of their President's demise. (CP 165) If this is a "reverberat[ion]" of Whitman's poem, it is diminished through the act of recall: the result, like in The Dream

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<sup>211</sup> Allen Tate, "Poetry Modern and Unmodern," Hudson Review 21 (1968): 247-61, at 256.

<sup>212</sup> Stanford 371.

<sup>213</sup> Smith 298.

<sup>214</sup> Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," 1881, Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems, ed. Francis Murphy, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1986) 351-59, at 356. Emphasis added.

<sup>215</sup> Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems 355-56.



Songs, is a “record of loss, a Postlude, or the decay of the poet’s world”.<sup>216</sup> Indeed, the consciously metapoetic nature of “Formal Elegy” invites a radical re-vision of its text not as, to quote Smith, “Berryman’s major attempt at political engagement”,<sup>217</sup> but as a manifesto for The Dream Songs’ poetics of survival amid the flux of the contemporary world. Such a reading lends the work’s final lines particular significance:

The waters break.  
All black & white together, stunned, survive  
the final insolence to the head of you;  
bow.  
Overwhelmed-un, live.  
A rifle fact is over, pistol facts  
almost entirely are too.  
The man of a wise face opened it to speak:  
Let us continue. (CP 166)

The flood of chaos and violence unleashed by external events is re-composed in their aftermath as a birth-motif. It cannot, the poet implies, be otherwise, for if the American nation is characterised by a mnemonic of destitution which has failed to apply the past’s lessons to an unfamiliar post-war terrain, its survival is also dependent upon a more active process of forgetting through which the outpouring of grief is reversed and the “[o]verwhelm[ing]” tragedy negated back into “li[f]e”. The fate of Kennedy – here figured as a metonym for America itself, a country struck down by a fatal wound to its “head” – is, it seems, a drama destined for repetition whilst citizens and leaders resist the influence of history. Each generation of unconscious players, “bow[ing]” in deference to their fates, are drawn “together” only in their complicit evasion and ignorance. As a further translation of the so-called American Dream to the reading public, “Formal Elegy” functions to foreground the poet’s awareness that he is powerless to subdue such chaos with literary craft. He must instead derive what succour he can from his dual role as writer and social critic, “discriminat[ing] among the Protean shapes and functions of man”.<sup>218</sup>

Nevertheless, as The Dream Songs mounted throughout the 1960s, Berryman would entertain the possibility of an alternative means of “turning [his] back upon all this”.<sup>219</sup> When confronted with a nation lacking both intelligent direction and sustainable faith in its own hegemony, when living in an era in which “[m]ore than one third of all captured American personnel in Korea [had] engaged in treasonable activities... because

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<sup>216</sup> Mendelson 35.

<sup>217</sup> Smith 298.

<sup>218</sup> Alvarez 272.

<sup>219</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “Development of Modern American Poetry”.

they didn't really believe in anything, including their country",<sup>220</sup> was the solution to consider oneself a global citizen? The search for "a more open and inter-national form of cultural self-positioning"<sup>221</sup> which informs a number of early Dream Songs can be traced back to Berryman's notes for his 1957 lecture "Development of Modern American Poetry". Hadn't the last major artistic movement, he demanded of his audience, been wholly "inter-national" in nature, spearheaded as it was by "[t]he 3 foreigners in London" Eliot, Pound and Yeats, and further galvanised by a history of "intell[ectual] rev[olutions]" in "the West, & Japan if not India?"<sup>222</sup> Acknowledging the "world else peripheral" (DS 280) to the hegemonic American vision, the poet was outlining the terms of his own literary revolution, making what Philip Coleman has described perceptively as "a gesture that opposed the exceptionalist myth of national wholeness".<sup>223</sup> Within such a poetics, Henry the "mod[ern] Amer[ican] divorced [and] wandering"<sup>224</sup> might be granted the freedom to make himself at home in "Schwetzingen", "bizarre Tangier" or "outside Dublin". (DS 251) In The Dream Songs' uncertain textual terrain, where loss is insistently figured as "the paradigm for creation or creativity",<sup>225</sup> there seemed no reason why looking to Catholic saint "Brother Martin" de Porres for consolation would exclude a "d[i]ve" into the "arms of... Bodidharma, and the Baal Shem Tov". (DS 17) Song 31 appears at first glance to provide a compelling account of Henry's capacity to expand ambivalent patriotism into a broader global consciousness:

Henry Hankovitch, con guítar,  
did a short Zen pray,  
on his tatami in a relaxed lotos  
fixin his mind on nuffin, rose-blue breasts,  
and gave his parnel one French kiss;  
enslaving himself he withdrew from his blue

Florentine leather case an Egyptian black  
& flickt a zippo.  
Henry & Phoebe happy as cockroaches  
in the world-kitchen woofed, with all away.  
The international flame, like despair, rose (DS 31)

Not "Jancovic" but "Hankovitch". For Henry the imaginary American, true enlightenment necessitates self-recognition as an entity of international origin: Jewish name, Spanish guitar, Japanese prayer-mat, "French kiss[es]". However, with the clause that follows the

<sup>220</sup> Ross, Berryman and Tate, The Arts of Reading 345-46.

<sup>221</sup> Philip Coleman, "'The Politics of Praise': John Berryman's Engagement with W. B. Yeats," Etudes irlandaises 28 (2003): 11-27, at 16.

<sup>222</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Development of Modern American Poetry".

<sup>223</sup> Coleman, "The Politics of Praise" 22.

<sup>224</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>225</sup> Matterson 85.

first stanza's semicolon, "a surreal irony, an unsettling indeterminacy"<sup>226</sup> begins to pervade his quest for cultural plurality. Bestowing just "one... kiss" upon his "parnel" (or priest's mistress), aloof and smoking Henry subverts our expectations by not "saving" but "enslaving" himself. The gesture of retreat from the external world and its entanglements is conflated with the "flick" of his American-branded "zippo" which has served to light an "international flame". As Song 31 emphasises, things in this "world-kitchen" are becoming heated, unavoidably so. The "r[i]se" of global tensions is here analogous with the textual transformation of Henry's "parnel" Phoebe from Biblical deaconess<sup>227</sup> to a post-war Heliade, the offspring of a terrifying nuclear sun. The fantasy of the "international" outlook as a retreat from both allegiances of identity and the conflicts born of these allegiances is exposed as just that, a fantasy, fit only for the "cockroaches" who will survive the imminent apocalypse. Moreover, in a world that, as John Michael states, "continue[s] to experience the pressure of modernization [and] rationalization... as a threatening loss not just of local agency but of character, culture, and identity",<sup>228</sup> such a retreat on the individual's part runs the further risk of his becoming if not a "cockroach" then a "praying mantis", (DS 31) condoning through his apathy the advance of the Eastern martial forces

who even more obviously than the increasingly fanatical Americans  
cannot govern themselves. Swedes don't exist,  
Scandinavians in general do not exist,  
take it from there. (DS 31)

As Berryman reminds us pointedly, even non-aligned Sweden would respond to the Cold War's escalating threat by permitting the deployment of American nuclear submarines upon its west coast: a neutrality which, on these terms, signified little more than the loss of its political voice.

Perhaps, then, "the area of life Henry finds most important to his expanded awareness" in The Dream Songs is not, as Jo Porterfield has proposed, "world-consciousness"<sup>229</sup> but a world-conscience. His pilgrimages sacred and secular throughout this piece-poem, whilst opposing the exceptionalist myth of America as sole Promised Land, find things to be no better elsewhere. For, he complains in Song 251, what is travel

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<sup>226</sup> Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 1999) 53.

<sup>227</sup> See for example Paul's epistle in KJB, Rom. 16.1: "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cencrea".

<sup>228</sup> John Michael, Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008) 30.

<sup>229</sup> Porterfield 42.

in the post-war world but “missing by a narrow margin, / things desired”? (DS 251) Ancient history and sacred knowledge restored, Yeats’ “artifice of eternity”:<sup>230</sup> acknowledging simultaneously the persistence of and the impossibility of realising these desires, Berryman’s “inter-national” Songs of the late Fifties and early Sixties also function to question global perceptions of modernisation as a force of unilateral benefit to mankind. In Song 99 (“Temples”), Henry the “human American man”, (DS 13) product of his age, “does not enter” – cannot bring himself to enter – an Indian temple to Devi, the eight-armed redeemer goddess. Svātantrya, Devi’s nominal state of self-sufficient independence from the universe, has been shattered by the entry of “[o]ne sub-machine gun”, and he must bear the same responsibility for the violation as the Brahmin priest who “tools in atop his motorbike”: (DS 99)

It is very dark here in this groping forth

Gulp rhubarb for a guilty heart,  
rhubarb for a free, if the world’s sway  
waives customs anywhere that far

Look on, without pure dismay.  
Unable to account for itself.

The slave-girl folded her fan & turned on my air-conditioner.  
The lemonade-machine made lemonade.  
I made love, lolled,  
my roundel lowered. I ache less. I purr. (DS 99)

The mildly toxic, astringent “rhubarb” employed by the ancients to purge a guilty conscience is the same rue that barbs the heart of tourist-Henry, denied by “the world’s sway” a true affiliation with the desecrated custom and culture. As he “[l]ook[s] on, without pure dismay”, it is clear that compassion and empathy cannot “account for [them]sel[ves]” in this violent contemporary era. Furthermore, when juxtaposed against his enjoyment of “slave-girl[s]”, “air-conditioner[s]” and “lemonade-machine[s]” in Song 99’s final stanza, such lines acquire an even darker aspect: is this a mere empty performance of the guilt the situation demands, the “rhubarb” mumbled by actors to simulate meaningful dialogue?

Considered in this light, the roots of these Songs’ “inter-national form of cultural self-positioning”<sup>231</sup> might be traced back still further in Berryman’s career, to the 1953 long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. In similarity to that work’s exploration of the difficulties inherent in articulating a nation’s literary past and present, The Dream Songs

<sup>230</sup> Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works 95.

<sup>231</sup> Coleman, “The Politics of Praise” 16.

voice an expatriation both external and internal in nature: a fundamental sense of dispossession in which the concept of one's "home-country" can be neither lost nor found, because it never existed.<sup>232</sup> As a "man... deprived, & insulted, w[ith] enemies inside as well as on his side & against his side",<sup>233</sup> Henry as he moves on must constantly suffer the burden of this double displacement. The external world oppresses and marginalises him with its insistent message that, as Seymour Martin Lipset notes, "Those who reject American values are un-American".<sup>234</sup> Yet he himself is the product of this world, the mass-produced "I am" that in its selfish solipsism has failed to take on board the lessons of history. Estranged as he is from contemporary American society, Henry must also remain estranged from his own "individual soul under stress":<sup>235</sup> ancient "thought" has "fled: into the jungle" (DS 137) and his shared responsibility for the loss prevents him from seeking solace further abroad. It is perhaps, then, not so surprising that in a letter to his editor Robert Giroux as the publication of 77 Dream Songs approached, Berryman would specify the particulars of his volume's appearance thus: "Let the binding be utterly plain. Blue-black if poss[ible]. I'll be happy to send skin (see [Song] 16) if desired."<sup>236</sup> In Song 16, Henry's bruised "pelt" is pegged up for public consumption, exposing him in his disaffiliated state for all to judge. Susan Gubar regards the posture as a potential "dead-end", rendering the poem from its outset "a self-conscious register of corruption".<sup>237</sup> However, Berryman's text is ultimately saved from this fate by its ongoing permeability to post-war existence, translating external events into their startling verbal analogues. If Henry as diminished Everyman is "corrupt" and guilty, then all are guilty who look on with drinks in hand, reflected in and reflecting his "silky & black" fur. (DS 16) The "whir" of their "frozen daiquiris" both conceals and tacitly assents to "[t]he Chinese communes" distant yet ominous "hum":

Golden, whilst your frozen daiquiris  
whir at midnight, gleams on you his fur  
& silky & black.  
Mission accomplished, pal.  
.....

Collect in the cold depths barracuda. Ay,  
in Sealdah Station some possessionless  
children survive to die.  
The Chinese communes hum. Two daiquiris

<sup>232</sup> Coleman, "The Politics of Praise" 15.

<sup>233</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>234</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (New York: Norton, 1996) 31.

<sup>235</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>236</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 1.

<sup>237</sup> Susan Gubar, Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 166.

withdrew into a corner of the gorgeous room  
and one told the other a lie. (DS 16)

It is notable that Berryman's instructions to Giroux contain no reference to Song 53, a work composed just 14 months earlier that provides with its final lines a concise summary of Song 16: "Gottfried Benn / said: – We are using our own skins for wallpaper and we cannot win." (DS 53) Taken in its entirety, the 1954 comment of Benn's paraphrased here sheds further light on the precise nature of Henry's "[m]ission accomplished":

Don't lose sight of the cold and egotistical element in your mission. Your art has deserted the temples and the sacrificial vessels, it has ceased to have anything to do with the painting of pillars, and the painting of chapels is no longer anything for you either. You are using your own skin for wallpaper, and nothing can save you.<sup>238</sup>

If the exposure of Henry's "[b]lue-black"<sup>239</sup> skin appears calculated, "egotistical[ly]" self-promotional, the blame must lie with his status as a cultural and historical entity, determined by the zeitgeist that presses in. The echo of Benn's words throughout these Songs functions as a vehicle for Berryman's intimation that the die for the post-war world has already been cast. The role of art as static monument, resisting change and disorder through its capacity to unite humanity in mutual reverence, has been undermined fatally by the revelation that such reverence no longer characterises the relationship between man and man. Offering up his "own skin... for wallpaper", (DS 53) Henry's is perhaps the only remaining response to a world in which poets are left "out in the cold": (DS 3) a world, that at its worst, was able to view the "skins" of even the best Jewish craftsmen as macabre decorations.<sup>240</sup>

If The Dream Songs' poetics of a "personality" beleaguered by its surroundings stands as an imperfect monument to an imperfect world, however, it retains one "sacrificial vessel".<sup>241</sup> As Berryman considered his dubious hero, "separated, in hopelessness",<sup>242</sup> it was evident to him that a world where "[i]ncredible panic rules" (DS 46) placed intolerable stress upon not just the American ideals of democratic unity and global hegemony, but the marginalised individual negotiating its terrain. Traversing this piece-poem's literary

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<sup>238</sup> The essay in question, "Artists and Old Age", was first published in a 1954 issue of the German periodical Merkur; an English translation subsequently appeared in summer 1955's Partisan Review. Rpt. in Gottfried Benn, Primal Vision: Selected Writings of Gottfried Benn, ed. E. B. Ashton (New York: New Directions, 1971) 183-208, at 206.

<sup>239</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 1.

<sup>240</sup> As Brendan Cooper has observed, Berryman's references to these lines from "Artists and Old Age" in Songs 16 and 53 contain the "unavoidable connotation [of] the alleged Nazi utilisation of human skin in the construction of household objects". The allusion, however, also functions to emphasise the hypocrisy that underlies Benn's remarks by recalling the German writer's public enthusiasm for the Nazi regime in the early 1930s (Cooper, Dark Airs 149).

<sup>241</sup> Benn 206.

<sup>242</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 17.

landscape, Henry sweats beneath the demands of ex-wives, “surly cop[s]” and tax-collectors; for this inward expatriate, never at home in the world, even the gift of a workshop “wise” represents an unbearable burden of guilt for responsibilities shirked. Yet the source of Henry’s persecution-complex is best elucidated with recourse to a seemingly incongruous remark of the poet’s to William Heyen, outlining hopes for a future in which “the advanced man comes at us as a statesman”.<sup>243</sup> For, whilst The Dream Songs may demonstrate the persistence of these hopes, it functions simultaneously to negate them utterly: if the contemporary world portrayed by its texts calls the ideological coherence of both “statesman” and nation into question, then the threat of disintegration extends to identity itself, the subject body of the individual citizen. Song 8 depicts Henry’s worst nightmare of “going to pieces” (DS 137) as a result of the conflicting forces that displace and marginalise him:

The weather was fine. They took away his teeth,  
white & helpful; bothered his backhand;  
halved his green hair.  
They blew out his loves, his interests. ‘Underneath,’  
(they called in iron voices) ‘understand,  
is nothing. So there.’

The weather was very fine. They lifted off  
his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled  
to see himself less.  
They installed mirrors till he flowed. (DS 8)

The death of individuality, of innocent “green” youth: “ple[ading] / to see himself less”, Henry in Song 8 is forced to recognise himself as the ultimate loss, as a contingent and fractured figure “[u]nderneath” which lies no unifying principle. His estrangement both from his society and from his own self as society’s product has enabled enemies “inside as well as on his side & against his side”<sup>244</sup> to dismantle his identity into the constituent parts produced by each alien encounter with an alien environment. Jerold M. Martin has described this Song, which reduces Henry to the sum of mere “hair”, “teeth” and tennis skills, as “a textbook case of disintegration anxiety”.<sup>245</sup> Such a “feeling that the self is breaking apart”, he notes, is the common result of the “improper... structur[e] or absen[ce]” of the parental figures upon which a child bases its sense of identity.<sup>246</sup> If Martin’s diagnosis is to stand, however, it would be more accurate to state that in the case

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<sup>243</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 59.

<sup>244</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>245</sup> Jerold M. Martin, “Things Are Going to Pieces: Disintegration Anxiety in The Dream Songs,” Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet, ed. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 189-201, at 194, 195.

<sup>246</sup> Martin 192.

of Henry, begun in loss and departure, the “improperly structured” object in question is the external world upon which his text depends. As his identity “flow[s]” with each of the dream-work’s reflections of contemporary America, his “breaking apart” continues to testify to his inability to maintain a coherent and unified self-image. Yet this weakness, paradoxically, also grants him his only agency, for “see[ing] himself less” enables him simultaneously to enact a vision of the failure of his nation. Reading Song 8 thus, we can view Henry’s disintegration not as, to quote Martin, a “deterioration... leading toward death”,<sup>247</sup> but as a crucial aspect of The Dream Songs’ representations of the compromised post-war world. His survival as a disunified collocation of fragments signifies Berryman’s development of a poetics in which both allegiances and conflicts of identity “come from experiences of the world and not from the essential being of the self”.<sup>248</sup> The effect of experiencing America’s history of loss and politics of evasion, such Songs suggest, has been to render man’s functions and shapes Protean, fracturing and shifting amid the flux of mid-century existence.

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<sup>247</sup> Martin 195.

<sup>248</sup> Michael 31.



## CHAPTER 4: THE DREAM SONGS

### 4.1 “From Othering I Don’t Take Nothin, See”: Outlaw/ed Identities in The Dream Songs

With the October 1968 publication of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest as the “continu[ation] and conclu[sion] [of]... The Dream Songs”,<sup>1</sup> John Berryman would expand upon his previous description of the work as “sections, constituting one version, of a poem in progress”.<sup>2</sup> The introductory “Note” to this second volume, addressed in part to those critics who “went so desperately astray”<sup>3</sup> in their readings of 77 Dream Songs four years earlier, functions to set out the distinctly non-specific particulars of its text:

The poem... whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second...<sup>4</sup>

Berryman’s description of “imaginary” Henry – a figure who derives authority from his status as a fictive construction, and changes his face as frequently as his favoured pronoun – might in fact be said to render only one thing clear: The Dream Songs’ protagonist is a man “suffer[ing] an irreversible loss”, both dispossessed of and fallen from grace. Song 77 had closed the piece-poem’s first instalment by highlighting this central aspect of Henry’s character:

Henry likes Fall.  
Hé would be prepared to live in a world of Fáll  
for ever, impenitent Henry. (DS 77)

“Hé would be prepared to live in a world of Fáll”: the confident trochaic drive of the proclamation, however, falters just as swiftly, “falling” in tandem with the external world. For it is clear that in The Dream Songs’ poetics of double displacement, versifying Henry’s simultaneous sense of estrangement from his society and from his own self as that society’s product, this “impenitent” fallen Everyman is granted licence to contradict himself repeatedly as he journeys from Song to Song. He who shudders at the knocks of

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest: 308 Dream Songs, 1968 (New York: Farrar, 1969) ix.

<sup>2</sup> John Berryman, 77 Dream Songs, 1964 (London: Faber, 2001) iv.

<sup>3</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>4</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

taxmen and insurance-collectors is determined to make his impoverished tenant “pay both through his nose & ass”; (DS 336) he who declares himself “in need... of love” is overruled frequently by ““His Majesty, the Body””, each fresh vision of female beauty leading his “treacherous eyes” astray. (DS 247)

When considering the full significance of Henry’s inconsistent “departure[s]” from grace and favour in The Dream Songs, it is useful to note one likely source of inspiration for Berryman. In August 1963 the poet published a glowing review of W. H. Auden’s essay collection The Dyer’s Hand in the New York Review of Books, singling out the piece “Balaam and his Ass” for praise as the volume’s “showpiece”.<sup>5</sup> Within this account of the historic “relation between Master and Servant” in literature, psychology and theology, Auden’s concise summary of postlapsarian man’s situation could not have failed to escape Berryman’s notice: “In his fallen state he oscillates between a wish for absolute autonomy, to be as God, and a wish for an idol who will take over the whole responsibility for his existence, to be an irresponsible slave.”<sup>6</sup> And, indeed, it is possible to read Henry’s verse-voyage in the Songs – described aptly by Berryman as “the motions of a human personality, free and determined”<sup>7</sup> – as encapsulating this fundamental dilemma. Early on in the work, Song 13 attempts to establish the ultimate source of its dubious hero’s enmity. Henry’s “business”, we learn, is no less than epic in its scope, comprising as it does the rejection of “diminish[ment]” (DS 13) not just beneath the hands of America’s scientists but beneath the yoke of divine authority:

God’s Henry’s enemy. We’re in business... Why,  
what business must be clear.  
A cornering.  
I couldn’t feel more like it. – Mr. Bones,  
as I look on the saffron sky,  
you strikes me as ornery. (DS 13)

However, with the gerund of this final stanza’s third line, an unsettling ambiguity inheres within the text, raising the possibility of an alternative resolution. Whilst Henry may profess his determination “to live in a world of Fáll / for ever”, (DS 77) his efforts to “corner” God contain the disturbing implicit suggestion that he is the one who “couldn’t feel more” cornered. The vernacular reproach of Song 13’s final lines, singling out his stubbornly combative “orner[iness]” for criticism, also functions as an ironic reminder of

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<sup>5</sup> John Berryman, “Auden’s Prose,” rev. of The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays, by W. H. Auden, New York Review of Books 29 Aug. 1963: 19.

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Auden, The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays (London: Faber, 1962) 107, 114.

<sup>7</sup> JBP’s, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

his pre-determined status: despite his blasphemous ambitions, might Henry be less “ornery” than defined by that adjective’s original meaning, ordinary,<sup>8</sup> just another “irresponsible slave”<sup>9</sup> powerless beneath the “saffron sky” that menaces him?

One might say that the contradictory nature of Henry’s eschatological disquisitions in The Dream Songs gestures towards the work’s wider resistance to the reconciliation of its narrative inconsistencies. Nevertheless, such a reading must call into question Christopher Ricks’ 1970 assertion, “Berryman’s poem, for all its fractures and its fractiousness, is... intensely a theodicy – ‘a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil’”.<sup>10</sup> Berryman’s earliest handwritten notes pertaining to his piece-poem’s structure in fact reveal a *telos* at distinct odds with Ricks’ proposal: The Dream Songs not as a “vindication” but as “a questioning, a trial of God’s justice”.<sup>11</sup> This interrogation forms the basis of Song 266, in which Henry considers “the central question of theodicy”<sup>12</sup> from “here below”:

Was then the thing all planned?  
I mention what I do not understand.  
I mention for instance Love:  
God loves his creatures when he treats them so?  
Surely one grand *exception* here below  
his presidency of  
  
the widespread galaxies might once be made  
for perishing Henry, whom let not then die. (DS 266)

“Was then the thing all planned?” The tone of detached distaste adopted by Henry in these lines serves above all to problematise the concept of divine providence. What has been provided, it seems, is a reduced world in which the authoritative self-assertion of a Supreme Being has given way to the voice of the abandoned protagonist, free only in his sense of utter bewilderment. For if, as Song 46 had claimed previously, “*Do, ut des*”, the

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<sup>8</sup> As the Oxford English Dictionary states, the word “ornery” entered the American vocabulary in the eighteenth century, when it “represent[ed] a regional or colloquial pronunciation” of “ordinary” (implying “commonplace”, and as a result “inferior”). Since the early twentieth century, its meaning has been restricted generally to “mean, cantankerous, contrary” (“Ornery, adj.,” OED Online, December 2012 (Oxford UP) 25 Jan. 2013 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/132649?redirectedFrom=ornery>>).

<sup>9</sup> Auden, The Dyer’s Hand 114.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ricks, “Recent American Poetry,” rev. of The Body, by Michael Benedikt, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, by John Berryman, Coming Close, by Helen Chasin, Teeth, by Hale Chatfield, Firstborn, by Louise Glück, and The Pearl is a Hardened Sinner, by Stanley Kiesel, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 313-39, at 336. Whilst a full exploration of the role played by theodicy and anti-theodicy in The Dream Songs is beyond the remit of this thesis, Brendan Cooper’s recent work Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry (Oxford: Lang, 2009) makes a valuable contribution to the field; see also John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980) 34-66.

<sup>11</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 137.

ancient system of reciprocal exchange between the divine and the human,<sup>13</sup> is “dea[d]”, (DS 46) Song 266 offers an exploration of the consequences. Though reluctant to return love to a deity who treats “his creatures... so”, Henry commences an appeal to his distant Maker regardless. Might he be permitted to escape punishment as the mortal world’s “one grand *exception*... let not then die”? Brendan Cooper observes, “Henry’s self-description [in Song 266]... exalts his condition to a level of historical uniqueness ironically and parodically comparable to that of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> “[I]ronic”, yes, for if Henry is no atheist, he is certainly no Christ-figure; his fear of suffering for his sins does not transcend (and is a mere by-product of) his greater fear of death. Daring to plead his audacious case as a “grand *exception*”, he is emphasising simultaneously his own antagonistic stance as one “*except[ed]*” from God’s “plan”, a product of the fallen society that expects to receive without giving in return.

Perhaps, then, Berryman’s refusal to reconcile the contradictions held within his Songs must be attributed to his protagonist’s Protean nature: a nature that, despite the temptations of metaphysical digression, depends both from the flux of contemporary events and from these events’ translation within the textual environment. In the essay “Balaam and His Ass”, Auden had declared man to be distinguished by the desire “to find [his] existence meaningful, to have a *telos*, and this *telos* [he] can only find in something... outside [him]self”.<sup>15</sup> Henry’s journey through a fallen world, by contrast, functions only to disprove the supposition that allegiances of identity will effect the desired “meaning” for the self. Christian, expatriate, statesman: the claims of these umbrella terms for unity and coherence have been undermined fatally by the plurality of voices each contains, from the powerful to the excluded and marginalised. As a “shell, through which the [nation] speaks”,<sup>16</sup> Henry’s *telos* in The Dream Songs might therefore be best described as the inability to locate himself securely within any doctrine, religious or otherwise.<sup>17</sup> Charles Altieri has suggested such a poetics to demonstrate not an inconsistency of approach but the more radical possibilities of the post-war literary imagination:

<sup>13</sup> Jörg Rüpke, Religion of the Romans (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 149. John Haffenden has presented a compelling argument for Berryman’s sourcing of the phrase “*Do, ut des*” (“I give, that thou shalt give”) from Wilhelm Stekel’s Sadism and Masochism, highlighting the parallels between Stekel’s “Theory of Resistance” and The Dream Songs’ stances towards God: “Love is only a seeking for love in return, ‘*Do, ut des*’... If the patient notices that love is not given in return or that it has not reached that degree which he expected, defiance enters in place of the love, which in turn manifests itself as active resistance” (Wilhelm Stekel, Sadism and Masochism, trans. Louise Brink, vol. 1 (London: Bodley Head, 1953) 46. See also Haffenden, Critical Commentary 97).

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 137.

<sup>15</sup> Auden, The Dyer’s Hand 113.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Donoghue, “Berryman’s Long Dream,” Art International 13 (1969): 61-64. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 152-66, at 155.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 139.

[The poet] is more interested in the alternatives than in any ‘right’ solution because the imagination probably works best as an instrument for entertaining options by helping the alternatives take on weight and by projecting the various selves that emerge with each possibility.<sup>18</sup>

In The Arts of Reading, Berryman had compared Eliot’s voice in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to that of “a Hebrew prophet calling on the people... to understand better themselves and the world”.<sup>19</sup> Yet, writing his Dream Songs more than fifty years after his modernist forefather’s efforts, the poet’s own diminished faith in the imaginative craft’s capacity to provide a single “right” solution was clear. His protagonist attempts a similar “Hebrew prophe[cy]” amid mid-century America’s “alarms” and “brutal revelry”, transliterating Job 3.3’s cry: “Yo-bad yōm i-oowaled bo v’ha’l lail awmer h’re gawber! / – Now, now, poor Bones.” (DS 97)<sup>20</sup> Here, however, the result is a marked deflation of Henry’s self-aggrandizing tone. The reactive acquisition of Job’s identity does not provide the desired support and substance, but instead proves “terrifyingly abject”.<sup>21</sup> Assuming another’s griefs, Henry is in the process rendered still more other to himself. At once Job and not-Job, he cannot “call... on the people” to repent, forced as he is to jabber an alien dialect within the contemporary context. The facile and uncomprehending “[n]ow, now” of the Song’s closing lines summons him back inexorably to the twentieth century, whilst highlighting the impotent futility of such an anachronistic plea.

Throughout The Dream Songs Henry, who must negotiate the fallen and ideologically compromised post-war landscape, experiences this estrangement from both self and society as the fracturing of his identity into the “various selves that emerge with each possibility”.<sup>22</sup> Following His Toy, His Dream, His Rest’s publication, Berryman would discuss the central importance of his protagonist’s ever-changing stances to his own conception of the work:

I wish that here [we] had some persistent plan. Most of this is wedding of what we may be, later on this afternoon, next week, what we were on September 12, what you are in relation to your little boy... Out of these possibilities of “I” which I have given a new identity to, Henry, I let some flower.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After, Blackwell Introductions to Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 202.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Ross, John Berryman and Allen Tate, The Arts of Reading (New York: Crowell, 1960) 343.

<sup>20</sup> According to Berryman’s own unfinished translation of the Book of Job, which he worked on sporadically throughout the mid-Fifties: “Perish the day’s fire into which I was born, and that night’s joy crying ‘A boy!’” (JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, “Job” Notebook).

<sup>21</sup> John Michael, Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008) 8.

<sup>22</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 202.

<sup>23</sup> John Berryman, “John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview,” interview with William Heyen, Ohio Review 15 (1974): 46-65, at 63.

The statement is particularly significant, containing the veiled implication that the narrative plurality which locates “right” solutions within an experiential and textual openness is the only “persistent plan” of The Dream Songs. Yet whilst the language of multiple lives<sup>24</sup> that Berryman’s piece-poem enacts is dependent upon the flexibility of Henry’s guises, this flexibility, as Stephen Matterson has noted, remains highly problematic. “[A]bsorbing the secret griefs of others into himself”,<sup>25</sup> Henry experiences his identity as disunified and contingent, constantly “breaking up”. (DS 85) However, this process of othering also functions, conversely, to provide a valuable insight into the work’s textual terrain. A survey of Henry’s adventures confirms that, for all his sins, he has killed nobody, but his “mirror” is (significantly) “a murderer’s”. (DS 19) In his persecuted state, surrounded by losses and tormented by epistemological doubt, he cannot be quite sure of his innocence, as Song 29 intimates:

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,  
 end anyone and hacks her body up  
 and hide the pieces, where they may be found.  
 He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody’s missing.  
 Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.  
 Nobody is ever missing. (DS 29)

The madman self that in these lines’ dark subtext longs to “[go] over everyone” is an alternative “possibility” of “Gentle friendly Henry Pussy-cat”’s “I”, (DS 19) a further shard of his fractured identity that threatens to “be found” at any moment. The Song reveals his crime of “thought” and thought only, the “radically displaced emotion” that Thomas Travisano criticises for “too much exceed[ing] its cause”,<sup>26</sup> to be a fundamental aspect of the art of the dream which must translate the external world. Despite his status as a mere imaginary murderer, Henry, whose “mind grew blacker the more he thought”, (DS 147) will find it impossible to make adequate amends: permeable to all that enters his text, he must also represent this repellent facet of American democracy.

It is notable that Henry’s “omniform, modal”<sup>27</sup> character in The Dream Songs displays a marked tendency towards identification with figures that occupy the margins of society. In the guise of one of “the miserable... who have dared to practise the art of poetry for the United States”,<sup>28</sup> Henry draws parallels between his own position and that of

<sup>24</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 203.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 87.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 1999) 247.

<sup>27</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>28</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11. Cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 46.

the Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky, sentenced to five years' hard labour in 1964 for the dubious crime of "*parasitism*". (DS 180) Yet, as Anthony Caeshu observes, "nothing is as it seems in a world where [loss] has painted everything black, including Henry's face".<sup>29</sup> Just as swiftly, Henry may assume the stance of the African American, "free, black & forty-one" (DS 40) and thus emphatically distanced from the precepts (free, white and twenty-one) that have guaranteed US citizens full legal independence historically. In Song 41, this absorption of the social other culminates in a striking first-person account of the Polish Jews' experiences of Nazi persecution. Henry's description of "fiery" flight from the Warsaw ghettos rejects pat assurances of the human spirit's capacity to transcend "bullet[s]", "burned" temples and "sacked shop[s]". (DS 41) The text, which owes a clear debt to Paul Celan's "Todesfuge",<sup>30</sup> works to reconfigure the word "psalm" into an empty tune which "palms" the ears, a temporary diversion at best from the horrors that press in:<sup>31</sup>

... it's not we would assert  
particulars, but animal; cats mew,  
horses scream, man sing.

Or: men psalm. Man palms his ears and moans.  
Death is a German expert. (DS 41)

The dangers of such a poetic strategy are immediately apparent. As a "white American in early middle age" himself – "extremely lucky", as he would remark to a Harvard Advocate interview team, "that I don't have th[ose] problem[s]"<sup>32</sup> – Berryman certainly risked his work's emotions "too much exceed[ing] [their] cause".<sup>33</sup> Did Song 41 and its fellow texts represent the appropriation of private sorrows for artistic gain, and thus invite the charges of exploitation that would be levied at Sylvia Plath's "Holocaust poems" in the 1965 volume Ariel?<sup>34</sup> Yet it is just as apparent that what The Dream Songs gains

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Caeshu, "Dramatizing the Dreadful: Affective Postures in The Dream Songs," After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 101-20, at 113.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Celan's infamous refrain "der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" from the poem "Todesfuge", or "Death Fugue" (Paul Celan, Poems of Paul Celan, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil, 1988) 61-3). See also Cooper, Dark Airs 149-50.

<sup>31</sup> A handwritten note to one early draft of Song 41 further substantiates this reading, describing the text as "a dream" in which "H[enry] as a Jewish atheist speaks" (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 6).

<sup>32</sup> John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 9.

<sup>33</sup> Travisano 247.

<sup>34</sup> Discussing Plath's employment of the Jewish genocide as poetic motif in Ariel, the critic George Steiner would question whether "any writer... any human being other than an actual survivor, [has] the right to put on this death-rig" (George Steiner, "In Extremis," 1969, The Cambridge Mind: Ninety Years of The Cambridge Review, 1879-1969, ed. Eric Homberger, William Janeway and Simon Schama (London: Cape, 1969) 303-08, at 305). See also Amy Hungerford, The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2003) 24-45.

from Henry's identification with contemporary society's margins is inextricably related to this piece-poem's artistry. In "One Answer to a Question", an essay composed for a 1965 Shenandoah symposium, Berryman would attribute the development of his literary voice to a key "discovery... that a commitment of identity can be 'reserved,' so to speak, with an ambiguous pronoun... [t]he [speaker] himself is both left out and put in".<sup>35</sup> The full impact of this "discovery" continues to reverberate throughout The Dream Songs. Figured simultaneously as social outlaw and as bureaucratically ratified citizen paying his dues, both "left out [from] and put in[to]" his text, Henry's weakness also functions as the chief source of his strength. His "ambiguous pronoun" – the infinitely acquisitive yet "terrifyingly abject"<sup>36</sup> "I" – raises the possibility of a new agency for lyric poetry: an art that stands not as static monument but as an entity at once composed of and re-composing the flux of national experience.<sup>37</sup> This reading casts into sharp focus the second epigraph affixed to 77 Dream Songs, which quotes from Lamentations 3.63, "I am their musick." In his plural role as "I" and the alternative "possibilities of 'I'",<sup>38</sup> Henry's is the "musick" of Lamentations' unspecified "enemies... that rose up against me"<sup>39</sup> and also of the victimised "me" itself, both subject and prepositional object of the verse. The result is a subversive interrogation of the identity-politics of national, racial and social affiliation. The clear-cut distinction between Henry and not-Henry, between African American, Jew and weeping woman, is replaced in The Dream Songs by what William Meredith has termed the work's "terrible uncertainties of [i]dentity".<sup>40</sup> Amid Song 119's textual terrain of marginalised "shadows" and false "act[s]", Henry's insistence upon the fluidity of his own stance facilitates his transformation from agonist to antagonist:

Shadow & act, shadow & act,  
 Better get white or you' get whacked,  
 or keep so-called *black*  
 & raise new hell. (DS 119)

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<sup>35</sup> John Berryman, "One Answer to a Question," Shenandoah 17 (1965): 67-76. Rpt. as "Changes" in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic, 1966) 94-103, at 98. According to Berryman, this "discovery" was made during his composition of "The Ball Poem", a piece first published in 1948's The Dispossessed (Berryman, "Changes" 97).

<sup>36</sup> Michael 8.

<sup>37</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>38</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 63.

<sup>39</sup> See KJB, Lam. 3.61-63: "Thou hast heard their reproach, O Lord, and all their imaginations against me. The lips of those that rose up against me, and their device against me all the day. Behold their sitting down and their rising up; I am their musick."

<sup>40</sup> William Meredith, "Henry Tasting All the Secret Bits of Life: Berryman's Dream Songs," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 6 (1965): 27-33, at 31.



“[A]bsorbing the secret griefs of others into himself”<sup>41</sup> and in the process becoming “so-called *black*” may well “raise new hell” for Berryman’s speaker, situating him in the midst of the Civil Rights movement’s violent struggles. More crucially, though, adoption of the alien identity provides him with a platform from which to critique the hegemonies responsible for shaping mid-century American society. Viewed in the context of this Song, Henry’s allusion to Ralph Ellison’s 1964 essay collection Shadow and Act – a seminal discussion of the cultural suppression of African Americans – takes on the weight of a statement of allegiance, calling black and white citizens alike to its egalitarian cause. Might voicing the injured identities that stand as reproof to the national dream serve ultimately to foreground America’s broken promises of liberty, encouraging the country’s “shadow[y]” margins to take up agency and act?

It is not so surprising, then, that the critic Denis Donoghue can declare of Henry’s fractured self, “A Gentile who becomes an imaginary Jew by an act of sympathy is perhaps as complete as a modern man can be.”<sup>42</sup> Whether “imaginary Jew”, “so-called *black*” (DS 119) or possible murderer, the textual guises assumed by The Dream Songs’ “elongate” hero could be said to represent not just “act[s] of sympathy” but a version of Keats’ negative capability. The easy identification “with every sort of person and situation”<sup>43</sup> emerges as the only form of justice available to the excluded and marginalised identities that stake their claims upon the uncertain post-war terrain. For, as John Rawls would observe in the years following The Dream Songs’ publication, what is justice’s fundamental requirement but “losing, at least momentarily, the identity of oneself in order to register and represent the identities of others”?<sup>44</sup> However, whilst Henry’s existence as a figure “continually in for... and filling some other Body”<sup>45</sup> enables him both to endure and to represent the inequalities and losses that comprise his literary landscape, it is essential that we resist the temptation to locate such multiplicity within any notion of a wider post-war return to Romantic constructions of the persona.<sup>46</sup> The narrative plurality

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<sup>41</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>42</sup> Donoghue 154. Donoghue is also, of course, alluding here to Berryman’s 1945 short story “The Imaginary Jew”, in which the protagonist states, “The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew. Every murderer strikes the mirror” (John Berryman, “The Imaginary Jew,” Kenyon Review 7 (1945): 529-39. Rpt. in TFOTP 359-66, at 366). Chapter 1 discusses this story in detail.

<sup>43</sup> Meredith, “Henry Tasting All the Secret Bits of Life” 31.

<sup>44</sup> John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 1971 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1999) 118. Cit. Michael 19.

<sup>45</sup> John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, John Keats: Selected Letters, ed. Robert Gittings, rev. ed, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 147-49, at 148.

<sup>46</sup> Critical arguments for mid-century American poetry as representative of the final throes of Romanticism have focused traditionally upon discussion of the works of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, suggesting their personae to be structured around a continuous quest for a transcendental vision. See for example Henry Hart, Robert Lowell and the Sublime (New York: Syracuse UP, 1995), Marjorie Perloff, The Poetic Art of Robert

and rejection of textual resolution that characterises Berryman’s response to his era in The Dream Songs renders not just Henry’s corpse but the Western literary corpus subject to numerous identity claims. As Peter Maber elaborates, “in revisiting [a] form [the poet] inherits the old ambivalences, as well as adding his own and those of his own time, creating [an] equally fluid representation of a representation”.<sup>47</sup> A representation of a representation: an apt expression indeed. Henry in one late Song addresses Wordsworth as “thou form almost divine”, (DS 380) yet the modifier “almost” is key. The Romantic attribution of “divine” authority to the literary imagination is challenged explicitly in Song 64, where rhetorical posture alone fails to make all parts of the assumed identity cohere. Henry-as-drunken-visionary, would-be priest of the post-war world, may bear with him a distinctly unholy trinity – the “cig’s”, the “flaskie”, the “crystal cock” of both tilted glass and penis – but the “kneel” with which he anticipates “blessing” remains stubbornly, mundanely secular. (DS 64) The very concept of poetic transubstantiation has “gone to seed”, (DS 64) and the only spiritual vision he can now receive is granted at second hand, fleeting and unsatisfactory:

Supreme my holdings, greater yet my need,  
 thoughtless I go out. Dawn. Have I my cig’s,  
 my flaskie O,  
 O crystal cock, – my kneel has gone to seed, –  
 and anybody’s blessing?  
 .....

... – I knew a one of groans  
 & greed & spite, of a crutch,

who thought he had, a vile night, been – well – blest.  
 He see someone run off. Why not Henry,  
 with his grasp of desire?  
 – Hear matters hard to manage at de best,  
 Mr Bones. Tween what we see, what be,  
 is blinds. Them blinds’ on fire. (DS 64)

In this world of “vile night[s]”, “hard” enough “to manage at de best”, the “blinds” with which man divides his own subjective perception of events (“what we see”) from the bewildering flux of external phenomena (“what be”) have become, it seems, an untenable luxury. As such, Song 64 suggests, they cannot avoid becoming victims of the disorder: set ablaze by rioters, burning in the streets.

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Lowell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1973) and Joyce Carol Oates, “The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poems of Sylvia Plath,” Southern Review 9 (1973): 37-54.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Maber, “‘So-called black’: Reassessing John Berryman’s Blackface Minstrelsy,” Arizona Quarterly 64 (2008): 129-141, at 133.

Framed thus, the gesture towards Romantic literary convention contained within the “breaking up” (DS 85) of Henry’s identity can be viewed more accurately as a contemporary interrogation of that tradition. In The Dream Songs’ “model of [a] method”,<sup>48</sup> where artistic influence is acknowledged most frequently through its conscious casting-off or inversion, Wordsworth’s vision of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquillity”<sup>49</sup> has been supplanted by what Berryman would later term “the expression of emotion in action.... [w]ith data”.<sup>50</sup> It is, moreover, the precise nature of the data provided by this piece-poem, and the bewildering juxtaposition of lexicons and modalities that inheres within each of its protagonist’s guises, that foregrounds the limitations of Henry’s negative capability. The Dream Songs are presented as dispatches from a chaotic post-war frontier characterised by “an absolute disappearance of continuity & love”; the “blinds” of imaginative transformation have been dismantled, and “everything is what it seems”. (DS 101) When we consider the work’s contextual premise, however, the phrase “everything is what it seems” takes on a subversive secondary implication. The Henry who can declare in African American vernacular, “I knew a one of groans” and “He see someone run off” (DS 64) is also the “white American in early middle age”<sup>51</sup> who mediates the poem’s discourse, containing and framing the represented speech act. Affecting to articulate the secret griefs of the social other,<sup>52</sup> Henry is in the process less “in for... and filling some other Body”<sup>53</sup> than a manifestation of what Berryman in one early note described as “the show-problem”:<sup>54</sup> a representation, that is, of the difficulty of representation itself. These Songs function to expose imaginative identification with society’s margins as the ultimate “blind”, as a false promise of yet-unrealised justice that shields their dreaming speaker from the prevailing reality of unconquered corruption and prejudice. Yet Henry, whose dreams source their authority from fantasy, has no other option if he is to stave off disintegration (for the duration of a single Song, at least). In Song 195, professor-Henry, faced with the daunting task of summarising the “heartless” carnage wrought by “History’s Two-Legs”, (DS 195) presents his preferred “reality” to the class without a sense of irony:

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<sup>48</sup> Edward Mendelson, “How to Read Berryman’s Dream Songs,” American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1973) 29-43, at 31.

<sup>49</sup> William Wordsworth, preface, Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems, 1802, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 239-51, at 250.

<sup>50</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 57.

<sup>51</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>52</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>53</sup> Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, John Keats: Selected Letters 148.

<sup>54</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

reality is

...reskinned knuckles & forgiveness & toys  
unbreakable & thunder that excites & annoys  
but's powerless to harm.  
Reality's the growing again of the right arm  
(which so we missed in our misleading days)  
& the popping back in of eyes. (DS 195)

The dream of reality ensures that Henry's much-lamented injured arm is at once "grow[n] again" to its former vigour,<sup>55</sup> and that his "eyes" (or, indeed, "I"s) are restored to a fixed state. It seems that the survival of The Dream Songs' protagonist, his coping strategy for a world whose brutality promotes only abjection and self-estrangement, depends not just upon the employment of the poetic imagination but upon its acknowledgement as a consciously performative stance. Such a stance is necessarily flawed, for it requires a constant awareness of its failure to administer justice to both the "I" and the not-"I" it portrays; the "act of sympathy"<sup>56</sup> alone cannot fully erase the identity of the self, nor accurately represent the other. But for Henry, who locates his subjectivity in the dream-text's permeability to external phenomena, it offers the only possibility of coherent "selving". (DS 66) The model of poetic identity proposed by The Dream Songs renders "self-knowledge... more problematic a concept than objective knowledge because there is no way to separate subjective processes and desires from what gets attributed to the object",<sup>57</sup> and no way to distinguish dream of self from dream of world. The fixed and unified identity emerges as the ultimate object of desire, distanced perpetually through its basis in performance; what we know of Henry, and what Henry knows of himself, must be filtered through an ever-changing parade of "shadow[s] & act[s]". (DS 119)

If, then, the multiple allegiances of identity assumed by Henry in The Dream Songs represent no simple social critique but a more profound "show-problem",<sup>58</sup> it remains notable that no one aspect of the volume has incited greater controversy than its protagonist's recurrent appearances in blackface. From the second Song of the published collection – subtitled "Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance" (DS 2) – the "advance" of The Dream Songs' plot, of its "motions of a human personality"<sup>59</sup> as plot, is situated simultaneously within the sociopolitical landscape of post-war America and within the work's own consciously metapoetic textual terrain. As Peter Maber suggests, it is possible

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<sup>55</sup> Among the numerous injuries and ailments Henry lays claim to in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, his broken "right arm" merits repeated mention; see Songs 163-166 and 169-70.

<sup>56</sup> Donoghue 154.

<sup>57</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 163.

<sup>58</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>59</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder "National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969".

to trace the nineteenth- and twentieth-century influences of both “Uncle Remus and the literature of the dialect movement” and modernism’s subsequent “racial masquerades”<sup>60</sup> in Song 2. Composed during Berryman’s November 1962 visit to Boston, Massachusetts, where John F. Kennedy’s resignation from his Senate seat had occasioned a “Special Election”, this text’s portrayal of Henry’s “baffled” (DS 2) exclusion from his nation’s democratic processes gains much of its propulsive opening power from the hyperbolic performance of black folk narrative:

The jane is zoned! no nightspot here, no bar  
there, no sweet freeway, and no premises  
for business purposes,  
no loiterers or needers. Henry are  
baffled. Have ev’ybody head for Maine,  
utility-man take a train?

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,  
but is he come? Le’s do a hoedown, gal,  
one blue, one shuffle,  
if them is all you seem to réquire. Strip,  
ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on  
one chaste evenin. (DS 2)

The rhythmic and verbal syncopations, the parallel phrases and rhetorical questions, the onomatopoeic drive of the line “utility-man take a train”: all co-opt the performative strategies that John Edgar Wideman has identified as definitive traits of African American vernacular.<sup>61</sup> By placing these words in Henry’s mouth, however, Berryman is alluding deliberately to the negative tropes that had dogged his literary forefathers’ representations of the racial other. Henry in his imaginary blackface is marginalised and placed outside the bounds of his culture in his ignorance of “the fact that, on Election Day, all bars are closed”.<sup>62</sup> His customary occupations – women (or “jane[s]”), “nightspot[s]”, the lure of the “sweet freeway” – are checked by an enforced “zone” of darkness that takes on starker implications in the Song’s second stanza. This day of empty streets and shaken electrical and political powers may, Berryman insinuates, also herald a (distinctly undemocratic) election in the word’s theological sense, leaving damned Henry and his associates to inherit the earth.<sup>63</sup> Yet, faced with a situation in which all might feasibly “lose dere grip”,

<sup>60</sup> Maber 130.

<sup>61</sup> John Edgar Wideman, “Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature,” *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 59-77, at 74. Cit. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 137.

<sup>62</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary* 82.

<sup>63</sup> A number of striking parallels exist between Song 2 and the New Testament’s visions of forthcoming apocalypse. See especially *KJB*, Mark 13.24-25: “[T]he sun shall be darkened... and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken”, and *KJB*, Rev. 6.15: “[A]nd the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains,

what does our blackface hero do? He dances. The idiom of “a suppressed minority group” is subjected to the liberal white gaze and transformed into what Susan Gubar terms a “revolt against authoritarianism”. Like in the works of “the white proponents of modernism”,<sup>64</sup> the so-called “primitive” rhythms of the black speech act are presented here as a potential antidote to the bureaucracy and staid conservatism of Western civilisation: blazingly healthy and vitally authentic, this, it seems, is the language of a twentieth-century Adam untainted by the restrictions of social convention.

Such a representation of black America in The Dream Songs – which takes its cue from canonical sources including Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Pound’s Confucian Odes<sup>65</sup> – has caused several critics to fall into the trap of conflating the work’s “romantic racism”<sup>66</sup> with the imaginative empathies of negative capability. Writing a few months prior to His Toy, His Dream, His Rest’s publication, William Wasserstrom would attribute to these blackface Songs an “undisguised importation of Negritude... drawn straight from the heart of misery incarnate”.<sup>67</sup> The following year, Adrienne Rich declared, “A man who needs to discourse on the most extreme, most tragic subjects, has recourse to nigger talk.”<sup>68</sup> However, any consideration of the central importance of “disguise” within The Dream Songs’ constructions of the literary persona provides a challenge to these early readings. In this piece-poem that documents the fractured dream-identities of a “white American in early middle age”,<sup>69</sup> and in which “[k]nowledge of self must be filtered through... the performance of self”,<sup>70</sup> just what degree of authenticity can we ascribe to Henry’s “nigger talk”? The final stanza of Song 2 shines a spotlight on matters both literally and figuratively:

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and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains”.

<sup>64</sup> Gubar 136.

<sup>65</sup> Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes, an unfinished two-scene verse drama first published in 1932, is notable for its characters’ performances of various set pieces and songs in blackface dialect; performances which, as Michael North has stated, suggest blackness to represent a simultaneous “freedom and servitude” (Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 90). See also Pound’s employment of the black speech act as escape-motif in his Confucian Odes: “I just can’t live with these here folks, / I gotta go home and I want to git goin’ / To whaar my dad’s folks still is a-growin’” (Ezra Pound, The Confucian Odes: The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius, 1954 (New York: New Directions, 1959) 100).

<sup>66</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1988) 213.

<sup>67</sup> William Wasserstrom, “Cagey John: Berryman as Medicine Man,” Centennial Review 12 (1968): 334-54. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 167-85, at 176.

<sup>68</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Living with Henry,” Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 10-11. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 127-32, at 130.

<sup>69</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>70</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 163.

– Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin  
 yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?  
 Honey dusk do sprawl.  
 – Hit’s hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing.  
 Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray.  
 I votes in my hole. (DS 2)

The interjection of a second voice that addresses Henry sardonically as “Sir Bones” functions to foreground the fact that his responses to the contemporary world are performed upon a self-consciously literary stage. For whilst Henry’s may be the “musick” of the marginalised identities that struggle for recognition in post-war America, it is crucial to note that the quotation from Lamentations that prefaces 77 Dream Songs is framed within the context of a prior epigraph from Karl Wittke’s Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage: “Go in, brack man, de day’s yo’ own.”<sup>71</sup> Absorbing the modernists’ black language practices, Berryman in The Dream Songs is acknowledging the racist element through its employment as dramatic mode.<sup>72</sup> The poet drives his point home further with the dedication of Song 2 to “the memory of [Thomas Dartmouth] Daddy Rice” – a white vaudeville performer “who sang and jumped ‘Jim Crow’ in Louisville in 1828”.<sup>73</sup> The minstrel-show context, as the ultimate example of “parodic mimicry of the American black population”,<sup>74</sup> becomes a self-reflexive lens through which the text views its own representations. The masquerade is deliberate, and the evidence is writ large in Song 2’s final stanza, which exposes its hallmarks of black diction as overt parody through their juxtaposition with other markers of literary high style. Henry’s distinctly unchaste verse-voyage is compared with that of the questing Grail-knight “Galahad”, and the inappropriateness of the correlation emphasised by the gleeful Carrollesque nonsense of “Kinged or thinged”. The slang term “[p]oll-cats” is subjected to an intricate series of puns that reveal Henry’s enduring hopes both for black voters’ assumption of political agency and for, more mundanely, the return of the linesmen (or “pole-cats”) who will restore power to the district.

Susan Gubar has stated persuasively of The Dream Songs’ “cross-racial” idiom:

So adulterated is Berryman’s black talk that it calls attention to the act of ventriloquism, foregrounding its status as a debased imitation and thereby its tendency to veer into a performance something like a drag show.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1930) i. Cit. Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iii.

<sup>72</sup> Maber 131.

<sup>73</sup> Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iii. In the wake of Rice’s popular performances, the phrase “to jump Jim Crow” became a common nineteenth- and twentieth-century slang term implying the adoption of a staged black caricature.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 179.

<sup>75</sup> Gubar 163.

This revised reading of the work's "grand groans", (DS 97) advanced in recent years by Brendan Cooper and Peter Maber, is distinguished by a desire to count Berryman amongst the practitioners of a newly post-modern blackface: a literature founded upon the critique of its own representations, and "critiqu[ing]... itself as [an] artefact of racial prejudice".<sup>76</sup> Such interpretations provide a compelling riposte to the writer Michael S. Harper, who with his 1977 poem "Tongue-Tied in Black and White" launched a now-infamous attack upon what he perceived to be Berryman's "offen[sive]" appropriation of a white Southern childhood's "inner voices":

you wrote in that needful black idiom  
offending me, for only your inner voices  
spoke such tongues, your father's soft prayers  
in an all black town in Oklahoma, your ear lied.  
*That slave in you was white blood forced to derision.*<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps, we might answer, it is these same "lie[s]" Harper castigates that are, in fact, most necessary to The Dream Songs' "so-called *black*" idiom. (DS 119) The racial stereotypes evoked by Henry's "s[inging] and jump[ing] 'Jim Crow'"<sup>78</sup> offer a dramatisation not of blackness itself, but of the liberal white citizen's dilemma: the failure, that is, to shed completely "the identity of oneself in order to register and represent the identities of others".<sup>79</sup> For if Henry in his permeability to external phenomena is a product of his ideologically compromised post-war age, he is also a product of his creator – a man who would declare himself in one interview "extremely lucky to be white", whilst demonstrating every sympathy towards "the problem" facing his contemporary and friend Ralph Ellison: "He's black, and he and [his wife], wherever they go, they are black."<sup>80</sup>

Any consideration of the ultimate significance of The Dream Songs' minstrelsy, however, is complicated further by the sporadic textual presence of Henry's unnamed blackface companion. Berryman's conceptual notes for the work indicate the notion of a

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<sup>76</sup> Cooper, Dark Airs 181. Peter Maber's 2008 essay "'So-called black': Reassessing John Berryman's Blackface Minstrelsy" supports this view, asserting that the poet's blackface Songs take "a racist minstrel convention – the distortion of words, or perhaps misuse / coinage of words – and use... it to unfold polysemic possibilities that lead us away from essentialist cliché" (Maber 137).

<sup>77</sup> Michael S. Harper, Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2000) 126.

<sup>78</sup> Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iii.

<sup>79</sup> Rawls 118. Cit. Michael 19.

<sup>80</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 9. It is notable that Ellison himself (whom Berryman consulted frequently during The Dream Songs' composition) drew a clear distinction between the authentic black speech act and its representation in Berryman's work as poetic "show-problem": "My preference is for idiomatic rendering, but I wasn't about to let the poetry of what he was saying be interrupted by the dictates of my ear for Afro-American speech. Besides, watching him transform elements of the minstrel show into poetry was too fascinating" (Ralph Ellison, cit. Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 387).



second “character” “who calls [Henry] ‘Mr Bones’”<sup>81</sup> to have originated at an early stage of its composition. This “Friend” would supply a broadly “choric” response to various of Henry’s adventures, at once “inquisitive [and] reproachful... Architectonic”.<sup>82</sup> A curious expression of Berryman’s: “Architectonic”? Upon first glance at the volume, the figure who dances and “hum[s]” with Henry on his mid-century stage appears to correspond fully with the word’s definition, his character evincing “a clearly defined structure, esp[ecially] one that is artistically pleasing”.<sup>83</sup> Inciting a call-and-response narrative trajectory with his repeated enquiries “What happen then, Mr. Bones?”, (DS 26) he invites the Songs’ beleaguered protagonist to take refuge from a world of marginalisation and loss in a series of set pieces that betray the clear influence of the American vaudeville tradition:

I offers you this handkerchief, now set  
 your left foot by my right foot,  
 shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,  
 arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,  
 hum a little, Mr Bones. (DS 76)

Nevertheless, it is the Friend’s refusal to be confined within the role of mere entertainer that calls into question the enduring value of Berryman’s initial descriptions of his function. If the poet’s earliest structural notes and post-publication comments alike emphasise The Dream Songs’ capacity to absorb “the language of the blues and Negro dialects”,<sup>84</sup> they also suggest the Friend’s characterisation to result from an acquisitive ransacking of the broader Western literary canon for potential models. At times he is, to quote Berryman, “*some* friend... like Job’s Comforter” who sits down and gives Henry “the traditional Jewish jazz – namely, you suffer, therefore you are guilty”,<sup>85</sup> a reminder that “Fate clobber all”, (DS 25) and “We hafta *die*.” (DS 36) At times he assumes the position of an ancient Greek chorus, elucidatory, responsive and occasionally reproachful: “– Mr Bones, you too advancer with your song, / muching of which are wrong.” (DS 99) At times, too, Henry’s relationship with him is akin to the “talk... betw[een] Don Q[uixote] and S[ancho] P[anza]”,<sup>86</sup> in which the bewildered yet loyal slave is the sole manifestation of the reality-principle:<sup>87</sup> “Tomorrow be more shows; be special need / for

<sup>81</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.1.

<sup>82</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>83</sup> “Architectonic, adj. and n.,” OED Online, June 2012 (Oxford UP) 10 Sep. 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/10398?redirectedFrom=architectonic&>>.

<sup>84</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 8.

<sup>85</sup> John Berryman, “Conversation with Berryman,” interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 346. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 16.1.

<sup>87</sup> Helen Vendler, who reads Henry’s Friend as a proto-“therapist”, or “blank wall on which to project behaviour”, was the first to employ Freud’s term “reality-principle” to describe his role (Helen Vendler, The

rest... now.” (DS 179) Indeed, a full perusal of The Dream Songs demonstrates that if Henry’s Friend is representative of any principle of structure, it is the same antagonistic plurality that underpins the work as a whole – the privileging of co-existent alternatives that resists a single “right” solution<sup>88</sup> and instead relates each narrative “anabranh [to] anabranh”.<sup>89</sup>

It is logical that Berryman’s “delight in obscuring origins”<sup>90</sup> should extend to his handling of the most direct source material for his Songs’ minstrel-show references – namely, Carl Wittke’s iconic 1930 study Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage. One statement of the poet’s to a Harvard Advocate interview team has posed a particular challenge to his critics:

There’s a minstrel show thing of Mr. Bones and the interlocutor. There’s a wonderful remark, which I meant to use as an epigraph, but I never got around to it. “We were all end-men,” Plotz – that’s what it says – “We were all end-men.” ... [Henry’s Friend] is never named; I know his name, but the critics haven’t caught on yet.<sup>91</sup>

Were both Henry and his Friend “end-men” in the strict sense of the word as employed by Wittke – two low comedians who with their punning misunderstandings “were universally successful in keeping their audiences in uproar”<sup>92</sup> – then the name in question would be “Tambo”, the traditional tambourine-wielding companion to “Brudder Bones” with his rattling castanets. However, this Friend is instead labelled “the interlocutor”, or pompous master of ceremonies, “whose intellectual standing always suffered in comparison with the nimble wits of the burnt cork stars on the [stage] ends”.<sup>93</sup> Berryman seems here to be gesturing towards a model of identity both defined by the context of the dream-world (if Henry is playing the end-man, then his role demands its counterpart) and, crucially, displaced from itself, estranged from the adopted subject position by its very basis in performance. For whilst Henry occasionally triumphs over his Friend’s reproaches, far more often the reverse is true, with The Dream Songs’ protagonist the butt of the joke whether he appears in blackface or not: “– Did your gal leave you? – What do *you* think,

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Given and the Made: Recent American Poets (London: Faber, 1995) 39). This interpretation, however, fails to account fully for the frequency with which the Friend expostulates against Henry’s actions, declaring “That’s enough of that, Mr. Bones” (DS 143) and “You don’ make sense” (DS 272).

<sup>88</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 202.

<sup>89</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5, Folder 5.

<sup>90</sup> Maber 133.

<sup>91</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Wittke 141.

<sup>93</sup> Wittke 138. Peter Maber has suggested that this inconsistency may represent “a lapse of memory” on Berryman’s part (Maber 5). However, given that the description of the Friend as “interlocutor” recurs throughout Berryman’s draft schemata for The Dream Songs – composed at a time when research for his piece-poem included careful study of Tambo & Bones – it appears more probable that the deviation from Wittke’s framework is intentional.

pal? / – Is that thing on the front of your head what it seems to be, pal? / – Yes, pal.” (DS 51) Frequently, too, the two figures perform the more ambiguous double-act exemplified by Song 60, which places the essence of these texts’ “show-problem”<sup>94</sup> on stage:

Afters eight years, be less dan eight percent,  
distinguish’ friend, of coloured wif de whites  
in de School, in de Souf.  
– Is coloured gobs, is coloured officers,  
Mr Bones. Dat’s nuffin? – Uncle Tom,  
sweep shut yo mouf,

is million blocking from de proper job,  
de fairest houses & de churches eben. (DS 60)

This oneiric work in which “[k]nowledge of self must be filtered through... the performance of self”<sup>95</sup> ensures that the wish to represent the authentic must betray the impossibility of doing so. In Song 60’s paradox of self-estrangement, blackface Henry, promoting the Civil Rights movement’s efforts to desegregate “de School, in de Souf”, reprimands his doubting Friend with “Uncle Tom, / sweep shut yo mouf”. Nevertheless, the “mouf[ing]” which passes between these two minstrels on their fictitious national stage is part of a deeper-established collusion: affecting to sing the dream of justice, the debased linguistic rendition functions instead to foreclose its possibilities.

Whilst Henry’s Songs of the “[h]arms” (DS 149) visited upon his generation’s social outlaw figures demonstrate his eagerness to “absorb... the secret griefs of others”,<sup>96</sup> they also, then, contain what one critic has described as “the fated sense that such an effort is doomed from the start”.<sup>97</sup> As a “white American in early middle age”,<sup>98</sup> his status containing and framing the cries of exclusion and marginalisation he transmits, Henry cannot assuage his nation’s sins by becoming the Other. He must instead attempt to make the Other over in his own image, and the result is a performative parody of empathy that is emphasised early in The Dream Songs by Song 40’s blackface declaration, “[F]rom othering I don’t take nothin, see”. (DS 40) From “othering” (a term which here suggests both the act of representation and the “others” themselves whose identities are co-opted) Henry can indeed “take nothin”, for the authenticity he seeks is realised through the lens of his own white liberal fakery. The identities that he adopts are rendered alien and abject, doing justice to neither the “I” nor the not-“I” he enacts. Full acknowledgement of the performative antagonism that underpins Henry’s “othering” in The Dream Songs requires a

<sup>94</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>95</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 163.

<sup>96</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>97</sup> Gubar 138.

<sup>98</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

fresh assessment of the minstrel-show trope's significance within its radical identity-poetics. Such an endeavour must take into account several facts neglected by the harshest critics of Berryman's blackface texts: that, as the poet would confess in a 1963 letter to his former Cincinnati colleague Van Meter Ames, "Of course I saw vaudeville, in Oklahoma and Tampa... though I admit I never saw genuine minstrels";<sup>99</sup> that Henry's Friend figures in direct speech only thirty-one times in a work comprising 385 individual Songs.<sup>100</sup> Rather than seeking to define The Dream Songs' minstrelsy as a *telos*, whether "the dream life of white discourse",<sup>101</sup> as Aldon Lynn Nielsen proposes, or Helen Vendler's neo-Freudian formulation of "Conscience at one end of the stage and the Id at the other",<sup>102</sup> these Songs can be read more fruitfully as symptomatic of the work's wider "show-problem".<sup>103</sup> Texts such as Song 179 function as striking depictions of a consciously oneiric world in which performance (the representation as re-presentation) is the sole means of self-expression. And if Berryman's piece-poem places America's compromised post-war society on stage, then Henry and his Friend are merely players; their identities are contingent, fractured and wholly inauthentic, shifting with each new act. It is, however, clear that the assumption of multiple guises remains their only stay against "going to pieces" (DS 137) entirely:

A terrible applause pulls Henry's ear,  
 before the stampede: seats on seats collapse,  
 they are goring each other,  
 I donno if we'll get away. Who care?  
 Why don't we fold us down in our own laps,  
 long-no-see colleague & brother?

– I don't think's time to, time to, Bones.  
 Tomorrow be more shows; be special need  
 for rest & rehearse now.  
 Let's wander on the sands, with knitting bones... (DS 179)

The performance "knit[s]" Henry-as-Bones, drawing his identity together, until the bloody demands of "tomorrow" at least. This is a distinctly dubious form of salvation, for it has been achieved at the price of irrecoverable damage to his subjectivity: "fold[ing] us down in our own laps", these "long-no-see" companions who cloak their true faces behind burnt-cork makeup are also adopting an emergency crash position. Given the evidence writ large in The Dream Songs, it is not so surprising that Berryman's preparatory notes for the volume include a marked page from Søren Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death which

<sup>99</sup> John Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 82.

<sup>100</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 48.

<sup>101</sup> Nielsen 141.

<sup>102</sup> Vendler 36.

<sup>103</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

identifies the “lowest of all... despair” as the subject’s desire “to be another than himself”.<sup>104</sup> In these Songs’ performances of mid-century malaise, the despair born of estrangement both from self and from world is unavoidable, but the “shows” must continue to go on. Henry, condemned to pose beneath “[f]ilthy four-foot lights / [that] reflect on the whites of our eyes”, (DS 63) has no other option but to sing.

#### 4.2 “I was not Killed / by Henry’s Viewers but Maimed”: The Dream Songs as Performance Anxiety

In October 1961, Berryman drafted a handwritten “PROEM” in anticipation of his “pseudo-poem or epic”’s publication.<sup>105</sup> The document, however, differs markedly from the “Note” with which the poet would prefix 77 Dream Songs when this first instalment of his work eventually appeared in 1964. The published 77 Dream Songs preface is broadly elucidatory, identifying its texts as “sections, constituting one version, of a poem in progress”<sup>106</sup> and bestowing various dedications and thanks. Its precursor, by contrast, constructs a fanciful frame narrative in which “the ms. was found in an abandoned keyhole, & transmitted to me by enemies, anxious to thwart my lawful work”.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Berryman’s early “PROEM” places emphasis firmly upon his protagonist’s refusal to be “pried / open for all the world to see”: (DS 1) “Who ‘Henry’ was, or is, has proved undiscoverable by the social scientists. It is hoped, tho’, that he knew Russian, and certain that he claimed to be a minstrel.”<sup>108</sup> This draft preamble functions as a tacit admission that the work to follow is founded upon creative artifice. If, as Charles Thornbury proposes, “a dream might be called a dramatic allegory in which the characteristics and experiences we ourselves possess are represented by people or objects”,<sup>109</sup> then for Henry, whose “selving” (DS 66) depends from such representations, the dream is all-encompassing, and has become “a trope for both text and life”.<sup>110</sup> It is thus

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<sup>104</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death, ed. and trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1954) 186. Cit. Vendler 55.

<sup>105</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>106</sup> Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iv.

<sup>107</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>108</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Thornbury, “The Significance of Dreams in The Dream Songs,” Literature and Psychology 25 (1975): 93-107, at 96.

<sup>110</sup> Martin 191.

that, as translator of the American Dream to the post-war reading public, he is compelled to perform not just the flux of contemporary events but the beliefs, stereotypes and stories upon which his nation has been established. “Know[ing] Russian”, Henry is indicated from The Dream Songs’ outset to be traitorously unconstitutional, an untrustworthy potential “double agent”; “claim[ing]... to be a minstrel”, he acts the “end-man”<sup>111</sup> in the term’s sense of a low comedian marginalised by the performance of his own marginalisation.<sup>112</sup> Berryman’s “PROEM” joins both the published text and draft plans of The Dream Songs as supporting evidence for Denis Donoghue’s assertion, “[F]or [the work’s] poetic purposes, history is not enough. There is also art”.<sup>113</sup> As he journeys through the volume, Henry’s verse-voyages are shaped by the global and national events to which he bears witness. He informs us that “My wife’s candle is out / for John F. Kennedy”, (DS 200) reports the deaths of Blackmur, Frost, Winters and others and watches footage of Eisenhower’s speeches on television. Yet he is possessed simultaneously of a self-proclaimed “Tragical History”<sup>114</sup> in which his fractured and transitory experiences of the modern world and its losses co-exist alongside his adoption of literary guises whose significance has endured throughout the ages: identities as various as “Pelides”, (DS 53) a priest of the Bacchae “squat on the altar” (DS 212) and a “necessary knight” to “one of Spenser’s ladies”. (DS 315) By July 1967, engaged as he was in the mammoth task of selecting and ordering the Songs which would constitute His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Berryman could not have been more aware that his protagonist’s “flexible identity [was] the result of artifice”.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, one question remains: just what, then, was the basis of his declaration to Life journalist Jane Howard that same month, “There is a fiendish resemblance between Henry and me”?<sup>116</sup>

The issue of the “resemblance” between Berryman and his protagonist has preoccupied critics since 77 Dream Songs’ initial publication. The poet later clarified his Life statement with the comment “Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand I am not Henry”,<sup>117</sup> but the damage, it seemed, had already been done. In the first monograph on Berryman’s career to appear, William J. Martz would assert of The

<sup>111</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 8.

<sup>112</sup> The combination of characteristics attributed to Henry in Berryman’s “PROEM” may also contain a secondary, more critical implication: is this the nightmare of a man awaiting civilisation’s “end” as escalating tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States threaten to precipitate nuclear destruction?

<sup>113</sup> Donoghue 156.

<sup>114</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>115</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>116</sup> John Berryman, “Whiskey and Ink, Whiskey and Ink,” interview with Jane Howard, Life 63 (1967): 67-76, at 70.

<sup>117</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 6. See also Berryman’s “Note” to His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, which describes Henry as “an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)” (Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix).

Dream Songs, “Henry is indeed John Berryman struggling with his own life”;<sup>118</sup> the view has been propounded subsequently by Joel Conarroe (“[Berryman] journeys... over the blighted terrain of his own personal history”) and John Haffenden (“the soul under stress, and under observation, is Berryman’s”), among others.<sup>119</sup> Such readings derive their authority from the paradigm of literary mimesis that renders the art a strict textual transposition of the life. Henry in some Songs has a dog, like Berryman, and in others his drinking problem; he dreams on one occasion of a family unit that comprises, as Berryman’s at the time of composition, “my first wife, / and my second wife & my son”. (DS 54) In several late Songs he also has a daughter, who even shares the nickname the poet awarded to his real-life progeny, “the adorable *Little Twiss*”. (DS 373)<sup>120</sup> However, at the risk of sounding facile, Berryman, for all his public agonies, never took to the stage in blackface, “knew Russian” or adopted the spurs of a knight. Indeed, as Ernest J. Smith has observed, “Henry... often betrays a cynicism or short-sightedness more common to the age than to his creator”:<sup>121</sup> one example is Song 245, which, following snide criticism of the Kennedy administration (“there is a work called The Republic”), has Henry conclude with a clear degree of authorial tongue-in-cheek, “I personally... / hate foreign ideas.” (DS 245) In his permeability to the disintegration of the American Dream and his acknowledged basis in performative artifice, Henry might be more accurately viewed as both Everyman and *noman*. His oneiric textual terrain – a dream of a dream, in which there is “no secure ground for judgment beyond what the speaker... project[s]”<sup>122</sup> – facilitates the fracturing of his identity into its various guises. And it follows that these guises, performed as they are by “a white American in early middle age”,<sup>123</sup> may also include the rather prosaic characteristics (alcoholic, divorcé, dog-owner) shared by John Berryman, middle-aged white American poet.

Berryman would go on to explain to Richard Kostelanetz in a 1970 interview,

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<sup>118</sup> William J. Martz, John Berryman, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers 85 (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1969) 39.

<sup>119</sup> Joel Conarroe, John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry, Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry (New York: Columbia UP, 1977) 97; Haffenden, Critical Commentary 1. These biographical interpretations of The Dream Songs have continued to influence recent critical discussions of Berryman’s oeuvre; see for example Michael Hofmann, ed. and introd., John Berryman: Poems selected by Michael Hofmann, Faber Poet to Poet Series (London: Faber, 2004) viii, ix and Justin Quinn, “Failed Vision?” After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 71-3.

<sup>120</sup> Berryman’s manuscript drafts of Song 54 date from March-April 1958; his first daughter, Martha, was born in 1962, following the poet’s third marriage (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 157).

<sup>121</sup> Smith 300.

<sup>122</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 163.

<sup>123</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

All the way through my work... is a tendency to regard the individual soul under stress. The soul is not oneself, for the personal "I", me with a social security number and a bank account, never gets into the poems; they are all about a third person.<sup>124</sup>

Cast in this light, Henry's fundamental "undiscoverab[ility]",<sup>125</sup> his sense of dual estrangement from the compromised post-war world and from himself as its representative product, renders him the ideal "third person" for The Dream Songs. As part of a volume composed within "the context of... the Confessional utterance of the fifties and sixties",<sup>126</sup> Song 260 affects to provide a tantalising insight into both poet and protagonist's "individual soul[s] under stress", to reveal the personal agonies of the abject and displaced "I" that is subject to ongoing "Tides of dreadful creation". (DS 260) The lines that follow, however, could not stray further from this template:

Lucid his project lay, beyond. Can he?  
Loose to the world lay unimaginable Henry,  
loose to the world,  
taut with his vision as it has to be,  
open & closed sings on his mystery  
furled & unfurled.

Flags lift, strange chords lift to a climax. Henry  
is past. Returning from his travail, he  
can't think of what to say.  
The house's all about him, so is his family.  
Tame doors swing upon his mystery  
until another day. (DS 260)

Henry's, in fact, is the elusive "[l]ucid" dream in which one remains aware of the wholly fictional basis of one's actions. "Loose to the world", his song of the lack of restraints upon his identity also signifies its ultimate refusal to be pinned down. The multilayered internal rhyme scheme and juxtaposed antonyms ("loose" and "taut", "open & closed", "furled & unfurled") of the text's second stanza "climax" in its final image of a "swing[ing]" door through which we gain only fleeting glimpses of Henry's "mystery". The performance, the "unfurled" flag of affiliation is all, and past this is loss and wordlessness, the fragmenting and discontinuous self that "can't think of what to say". For Berryman, a "poet's poet"<sup>127</sup> who throughout his career reacted to the Confessional label

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<sup>124</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

<sup>125</sup> JBS, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>126</sup> David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1987) 402.

<sup>127</sup> Adrienne Rich, letter to John Berryman, 13 Oct. 1966, JBS, Correspondence, Box 22, Folder "10, 1966 – 11, 1966".



“[w]ith rage and contempt”,<sup>128</sup> placing this Protean corpse at the centre of The Dream Songs’ corpus represented a deliberate challenge to Confessionalism. Reserving “Berryman’s... identity”,<sup>129</sup> as Stephen Matterson has suggested, Henry is reserving simultaneously his own: the art of his dream lies not in mimesis but in the fictionalisation of the source material that life supplies.

If this is the case, one might ask, then what deterred Berryman from employing his original “PROEM” to preface The Dream Songs, and with its descriptions of a “ms... found in an abandoned keyhole” and a protagonist “undiscoverable by the social scientists”<sup>130</sup> acknowledging overtly the artifice of his art? One remark of the poet’s from 1967 offers partial elucidation:

Henry, for instance, refers to himself as “I”, “he” and “you”, so that the various parts of his identity are fluid. They slide, and the reader is made to guess who is talking to whom. Out of this ambiguity arises richness. The reader becomes more aware, is forced to enter into himself.<sup>131</sup>

The performance is rendered successful through the presence of a reading audience, those for whom Henry dreams. For if this piece-poem’s shifting metaliterary terrain is created from the dream-text’s fictions, it also functions to create what Anthony Caleshu describes as a “world of paradoxically naturalizing affect”: a world which sings not just epic tales but Henry’s mundane domestic encounters with his dog, family and house in order to fulfil its readers’ desires for “sincerity, credibility, and believability”.<sup>132</sup> Accordingly, “we are asked not only to recognize [the work’s vignettes], but to indulge in [their] theatre”.<sup>133</sup> Texts such as Song 184 certainly demand indulgence, requiring the reader to “enter into himself” to forge an imaginative correspondence with Henry (a figure like us, a fellow Everyman). In this excoriating litany of perceived failures, The Dream Songs’ protagonist, unsuccessful in his primary vocation as “makar”, (DS 184) finds little consolation in other areas of experience. Each internal rhyme in the Song’s opening lines drives his self-accusatory point home further: as a “scholar” he is “nailed” (at best pigeonholed, at worst screwed over, crucified); only in the baser art of the “lover” is he “hailed” (a term suggesting the “storms” that these activities might provoke). (DS 184)

Failed as a makar, nailed as a scholar, failed

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<sup>128</sup> John Berryman, “The Art of Poetry,” interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 21.

<sup>129</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>130</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 5A, Folder 11.

<sup>131</sup> Berryman, interview with Jane Howard 76.

<sup>132</sup> Caleshu 103, 101.

<sup>133</sup> Caleshu 103.

as a father & a man, hailed for a lover,  
Henry slumped down, pored it over.  
We c-can't win here, he stammered to himself.  
With his friend Phil and also his friend Ralph  
he mourned across or he wailed. (DS 184)

It is nevertheless clear that indulgence of Henry's woes comes at a price, necessitating "[our] assent despite [our] awareness of what [we] are assenting *to*".<sup>134</sup> The stanza's rapidly accruing perfect rhymes also work to raise the possibility of the alternative readings that lurk beneath the text's surface. The extent of Henry's mourning (does he protest just a little too much?) runs the risk of branding him a "faker". In Song 184, however, this subversive subtext is eclipsed by the insistence with which its speaker requests our sympathy; the vulnerable stammer and the end-rhymes of "[f]ailed" and "wailed" constitute the enduring impact of its lines.

Should we follow Caleshu, then, in asserting that The Dream Songs demonstrates "our shared liability for the staged life which [is] unraveling before us"?<sup>135</sup> Not quite, perhaps, for it is crucial to note that the work's enduring resistance to narrative and textual resolution also betrays a deep ambivalence towards its audience: the near-hysterical demand for sympathy cannot be equated with what should be freely given.<sup>136</sup> The "Note" that Berryman would eventually affix to 77 Dream Songs serves to clarify the issue of just where "liability" for Henry's "staged life" lies: "Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character... still less to the author, but to the title of the work."<sup>137</sup> The oneiric world of The Dream Songs requires not only poet and protagonist but reader to relinquish authority for the transgressions of its text, for "opinions and errors" have been defaulted "onto a piece of the text itself, 'the title of the work'".<sup>138</sup> Casting Henry as mediator of the American experience, translating its history of loss and politics of evasion into the art of the dream, these verses strive to invite our imaginative participation. We are promised the everyday journey of an Everyman "tasting all the secret bits of life" (DS 74) and exploring those mysteries "hidden in history & theology, hidden in rhyme". (DS 159) But, as Song 67 emphasises, Henry's revelations are manifested all too frequently as a further smoke screen:

I don't operate often. When I do,  
persons take note.  
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<sup>134</sup> Mendelson 40.

<sup>135</sup> Caleshu 102.

<sup>136</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 165.

<sup>137</sup> Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iv.

<sup>138</sup> Caleshu 104.

– Mr Bones, I sees that.  
They for these operations thanks you, what?  
not pays you. – Right.  
You have seldom been so understanding.  
Now there is further a difficulty with the light:

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness  
operations of great delicacy  
on my self. (DS 67)

Eagerly following Henry's much-feted "operations", offering implicit critical approval via our desire to view his performances of the American Dream, our presence "oblige[s]" each show on his literary stage. However, this self-reflexive textual terrain of fractures and ellipses that sings the loss of coherent "selving" (DS 66) must ultimately keep us "in complete darkness". Surgically precise, Song 67's separation of "my self" into two words highlights the self-estrangement that inheres within Henry's performative rhetoric.<sup>139</sup> Assuming the guise of the poet-surgeon who stands ready to dissect his troubled identity "for all the world to see", (DS 1) he can shed further "light" on neither the "I" nor the "not-I" he enacts. Berryman would expand upon this Song's central dilemma in the unpublished prose piece "Draft of an Aesthetic":

[W]hat the artist imitates is images, his own images of the common body of experience of which his audience also has images. In some sense the subject, by the time he has begun to imitate it, is already private.<sup>140</sup>

Like the process of absorption and inversion that characterises Henry's adoption of established literary guises, his broken promises of revelation in The Dream Songs function as a reminder that the landscape he inhabits is profoundly metapoetic in nature. Read in this light, David Haven Blake's statement that Song 67 "could serve as a head note to the entire [C]onfessional moment"<sup>141</sup> merely reinforces our need as readers to guard against the seductive force of Henry's "wail[s]": (DS 184) the confessional, acknowledged as such and performed on stage, has become just another text to be manipulated at will.

It is certain that Berryman's strategy of defaulting "opinions and errors" onto "the title of [The Dream Songs]"<sup>142</sup> facilitated his composition of a work far greater in scope than his initial plans to chronicle "national chagrin" would suggest.<sup>143</sup> As the product of a morally and politically compromised age in which "there are no idols", Henry instead

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<sup>139</sup> Gareth Reeves, "Songs of the Self: Berryman's Whitman," Romanticism 14 (2008): 47-56, at 51.

<sup>140</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Draft of an Aesthetic".

<sup>141</sup> David Haven Blake, "Public Dreams: Berryman, Celebrity and the Culture of Confession," American Literary History 13 (2001): 716-36, at 725.

<sup>142</sup> Berryman, 77 Dream Songs iv.

<sup>143</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 17.

stands as evidence for W. H. Auden's 1962 testimony that "Our real, because permanent, idolatry is an idolatry of possibility."<sup>144</sup> Absolved of responsibility for the transgressions of his text,<sup>145</sup> his performances are set free to span an infinite number of adopted subject positions, prompting him to enquire confusedly in Song 243, "Is it the hour to replace my face?" (DS 243) One draft manuscript of Berryman's from 1967 emphasises the transformative potential of the dream-work for this "white American in early middle age":<sup>146</sup>

In a concave dream Henry became a lady:  
 'Lady Henry' everyone agreed  
 'is the best of ladies all.'  
 Couvade & all that. Make-up's tracery.  
 If you cut us, do we not bleed?  
 I stand up or I fall,

uttered Henry, depending on how many  
 martinis I've enstomached, dry sherry martinis.  
 I can count up to ten.  
 I've no responsibilities, like money,  
 kids & a house. I let men pay for these.  
 I perform, I perform again,

admirers crowd my boxes, Kabuki-wise,  
 William's boy actors. In an ache of love  
 I practice black & gay  
 under my lover, so I know his size.  
 I bless his sweetest size, I smooth his rough,  
 after all, I may have a baby.<sup>147</sup>

Through the looking glass, the "concave dream" is the dream of femininity. Henry must effect his own birth as Other before a crowd of similarly-costumed "boy actors" in order to be judged "the best of ladies all". If his "[c]ouvade" show convinces his peers, then it appears to convince him too: by the third stanza, staged womanhood (the "make-up", the "bleeding" achieved via the actor's strategic "cuts")<sup>148</sup> has been supplanted by the confident declaration that "after all, I may have a baby". Yet, as Berryman's text insinuates, its protagonist's desire to "stand up" to his test is an essential facet of the performance. One cannot help but wonder: just who is performing whom here? In The

<sup>144</sup> Auden, The Dyer's Hand 118.

<sup>145</sup> Caleshu 104.

<sup>146</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>147</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 5. This Song, affixed with the handwritten note "April '67, Ballsbridge", was never published.

<sup>148</sup> Berryman is also alluding with the poem's fifth line to Shylock's speech in The Merchant of Venice 3.1.59: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" (William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, The Collins Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Susan Anthony, Robert Cummings et al. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994) 245-74, at 259). Read in this context, the reference to Shakespeare's own imaginary Jew might be construed as a gesture towards both Henry's desire to elicit the imaginative participation of his audience and the painful cost that adopting the female guise has exacted upon him.

Dream Songs’ “construction of a world”<sup>149</sup> in which both plot and personality depend from “the kind of events that happen there”,<sup>150</sup> identity-ascription is a process at once violently reactive and terrifyingly abject in nature.<sup>151</sup> It cannot be otherwise, for as he shuttles between a series of increasingly ambiguous manifestations of the female guise, the male lines of his face visible beneath its “tracery”,<sup>152</sup> Henry’s true role is that of servant to the demands of his text. Required to “smooth” his partners’ “rough[s]”, he is defined by the context of the dream, and must provide the appropriate counterpart to their desires if he is to survive to “perform again”. And the result is a “breaking up” (DS 85) of his identity that occurs between the very phrases of this Song. Henry, who is subject to the language of multiple lives<sup>153</sup> that has infected his piece-poem to word level, is permeable to every alternative reading, every potential interpretation of its lines. His theatrical “practice” may be a fiction, but it is a supreme fiction, for its whims are the only source of textual authority: he has no choice but to feign “so-called *black*” (DS 119) or a manner of “gay” acquiescence; even, as Berryman suggests slyly, to participate in the homosexual acts that underlie these “boy actors”’ staged romances.

It is not so surprising, then, that Henry seeks solace in alcohol throughout The Dream Songs. Having relinquished his own part in his text’s “errors”, he is nevertheless compelled to sing “a sense of total LOSS” (DS 101) from his self-estranged position, for his fragmented identity is “loose” to the text-as-world (DS 260) and performed without his consent. In Song 220, he cannot assuage his Friend’s concerns that “I’m / not altogether the same / pro-man I strutted out from the wings as”, for he himself is affected by the same instability. As such, the advice he proffers, framed simultaneously as drunkard’s slur and endman’s pun, represents at best a degree of resentful resignation: “– my friend, the clingdom has come”. (DS 220) At this time when Henry and his Friend ought to “cling” firmest to their assumed identities, arm-in-arm together on stage, the die has already been cast and the judgement “come”; all that remains is their desperate desire to maintain the charade of dramatic continuity. Perhaps, as Peter Maber observes, Berryman’s Songs function above all to demonstrate that there is “no unqualified investment in the freeing power of [language]”.<sup>154</sup> Early in the volume, Henry identifies the “art” of the dream as

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<sup>149</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 103.

<sup>150</sup> Mendelson 31.

<sup>151</sup> Michael 8.

<sup>152</sup> As the Oxford English Dictionary states, such “tracery” may mark a course or describe an origin, yet also indicates “a transparent drawing . . . over original lines” (“Tracery, n.,” OED Online, September 2012 (Oxford UP) 13 Sep. 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/204186?redirectedFrom=tracery>>).

<sup>153</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 203.

<sup>154</sup> Maber 134.

“the original crime” (DS 26) responsible for his status as a fallen man doomed to translate a fallen world:

- What happen then, Mr Bones?  
you seems excited-like.
- Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime

besides a sense of others, my God, my God,  
and a jealousy for the honour (alive) of his country,  
what can get more odd?  
and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.  
– What happen then, Mr Bones?  
– I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died. (DS 26)

Song 26 indicates the creative artifice of Henry’s literary landscape, and the infinite flexibility of his guises, to be the root cause of his ontological and social alienation. His “sense of others”, specifically his quest to “absorb... the[ir] secret griefs”,<sup>155</sup> has enabled him to challenge not only the supremacy of a Creator who permits injustice to exist, but the “honour” of his nation, a Promised Land so different (as the possessive pronoun of “his country” implies) from God’s own. Estranged as he is from both the phenomenal world in which select gangs “thrive” and from himself as its “discontent[ed]” product, it seems that death might offer a welcome respite for Henry. Yet, read within the context of The Dream Songs as whole volume, this Song’s final assertion raises more questions than it answers: is this really a “marvellous piece of luck” for the work’s protagonist? If we are to interpret Henry’s statement “I died” as the sacrifice of his subjectivity to the dream-world, a process in which his “I” is attributed repeatedly to surrounding objects in order to “register and represent the identities of others”, it is evident that such death is dubious fortune indeed. The lacuna contained within the text’s last line serves as a reminder that the attempt to “los[e]... the identity of one’s self”<sup>156</sup> has merely destabilised each “piece” of Henry’s fractured personality further. The act of representation alone cannot stave off disintegration, for it comes at the price of relinquishing control to The Dream Songs’ metapoetic textual terrain, itself a dream of “the turbulence of the modern world, and memory, and wants”.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, one 1963 essay of Berryman’s provides a useful gloss to Henry’s condition: “The [subject] can be made helpless by what is part of his strength: his strangeness, mental and emotional”.<sup>158</sup> Rendering him “strange” to both self and represented other through his basis in performance, and subjecting him to the dictates of a

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<sup>155</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>156</sup> Rawls 118. Cit. Michael 19.

<sup>157</sup> Berryman, “Changes” 102.

<sup>158</sup> John Berryman, “The Poet and His Critics III: A Symposium on Robert Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’” (symposium), New World Writing 21, ed. Stewart Richardson and Corlies M. Smith (New York: Lippincott, 1963) 148-55. Rpt. as “Despondency and Madness: On Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’” in TFOTP 316-22, at 316.

text characterised by ellipses, losses and palimpsestic overwriting, Henry's dream of death plunges him into a living nightmare.

However, the very narrative "turbulence" of The Dream Songs, gesturing towards the loss of a coherent national and personal history, also invites an alternative reading of the death Song 26 recalls so fondly. Might this line in fact anticipate the "Opus posthumous" Songs collected in Book IV of the volume, which describe what one interviewer has termed Henry's "descent into the underworld"?<sup>159</sup> The collocation is strengthened by Song 26's allusion to Whitman's "Song of Myself" ("And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier"),<sup>160</sup> an allusion that recurs in the first poem of the "Op. posth." sequence. Henry's death is certainly "different", for in Song 78 he must witness the "shear[ing] / off" of his "subject body" before a formidable group of deceased intellectual and literary "ancestors":

Walt's 'orbic flex,' triads of Hegel would  
incorporate, if you please,

into the know-how of the American bard  
embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being,  
and the younger Stephen Crane  
of a powerful memory, of pain,  
these stood the ancestors, relaxed & hard,  
whilst Henry's parts were fleeing. (DS 78)

Death, as manifested through the "know-how" of the post-war "American bard", may conceivably prove "luck[y]" for Henry and his author. The Song announces overtly its intention to carve out a canonical place for the "fleeing" pieces of its protagonist's identity. Despite his "[d]arkened... eye" (or "I") and "inapprehensible" nature, (DS 78) Henry must be considered alongside the works of the "ancestors" who stand "relaxed" in their unimpeachable status yet forbidding in their gaze; his Protean verse-voyage demands to be counted among those literary endeavours judged to be "best" by the Western world's critics. Furthermore, the ambitious poetics of the fourteen "Op. posth." Dream Songs, aiming to "incorporate" both the "orbic flex"<sup>161</sup> of Whitman's open-form verse and Hegel's dialectic of internal contradictions into Henry's corporeal disintegration, provides their beleaguered subject with a potential source of refuge. As the ultimate contradiction – a man surviving his own death – Henry believes himself to have entered an off-stage realm where "one would be free from orders". (DS 88) "[F]lared out of history // & the obituary

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<sup>159</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 6.

<sup>160</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 1881, Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems, ed. Francis Murphy, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1986) 63-124, at 69.

<sup>161</sup> The reference is to Whitman, "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems 91: "A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, / The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full."

in *The New York Times*”, (DS 79) his performances, he tells us, must “come to a full stop”, (DS 85) because they are no longer permeable to the flux of external experience.<sup>162</sup> A retreat from the world, then – but, crucially, not from the words themselves, the verbal events of the dream. For if, as Morse Peckham has suggested, death is “the desire for the most perfect [state] we can imagine, for total insulation from all perceptual disparities”,<sup>163</sup> it is clear that this cannot be Henry’s fate. Song 80’s paired antonyms highlight the “perceptual disparities” composed of and composing Henry’s existence even as he muses upon his vacated corpse: “I hate the love of leaving it behind, / deteriorating & hopeless that.” (DS 80) The body is “hopeless”, but as Berryman’s ambiguous syntax implies, it is perhaps more hopeless still to “leave... it behind”. Indeed, in doing so, how does one maintain an audience? The dilemma is encapsulated in Song 83, where Henry considers the consequences of spending eternity “on one’s back flat”: (DS 83)

coming no deadline – is all ancient nonsense –  
 no typewriters – ha! ha! – no typewriters –  
 alas!  
 For I have much to open, I know immense  
 troubles & wonders to their secret curse.  
 Yet when erect on my ass,

pissed off, I sat two-square, I kept shut his mouth  
 and stilled my nimble fingers across keys.  
 That is I stood up.  
 Now since down I lay, void of love & ruth,  
 I’d howl my knowings, only there’s the earth  
 overhead. Plop! (DS 83)

As readers, we cannot help but register the Song’s irony. “Huffy Henry” who “hid the day” so determinedly (DS 1) now has “much to open”, in the one place where “no typewriters” are available. When alive, “erect” and “pissed off”, his emotional lability and physical urges hindered his professional and social “st[anding]”. However, in this text’s complex conceit, the “deadline[s]” that Henry has escaped through his demise figure simultaneously as the dream-world’s ultimate dead line. The “I” “lay” horizontally, the cardiologist’s flatline, emerges as less of a respite from *The Dream Songs*’ “orders” (DS 88) than the loss of the final vestiges of his agency. Lacking a bodily vehicle with which to “howl [his] knowings”, he is unable from his subterranean position to solicit his readers’ “ruth”, and condemned to bear his hell of fractures and griefs alone.

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<sup>162</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>163</sup> Morse Peckham, *Man’s Rage to Chaos* (New York: Schocken, 1965) 34.



In an October 1966 letter, Adrienne Rich exclaimed to Berryman that the “Opus posthumous” manuscripts he had sent her “give... me hope for a resurrection”.<sup>164</sup> One might go further still and state that these Songs do not just raise the possibility of resurrection, but demand it as a necessity. As Berryman would remark in one late interview, “[Henry] doesn’t enjoy my advantages... He’s also simple-minded. He thinks that if something happens to him, it’s forever; but I know better.”<sup>165</sup> The body may be corrupt and “hopeless”, but Henry, product of the art of the dream which translates the external world, is not permitted to “leav[e] it behind” for long: (DS 80) it is insistently given substance, forcibly embodied, by its text. The poet drove his point home further by appending one final Song to the original “Op. posth.” sequence as the publication of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest approached.<sup>166</sup> The words of Song 91 function to highlight their own dependence from The Dream Songs’ metaliterary stage, where every tale requires a performer to do the telling. In order for Henry to truly survive his death and continue his verse-voyage, Book IV’s sub-textual allusions to St. Lazarus must culminate in his performance of the Lazarene experience.<sup>167</sup> Emerging from his grave as a miraculous “sight”, he is once again confronted by an audience that expects the impossible, the authentic revelation behind the guise:

Noises from underground made gibber some,  
 others collected & dug Henry up  
 saying ‘You *are* a sight.’  
 Chilly, he muttered for a double rum  
 waving the mikes away, putting a stop  
 to rumours...

.....

A fortnight later, sense a single man  
 upon the trampled scene at 2 a.m.  
 insomnia-plagued, with a shovel  
 digging like mad, Lazarus with a plan  
 to get his own back, a plan, a stratagem

<sup>164</sup> Adrienne Rich, letter to John Berryman, 13 Oct. 1966, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 10, Folder “10, 1966 – 11, 1966”.

<sup>165</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 340.

<sup>166</sup> John Haffenden observes that the majority of Berryman’s “Opus posthumous” Songs were composed between 1964 and 1966 (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 159-64), with the first thirteen poems of the sequence appearing in the Times Literary Supplement and the New York Review of Books from December 1-15, 1966. Song 91, however, was not included in this group and never published separately. Given that a November 1966 letter from Robert Lowell to the poet indicates “the Randall” (later Song 90) to close the sequence, it seems reasonable to infer that Song 91 was appended at a later date (Robert Lowell, letter to John Berryman, 5 Nov. 1966, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 10, Folder “10, 1966 – 11, 1966”).

<sup>167</sup> Jesus’ restoring of Lazarus of Bethany to life four days after his death is described in the Gospel of John. See KJB, John 11.41-44: “Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me... And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes”.

no newsman will unravel. (DS 91)<sup>168</sup>

The die is cast, the “scene” set. For Berryman’s protagonist, the inward expatriate never at home whether in or out of the world, “the thinky death” (DS 10) – of thought, of language itself – is impossible. The suffering born of self-estrangement persists, despite his desperate struggles to retreat from the demands of both text and external events. Henry, it seems, will never “get his own back” upon the eager crowds that surround him, for their presence continues to elicit the performances that compromise his identity: within The Dream Songs’ textual terrain, nothing is or can be his “own”.

Nevertheless, if The Dream Songs condemns its speaker to the compulsive performance of both the facts and the fictions that comprise contemporary human existence, it is evident that the work’s trials are not Henry’s alone. “[U]sing dream as a trope for both text and life”,<sup>169</sup> translating the American ideal of progressive prosperity into a nightmare of insignificance in which “the attention paid to poetry is so very slight”,<sup>170</sup> this piece-poem is also the dream of John Berryman, poet. One letter to his editor Robert Giroux, written during a 1964 hospital stay, betrays his sense of personal investment in the accumulating Songs: “Somebody observed recently that [my] book is not at all like just a book of poems or a poem, much less part of a poem, but is like the lifework of a poet. Something in this.”<sup>171</sup> “[T]he lifework of a poet”, or a lifetime’s work. Of the thirteen years that Berryman would dedicate to composing The Dream Songs, those preceding His Toy, His Dream, His Rest’s completion in March 1968 were to prove by far the most taxing. Buoyed by receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and a Guggenheim Fellowship for the 1966-67 academic year,<sup>172</sup> the poet resolved to relocate to Dublin. Here, among “the haunts of Yeats”, (DS 281) Joyce, Wilde and others, he would hew the work’s second instalment from “no less than 259 Songs... besides 35 unfinished & scores of fragments”.<sup>173</sup> This, in fact, was a conservative estimate of the task ahead, for by November 1966 Berryman had written more than seventy additional “travel & Irish”

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<sup>168</sup> The parallels with Sylvia Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus” from her posthumously published collection Ariel are striking here; compare especially Plath’s lines, “The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot – / The big strip tease” (Sylvia Plath, Ariel, 1965 (London: Faber, 2001) 9). Berryman, who dedicated Song 172 to Plath’s suicide, would certainly have been aware of the correlation, plus the veiled threat of authorial disintegration it implies.

<sup>169</sup> Martin 191.

<sup>170</sup> John Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” The American Scholar 28 (1959): 384-90. Rpt. in TFOTP 310-15, at 311.

<sup>171</sup> John Berryman, letter to Robert Giroux, undat., JBPs, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder “77 Dream Songs”.

<sup>172</sup> 77 Dream Songs was awarded the 1965 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry by a panel of judges that included Howard Moss, May Swenson and Allen Tate; Tate would later declare that he felt the prize to be “long overdue and richly deserved” (Tate, cit. Haffenden, Life 337).

<sup>173</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 337.

Songs,<sup>174</sup> with Book VI alone comprising a colossal 132 texts, it was clear that His Toy, His Dream, His Rest was to far eclipse his original plans for a book of ninety-one further Songs.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, the sheer number and variety of Berryman's extant attempts to design a framework for the volume indicates the difficulty that its organisation presented. Whilst Book V was to represent Henry's "resurrection" in the wake of the "Opus posthumous" sequence, the poet considered arranging Books VI and VII according to "colours", "genre, as films" or even "the senses"; would the work conclude with the "assumption [of Henry's] future", or merely his abrupt departure "OFF" stage?<sup>176</sup> Given that in 77 Dream Songs, as John Haffenden states, "Berryman's failure to impose a narrative structure gave him a deductive sense of the form proper to... his hero",<sup>177</sup> it is not, though, surprising that he would eventually reject these potential models in favour of Song 293's conclusion:

What gall had he in him, so to begin Book VII  
 or to design, out of its hotspur materials,  
 its ultimate structure  
 whereon will critics browse at large, at Heaven Eleven  
 finding it was not cliffhangers or old serials  
 but according to his nature (DS 293)

Once again, the revelation is proffered as it is denied; the "ultimate structure" of these late Songs "accord[s] to [Henry's] nature". The uneasy half-rhyme, the correlation sought between the concrete and the abstract, foregrounds the epistemological cop-out: Henry's "nature", as we well know, is contingent and fractured, subject to the flux both of text and of external phenomena. However, the stanza remains a striking one, for Henry's bitter "gall" at his marginalisation has here been replaced by a bold confidence in the "hotspur materials" that comprise his voice. In Song 293's rhetoric of self-aggrandisement, only those select critics (or apostles?) who have kept the faith will be rewarded for their efforts at the eleventh hour: the post-war world's "Heaven Eleven" figures simultaneously as a "7-Eleven", a one-stop shop of interpretative riches.

Perhaps, we may hazard, such Songs are the natural consequence of The Dream Songs' ambitious metapoetics, which grants the publically lauded text license to perform its own success. In the wake of 77 Dream Songs' reception, Henry in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest continues to drink heavily and renews his pursuit of "girls & pupils", (DS 285) but

<sup>174</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 342.

<sup>175</sup> Berryman's original intention to compose a total of 168 Dream Songs suggests his conception of the "Opus posthumous" sequence's centrality to the work. This prototype framework (77 + "Op. posth." (7 + 7 = 14) + 77) may also represent an oblique gesture towards Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man, or the Seven Deadly Sins.

<sup>176</sup> See JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>177</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 37.

also receives “[f]an-mail from foreign countries”, (DS 342) gives “interview[s]... in London” (DS 371) and congratulates himself upon “the prizes mostly won”. (DS 280) Yet this reading is problematised by a consideration of Henry’s activities in detail, for these are not Everyman’s dilemmas, and not even dilemmas at all: are they not, in fact, experiences unique to John Berryman, “white American in early middle age”?<sup>178</sup> The issue is compounded by one 1970 interview in which Berryman, who had insisted so fervently that “the poet does not enter the poem at all”,<sup>179</sup> appeared to concede a “personal” influence upon The Dream Songs: “Finally, I left the poem open to the circumstances of my personal life. For example, obviously if I hadn’t got a Guggenheim and decided to spend it in Dublin, most of [B]ook VII wouldn’t exist.”<sup>180</sup> Reading Song 342, with its historical correspondences to the Berrymans’ docking in Ireland, one might easily reach Denis Donoghue’s conclusion that the performance has been found out, “the game is up”.<sup>181</sup> In its acute self-consciousness, Berryman’s piece-poem must continue to fulfil its readers’ desires for “sincerity, credibility, and believability”<sup>182</sup> if it is again to solicit their imaginative participation and public praise. And the result, it seems, is a protagonist who has shed his exuberant polyglotism and shifting guises, and “beg[un] to collapse into his poet”:<sup>183</sup>

Fan-mail from foreign countries, is that fame?  
 Imitations & parodies in your own,  
 translations?  
 Most of the relevant prizes, your private name  
 splashed on page one, with a photograph alone  
 or you with your lovely wife?

Interviews on television & radio  
 on various continents, can that be fame?  
 Henry could not find out.  
 Before he left the ship at Cobh he was photographed,  
 I don’t know how they knew he was coming  
 He said as little as possible. (DS 342)

However, the text’s second stanza, which also evokes distinct semantic and syntactical correspondences with Song 1 (“It was the thought that they thought / they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away. / But he should have come out and talked” (DS 1)) raises the possibility of these late Songs’ manifesting a very different arrival. Self-referential,

<sup>178</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>179</sup> JBPs, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 3. The sentiment was echoed in the published “Note” to the volume, which describes Henry as “an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)” (Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix).

<sup>180</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 29-30.

<sup>181</sup> Donoghue 157.

<sup>182</sup> Caleshu 101.

<sup>183</sup> Donoghue 153.

recalcitrantly intratextual, the life that they portray is achieved through the “re-organization of experience, structured metaphorically... the result of successive imaginative acts”:<sup>184</sup> not, as John Haffenden has proposed, a life “arrogate[d] to art”,<sup>185</sup> but an art arrogated to life. In this revised reading, the poet, fuelled in his writing by the desire for public currency, has relinquished not just authority for the transgressions of his text,<sup>186</sup> but control of its performances. The achievement of literary renown, as another external phenomenon translated by the art of the dream, can only be represented as re-presentation, acknowledged as fictive: in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Henry, as the vehicle for his text’s performances of national turmoil, has also become the vehicle for the compulsive performance of Berryman-as-celebrity-poet.

Berryman’s final Dream Song compositions, then, relentless in their accumulation, invite a radical inversion of the poet’s assertion to Peter Stitt, “[Henry] only does what I make him do.”<sup>187</sup> In Song 143, a text written in 1967, Henry revisits the suicide of the poet’s father, first addressed by Berryman two decades earlier in the poems “A Point of Age” and “Fare Well”:<sup>188</sup>

- That’s enough of that, Mr Bones....  
 Honour the burnt cork, be a vaudeville man,  
 I’ll sing you now a song  
 the like of which may bring your heart to break:  
 he’s gone! and we don’t know where. When he began  
 taking the pistol out & along,

you was just a little; but gross fears  
 accompanied us along the beaches, pal.  
 My mother was scared almost to death.  
 He was going to swim out, with me, forever,  
 and a swimmer strong he was in the phosphorescent Gulf,  
 but he decided on lead.

That mad drive wiped out my childhood. I put him down  
 while all the same on forty years I love him  
 stashed in Oklahoma  
 besides his brother Will. Bite the nerve of the town  
 for anyone so desperate. I repeat: I love him  
 until I fall into coma. (DS 143)

<sup>184</sup> Hayden Carruth, “A Meaning of Robert Lowell,” Hudson Review 20 (1967): 429-47, at 443.

<sup>185</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 3.

<sup>186</sup> Caleshu 104.

<sup>187</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 31.

<sup>188</sup> “A Point of Age” was originally published as part of Berryman’s selection of “Twenty Poems” in the 1940 New Directions volume Five Young American Poets, whilst “Fare Well” first appeared in an April 1948 issue of Poetry. Both poems were subsequently reprinted in Berryman’s first full-length collection, 1948’s The Dispossessed; Chapter 1 provides discussion of their content.

The traumatic memory is placed on stage, “framed... with vaudevillean trappings”,<sup>189</sup> there to demand our sympathy as readers. This is a show designed to bring our “heart[s] to break”, and the ambiguity of the text’s personal pronouns “I” and “you”, combined with its lack of “other voices... signaled by initial dashes”,<sup>190</sup> work to sustain the fiction of authenticity-within-the-fiction: should we read its lines as an address from the Friend to Henry, from Henry to himself or from Berryman to his protagonist? However, the second stanza’s description of the “phosphorescent Gulf” in which John Senior swam also recalls one telling remark of the poet’s from a 1963 essay:

The necessity for the artist of selection opens inevitably an abyss between his person and his persona... The persona looks across at the person and then sets about its own work.<sup>191</sup>

Amid Song 143’s oneiric terrain, not just Henry but the text to which he is subject “looks across at the person and then sets about its own work”. “[P]ut[ting]... down” and denigrating the “mad drive” of the father, Henry is also required to “put on” Berryman’s tragic tale. The Song’s consciously literary style – the metonyms (“lead” for bullet), the convoluted syntax, the showman’s cry “he’s gone!” – functions in this context as a reminder that “[i]f Henry’s identity is a matter of artifice, then so is Berryman’s own”.<sup>192</sup> The childhood trauma that the famous poet would allude to frequently in interviews<sup>193</sup> has been absorbed by the art of the dream, and is staged there as an artificial construction. As such, Henry’s adoption of Berryman’s identity renders the creator the product of his creation, and ensures that the personal confession remains inaccessible behind the guise. Declaring hysterically, “I repeat: I love him”, Henry in Song 143 achieves not, as Peter Maber has suggested, self-definition through “direct engagement and reconciliation” with a lost past,<sup>194</sup> but the opposite effect. Estranged from both self and represented other through his basis in performance, the “I” he enacts (not-Henry, not-Berryman) is catastrophically vulnerable, threatening to lapse entirely from the text.

The complex metapoetics that inheres within the late Songs of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest must call into question any reading of this piece-poem “as a head note to the

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<sup>189</sup> Gubar 165.

<sup>190</sup> JBPs, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder “77 Dream Songs”.

<sup>191</sup> Berryman, “Despondency and Madness: On Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour,’” TFOTP 321.

<sup>192</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>193</sup> See for example Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 3: “I was born in Oklahoma; my father was a banker and my mother was a schoolteacher; they were the only people who could read and write for hundreds of miles around... so they got married; so I arrived. Son number one. Then we moved to Florida, and my father killed himself.”

<sup>194</sup> Maber 138.

entire [C]onfessional moment”,<sup>195</sup> as an accurate autobiographical delineation of Berryman’s personal terrors and triumphs. Its works gesture instead towards a process in which the flux of post-war experience is absorbed by the art of the dream, and performed as verbal analogue regardless of its incompleteness. The Dream Songs’ model has become synonymous with the method of its “pieces” that “did not heed / their piecedom but kept very quietly on / among the chaos”. (DS 311) The revelation imputes a distinct irony to Songs such as 281, in which Henry-as-Berryman considers the magnitude of his labours:

After thirty Falls I rush back to the haunts of Yeats  
& others, with a new book in my briefcase  
four times too large:  
all year I must in terminal debates  
with me say who is to lives and who to dies  
before my blessed discharge. (DS 281)

The “terminal debate” is here implied to be interminable, incurable: it cannot be otherwise, for the killing of Songs, providing a single solution to the volume’s organisation, would deny the existential inclusiveness and the multiple “lives” of the dream. Accordingly, the stanza’s penultimate line takes on the aspect of a plea (“with me *say*”) for the textual authority that the poet lacks. However, the delight with which Henry anticipates his “blessed discharge”<sup>196</sup> from The Dream Songs prompts a re-evaluation of this “new book”’s poetic strategy. Might His Toy, His Dream, His Rest evidence only what Luke Spencer has termed “a mutually impoverishing art-life relationship”,<sup>197</sup> trapping poet and protagonist alike within increasingly restrictive masks? It remains crucial to note, though, that if Henry’s performances are violently reactive, depending both from the external events that permeate the text and from the context of the dream-world, they also require a reaction to the demands of those others who occupy his literary landscape.<sup>198</sup> Performing the literary fame of John Berryman, poet, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest is responding to its critics, perpetuating “a never-ending loop of narrative possibilities” in which the text, first telling the tale and then “positioning [it]self as [its] own reader”, “return[s] to become the interpretive critic of [it]self”.<sup>199</sup> In these late Songs, Henry in “his cage” continues to

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<sup>195</sup> Blake 725.

<sup>196</sup> The word “discharge”, employed in this context, implies the release from liability and the payment of a debt, but also, as the Oxford English Dictionary states, “the flowing out from confines” (“Discharge, n.,” OED Online, September 2012 (Oxford UP) 13 Sep. 2012

<<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/53707?rskey=HvcIyK&result=1&isAdvanced=false>).

<sup>197</sup> Luke Spencer, “‘The pieces sat up & wrote’: art and life in John Berryman’s Dream Songs,” Critical Quarterly 29 (1987): 71-80, at 76.

<sup>198</sup> As Amin Maalouf explains, a major determinant of “a person’s affiliation to a given group” is “the influence of others: the influence of those about him... who try to make him one of them; together with the influence of those on the other side, who do their best to exclude him” (Amin Maalouf, cit. Michael 31).

<sup>199</sup> Caleshu 106.

“dance” on stage (DS 351) and to shift guise and locale. Praise is the catalyst for change, sustaining his verse-voyage by providing infinite potential for imaginative response:

A best word across a void makes a hard blaze.  
Henry reacted like a snake to praise,  
he shed his skin  
appearing thenceforward in a new guise  
so the praise was for his past, he not therein,  
saving him from vanity, the mirror’s eyes... (DS 287)

Praise, then, is a kindled fire, but it also represents “a void”, even “a cross” to bear. For the fame that Song 287 performs is emphasised as transitory in its nature, subject to continual re-interpretation. Each commendation is absorbed by the dream and requires Henry to adopt “a new guise” in answer; the effect is to open a lacuna of self-estrangement in which the persona looks across at the celebrated, lost past and finds “he not therein”. Cast in this light, the “mirror’s eyes” with which the stanza concludes figure simultaneously as the multiple “I”s that prevent this piece-poem from resting upon its laurels. Henry’s shifting stances, it seems, must constantly begin anew, because they are fuelled by the desire to match those achievements that are “past” and therefore no longer accessible or relevant.

Nevertheless, The Dream Songs’ textual terrain – a dream of a dream of fame at any price – serves to warn us against taking Song 287’s assertions at face value. Can the acute consciousness of an audience that prompts the work to act out its own notices in order to perpetuate its public renown really be read as a means of salvation from “vanity”? (DS 287) In her 1969 article “Living with Henry”, Adrienne Rich was not the first critic to observe, “through the second volume [of The Dream Songs], there are fewer poems which seem terrific in their singleness”.<sup>200</sup> 77 Dream Songs’ convoluted syntax, its fractured argot singing the experiences and voices that refuse poetic unification, are replaced frequently in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest with lines that border upon the flatly prosaic. Henry tells us that he “sat reading the *Times Literary Supplement* / with a large Jameson & a worse hangover”; (DS 351) elsewhere “he seems to be out of everything... / save whiskey & cigarettes, both bad for him”. (DS 356) Whilst Rich, in deference to her “cher maître”,<sup>201</sup> attributes such Songs to “the sense of the Long Poem... accumul[at]ing to fulfillment”,<sup>202</sup> a more profitable explanation of their stylistic lapse might be obtained through a

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<sup>200</sup> Rich, “Living with Henry” 128. See also Denis Donoghue’s assertion that “in the later [S]ongs... discipline is intermittent and haphazard” (Donoghue 162).

<sup>201</sup> Adrienne Rich, letter to John Berryman, 13 Oct. 1966, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 10, Folder “10, 1966 – 11, 1966”. The reverence was to a great extent mutual, for Berryman would dedicate Songs 294, 307 and 362 to Rich, whilst Song 351 alludes explicitly to her 1966 poem “The Demon Lover”.

<sup>202</sup> Rich, “Living with Henry” 128.



consideration of not just the praise but the criticism that had been heaped upon 77 Dream Songs. For if the poet was disappointed by Frederick Seidel's 1965 declaration that "when the happening doesn't work, lines seem... irrelevant and odd",<sup>203</sup> his friend Robert Lowell's review of the volume the previous year had delivered a far more crushing blow:

One would need to see the unpublished parts to decide how well it fills out as a whole... As it stands, the main faults of this selection are the threat of mannerism and, worse, disintegration. How often one chafes at the relentless indulgence, and cannot tell the what or why of a passage.<sup>204</sup>

The "mannerism[s]", the "rhetoric[al]... thrashes and grinds and gasps".<sup>205</sup> might it not be in the fame-hungry poet's best interests to replace some of them with lines translucent to the critics, rewarding their efforts with explication? Distributing over several texts the "hotspur materials" (DS 293) that had been condensed within just 18 lines in 77 Dream Songs, it is evident that His Toy, His Dream, His Rest's Songs of literary fame are equally permeable to critical denunciation. Placed on stage, the work's anxiety of influence, its desire both to stand beside and to eclipse the achievements of its canonical "ancestors", (DS 78) has given way to an anxiety of reception in which the text, responding to its critics, also seeks to court and to shape our future response as readers.

Perhaps the "vanity" (DS 287) of The Dream Songs' self-promotional efforts, couched as they are "in the language of self-scrutiny",<sup>206</sup> could thus be more accurately described as symptomatic of a profound textual neurosis. Despite the work's late concessions to its critics, Henry's basis in performance continues to facilitate his Protean shifts in guise, and to refuse easy narrative resolution. Working to sustain their fiction of "sincerity, credibility, and believability",<sup>207</sup> the Songs of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest solicit our praise in order to ensure our complicity in their resistance to interpretation: Berryman's piece-poem – "not meant to be understood, you understand" (DS 366) – which puts "our common human life"<sup>208</sup> on stage also aims to put one over on us. Yet it remains notable that, as befits this work of contradictions, multiplicity and perceptual disparities, its protagonist's strength figures simultaneously as his ultimate weakness. Recognising Henry's subjection to the art of the dream, we as readers are granted the power to translate its translations of external events, and to modify what we are told. Henry in Song 333

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<sup>203</sup> Frederick Seidel, "Berryman's Dream Songs," rev. of 77 Dream Songs, by John Berryman, Poetry 105 (1965): 257-59, at 258.

<sup>204</sup> Robert Lowell, "The Poetry of John Berryman," rev. of 77 Dream Songs, by John Berryman, New York Review of Books 28 May 1964: 3-4, at 4.

<sup>205</sup> Seidel 258.

<sup>206</sup> Blake 723.

<sup>207</sup> Caleshu 103, 101.

<sup>208</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345.

seeks to establish the loyalty of his audience once and for all, and to distinguish the faithful from those “rest” who denigrate his status:

As for the rest, Henry sounds like eighty Viet Congs  
in their little sweet ears: no stratagem  
with which he has been tasked

will ever bring those babies into camp,  
hurrah: will never bring. Henry’s listeners  
make up a gallant few,  
as I have said before: bring nearer the lamp,  
we’ll find them out, with lightning, in the torrents  
that are merely Henry’s due (DS 333)

The interrogation under “the lamp” is military in its determination to capture a hearing. Song 333 proclaims itself to be daring and difficult, a trial by “lightning”’s fire: only the most committed readers will emerge as “gallant” soldiers, supporting and sustaining the text’s fictive ranks. However, this Song’s employment of the compound verb “make up” and the relentless insistence with which it hunts its “few” celebrants work at the same time to shed far brighter light upon the mutually sustaining nature of the relationship. If Henry’s dream is the dream of renown, it is the reality of our presence beyond The Dream Songs’ parameters that permits his ongoing survival. Not just celebrating but identifying the artifice with which he sings the post-war American Dream enables us to give Henry his “due”.

#### 4.3 “You Go by the Rules but There the Rules Don’t Matter”: Conclusions

Reading The Dream Songs, it is tempting to conclude that Henry, as “a shell, through which the [nation] speaks”,<sup>209</sup> is less a translator of the post-war American Dream than a victim of its nightmare. However, it is more evident still that the trials he undergoes gesture towards “a totally new kind of narrative poetry”, a verse that Conrad Aiken would describe as “the answer to our poetic predicament, as of now”.<sup>210</sup> As Berryman’s protagonist traverses mid-century America’s “paradoxical and fractured ground”<sup>211</sup> and

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<sup>209</sup> Donoghue 155.

<sup>210</sup> Conrad Aiken, letter to John Berryman, 22 Oct. 1968, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 23, Folder “8, 1968 – 12, 1968”.

<sup>211</sup> Michael 25.

performs the events that occur within and beyond the bounds of his text, the strength of these Songs' appeal lies in their infinite capacity for imaginative response to the literary landscape constructed. Absorbing the "griefs" of its nation's social outlaw figures<sup>212</sup> has enabled this self-consciously oneiric work to control and shape its source materials, and to subject life to its art. The result is a radical interrogation of the agency and function of the poetic act, which must take its authority from fantasy to sing what is contingent and disunified. Within The Dream Songs, the "happy map" is always "a folding map": (DS 214) the "areas of hope and fear that Henry is going through at a given time"<sup>213</sup> work simultaneously to raise the co-existent interpretative possibilities that lurk beneath the text's surface. Indeed, the Protean nature of Henry's identity and lexicon both comprises and fuels Song 327's challenge to Freudian readings of his dream:

Freud was some wrong about dreams, or almost all;  
besides his insights grand, he thought that dreams were a transcript  
of childhood & the day before,  
censored of course: *a* transcript:  
.....

I tell you, Sir, you have enlightened but  
you have misled us: a dream is a panorama  
of the whole mental life,  
I took one once to forty-three structures, that  
accounted in each for each word... (DS 327)

No single "transcript" of childhood, Henry's Songs are here implied to represent the un-"censored" palimpsest of post-war existence, each unstable "structure" revealing further structures. As such, this "panorama" of his "whole mental life" is also the play of fractured images that constitutes the contemporary American experience of "national chagrin & splendor".<sup>214</sup> For if Henry's dream is fictive, reliant upon the performances of the Other that confuse analogies (my situation is like that of the Negro) with identities (I am him),<sup>215</sup> it demands a hearing nevertheless. These texts can render with accuracy neither the identities that their protagonist adopts nor "the felt moment[s] of perception"<sup>216</sup> that he enacts on stage. However, the performer's mask that both betrays and conceals his fractured "selving" (DS 66) contains its own message, born of the dream-world's supra-reality. Perhaps, The Dream Songs suggests, the self-estrangement that results from

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<sup>212</sup> Matterson 87.

<sup>213</sup> Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al. 6.

<sup>214</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>215</sup> Discussing Don Quixote in the 1962 essay "Balaam and His Ass", W. H. Auden would attribute this "confus[ion]" to "madness": "Madness confuses analogies with identities... [it] can[not] say, "Windmills are like giants" (Auden, The Dyer's Hand 137).

<sup>216</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 4.

affiliation to dream is all that those negotiating mid-century America's ideologically compromised terrain can expect: perhaps this is what it is like to be an American citizen.

Cast in this light, William J. Martz's 1969 declaration, "Henry... is a brilliant but insufficient unifying device [for The Dream Songs]"<sup>217</sup> must raise, at best, a wry smile from the reader. One might respond that the contradictions, lacunae and perceptual disparities that characterise this dubious hero are, in fact, the point of Berryman's piece-poem. Versifying the experience of not coping, Henry's fractured performances provide a means of "administering & making acceptable" what is "volcanic & ruining" in the lives of poet and nation.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, despite Berryman's numerous attempts to address "the fundamental *interdependence* and sequence" of his Songs,<sup>219</sup> it is clear that "[w]hen all other schemes are exhausted"<sup>220</sup> his Protean protagonist remains their constant factor. Such a "model of [a] method",<sup>221</sup> depending simultaneously from the flux of external events and from these events' translation within the text as verbal analogue, can offer no easy interpretative solution to The Dream Songs. It instead serves to foreground the work as an ongoing process in which the art of the dream claims and re-shapes the life it receives. Putting the show on the road, the allusions and stylistic shifts of Henry's "folk-talk" also "put the road on the show": (DS 250)

I cough my proper blood. A time advances, black  
& full? when I won't hafta. Seconal: ...  
no. Let's put the road on the show.

As folk-talk (what we have for proverbs) swirl  
the valid & a mad; yeah, mad, and so  
the valid, man. (DS 250)<sup>222</sup>

It is no use searching for narrative unity, "go[ing] by the rules", for as Henry tells us, here "the rules don't matter". (DS 204) In Song 250, the Biblical "proverbs" that once guided human action have been relegated to parentheses.<sup>223</sup> Henry's waking dream has denied him rest, and ensured that, as he states, "the ability of sleep [has] le[ft]... for ever": (DS 250) its contradictions render him unable to distinguish the "valid" from the "mad", much less to privilege one state above the other.

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<sup>217</sup> Martz 40.

<sup>218</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1B.

<sup>219</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 46.

<sup>220</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 1.

<sup>221</sup> Mendelson 31.

<sup>222</sup> "Seconal", as John Haffenden observes, is "[t]he trade name of seco-barbital", a drug prescribed in cases of nervous insomnia due to its anticonvulsant and sedative properties (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 115).

<sup>223</sup> Like the name "achilles" in Song 14, one can assume that this Biblical book's title has been deliberately "spelt with rage with a small letter at the beginning" (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 56).

Discussing The Dream Songs with Peter Stitt in 1970, Berryman would relate the work's lack of an objective moral framework to its failure to engage with nature: "[O]bservation of nature, of which I have absolutely none... makes possible a world of moral observation".<sup>224</sup> A surprising remark, because it is not in the least surprising that Henry cannot tell "one damned butterfly from another" and is entirely "ignorant of the stars". (DS 265) In 1958, the New Critic John Crowe Ransom had published the essay "New Poets and Old Muses", which suggested poetic representations of nature to function as a potential objective correlative for morality:

Suppose the purpose of the poem is to heal the appalling loneliness than (sic) human creatures suffer... The action of the[se] human agents is in intimate association with the stage properties, so to speak; such as a view, or birds and beasts, or inanimate objects like winds, waters, stones, trees, lights and shadows. And what happens is, simply, that the stage properties soon begin to figure in the poem as if they were moral agents... they seem wonderfully understanding; they seem "expressive," and what they express seems to be their sympathy with the moral actions and speeches of the principals.<sup>225</sup>

Yet for Henry, marginalised product of the mechanised post-war world translated by the dream, nature's "stage properties" can effect no cure and provide no guidance precisely due to their acknowledged basis in performance. Conscious as he is of his posed position on his own literary stage, he is doomed to remain estranged from "the felt moment of perception",<sup>226</sup> the revelation of community; in this context, any "sympathy" assumed by the represented objects which surround him must be both contingent and wholly inauthentic, subject to the demands of the text. However, Song 265's assertion that "next time it will be nature & Thoreau / this time is Baudelaire, if one had the skill" (DS 265) offers a useful additional gloss to Berryman's comment. For if The Dream Songs' self-consciously literary terrain can supply no moral compass to direct its protagonist's actions, its capacity for "observation"<sup>227</sup> is undiminished as a result. Announcing its desire to emulate Charles Baudelaire, a poet as renowned for his descriptions of debauched dissolution as for a verse "supple and staccato enough to adapt to... the undulations of dreams, and sudden leaps of consciousness",<sup>228</sup> Berryman's text is seeking explicit comparison with Baudelaire's radical works of urban sensibility. As Henry continues his futile task of "[c]ollating [the] bones" (DS 30) of what has been irrevocably lost – moral and

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<sup>224</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 23.

<sup>225</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses," American Poetry at Mid-Century, by John Crowe Ransom, Delmore Schwartz and John Hall Wheelock (Washington, WA: Library of Congress, 1958) 1-14, at 9.

<sup>226</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 4.

<sup>227</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 23.

<sup>228</sup> Walter Benjamin, The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire, ed. Michael W. Jennings (New York: Harvard UP, 2006) 69.

social order, personal significance, the old “glories of the world” (DS 26) – his fractured and discontinuous guises are our only means of collating his verse-voyage. His performative engagements with not flora and fauna but human nature facilitate the survival of the poetic self, fuelled by infinite possibilities of response to all it absorbs.

The Dream Songs’ model of the poem-as-life, then, could not differ more markedly from that employed by “the ancient maker priest” whose monument Henry visits in Song 73:

and the fifteen changeless stones in their five worlds  
with a shelving of moving moss  
stand me the thought of the ancient maker priest.  
Elsewhere occurs – I remembers – loss.  
Through awes & weathers neither it increased  
nor did one blow of all his stone & sand thought die. (DS 73)

The “thought” of this “maker”/makar figure is bracing (much as the effect of a “st[ood]” drink), but it is also something to be endured, to withstand. And it is notable that the formal harmony of the craftsman’s Zen garden, aiming to balance and temper unchecked emotion, has the opposite effect upon Berryman’s protagonist. As Henry contemplates these stones with their “shelving of moving moss”, the “awes & weathers” of external change penetrate his text and produce their verbal analogue in the insistently subversive rhyme “loss”. In the dream-world, it seems, balance always begets unbalance, for it must be tested against the contemporary situation and found wanting. If such Songs suggest this piece-poem’s relationship with its creative forebears to be characterised by an enduring antagonism, it is clear that dissatisfaction with the old artistic templates is inextricably commingled with ambition. Berryman would spell out his position in a 1969 National Book Award acceptance speech: “It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models... I set up The Dream Songs as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry”.<sup>229</sup> Matching the achievements of a Baudelaire, a Thoreau, even an “ancient maker priest”, would also require eclipsing their work, subjecting their cadences to a “new rhythm”<sup>230</sup> of post-war experience. And if this was the case, the same process of re-vision must apply to the poet’s own more modest apprentice efforts. In just a few lines, Song 73 works to dismiss the attempts to fix and re-capture a lost past that had distinguished Berryman’s first long poem, 1953’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. A more overt ire, however, is discernable towards the New Critical literary school founded by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, a movement that had exerted heavy

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<sup>229</sup> JBP’s, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

<sup>230</sup> JBP’s, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “Development of Modern American Poetry”.

influence both upon the American academy of the 1940s and 50s and upon the poet's earliest verse compositions.<sup>231</sup> Song 73 subjects Tate's insistence that "Formal versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance... that the poet is in control of the disorder both outside him and within his own mind"<sup>232</sup> to the art of the dream, where it is unable to subdue the ungovernable chaos that encroaches. The notion of art as a static monument, demonstrating the inherent "goodness" and unity of the world through the "good of [its] meters",<sup>233</sup> has collapsed beneath the weight of Henry's indiscriminate permeability to the data of his surroundings: confronting this craftsman's "fifteen changeless stones", he is confronted only by a further "loss" that is no longer relevant and cannot be regained.

It is indisputable that Berryman's poetic strategy in The Dream Songs was a risky one indeed. Relinquishing control of the disorder within and beyond his text necessitated severing an established relationship with his early mentors and literary ancestors alike, leaving him vulnerable to "the worst kind" of criticism (uncomprehending, even "indifferent").<sup>234</sup> Yet the work resists a reading as mere reaction for reaction's sake on these grounds, for its ongoing rebellion from influence enables not just "escape" but responsive "recovery".<sup>235</sup> As Brendan Cooper observes, Berryman's declared "hostil[ity]"<sup>236</sup> towards his forefathers is "a generative hostility... in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction".<sup>237</sup> In The Dream Songs' radical metapoetics, style and structure refuse the imposition of order the better to "articulate... modes of thinking and project... relationships through which latent values and orders can be perceived".<sup>238</sup> Deep within Henry's dream, where what is valued most (authenticity, narrative coherence, a unified personality) is always what has been lost, it is therefore vital that we avoid the trap of conflating such hostility with contempt. As Henry sets sail for Ireland at the beginning of Book VII, clutching "a Whitman & a Purgatorio, / a one-volume dictionary, / an Oxford Bible with all its bays & nooks", (DS 279) these literary monuments are acknowledged as the potential templates which must be put to the test in

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<sup>231</sup> Berryman would acknowledge the influence of prominent New Critics including Richard Blackmur, Ransom and "my Columbia teacher Mark Van Doren" upon his early practice in a statement drafted two years before his death (Berryman, TFOTP x).

<sup>232</sup> Allen Tate, "Poetry Modern and Unmodern," Hudson Review 21 (1968): 247-61, at 256.

<sup>233</sup> Ransom, "New Poets and Old Muses" 12-13.

<sup>234</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder "The Old Criticism".

<sup>235</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder "Development of Modern American Poetry".

<sup>236</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder "National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969".

<sup>237</sup> Brendan Cooper, "'We Want Anti-Models': John Berryman's Eliotic Inheritance," Journal of American Studies 42 (2008): 1-18, at 3.

<sup>238</sup> Charles Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s (Cranbury, NJ: Assoc. UP, 1979) 24.

order to be discarded: their epistemological certainties may be incompatible with the flux of contemporary experience,<sup>239</sup> but the shortfall, the distance evoked between words and world, remains “the paradigm for creation and creativity”<sup>240</sup> nonetheless. In Song 366, Henry persists in “stand[ing] up for... / Wordsworth & that sort of thing” despite the extent of his own post-war sufferings:

— Oh, I suffer from a strike  
& a strike & three balls: I stand up for much,  
Wordsworth & that sort of thing.

The pitcher dreamed. He threw a hazy curve,  
I took it in my stride & out I struck,  
lonesome Henry.  
These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand.  
They are only meant to terrify & comfort.  
Lilac was found in his hand. (DS 366)

The baseball metaphor is apt, for Henry-the-player, subject to his oneiric text’s demands (the “hazy curve” of the dreaming “pitcher” that also figures as its homonym, “picture”), is required to change ends and roles repeatedly, and to risk with each performance the “strik[ing]” out of his subjectivity. Amid this chaotic metapoetic field, however, the homage to the Western world’s canonical artists persists, even as these figures are recognised as providing limited solace and no aid to interpretation. Henry, who grasps his “[l]ilac” in conscious tribute to the old poets he loved so well but found wanting,<sup>241</sup> experiences the lack of a predetermined model for his verse-voyage and the multiplicity of his guises as a profound “lonesome[ness]” and self-estrangement. Yet Song 366 suggests such “terr[or]” to be a simultaneous source of “comfort”. The absorption and inversion of potential templates with which The Dream Songs solicits public renown enables Henry to continue to sing on his literary stage: the Protean nature of his fractured “selving” (DS 66) sustains his verse-voyage and gives his words their “[w]orth”.

Cast in this light, Berryman’s vision of a future for American verse, outlined in a 1970 interview, attains a distinct irony:

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<sup>239</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>240</sup> Matterson 85.

<sup>241</sup> Whilst Song 366 alludes here to Whitman’s elegy “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, which declared in the wake of President Lincoln’s 1865 assassination, “Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac” (Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” 1881, Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems, ed. Francis Murphy, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1986) 351-59, at 353), it also suggests the influence of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land; compare the latter poem’s opening lines, “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire” (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, 1922, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2369-83, at 2370).



I feel that... we need a poetry that gives up everything – all kinds of traditional forms – and yet remains rich. What is wrong with poetry now is that poets won't take on observation, dealing with what is sent into individuals from the universe.<sup>242</sup>

The statement is coyly self-referential, cloaking transparently the poet's own ambition: isn't this in fact a description of The Dream Songs, the piece-poem of a man who has lost everything but is compelled to perform "what is sent into individuals from the universe" regardless? Nevertheless, a parallel reading of Song 370 serves as a caution against applying this declaration to Berryman's work too literally. The "observation[s]" "sent into [Henry] from the universe" and there translated by the art of the dream can make no claim for the verisimilitude of their representations:

Henry saw with Tolstoyan clarity  
his muffled purpose. He described the folds –  
not a symbol in the place.  
Naked the man came forth in his mask, to be.  
Illnesses from encephalitis to colds  
shook his depths & his surface.

When he dressed up & up, his costumes varied  
with the southeast wind, but he remained aware.  
Awareness was most of what he had. (DS 370)

In Song 370, "Tolstoyan clarity" itself, the depiction of startling vividness, has been transmuted into the dream-world's supra-reality: there is "not a symbol in th[is] place", for the text's self-conscious fictionality can impute no underlying truth to Henry's analogical guises. The fractured identity of Berryman's protagonist, stripped "[n]aked" on stage "for all the world to see" (DS 1) but still retaining "his mask", must remain entirely inauthentic, and so entirely private. As Charles Thornbury notes, donning his various "costumes" has served merely to distance him further from the figures with which he seeks affiliation, allowing him "to be both something he is and something he is not".<sup>243</sup> The result is a performative parody of imaginative empathy, capable of doing justice neither to the "I" nor to the not-"I" he enacts. Such interpretations foreground the fact that Henry's impotent "[a]wareness" of his situation constitutes "most of what he [has]". Not, to quote Mark Van Doren, "forgetting nothing",<sup>244</sup> but remembering less, his affliction is worse than "colds" or even "encephalitis" because it deprives him of all agency. The puppet of his text, Henry is compelled to submit to its demands, "dress[ing] up" for the audience whose presence enables his ongoing survival. His tantalising promises of an authentic revelation invite our

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<sup>242</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 346-47.

<sup>243</sup> Thornbury, "The Significance of Dreams in The Dream Songs" 97.

<sup>244</sup> Mark Van Doren, letter to John Berryman, 26 Sep. 1968, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 23, Folder "8, 1968 – 12, 1968".

participation as readers, but can never be fulfilled due to their basis in fantasy: his performances function in this context as the ultimate hiding-place from critical discovery.

We might, then, join Charles Altieri in viewing the works that conclude The Dream Songs as less of a celebration of infinite possibilities of imaginative response than a resigned acceptance of this piece-poem's fate. Performing the literary fame of John Berryman, white American poet "in early middle age",<sup>245</sup> delineating the trials unique to its own "muffled purpose", (DS 370) the text has relinquished the posture of "address[ing] a substantial public".<sup>246</sup> Furthermore, its origins in the artifice that cannot "honor imaginary identifications" suggest that there is no hope of "recover[ing] the rhetorical stances capable of projecting values against which social life c[an] be judged and at least partially corrected".<sup>247</sup> Whilst Henry's final "[n]aked[ness]" (DS 370) may be lamentable, it is also, however, inevitable to the work of the poem-as-life. As he "peer[s] quite alone / as if the worlds would answer to a code", (DS 285) the "code" to his chaotic existence also figures as the coda to his verse-voyage, the widest lacuna of all that is contained within Song 385's final line:

My daughter's heavier. Light leaves are flying.  
Everywhere in enormous numbers turkeys will be dying  
and other birds, all their wings.  
They never greatly flew. Did they wish to?  
I should know. Off away somewhere once I knew  
such things.

Or good Ralph Hodgson back then did, or does.  
The man is dead whom Eliot praised. My praise  
follows and flows too late.  
Fall is grievous, brisk. Tears behind the eyes  
almost fall. Fall comes to us as a prize  
to rouse us toward our fate.

My house is made of wood and it's made well,  
unlike us. My house is older than Henry;  
that's fairly old.  
If there were a middle ground between things and the soul  
or if the sky resembled more the sea,  
I wouldn't have to scold

my heavy daughter. (DS 385)

Sombre, almost elegiac in tone, this last Song presents a microcosmic palimpsest of its sprawling text's "whole mental life". (DS 327) Here is nature's failure to structure subjective experience (the "[l]ight leaves" juxtaposed against the "heavy daughter"),<sup>248</sup> and

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<sup>245</sup> Berryman, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest ix.

<sup>246</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 173.

<sup>247</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 173.

<sup>248</sup> Since Song 385's first publication in His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, a number of critics have taken the daughter's "heav[iness]" to indicate a pregnancy; see for example Matterson 89 and Reeves 56. However,

the loss of a certainty now “[o]ff away somewhere” and inaccessible. Here, too, is the double-edged praise of another literary forefather, “flow[ing] too late” to be relevant to the post-war world where “[f]all” is both a perpetual state and a tolling bell “to rouse us toward our fate”. For it remains notable that if the art of Song 385 necessitates the perpetuation of its renown as a “house... made well”, the same cannot be said of its subject, Henry House. His last testament, as Gareth Reeves observes, holds in uneasy tension the “biblical overtones” of Psalm 23 (“I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever”) with Matthew 12.25’s “more downbeat” “house divided against itself [that] shall not stand”.<sup>249</sup> It is perhaps thus that Song 385’s concluding stanza, having devolved its “intimations of loss and fall... into [the] immediately domestic terms”<sup>250</sup> that offer no universal solutions, nevertheless retains the aspect of a universal dilemma. In a society where, Fredric Jameson has argued, “the distance between the structures that order everyday life and the phenomenology... of that life itself have (sic) become unbridgeable”,<sup>251</sup> the dream-world’s translations of the flux of external experience<sup>252</sup> provide a distinctly dubious form of shelter. The self-estrangement that results from Henry’s Protean performances has served merely to reinforce the pre-existent divide between adjective (“middle”) and fact (“ground”), words and world, “the soul” and “things”. As the work’s beleaguered protagonist resumes his quest for coherence and unity one last time, he is forced to concede that the all-inclusive, empathetic poetics that attributes subjective processes and desires to surrounding objects<sup>253</sup> is another false guise, an ultimate failure. Imaginative craft alone cannot render “the sky” analogous with “the sea”, much less with the poet’s vision (or “see”) the phrase slyly implies. The Dream Songs’ rhetoric of dissemblance, of the contradictions that refuse to cohere in a fixed solution, culminates in this text’s final line, in which the “epistemology of loss” (CP 11) is made – suddenly, irretrievably – flesh. The lacuna that separates Henry-performing-Berryman from real, “heavy” daughter is fundamentally “unbridgeable”, for it contains all that has been lost and cannot be reconciled: one must assume that it would occupy an infinite number of blank pages, were it not for the limitations of the work’s published format.

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given that Henry’s performances of Berryman up to this point draw without exception upon the external events contemporary to their composition, it seems more likely that the adjective alludes to the irreversible nature of change, a child grown “heavy” upon her father’s back.

<sup>249</sup> Reeves 55. See also KJB, Ps. 23.6 and Matt. 12.25.

<sup>250</sup> Donoghue 165.

<sup>251</sup> Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991) 411. Cit. Jonathan Flatley, Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008) 77.

<sup>252</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>253</sup> Altieri, The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry 163.

“[T]errify[ing]” in their “comfort” (DS 366) and comforting in their terror, singing the self-estrangement that stems from affiliation to the post-war American Dream, The Dream Songs comprise the greatest part of Berryman’s poetic legacy. His hard-sought “subjects &... actual heart”<sup>254</sup> lie in this *magnum opus* that would eventually beat its protagonist at his own game: a work that, surviving Henry’s death, continues to “baffle” critics, (DS 308) and thus to survive that of its creator. It seems right, somehow, that the last word on its pages should belong to Mark Van Doren, Berryman’s former Columbia mentor, who would come in his later years to recognise the extent of not just his protégé’s hostility but his boundless ambition: “Here it all is, dreadful and ridiculous and beautiful... and terrible and sweet in one long breath. Which you know how to hold.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 200.

<sup>255</sup> Mark Van Doren, letter to John Berryman, 26 Sep. 1968, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 23, Folder “8, 1968 – 12, 1968”.

## CHAPTER 5: LOVE & FAME AND DELUSIONS, ETC. OF JOHN BERRYMAN

### 5.1 “Henry Reacted Like a Snake to Praise”: The Autobiographical Art of Love & Fame

In a Paris Review interview of late October 1970, John Berryman would declare to Peter Stitt, “Your idea of yourself and your relation to your art has a great deal to do with what actually happens.”<sup>1</sup> Coming from a man once again undergoing treatment at St. Mary’s Hospital, Minneapolis for “[c]yclothymic personality” and “[h]abitual excessive drinking”,<sup>2</sup> the statement attains a distinctly bleak aspect. However strongly he might have recommended that a writer “cultivat[e]... extreme indifference to both praise and blame”,<sup>3</sup> it was evident that the praise with which 1968’s His Toy, His Dream, His Rest was greeted had rendered him immune to his own prescription. The Dream Songs’ concluding volume, with its compulsive metaliterary performances of Berryman-as-celebrity-poet, had cemented his reputation as epic bard of the post-war American landscape. Moreover, the year of critical adulation that followed its publication, in which Berryman shared the Bollingen Prize for Poetry with Karl Shapiro, scooped the National Book Award and was awarded the title of Regents’ Professor of Humanities, was to further increase his public currency by sustaining the fiction of authenticity behind the work’s guises. In sudden demand for lectures and readings nationwide, Berryman’s erratic and intoxicated appearances functioned to reinforce his status as the product of his protagonist Henry’s dream. And the result was a critical conflation of the art of fame with the real man: as he reeled and roared on stage, both the creator and the consequence of Henry’s “sing to shay”, (DS 35) it was unsurprising that many would cede to Jerome Mazzaro’s assertion that “Henry is obviously a double figure for Berryman”.<sup>4</sup> Yet as the months and the prizes rolled by, one question remained uppermost in the poet’s mind. In the wake of The Dream Songs, just what would happen next? Speaking to Richard Kostelanetz in 1969, Berryman had described the “pains [that] course[d] through [him]” at the thought of relinquishing his Protean protagonist, “that marvelous way of making your mind known to many other

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, “The Art of Poetry,” interview with Peter Stitt, Paris Review 53 (1972): 177-207. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 18-44, at 37.

<sup>2</sup> John Haffenden, The Life of John Berryman (Boston, MA: Routledge, 1982) 364.

<sup>3</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 21.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Mazzaro, “Berryman’s Dream World,” rev. of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, by John Berryman, Kenyon Review 31 (1969): 259-63, at 260.

people”.<sup>5</sup> Whilst he would continue to compose Dream Songs sporadically throughout his last years, “Henry by Night”, one of the few published parerga to His Toy, His Dream, His Rest,<sup>6</sup> evidences the increasing sense of futility that accompanied his labours. Both Henry-as-Berryman’s “nocturnal habits” and the “old tune” of the dream-text itself are now interrupted by repeated wakings, the “stercoraceous cough”<sup>7</sup> of the performer’s death-rattle:

Then, inhuman,  
he woke every hour or so – they couldn’t keep track  
of mobile Henry, lost

at 3 a.m., off for more drugs or a cigarette,  
reading old mail, writing new letters, scribbling  
excessive Songs;  
back then to bed, to the old tune or get set  
for a stercoraceous cough, without quibbling  
death-like. His women’s wrongs

they hoarded & forgave, mysterious, sweet;  
but you’ll admit it was no way to live  
or even keep alive.  
I won’t mention the dreams I won’t repeat  
sweating & shaking: something’s gotta give:  
up for good at five. (CP 255)

The unmentionable sub-textual nightmare of “the dreams I won’t repeat” also figures here as the reality that cannot guarantee Henry’s survival by reiterating his fictive “I” in the phenomenal world. Read in this light, the Song’s final line signifies a dawning realisation on the part of the poet whose identity it enacts: emerging from the dream of public renown, waking “up”, necessitates the “pains”<sup>8</sup> of surrendering Henry, of giving him “up for good”. As “Henry’s Understanding”, which appeared alongside “Henry by Night” in a 1969 Harvard Advocate issue, elaborates, this is an artistic development “[s]uddenly, unlike Bach, // & horribly, unlike Bach”.<sup>9</sup> Where the eighteenth-century composer had cleaved to the forms of his German classical heritage, the contrapuntal harmonics of his arrangements enriching the prevailing style, these parerga represent a call-to-arms for stylistic and thematic severance. Nevertheless, if in Berryman’s easy familiarity with the Dream Song format “it only t[ook] a few minutes to make” (or, as these late texts suggest, to *unmake*) “a man”, (CP 255) it was clear that the quest for a new direction would present considerable

<sup>5</sup> John Berryman, “Conversation with Berryman,” interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Massachusetts Review 11 (1970): 340-47, at 341.

<sup>6</sup> Following His Toy, His Dream, His Rest’s October 1968 appearance, Berryman would publish just five further Dream Songs, three of which (“Henry by Night”, “Henry’s Understanding” and “The Handshake, The Entrance”) were reprinted in his final volume of poetry, 1972’s Delusions, etc. of John Berryman.

<sup>7</sup> John Berryman, “Henry by Night,” Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 13. Rpt. in CP 255.

<sup>8</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 341.

<sup>9</sup> John Berryman, “Henry’s Understanding,” Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 12. Rpt. in CP 255-56.

difficulties. His view of himself at fifty-five “only as an epic poet” was sufficiently established to cast profound doubts upon his capacity to attempt another work of The Dream Songs’ magnitude: as he would confess to Peter Stitt, with Henry’s trials over, “I didn’t expect to write any more verse”.<sup>10</sup>

With the beginning of 1970, Berryman thus resolved to turn his attentions to prose. Preparing a University of Minnesota course on Hamlet, he was inspired to resume the “comprehensive biographical & critical Shakespearian studies” he had begun almost two decades previously;<sup>11</sup> in a flurry of activity most suggestive of his lack of focus during this period, he also worked intermittently on a translation of Sophocles, a collection of essays and stories<sup>12</sup> and a study of Emily Dickinson’s verse. Despite these outward signs of productivity, however, the poet would complain to William Meredith in a letter of February 1, 1970, “Off here in the Middle West I suffer a little from the feeling that I am working in a void.”<sup>13</sup> The tours ended and the flow of praise ceased, the “void” of reception the poet lamented had, it seems, become synonymous with an absence of poetic purpose. And it is telling that, having identified this “void”, Berryman commenced the very next day to fill it with the first lines of the poem “Her & It”. This new work signalled an unanticipated breakthrough into what he described subsequently to Meredith and others as “a style new for me and new I believe for anybody”.<sup>14</sup>

I fell in love with a girl.  
O and a gash.  
I’ll bet she now has seven lousy children.  
(I’ve three myself, one being off the record.) (CP 169)<sup>15</sup>

The writer who had declared to a Harvard Advocate interview team fifteen months earlier “I don’t write short [poems] – no, I don’t”<sup>16</sup> had embarked once again upon just that task. As he would comment of “Her & It”’s first stanza, “I looked at it, and I couldn’t find anything wrong with it. I thought, ‘God damn it, that is a *fact*.’”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the answer to

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<sup>10</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 37.

<sup>11</sup> John Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 360.

<sup>12</sup> This collection, contracted by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, was published posthumously as The Freedom of the Poet (New York: Farrar, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> John Berryman, cit. Paul Mariani, Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 453.

<sup>14</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise stated, citations of Love & Fame in this thesis refer to John Berryman, John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937-1971, ed. and introd. Charles Thornbury (London: Faber, 1991), in which Thornbury employs an amalgamation of the first British edition (John Berryman, Love & Fame (London: Faber, 1971)) and second American edition (John Berryman, Love & Fame (New York: Farrar, 1972)) as copy-text.

<sup>16</sup> John Berryman, interview with David McClelland et al., Harvard Advocate 103 (1969): 4-9. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-17, at 11.

<sup>17</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 37.

what happened next was what had “actually happen[ed]”<sup>18</sup> already: the literary *bildungsroman* as alternative means of making the celebrated mind known to the reading public. Focusing on “the historical personality of the poet” in the middle Thirties, the verses that accrued rapidly in the wake of “Her & It” enabled Berryman, he believed, to “wipe... out all the disguises and [go] to work”.<sup>19</sup> No longer mediated through Henry’s performances, this account of a young man’s struggle for self-definition would take style as subject in order to construct the narrative of how John Berryman, poet, had come to be: it would map his progress from schoolboy adulation of heroes to artistic fame, and from adolescent infatuation to fatherhood and a “well-loved” wife.<sup>20</sup>

The full extent of Berryman’s enthusiasm for his newly emergent style is evinced by one handwritten postscript to an early manuscript: “Half my... b[oo]k in 5 excited days / many many years later at the height of my power.”<sup>21</sup> The unrhymed quatrains of these poems, often composed piecemeal before later assembly, may well owe their “genesis” to his studies of Dickinson, as he later claimed.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is notable that the cumulative effect is, to quote J. M. Linebarger, “not really [that of] a form at all in any traditional sense”.<sup>23</sup>

and shagging with a rangy gay thin girl  
 (Miss Vaughan) I tore a section of the draperies down.  
 I wore white buckskin shoes with tails sometimes  
 & was widely known on Morningside Heights... (CP 175)

The ghost of iambic pentameter ebbing and fading, the contraction and expansion of line length according to the exigencies of each statement: The Dream Songs’ final devolution into domestic minutiae has here been stripped back further to a prosy realism devoid of Henry’s metaphysical digressions and self-conscious “wag[s]” (DS 14) and winks. Surveying the first works of this collection, what, then, are we to make of Berryman’s insistence that they were “[a]s classical as one of the *Rubáiyát* poems – without the necessities of rhyme and meter, but with [their] own necessities”?<sup>24</sup> Whilst the statement teeters indisputably upon the brink of self-indulgence, partial elucidation of the ambiguous “necessities” to which it alludes is provided by a parallel examination of the poet’s 1969

<sup>18</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 37.

<sup>19</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 36, 38.

<sup>20</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 2.

<sup>21</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1; the manuscript in question is of the poem “Transit” (CP 197).

<sup>22</sup> Both Berryman’s “Afterword” to the English edition of Love & Fame (London: Faber, 1971) and his “Scholia” to the Farrar, Straus & Giroux second edition state, “[M]y lyric form here had its genesis in a study of [Dickinson’s]” (CP 290). For evidence of the poet’s working method, see JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>23</sup> J. M. Linebarger, John Berryman, Twayne’s United States Authors Series 244 (New York: Twayne, 1974) 127.

<sup>24</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 37-38.



National Book Award acceptance speech. Announcing provocatively to his audience, “It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models... I set up The Dream Songs as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry”,<sup>25</sup> Berryman had sought in this speech to foreground the “generative hostility, [the] postwar anxiety of influence”<sup>26</sup> that had characterised his work from its earliest origins. As he stood upon the podium, though, it could no longer escape his notice that national recognition as the best (“best” through being as unlike his forefathers’ “best” qualities as possible) had functioned to render him a further source of his own anxiety: a literary begetter, an influence to ingest. The triumph of counting himself among the great American poets dead and living<sup>27</sup> necessitated Berryman’s self-apprehension as one of the “anti-models” he called for. According to his uncompromising stance, overt rejection of Henry’s *Songs* was the only possible way to eclipse them; surpassing his achievements would require a re-conception of style as an anti-style fuelled by the contrary energies of homage and of innovation.

Nevertheless, with the December 1970 publication of Love & Fame it was clear that Berryman’s growing “hostil[ity]”<sup>28</sup> towards The Dream Songs’ all-too-famous form had by no means precluded his ongoing absorption of wider poetic influence. Whilst his previous volumes had been dedicated to friends and family members, these new works were addressed instead to “THE SUFFERING LOVER & YOUNG BRETON MASTER” Tristan Corbière. (CP 167) Corbière’s eighteenth-century Amours Jaunes, alternatively exultant in and crushingly disdainful of life’s sordid realities, must have seemed an apt head note to Berryman’s “inquiry between two over-matched *grabs* in an ambitious young man: one for girls, one for poetry”.<sup>29</sup> For, as his dedicatory verse to Corbière implies slyly, Love & Fame’s poems would acknowledge the earlier writer’s “*mockery of the pretentious great*” by going one better in the process. Proffering the “*self-revelations*” of youth, they aimed to cut down Berryman’s own celebrated public figure by chronicling its far less illustrious origins:

*Your mockery of the pretentious great  
your self-revelations*

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<sup>25</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

<sup>26</sup> Brendan Cooper, “‘We Want Anti-Models’: John Berryman’s Eliotic Inheritance,” Journal of American Studies 42 (2008): 1-18, at 3.

<sup>27</sup> In a series of notes for the (unwritten) Love & Fame poem “Calif[ornia]”, Berryman was, in fact, to do just this: his list of “middle” generation American poets reads “Ted [Roethke], Delmore [Schwartz], Randall [Jarrell] / Cal [Lowell], Eliz[abeth Bishop], me?, Karl Shapiro” (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1).

<sup>28</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

<sup>29</sup> John Berryman, “John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview,” interview with William Heyen, Ohio Review 15 (1974): 46-65, at 65.

*constitute still in any sunset sky  
a cursing glory (CP 167)*

The first section of Love & Fame was to gain notoriety, however, less for the work's "glory" than for the "cursing" it provoked subsequently from reviewers. "Cadenza on Garnette"'s dialogue with a further "anti-model"<sup>30</sup> (this time Wordsworth, no less) serves to clarify both the content and the method of this "inquiry":

'If I had said out passions as they were,'  
plain-saying Wordsworth confided down deep age,  
'the poems could never have been published.'  
Ha! a confrère. (CP 170)

At first glance, the stanza's gleeful recognition of "confr[aternity]" suggests a mutual experience of "passions" beyond words, of a magnitude that could only be diminished by the act of "plain-saying". Yet Berryman opts in his next lines to describe these "passions" regardless, reducing their sublimities to exhibitionistic displays of "fondl[ing]" (CP 170) and nonchalant shifts in affection:

She set up a dazing clamour across this blood  
in one of Brooks Hall's little visiting rooms.  
In blunt view of whoever might pass by  
we fondled each other's wonders.

One night she couldn't come down, she had a cold,  
so I took away a talkative friend of hers... (CP 170)

Perhaps, then, Love & Fame's publication stood as evidence that Wordsworth as "confrère" had been conning himself regarding the incommunicable nature of a young man's ardours and, more crucially, the need for their censorship. Was the poet's true function, in fact, to "tell it all" and thus to lay bare a personal history of "[l]overs & secrets"? (CP 170)

Reading these initial works, one might easily concede to Robert Phillips' damning assessment, "[their] catalog of sexual performances, without... commitment to other values than satisfying the itch, is indicative of [a] total lack of commitment to other higher values".<sup>31</sup> The protagonist who dreams of "satisfy[ing] at once all Barnard & Smith" (CP 179) before attending to the (presumably lesser) beauties of a nearby secretarial school is also the hysteric who locates himself "squarely in the middle of Hell" (CP 186) upon receiving a C grade. As he dances and drinks his way through field-trips, proms and

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<sup>30</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder "National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969".

<sup>31</sup> Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) 99.

parties, his pursuit of artistic recognition risks being eclipsed by the abuse of his respectable college-boy “status” (CP 174) for baser gains. Even so, the poem “Freshman Blues” provides an early indication of this distasteful figure’s deeper preoccupations. A typically explicit description of one “intense friend”’s sexual anxieties is linked by the quatrains that follow both to the loss of a father “perforated” by gunshot (CP 173) and to his own dismissive treatment of another female:

Thought much I then on perforated daddy,  
 daddy boxed in & let down with strong straps,  
 when I my friends’ homes visited, with fathers  
 universal & intact.

McGovern was critical: I treated my girl *slight*  
 who was so kind to me I climbed in bed  
 with her, with our pajamas, an icy morning  
 when I’d stayed overnight (CP 173)

The struggle for self-definition, Berryman implies, must begin from the absence of “fathers / universal and intact” which lies at the centre of poem and personal identity. Yet in its pointed juxtaposition of the “daddy” stanza against various trivial undergraduate misadventures, “Freshman Blues”’ enduring impression remains less that of “a man deeply affected by his father’s suicide”<sup>32</sup> than that of a man seeking a coherent model for art and adult life. Whilst the “girl” he enjoys so casually in these lines is rendered nameless by his ongoing promiscuity, the effect is compounded by her role as a mere “cipher” to his quest; as Jonathan Galassi has observed, the women “feasted on” (CP 170) in *Love & Fame*’s first sections represent mere “sounding-boards, faces out of an imagined audience, necessary but interchangeable”.<sup>33</sup>

One can therefore say more accurately that *Love & Fame*’s young speaker lusting after Elspeth, Garnette and “Shirley C / the preternatural dancer from Johnson Hall” (CP 173) is also the proto-poet committed only to “tell[ing] all” (CP 170) of his labours to find a voice. If to Berryman these “*grabs*... for girls, [and] for poetry” are “over-matched”,<sup>34</sup> it is because theirs is “a devotion that seeks objectivisation in a series of forms”.<sup>35</sup> No matter that the protagonist’s desire for the real Shirley is unfulfilled, for the vision of the dancer receding “into what faraway air?” endures, alongside the delight that accompanies his discovery of W. H. Auden’s verse during the infatuation. (CP 172) “The Heroes”, a work

<sup>32</sup> Jack Vincent Barbera, “John Berryman: R. I. P.,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 2 (1972): 547-53, at 551.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Galassi, “John Berryman: Sorrows and Passions of His Majesty the Ego,” *Poetry Nation* 2 (1974): 117-24, at 118.

<sup>34</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 65.

<sup>35</sup> Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1960) 139.

first published in July 1970,<sup>36</sup> evinces Berryman's adolescent enthusiasm for a formidable list of potential literary models. From Eliot and Pound to "hard-headed Willie" [Faulkner] and "drunky Jim" [Joyce], (CP 184) these figures comprise a pantheon worthy of "ador[ation]" indeed:

I had, from my beginning, to adore heroes  
& I elected that they witness to,  
show forth, transfigure: life-suffering & pure heart  
& hardly definable but central weaknesses

for which they were to be enthroned & forgiven by me. (CP 185)

The text contains the suggestion that "election" of such "heroes" might function simultaneously to "elect" this would-be writer as their eager apprentice. Not just "witness[ing]" their "life-suffering" but "witness[ed] to", "show[n] forth" and "transfigure[d]" in the process, his appreciation of these men's achievements may ultimately permit his entry among their ranks; following in their wake, even his "central weaknesses" in verse-composition could one day be both "forgiven" and "enthroned". Nevertheless, a wider survey of Love & Fame's first poems serves as a reminder that literary hero-worship is not without its own intrinsic difficulties. These same "[n]iceties of... identification" threaten in "In & Out" to assume the function of "[a] shroud, a spade", (CP 182) and to bury his nascent voice beneath derivative echoes. Displaying preternatural awareness of Harold Bloom's precept that "Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves",<sup>37</sup> Berryman's speaker articulates the dilemma in "Two Organs":

My longing yes was a woman's  
She can't know can she *what kind* of a baby  
she's going with all the will in the world to produce?  
I suffered trouble over this,

I didn't want my next poem to be *exactly* like Yeats  
or exactly like Auden  
since in that case where the hell was I? (CP 178-79)

The true hell tormenting Love & Fame's early protagonist, it seems, is the lack of artistic identity which belittles and unmans him, rendering his situation pointedly analogous with that of "Plato's uterus... /... passionately longing for children". (CP 178) It is evident,

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<sup>36</sup> "The Heroes" appeared in a Times Literary Supplement of July 16, 1970 as part of a group of six poems that also included "Her and It" (later "Her & It"), "The Other Cambridge", "Meeting", "Tea" and "Heaven"; Berryman would describe the news of their acceptance as "further encouragement" towards Love & Fame's composition (Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 37).

<sup>37</sup> Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 5, 6.

moreover, that his comically modified (and distinctly paradoxical) desire to conceive “big fat fresh original & characteristic poems” (CP 178) not “*exactly* like Yeats” could not be further from the model of “generative hostility”<sup>38</sup> that would fuel Berryman’s composition of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs. Forswearing New York for two years’ study at Clare College, Cambridge, the desire to establish himself upon the grounds trodden by his hero continues to occupy this figure as he gazes from the ship’s deck: “Yeats, Yeats, I’m coming! it’s me...”. (CP 189)

Whilst the narrator of Love & Fame is “[n]ever better pleased” than with his relocation to the British “haunts” of “old masters”, (CP 189) it is thus not entirely surprising that he finds the change of scenery to herald no improvement in his endeavours. In the volume’s second section, the formerly “tireless & inventive dancing man” (CP 175) confronts a profound sense of marginalisation most striking for its conflation of the “discrete and non-sequential ideas” of “personal isolation and literary unfulfilment”:<sup>39</sup> “I don’t show my work to anybody, I am quite alone.” (CP 194) Once again, personal experience has been co-opted into the service of the poetic “*grab*”.<sup>40</sup> Lacking reception within even Clare’s Dilettante Society, this proto-poet believes that he may as well be “quite alone”, despite ample evidence to the contrary in his burgeoning friendships with “new companion[s]”. (CP 194) His “idiom”, he explains elsewhere, is “too much for” the English ear, influenced as it is by the foreign voices of Hart Crane, Stevens and, of course, Yeats. (CP 194) Such complaints, however, gain a distinctly ironic aspect in the poem “Monkhood”. The man who so relished the “high company” (CP 180) of Richard Blackmur the previous spring now refuses the society of his “superior” fellow-aliens at Cambridge:

I never went to see Wittgenstein or Broad,  
I suffered a little from shyness, which was just arrogance  
not even inverted.  
I refused to meet Eliot, on two occasions,

I knew I wasn’t with it yet  
& would not meet my superiors. Screw them. (CP 195)

The devotion to heroes and thought “poured” into books (CP 173) have resulted only in the defensive “arrogance” that masks this speaker’s underlying anxieties: how can his mechanical first-person anaphora, his lack of a unique poetic voice, possibly match the achievements of an Eliot, a Wittgenstein? When cast in the light of Love & Fame’s opening works, the Clare poems’ unflattering portrait of their withdrawn protagonist is,

<sup>38</sup> Cooper, ““We Want Anti-Models”” 3.

<sup>39</sup> John Haffenden, John Berryman: A Critical Commentary (London: Macmillan, 1980) 73.

<sup>40</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 65.

furthermore, sufficient to provide a wider and far more damning diagnosis. Privileging literature over life, and seeking love and fame not in the phenomenal world but through its textual “objectivisation”,<sup>41</sup> the Berryman that these works depict is less society’s “victim”,<sup>42</sup> as Peter Stitt has claimed, than its self-appointed exile. As he explores Cambridge via a tour of “its bookshops”, declaring them to “outrank... the supernatural glass in King’s Chapel”, (CP 192) the sacrifice of life to art enables him to resist the flux of external reality, from the suicide of a former classmate (he recalls, vaguely, “it was something to do with a bridge”) to worsening political “news from Spain”. (CP 197) Small wonder that, groping for memories of the young man he once was, the mature poet aiming to “tell it all” (CP 170) is reduced to quoting the “death-words” (CP 193) of other masters:

Images, memories, of a lonely and ambitious young alien.  
Buildings, buildings & their spaces & decorations,  
are death-words & sayings in crisis. (CP 193)

In his 1974 study of Berryman’s oeuvre, J. M. Linebarger was by no means the first critic to observe, “[M]any [poems] in Love & Fame... achieve... a delightful humor and irony by presenting the younger Berryman through the eyes of the older one.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Berryman’s descriptions of the would-be artist “ground to a halt” (CP 181) in his labours serve frequently to highlight the schism between his desired “achievement and his real self”.<sup>44</sup> We are invited to laugh at the misguided youth who, eager to follow Richard Blackmur’s prescription for a “fresh [verse] idiom” that “adds to the stock of available reality”, (CP 179) draws instead upon just this “stock” to craft stanzas from his master’s quoted words.<sup>45</sup> William Meredith would characterise the idiom peculiar to Love & Fame’s first sections – one of metrical irregularities and narrative disconnections, by turns flatly prosaic and sensational in tone – as that “of a young writer trying to find out what his province is, more confident than he has any right to be that everything that happens to him is interesting”.<sup>46</sup> The issue, however, is problematised by the mature poet’s presence both behind and within his lines, modulating past recollections with asides from a conscious present:

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<sup>41</sup> Pascal 139.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Stitt, “Berryman’s Last Poems,” Concerning Poetry 6 (1973): 5-12, at 6.

<sup>43</sup> Linebarger 132. See also John Haffenden’s discussion of “the irony inherent in Berryman’s mode of narration” (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 76), and Philip Coleman’s recent assertion, “Berryman’s claim regarding [Love & Fame’s] ‘ironic title’ is significant” (Philip Coleman, “Love & Fame and the Self in Society,” After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, DQR Studies in Literature 38 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 225-40, at 230).

<sup>44</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 72.

<sup>45</sup> Compare R. P. Blackmur, Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (London: Allen, 1954) 364.

<sup>46</sup> William Meredith, “Swan Songs,” rev. of Love & Fame and Delusions, etc. of John Berryman, by John Berryman, Poetry 122 (1973): 98-103, at 99.

– Drawing the curtain over fragrant scenes

& interviews malodorous, find me  
domestic with my Muse  
who had manifested, well, a sense of humour  
fatal to bardic pretension. (CP 174)

The contemporary interpolation signposted by the dash draws “the curtain” temporarily over the middle Thirties’ so-called “fragrant scenes”. Nevertheless, whilst the Berryman of 1970 cites a “domestic[ity]” incompatible with his former “bardic pretension[s]”, his dismissal of the (offensive, unwelcome) “interviews malodorous” that have cemented his fame offers a covert indication that *Love & Fame*’s egoistic project of “solely and simply myself”<sup>47</sup> may not have escaped the curse of egotism entirely.<sup>48</sup> The poem “In & Out” explodes any notion of the volume’s “unilateral self-scrutiny”,<sup>49</sup> for here the paradigm is reversed and the “curtain” revealed to be transparent. The young man watching football from the sidelines has become the vehicle for an equally unflattering portrait of the current, celebrated writer:

my friend with shoulders & bright  
... scored the only touchdown at the Rose Bowl.  
I still hear from him, wanting me to contribute.

Money? for Columbia?? They use my name  
now & then. That’s plenty.  
I make a high salary & royalties & fees  
and brother I need it all.

I sent \$100 it’s true to Montana  
to fund a poetry prize in the name of a girl  
I liked in hospital, named Rita Lux,  
a suicide, witty & masochistic

who was trying to get her priest to leave the Church  
& marry her, she beat a punching bag  
with bare fists until her knuckles bled  
cursing with every blow ‘John Berryman!... John Berryman!...’ (CP 183)

John Haffenden notes perspicaciously that the sole “*self-revelation*” (CP 167) such texts provide “is that, *mutatis mutandis*, Berryman’s understanding of himself remains partial and undeveloped”.<sup>50</sup> The mockery of his mis-spent youth is at his expense, for in disclosing concurrently the enduring weaknesses of the present day,<sup>51</sup> it renders him

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<sup>47</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips 97.

<sup>49</sup> Galassi 119.

<sup>50</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary* 73.

<sup>51</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary* 76.

subject to a darker irony. The poet's old grudging refusal to "contribute" to social causes and preoccupation with his "name" are now further compounded by vainglorious boasts of "a high salary & royalties & fees": the fame he anticipated so eagerly has become a "curs[e]" in the mouth of a young woman that, despite his renown, he was unable, or unwilling, to save. As the final stanzas of "In & Out" emphasise, the mature artist's presence in these poems betrays a still wider schism between his actual "achievement and his real self":<sup>52</sup>

'Dear Mr C, A reviewer in *The Times*  
considering 200 poems of yours  
produced over a period of fifteen years  
adjudged them "crushingly dull"; my view too,

though you won't suppose of course I read them all.  
Sir, you are trivial.  
Pray do not write to me again. Pitch defileth.  
Yours faithfully, Henry.' (CP 184)

The Falstaffian self-righteousness with which Berryman publically condemns his rival's verse is a blow calculated to "crush", delivered as it is via the persona of The Dream Songs' protagonist: a reminder, that is, of his own achievement in Henry, the simultaneous success-voucher and performer of his status as a major American writer.<sup>53</sup> This double-edged recognition of himself as the product of the public adulation which had greeted his second long poem might well lead Berryman to declare, "I stand ashamed of myself; / yes, but I stand." (CP 196) Again and again in the decades since Columbia and Cambridge he had fulfilled his quest for a "big fat fresh original & characteristic" poetic voice; (CP 178) the voices of others, it seems, were no longer his concern.

It is, however, indisputable that Love & Fame's early quatrains, with their "apparently inconsequential shifts between constituent statements",<sup>54</sup> provoked distinctly ambivalent reactions from Berryman's contemporaries. Writing just days after the poet's initial burst of work on the volume, his former Columbia mentor Mark Van Doren would query "whether or not these things compose a series or even have connections?"<sup>55</sup> In a

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<sup>52</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 72.

<sup>53</sup> Although, as John Wilson has noted, "Berryman appears to be speaking without irony" here, it is likely that the co-option of Falstaff's phrase from Henry IV, Part 1 contains an element of self-mockery; speaking these words, Falstaff is adopting the guise of another celebrated Henry, in this case the King he serves (John Wilson, introduction, Robert Creeley's Life and Work: A Sense of Increment, ed. and introd. John Wilson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1987) 1-20, at 19).

<sup>54</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 70.

<sup>55</sup> Mark Van Doren, letter to John Berryman, 7 Feb. 1970, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder "Love & Fame Correspondence".



letter of the same month, though, Richard Wilbur supplied one answer in his perceptive account of the poem “Shirley & Auden”:

[You] go at it with a delightful apparent rambling. Non-making of Shirley recalls what Wither said about MAKING anybody, Wither’s queerness recalls Singer’s, whose novel puts you in mind of your own 8<sup>th</sup>-grade opus, etc... what a fine crazy drift, what transitions. The effect is to show that all the ambitions are akin and interwoven, without your saying so.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps, then, the unifying element of such a “crazy drift” was memory’s action as mnemonic, as its own aid. As each “fragrant scene” (CP 174) from the past summoned another, the effect was to locate meaning within the associative process itself, within the interstices between statements that contained the unspoken desire to “mak[e]” it in the literary world. That his chosen method of composition presented considerable difficulties for Berryman as he attempted to structure Love & Fame is demonstrated by one handwritten note of his from 1970:

It’s beg[inning] to look to me as if:  
while P[ar]t I... covers 4 yrs  
P[ar]t II... only covers my first term at Clare!

So: no Paris? Dylan [Thomas]? Dublin [and] Yeats? Madrigals on the Cam? Heidelberg etc, chess?<sup>57</sup>

If the mnemonic art of the book’s opening sections was associative, it was necessarily also highly selective, “[d]rawing the curtain over” (CP 174) as many events as were evoked. And indeed, the mature poet’s admission in these works that many of the experiences recounted have been blurred by the passage of time, potentially *misremembered* (“I don’t know what the hell happened all that summer”, (CP 187) “It was then I think I flunked my 18<sup>th</sup> Century” (CP 177)),<sup>58</sup> functions ultimately to call into question his description of Love & Fame as “autobiograph[y]”.<sup>59</sup> Revisiting his long-faded “passions”, (CP 169) Berryman cannot get them “out in the open, with no second party between [him and his]... deeds”,<sup>60</sup> for the inevitable “second party” is the act of recall that both summons specific incidents and imbues them with their present-day significance. In his “Scholia” to the volume’s second US edition, he would go so far as to concede of his protagonist, “This guy is

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Wilbur, letter to John Berryman, 17 Feb. 1970, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder “Love & Fame Correspondence”.

<sup>57</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>58</sup> On at least one occasion this misremembering appears to be deliberate on Berryman’s part, employed in service of a poem’s “effective... dénouement”; “Down & Back” explicitly connects the young man’s sexual adventures with examination failure and rustication from Columbia, when in truth “his family’s indigence alone had kept him from school” for a semester (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 74).

<sup>59</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 65.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips 5.

*unreal*, dreaming of an unchanged re[-e]ncounter [with his youth] after long years”. (CP 290) The recollections of these introductory poems represent not, as Ernest Stefanik has claimed, the “real world of the past”<sup>61</sup> but its textual reconstruction. As such, they serve to foreground the most severe of their speaker’s enduring weaknesses: the privileging of literature over life. Whilst Berryman was bolstered by Wilbur’s praise of “Shirley & Auden”, the “uncomprehending” (CP 290) reactions of others to his earliest Love & Fame texts left him wondering whether such a book might exact untold damage upon his cherished reputation. Might reacting against The Dream Songs as an “anti-model”<sup>62</sup> have resulted only in fleeting impressions, hazy anecdotes and interstices, a schism between real self and printed page?

## 5.2 Love & Fame as Reformation of Self / Word / World

In fact, however unshakeable Berryman’s confidence in “the height of [his] power”<sup>63</sup> at the outset of Love & Fame’s composition, his extant correspondence from the period suggests that as his verses mounted, so did his doubts regarding this project “so weird, so unlike all my previous work”.<sup>64</sup> Having completed a draft typescript by March 23, 1970, the poet took the unprecedented step of posting copies to a dozen friends (among them Adrienne Rich, Richard Wilbur, Edmund Wilson and Mark Van Doren), each accompanied by a newly humble letter:

[I hope] that some of [you] will find time to read it and CRITICIZE it. Weaknesses, stupidities, numbnesses, excrescences: – for God’s sake if you notice these, please let me hear. I also of course hope that some of you will like some of the poems...<sup>65</sup>

“[P]lease let me hear”:<sup>66</sup> the plea is striking in its tacit acknowledgment that listening to his own famous voice and adopting his past achievements as “anti-models”<sup>67</sup> may not be

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<sup>61</sup> Ernest C. Stefanik, “A Cursing Glory: John Berryman’s Love & Fame,” Renaissance 25 (1973): 115-27, at 116.

<sup>62</sup> JBPs, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

<sup>63</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>64</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>65</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>66</sup> An echo of this phrase is discernable in Berryman’s subsequent annotation to his volume of Emily Dickinson’s Complete Poems: “[she] doesn’t expect to *hear*, only to *be heard & tolerated*” (Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 384).

enough to guarantee future success. The writer who emerges as the product of his new book – the vainglorious, weak figure seeking love and fame not through his actions in the world but through literary adulation – instead testifies to the fact that “a poet’s precursors” are “poets and critics... often and more often as history lengthens”.<sup>68</sup> Demanding “reassurance, confirmation”<sup>69</sup> of his work’s merits so openly, confessing his dependency upon these fellow-artists’ voices, Berryman was supplanting his initial anxieties of self-influence with his late *Dream Songs*’ anxiety of reception, in which the text, responding to its critics, also seeks to shape the response of the reading public. Yet whilst the Henry of the last *Songs* had performed his fame and solicited his audience in order to gain their complicity in his resistance to further “Rich Critical Prose” judgments, (*DS* 170) the third section of *Love & Fame* is notable for its “adopt[ion of] almost every suggestion”<sup>70</sup> provided by Berryman’s elected correspondents. The results of Wilbur’s call for “more voltage” in the volume’s lines, and his proposal that the poet “acknowledge that [its] transitions are cursory, that you are not giving your whole life play-by-play? I am thinking of a slight bit of ringmaster talk... early in Part III”,<sup>71</sup> are discernable in “Message”:

Amplitude, – voltage, – the one friend calls for the one,  
the other for the other, in my work;  
in verse & prose. Well, hell.  
I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends.

Impressions, structures, tales, from Columbia in the Thirties  
& the Michaelmas term at Cambridge in ’36,  
followed by some later. It’s not my life.  
That’s occluded & lost.

That consisted of lectures on St Paul,  
scrimmages with women, singular moments  
of getting certain things absolutely right.  
Laziness, liquor, bad dreams. (*CP* 200-01)

Permitting (however grudgingly) his draft works’ reception to shape their ongoing composition, Berryman was, crucially, to finally disavow any pretence of “writing an autobiography-in-verse”. For if the protagonist of the Columbia and Clare poems had been “*unreal*”, (*CP* 290) a literary collage of “[i]mpressions, structures, tales”, then it was clear that the real life beneath the art must continue to elude any attempt at coherent explication.

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<sup>67</sup> *JBPs*, Speeches, Lectures, Readings, Box 2, Folder “National Book Award Acceptance Speech, March 12 1969”.

<sup>68</sup> Bloom 95.

<sup>69</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>70</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Wilbur, letter to John Berryman, 17 Apr. 1970, *JBPs*, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder “*Love & Fame* Correspondence”.

The sum total of the poet's quest for a celebrated voice was doomed to remain a series of "singular moments", the majority of which were now "occluded & lost".

Along with "The Search", which opens *Love & Fame*'s third section with an account of prodigious "studie[s]" of past masters before affirming the equal worth of "friend[ship]" with "men... of the present", (CP 200) "Message" signifies the beginning of a key *volte-face* in Berryman's project of "solely and simply myself".<sup>72</sup> In their permeability not just to the influence of literary heroes but to the concerns of the mature poet's contemporaries, these texts evince a growing dissatisfaction with the *bildungsroman* format. The Thirties' "fragrant scenes" (CP 174) are superseded by a "spread... thro' space & time" that culminates in what Berryman would describe in one note as the "us[e of] my full present knowledge".<sup>73</sup> And what was now coming to be known was sufficient to dispel any value attached to the strictly literary "love" and "fame" both sought and vaunted in the earlier works of the volume. Whilst Hayden Carruth's assessment, "Berryman's new poems give little evidence of trial", might well be applied to "In & Out"'s "boasting" stanzas,<sup>74</sup> the same cannot be said of "Despair":

It seems to be DARK all the time.  
I have difficulty walking.  
I can remember what to say to my seminar  
but I don't know that I want to.

I said in a Song once: I am unusually tired.  
I repeat that & increase it.  
I'm vomiting.  
I broke down today in the slow movement of K. 365.

I certainly don't think I'll last much longer.  
I wrote: 'There may be horrors.'  
I increase that.  
(I think she took her little breasts away.)

I am in love with my excellent baby.  
Crackles! in darkness HOPE; & disappears.  
Lost arts. (CP 207-08)

The text, like that of "In & Out", functions as a reminder of prior successes, interpolating Henry's distinctive voice from Dream Song 28. Instead of "In & Out"'s self-congratulation, however, the effect here is to highlight just what the protagonist has become as the product of his fame. The analogy with Song 28's dream of a lost sheep –

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<sup>72</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>73</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>74</sup> Hayden Carruth, "Love, Art, and Money," rev. of *Love & Fame*, by John Berryman, *The Nation* 2 Nov. 1970: 437-38, at 437.

“unusually tired”, fearing the onset of “horribles”<sup>75</sup> – is pointed, for the demands that public renown has placed upon this speaker (the critics with knives out, the eternal “seminar[s]”, the future labours) have served to plunge him into the waking nightmare of an “increas[ingly]” intolerable existence. The quest for art has come at the expense of a life which now consists only of losses: lost health, lost scholarly enthusiasm, the lost “HOPE” that “[c]rackles!” before vanishing; even, perhaps, a lost sense of his own capacity for further achievements.

That the later poems of Love & Fame represent a shift in Berryman’s mode of “autobiographical”<sup>76</sup> self-scrutiny is emphasised by the work’s corresponding stylistic evolution. Whilst first-person anaphora recurs in pieces such as “Despair” and “The Search”, the lines criticised by Adrienne Rich as a mere “store of [recalled] facts”<sup>77</sup> have given way to a sparse, strained present tense. The prosily reminiscent association of past episodes is replaced by a relentless accretion of bleak statements focusing upon the here and now available to the mature poet in its damaged, “occluded” (CP 201) form: this, it seems, was what it was really like to be, as “Two Organs” had claimed, “older, / American, & other”. (CP 179) Elucidation regarding the nature of this dawning “other[ness]”, and its significance to Love & Fame’s overall design, is provided by Berryman’s draft schema for the collection, which describes its third section as a “return... to politics”.<sup>78</sup> For if these texts denigrate the preceding verses’ quest for literary fame, they also offer a striking rebuttal of that protagonist’s solipsism via what Philip Coleman has termed “an anxious social and environmental criticism”.<sup>79</sup> In “To a Woman”, the speaker refrains from seducing his female addressee, drawing upon his “full present knowledge”<sup>80</sup> to warn her that “this hot light / we so love may not last. / *Man* seems to be darkening himself”. Not just America, he intimates, but “the tortured red hills” of the Eastern powers, too, “to this hot light swell with pride”, (CP 204) threatening to extinguish their shared sun in a terrifying vision of nuclear apocalypse. The appearance of such overtly “politic[al]” poems at this late stage of Love & Fame might be interpreted as a demonstration that the detachment from the wider world born of excessive “pride” was not the crime of Berryman’s distasteful early persona alone. As “Have a Genuine American Horror –&– Mist on the Rocks” implies, were these not the motivating factors behind the US government’s

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<sup>75</sup> Berryman is with these phrases quoting Dream Song 28 directly; compare that work’s lines “I am unusually tired. / I’m alone too” and “There may be horribles; it’s hard to tell” (DS 28).

<sup>76</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 65.

<sup>77</sup> Adrienne Rich, letter to John Berryman, 12 Apr. 1970, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 31, Folder “Love & Fame Correspondence”.

<sup>78</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>79</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 236.

<sup>80</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

controversial CHASE operation of the late Sixties, in which “(14,500 six-ton concrete-&-steel vaults of nerve-gas rockets, lethal)” were relegated to parentheses, abandoned to “leak... [their] coffins” at sea? (CP 203) “[R]eturn[ing]... to politics”<sup>81</sup> in these works, Berryman was declaring his own opposition and “other[ness]” to the “poetics of avoidance [and] withdrawal”<sup>82</sup> that had characterised his volume’s first sections. Renewed self-scrutiny has effected a re-vision of the objectivised, “*unreal*” (CP 290) protagonist, and functioned instead to establish a poetic “personality... marked not so much by its private adventures as its peculiar eager response to the impacts of experience”.<sup>83</sup> Cast in this “hot light”, the American Dream of success at the expense of social engagement that has failed the subject of these early poems is also symptomatic of the wider failure of his nation: a failure, that is, to accept responsibility for actions taken in the world and to acknowledge the contribution of each self-interested citizen to encroaching “dark[ness]” (CP 204) and despair.

Such a reading of Love & Fame’s structure presents a direct challenge to the oft-cited opinion of Peter Stitt and others that it is “the most [C]onfessional of Berryman’s books”.<sup>84</sup> In claiming what his posthumously published novel Recovery dubs “The American Nightmare”<sup>85</sup> as his own, the poet can be viewed more profitably not as “striv[ing] for personalization rather than for universalization”<sup>86</sup> but as refuting the boundary between the two states, calling into question their very categorisation. Accordingly, the work’s third section is described accurately as tracking the development of a poetic “self acutely aware of his place, not apart or removed from, but intractably embedded in society”.<sup>87</sup> Retreat from the flux of external phenomena has proved futile, for the persona that seeks fulfillment through his public reception is necessarily subject to that society’s vicissitudes; as “Views of Myself” had hinted, perhaps even Thoreau in his cabin was “*wrong*, / [to] judge... by himself” (CP 196) in the face of “world-wide madness”. (CP 206) Overcoming the fixation upon the life of his art – its endurance, its originality – that had dogged Love & Fame’s first poems, Berryman’s excoriation of those early texts’ narrative “I” signposts his awakening into a new artistic model for modern life in all its

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<sup>81</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>82</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 236.

<sup>83</sup> Pascal 147.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Stitt, “John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet,” Ohio Review 15 (1974): 66-74, at 72. See also J. M. Linebarger’s assertion, “[F]ar too many passages in Love & Fame... suffer from the weakness of much of the [C]onfessional poetry of our time” (Linebarger 129) and Robert Phillips’ chapter “John Berryman’s Literary Offenses” in The Confessional Poets (Phillips 92-106).

<sup>85</sup> Recovery, in fact, goes on to explicitly identify this “Nightmare” as “the old [dream of] Getting On and Doing Good” (John Berryman, Recovery (New York: Farrar, 1973) 158).

<sup>86</sup> Phillips 17.

<sup>87</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 232.

insanities, losses and terrors. The re-vision is sufficiently pointed as to suggest an alternative, ironic source for his title in John Keats' 1818 sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be":

When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the fairy power  
Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.<sup>88</sup>

If, as Ernest Stefanik proposes, "the insight of Keats' final couplet" may have "operate[d] as a variation of the *ubi sunt* motif" (where are those who were before us?) for Berryman,<sup>89</sup> it is clear that this motif is not applicable solely to his former literary heroes. In his struggle towards a socially responsible mode of existence, the mature poet surveying the chaotic "shore / Of the wide world" is forced to watch his vainglorious quest for personal significance through high art sink "to nothingness"; in order to banish the man he was, he must "[d]raw... the curtain over" (CP 174) the solipsistic protagonist of his book's initial works.

It is nevertheless vital that we resist the temptation to conflate Love & Fame's method of "criticizing backward... preceding [poems]" (CP 290) with a complete repudiation of its first two sections. As Berryman would note in his "Scholia" to the volume's second edition, these verses

make... play with an obsession that ruled "The Ball Poem" of 1942 as well as later, Homage to Mistress Bradstreet... and The Dream Songs... namely, the dissolving of one personality into another without relinquishing the original. (CP 291)

The reform sought through Love & Fame's metatextual response to its own prior lines requires a "return... to the original form from the standpoint of the crisis of the present".<sup>90</sup> The personality permeable to "the impacts of experience"<sup>91</sup> is defined as such by its acceptance of responsibility for past misdeeds: it is not enough to simply change one's ways, for, as "A Huddle of Need" emphasises, one must also declare, "I will say: I have

<sup>88</sup> John Keats, "When I have fears that I may cease to be," 1848, Keats: The Complete Poems, ed. Miriam Allott, Longman Annotated English Poets (London: Longman, 1970) 296-98.

<sup>89</sup> Stefanik 117.

<sup>90</sup> Gregory Wolfe, "Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Catholic Writer in the Modern World," The Catholic Writer: Papers Presented at a Conference Sponsored by the Wethersfield Institute, New York City, September 29-30 1989, ed. Ralph McInerney (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1991) 13-30, at 15.

<sup>91</sup> Pascal 147.

been wrong.” (CP 205) In the poem “Damned”, the speaker who once persuaded a woman into “[h]er first adultery”, callously turning his “head aside / to avoid her goddamned tears”, is plunged by renewed meditation upon the event into “a long long night” of sleep-denying “wrest”. (CP 205) His anxieties regarding a prospective illegitimate pregnancy could not be further from “Her & It”’s boast of issue “off the record”, (CP 169) condemned by Robert Phillips as “an irrelevant posture of supermasculinity”.<sup>92</sup> For, indeed, the critical re-vision of *Love & Fame*’s third section works above all to expose the true relevance of what has been recounted previously, granting the ageing poet his “full present knowledge”<sup>93</sup> that retreat from society has proved impossible, the ultimate delusion. As the title of “The Hell Poem” insinuates, if a C grade had represented “hell” for Berryman’s early protagonist, the experience of a locked psychiatric ward is a different matter entirely:

It’s all girls this time. The elderly, the men,  
of my former stays have given way to girls,  
fourteen to forty, raucous, racing the halls,  
cursing their paramours & angry husbands.

Nights of witches: I dreamt a headless child.  
Sobbings, a scream, a slam. (CP 209)

“[C]ursing their paramours”: the presence of these “raucous, racing” females, nightmarishly disturbed by the experiences visited upon them, provides the persona with a new and tortuous comprehension of just what “Damned”’s seductions have wrought. Such poems might well be interpreted as the advent of a permanently dark “[n]ight” of the soul for their speaker. Attempting to reconstruct the personality through the process of renewed social engagement, they instead reveal a poetic self still more broken down, a composite of losses and mistakes; all has been infected by a pervasive “world-wide madness” and “[r]eflexions on suicide” proliferate. (CP 206) Yet even amid this darkness, Berryman insists, one hope still “[c]rackles”: (CP 208)

A basis rock-like of love & friendship  
for all this world-wide madness seems to be needed.  
Epictetus is in some ways my favourite philosopher.  
Happy men have died earlier. (CP 206)

Whilst stressing the individual’s responsibility for every “desire and impulse” that degrades him, the teachings of the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus offer the prospect of redemption through a “basis rock-like of love and friendship” underlying even modern

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<sup>92</sup> Phillips 101.

<sup>93</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.



life's uncertainties. Fame has failed the suffering figure of "The Hell Poem" and "On Suicide", yes, but perhaps love might not do the same, the love that compels humanity to perform "[t]he operations of the will... in our power", and to undergo the most difficult trials for country or for friends.<sup>94</sup>

The poems that conclude Love & Fame's penultimate section are, accordingly, most notable for their depiction both of a new agency and of a new self-acceptance on the part of their damaged, "occluded" (CP 201) speaker. If the crimes of his solipsistic past are indelible, his desire to "do [his] best" (CP 213) in the future is evinced by his composition of a "new priority list" that focuses not upon artistic achievement but upon human interaction. (CP 211) The man who once sought membership of literary cliques at the expense of all other relationships, bitterly tallying the "fan-letter[s]" that "never came", (CP 202) is moved in "Death Ballad" to reach out to those who, like him, have been driven to the psychiatric ward by the real world's despairs:

take up, outside your blocked selves, some small thing  
that is moving  
& wants to keep on moving  
& needs therefore, Tyson, Jo, your loving. (CP 210)

A public, balladic form, then, for a reformed public man, singing a very different tune from that of Henry in the last texts of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest. Responding to his critics and rendering himself permeable to the flux of contemporary experience<sup>95</sup> had enabled the mature Berryman to shape his personal trials into a response to the suffering voices of wider American society. The development is striking in its correspondence with the poet's intention as outlined in one early draft preface for the volume:

I am not afraid for my reputation: I let [the poems] go, wondering if any of them will give anyone tranquil pleasure or instruction or support or chills of recognition & wonder at the back of the neck. [I] try to be individually helpful... as well as a learned follower... in the literature & self-salvation of my beloved tragic intelligent lucky country.<sup>96</sup>

We cannot quite believe that the old concern "for my reputation" has been fully renounced; as "The Home Ballad" states, the completed Love & Fame manuscript ("Xerox'd before we publish it" (CP 214)) will be posted back to Berryman's twelve correspondents,

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<sup>94</sup> Epictetus, Discourses and Selected Writings, ed. Robert Dobbin, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2008) 45, 54. Berryman's late enthusiasm for the writings of Epictetus is further evinced by his unpublished 1971 essay "On Interpretation", which declares of Dream Song 14, "but [Henry] was only talking, friends, ab[ou]t The Usual, and even then he was ignoring Epictetus... on the role of habit" (JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder "SACRIFICE").

<sup>95</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 39.

<sup>96</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

demonstrating his ongoing desire for “reassurance, confirmation”.<sup>97</sup> But if the egotistical self of the early poems is not “surrender[ed]... in the object of love”<sup>98</sup> entirely in these works, it is evident that love remains its supreme achievement. This speaker’s anxieties of reception are eclipsed by his devotion to his daughter (“Despair”’s “excellent baby” (CP 208)), and by the delight with which he anticipates presenting these “stories true” (CP 214) to his wife: the story of the personality in society, an “almost hopeless angry art” that situates his own “Fate” firmly within the larger fate of his nation. (CP 215)

In fact, a survey of Berryman’s prose writings suggests the origins of Love & Fame’s self-critical movement – “wip[ing] out altogether”, as the “Scholia to Second Edition” declares, “all earlier presentations of the ‘love’ and ‘fame’ of the ironic title” (CP 290) – to predate the volume’s volcanic inception. In the 1959 review-essay “From the Middle and Senior Generations” the poet had proposed two alternative “central” motives for verse-composition:

Desire for fame and entertaining an audience are only two... motives, forgoable, particularly in the consciousness of a final two, which may be more central than any yet mentioned. Poetry is a terminal activity, taking place out near the end of things, where the poet’s soul addresses one other soul... And it aims – never mind *either* communication or expression – at the reformation of the poet, as prayer does. In the grand cases... it enables the poet gradually, again and again, to become almost another man.<sup>99</sup>

Following this model, the address to “one other soul”, the capacity for response to individuals outside the self, functions as a catalyst for “the reformation of the poet”; each interaction, as Roy Pascal has commented, is “a new act... [that] leaves the man different”,<sup>100</sup> necessitating a corresponding re-vision of the life and of the texts that have gone before. Love & Fame’s growing permeability to these “impacts of experience”<sup>101</sup> would lead ultimately to Berryman’s affixing a fourth and final section to the book. Having completed his tripartite manuscript by May 1, 1970, the poet underwent a radical religious conversion just eleven days later that lent an eerie prescience to his analogy between poetry and prayer. Defining the personal through its universal qualities and reaching out to address those “other soul[s]” afflicted by “world-wide madness”, (CP 206) Berryman, it seemed, had finally received an answer “alter[ing him] for good”. (CP 218) He would explain the precise character of this revelation to Peter Stitt in an interview the same year:

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<sup>97</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>98</sup> Stefanik 120.

<sup>99</sup> John Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” The American Scholar 28 (1959): 384-90. Rpt. in TFOTP 310-15, at 312.

<sup>100</sup> Pascal 183.

<sup>101</sup> Pascal 147.

I lost my faith several years ago, but I came back – by force, by necessity, because of a rescue action – into the notion of a God who, at certain moments, definitely and personally intervenes in individual lives, one of which is mine.<sup>102</sup>

The notion of a God of “rescue” – as the poet observed elsewhere, the “great inspiration” behind the narrative development of his first long poem Homage to Mistress Bradstreet<sup>103</sup> – had been transmuted from literature into the real, personal life. Significantly, however, the contingent nature of the “Eleven Addresses to the Lord” he appended to Love & Fame in the light of this “rescue action” serves to call into question his description of the volume in its “Scholia” as “however uneven – a whole”. (CP 290) Once aware of the work’s composition history, we cannot concede readily to Joel Conarroe’s assertion that a single teleology underpins its structure, “the second [half] representing a total repudiation of the values inherent in the... sections that make up the first”.<sup>104</sup> As the speaker of these poems falls “back in love” with the Catholic “Father” of his boyhood, (CP 221) the effect is instead akin to a re-casting of autobiography as theodicy:<sup>105</sup> the earlier sections’ trials are less “repudiat[ed]” than co-opted into a new crusade to “[l]ift up / sober toward truth a scared self-estimate”. (CP 220) The life-narrative must be revised once more, in accordance with poet and protagonist’s evolving “present knowledge”:<sup>106</sup> it must absorb and respond to a faith, like Saint Anselm’s, that surpasses understanding itself (“I do not understand; but I believe” (CP 220)).<sup>107</sup> Yet what is clear is that if, as Mary Gordon has stated, “[t]he artistic ego... coincided with the loosening of the grip of the Church over the hearts and minds of women and men”,<sup>108</sup> the Church’s renewed “grip” functions to excoriate Berryman’s protagonist further, erasing the last vestiges of love-for-fame:

Fearful I peer upon the mountain path  
where once Your shadow passed, Limner of the clouds

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<sup>102</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 39.

<sup>103</sup> One undated note among Berryman’s papers describes this “breakthrough” in Homage’s composition: “Blocked at the end of M[ovement] 1... without a clue – suddenly the opposite! < God’s rescues (of she honest & devoted, hard-working lost)” (JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1B).

<sup>104</sup> Joel Conarroe, “After Mr. Bones: John Berryman’s Last Poems,” The Hollins Critic 13 (1976): 5. Indeed, it seems more likely that, as John Haffenden has noted, Berryman’s “Scholia” “must accordingly have been conditioned by self-saving hindsight”: a further attempt on the poet’s part to influence the initial public reception of Love & Fame (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 78).

<sup>105</sup> As Roy Pascal remarks in Design and Truth in Autobiography, “[f]or old men, in particular, [autobiography] often acquires the meaning of a theodicy” (Pascal 183).

<sup>106</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>107</sup> Compare Anselm of Canterbury’s own words, “I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand” (Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion, Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, Oxford World’s Classics (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 82-104, at 87).

<sup>108</sup> Mary Gordon, “Getting here from there: a writer’s reflections on a religious past,” Spiritual Quests: The Art and Craft of Religious Writing, ed. William Zinsser (Boston, MA: Houghton, 1988) 29-52, at 47.

up their phantastic guesses. I am afraid,  
I never until now confessed.

I fell back in love with you, Father, for two reasons:  
You were good to me, & a delicious author,  
rational & passionate. Come on me again,  
as twice you came to Azarias & Misael. (CP 221)

Address 10 suggests the pilgrim's "[f]ear" of the world's "mountain path[s]" to be assuaged only by belief in the most "phantastic" of "guesses", the surrender of the self *as* the object of love. As such, these quatrains represent a crucial "reformation"<sup>109</sup> not just of persona and poet, but of their conceptions of the literary act. Where the egotistical mature narrator of *Love & Fame*'s early works had figured as the product of his publically-lauded texts, both artist and art are now recognised to be the products of a higher power still: God himself is the "delicious author, / rational & passionate".

The declarations of faith that constitute Berryman's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" extend an "exercise in onomastics"<sup>110</sup> begun in the sequence's opening lines, which characterise God, variously, as "Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake, / inimitable contriver, / endower of Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring Moon". (CP 215) As the speaker introduces his own "morning prayer" (CP 215) to his "Master" it is evident, furthermore, that such phrases are less "self-reflexive and... appl[icable] on a smaller scale to the poet as maker"<sup>111</sup> than self-diminishing, deliberately so. They cannot be otherwise, for the gift of versification itself has been administered by the Supreme Being whose role Berryman would later describe as that of "creator and sustainer... of the mind of man and all its operations".<sup>112</sup> Berryman's identification of these poems as "prayer[s]" works from their outset to signpost a further evolution of *Love & Fame*'s model of style as subject, as vehicle for the volume's quest to make the mind of the poet "known to many other people".<sup>113</sup> Meditative in tone, verging frequently upon the allegorical, citing the Biblical hermeneutics of "old theologian[s]" (CP 220) from Polycarp to Pascal, the style he had vaunted as "new for me and new I believe for anybody"<sup>114</sup> has here come full circle to reference one of the oldest styles. The prayer-template "impose[s] structure, discipline, tradition"<sup>115</sup> upon the protagonist who presents his "occluded & lost" (CP 201) figure to the

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<sup>109</sup> Berryman, "From the Middle and Senior Generations," *TFOTP* 312.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Mariani, "'Lost Souls in Ill-Attended Wards': Berryman's 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord,'" *A Book of Rereadings*, ed. Greg Kuzma (Lincoln, NE: Best Cellar, 1979) 8-21. Rpt. in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP: 1988) 219-31, at 225.

<sup>111</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 225.

<sup>112</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 41.

<sup>113</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 341.

<sup>114</sup> *JBP*s, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>115</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 221.

Lord, promising to situate him within a narrative of social and spiritual redemption in which “dreams” of fame “[m]ay fade” and “fan-mail go astray”. (CP 220) It remains notable, however, that if Love & Fame’s first sections demonstrate conclusively that the self cannot exist apart from wider society, nor escape the consequences of past misdeeds, these “Eleven Addresses” – composed at the eleventh hour, after eleven days of “wrest”, (CP 205) maybe even alluding to the eleven disciples who remained staunch in their faith – go one step further. Address 6 insists that the solipsistic former personality must not merely be accepted but be “fused” with that of the present, surrendered in its “double nature” for God to “look at” (CP 219) and judge:

Under new management, Your Majesty:  
Thine. I have solo’d mine since childhood, since  
my father’s blow-it-all when I was twelve  
blew out my most bright candle faith, and look at me.

.....

Confusions & afflictions  
followed my days. Wives left me.  
Bankrupt I closed my doors. You pierced the roof  
twice & again. Finally you opened my eyes.

My double nature fused in that point of time  
three weeks ago day before yesterday.  
Now, brooding thro’ a history of the early Church,  
I identify with everybody, even the heresiarchs. (CP 219)

The dream is over, yet like The Dream Songs’ protagonist Henry, who in his permeability to the flux of external experience<sup>116</sup> “identif[ies him]self with everyone in [the newspaper], / including the corpses, pal”, (DS 53) the speaker’s identification “with everybody, even the heresiarchs” is complete. The poem’s multiple Biblical allusions are juxtaposed against its portrait of an adulthood beset by a plague of “afflictions” to rival Job’s: divorces, a father’s suicide and financial, moral and spiritual “[b]ankrupt[cy]”. Nevertheless, God has “[f]inally” intervened to “pierce... the roof” of this corrupt body in a “rescue action”.<sup>117</sup> The guilt-ridden persona of the volume’s third section, rendered by full comprehension of his sins a “house divided against itself [that] shall not stand”, is reborn as Psalm 23’s “house of the Lord”.<sup>118</sup> Thus transformed, he is enabled to become a vehicle for good works through the forgiveness both of himself and of those others who are condemned to their “double nature[s]”.

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<sup>116</sup> Matterson 39.

<sup>117</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 39.

<sup>118</sup> See KJB, Matt. 12.25 (“And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand”) and Ps. 23.6.

One might say that Love & Fame's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" provide an answer to the plea most central to the volume, the speaker's plea, "Unite my various soul". (CP 217) Personal "[w]eaknesses [and] stupidities"<sup>119</sup> have been surrendered to a universal higher power in order to achieve a poetic self that is simultaneously a composite of "various" experiences and an entity united, "sole": a self desiring above all to "pace without fear the common path of death". (CP 217) For, as Address 2 emphasises, it is the beckoning presence of this all too "common path" that represents the ultimate test of faith. The "Master" bestowing "certain goodness" upon Berryman's protagonist has also through his infinite "allow[ances]" admitted, provided for and even forgiven innumerable "agoni[es]" (CP 216) and acts of violence:

yours the lost souls in ill-attended wards,  
 those agonized thro' the world  
 at this instant of time, all evil men,  
 Belsen, Omaha Beach, –

incomprehensible to man your ways.  
 May be the Devil after all exists.  
 'I don't try to reconcile anything' said the poet at eighty,  
 'This is a damned strange world.' (CP 216)

The sequence's "exercise in onomastics"<sup>120</sup> is here inverted strikingly to define God by his capacity for destruction, as the distant custodian of the "los[ses]" most "incomprehensible" to mankind. Perhaps, in following Saint Anselm, one must also follow Ralph Hodgson, the poet Berryman had invoked previously to preface Henry's last, futile call in The Dream Songs for "a middle ground between things and the soul": (DS 385) perhaps some elements of the Lord's plan cannot be reconciled. Whilst the Addresses' narrator declares with confidence, "I believe as fixedly in the Resurrection-appearances... // as I believe I sit in this blue chair", the "act of apparent affirmation sets up [further] dissonances",<sup>121</sup> succeeded as it is by the qualification of those events as "a special case / to establish... initiatory faith". (CP 216) Indeed, Berryman's verses suggest that modern man can expect no such miracles as he negotiates the trials of his own existence; the path is rocky, and uncertainty ever-present. His humble role requires him "not [to] question father's judgment but [to] gratefully accept... his counsel and admonitions",<sup>122</sup> celebrating the gifts vouchsafed him as best he can.

If Berryman's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" effect a radical reversal of Love &

<sup>119</sup> JBS, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>120</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 225.

<sup>121</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 227.

<sup>122</sup> Mary Jo Weaver, "American Catholics in the Twentieth Century," Perspectives on American Religion and Culture, ed. Peter W. Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 154-67, at 157.

Fame's initial quest for literary acclaim, it seems that the development must be attributed not to the poet's design but to God's intervening "rescue action".<sup>123</sup> The volume's concluding texts strive to unify both good and evil into the *ur*-text of this "delicious author"; (CP 221) even "[j]onquils" sing the oldest praise-script, "respond[ing] with wit to the teasing breeze". (CP 220) "Father Hopkins", unpublished during his troubled lifetime, has succeeded the heroes garlanded with prizes to assert in Address 10, "the only true literary critic is Christ".<sup>124</sup> (CP 221) All, we are told, has been "altered... for good", (CP 218) the persona reformed by love and in love. Given the benevolence of their message, what, then, are we to make of these Addresses' distinctly ambivalent reception by their first reviewers, from Hayden Carruth's dismissal of their speaker as a "boasting, equivocating secularist"<sup>125</sup> to Robert Lowell's comment that they were "cunning in [their] scepticism"?<sup>126</sup> It is conceivable that – despite Berryman's contention that his was a subject "on which I am an expert. Nobody can contradict me"<sup>127</sup> – the repeated re-definition of Love & Fame's titular values was a self-contradiction too far for many readers. The poet's denial of the contingent nature of his book's final poems and his insistence upon the work as "a whole" (CP 290) ran the risk of its spiritual and stylistic reformations coming too late to convince; whilst Berryman may have wished his prayers to emulate the "lightning words" of the Saviour, (CP 219) the damage of the prosy reminiscences that preceded them had already been done. Read in the light of, as an expansion of, those solipsistic "*grabs*... for girls, [and] for poetry",<sup>128</sup> it is not surprising that the Addresses' occasionally seriocomic "*grabs*" for salvation ("I have made up a morning prayer for you //... It took me off & on two days. It does not aim at eloquence" (CP 215)) would appear to some to be similarly "blustery"<sup>129</sup> and "*unreal*". (CP 290) However, as Berryman's quest for self-understanding is replaced by the belief that surpasses understanding, a more troubling ambiguity inheres in Love & Fame's professions of religious submission. The protagonist describes a faith as strong as his conviction that "I sit in this blue chair", (CP 216) yet, we recall uneasily, this is the same "blue chair" that in the earlier poem "Antitheses" "swivels, as my thought drifts". (CP 203) Identifying with the heresiarchs, his own heretical uncertainties – that evil and good alike

<sup>123</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 39.

<sup>124</sup> In fact, Hopkins' exact words, in an 1878 letter to his friend Canon Dixon, were "The only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ, who prizes, is proud of, and admires, more than any man, more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of his own making" (Gerard Manley Hopkins, cit. Mariani, "Lost Souls" 230).

<sup>125</sup> Carruth, "Love, Art, and Money" 437.

<sup>126</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to John Berryman, 27 Dec. 1970, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 24, Folder "12/1970".

<sup>127</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>128</sup> Berryman, interview with Willam Heyen 65.

<sup>129</sup> Carruth, "Love, Art, and Money" 437.

“live again”, that “Thou [art] there” – continue to infect his texts with their “double nature”: (CP 219) “Hast Thou prepared... / One sudden coming? Many so believe. / So not, without knowing anything, do I.” (CP 217) The “drift” of thought that interrupts the denial (“So not... do I”) with an admission of a lack of substantiating “know[ledge]” works here to establish its own sub-textual “[a]ntithes[is]”: the possibility of an understanding eclipsing rational consensus lurks beneath outright rejection of the parousia-narrative. For, as Address 4 implies, this figure’s desire for transcendence is matched by his fear of the Holy Ghost’s “[m]anifest[ation]” both of “glory” and of the weight of mankind’s sin:

Who haunt the avenues of Angkor Wat  
 recalling all that prayer, that glory dispersed,  
 haunt me at the corner of Fifth & Hennepin.  
 Shield & fresh fountain! Manifest! Even mine. (CP 218)

R. Patrick Wilson has observed that the qualified character of Love & Fame’s late religious revelations is sufficient to suggest an alternative source for the volume’s title.<sup>130</sup> “[L]ove” and “fame” are the goals, too, renounced by the protagonists of Alexander Pope’s 1717 poem Eloisa to Abelard, in a sacrifice marked not just by ambivalence but by agonized regret: “Lost in a convent’s solitary gloom! / There stern religion quenched the unwilling flame, / There died the best of passions, love and fame.”<sup>131</sup> Acknowledging these lines as a potential influence upon Love & Fame further supports the suspicion that Berryman’s aim to cut down the “*preten[sions]*” (CP 167) of its earliest verses may also serve to undermine the “Eleven Addresses to the Lord”’s pledges of spiritual commitment. Could the demands of “stern religion”, its humble devotional “flame”, really erase the persistent “flicker of impulse lust” (CP 217) for “rare girls” and “high company”? (CP 180) Recognition of the “double nature” (CP 219) that inheres within the book’s last texts presents a challenge to William Heyen’s assertion that Berryman “was shedding the self in these poems... in order to get away from it”.<sup>132</sup> Equivocating, by turns selfless and self-serving, they represent not the fulfillment of self-excoriation in divine surrender but the ongoing “reformation”<sup>133</sup> of oeuvre, persona and poet in the light of each interaction with the universe. Such an art of modern life necessarily wrong-foots the reader constantly in his search for a single unified stance: we might, in fact, conclude with Gary Q. Arpin that

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<sup>130</sup> R. Patrick Wilson, “The Ironic Title of Berryman’s Love and Fame (sic),” Notes on Contemporary Literature 5 (1971): 10-12, at 10.

<sup>131</sup> Alexander Pope, Eloisa to Abelard, 1717, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2546-54, at 2547.

<sup>132</sup> Berryman, interview with William Heyen 49.

<sup>133</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.



“several ‘Berrymans’” are depicted in Love & Fame.<sup>134</sup> The writer supplied a telling account of his volume’s poetics in a 1970 interview with Heyen, who quoted to him the first lines of W. B. Yeats’ “The Choice”:

The intellect of man is forced to choose  
Perfection of the life, or of the work,  
And if it take the second must refuse  
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.<sup>135</sup>

Responding tartly, “I admire that poem. It’s wonderful. But it’s full of shit. Because the results are not right, or if they are, the next poem will correct them”,<sup>136</sup> Berryman would emphasise that “[t]he intellect of man... forced to choose” must choose again with every fresh action in the world, every new literary act. Accordingly, his “Eleven Addresses” invite a final reading less as God’s product than as the products of each “creating situation”,<sup>137</sup> the products, that is, of those despairing and divine voices that break through solipsism to demand a reciprocal response. If Berryman was unwilling to relinquish full creative agency to God as “delicious author”, (CP 221) however, it remains notable that this reluctance was not without considerable justification. Address 11 foregrounds the danger to the self that is attendant upon such a sacrifice:

‘Eighty & six years have I been his servant,  
and he has done me no harm.  
How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’  
Polycarp, John’s pupil, facing the fire.

Make too me acceptable at the end of time  
in my degree, which then Thou wilt award.  
Cancer, senility, mania,  
I pray I may be ready with my witness. (CP 221)

Sourcing its phrases directly from Berryman’s Loeb Classical Library edition of The Apostolic Fathers,<sup>138</sup> this last Address offers a harrowing vision of the ultimate “[p]erfection of the life”.<sup>139</sup> The martyrs’ reward, its lines imply, can only be attained through a revised definition of the word “witness”, witness as personal testimony: what is required is unimaginable suffering, in the modern world that of “[c]ancer” or “more

<sup>134</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, The Poetry of John Berryman (New York: Kennikat, 1978) 90.

<sup>135</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Choice,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works, ed. and introd. Edward Larrissy, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 130. Cit. Heyen 65.

<sup>136</sup> Berryman, interview with Willam Heyen 65.

<sup>137</sup> Douglas R. Wilmes, “In the Vise: Berryman’s Delusions, etc.,” Interpretations 13 (1981): 80-86, at 84.

<sup>138</sup> Compare especially Address 11’s second stanza with The Apostolic Fathers’ account of “The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna”: “when the Pro-Consul pressed him and said: ‘Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ,’ Polycarp said: ‘For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’” (The Apostolic Fathers, ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1913) 325).

<sup>139</sup> Yeats, “The Choice,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works 130.

problematically”, as Michael Heffernan states,<sup>140</sup> “senility, mania”. The faith that surpasses rationality, then, may still prove to be a delusion, the hallucination of a sick and unholy fool. But what is one to do when the alternative is a self divided and guilt-ridden, “raging in the dark”<sup>141</sup> at the memory of past misdeeds? Choosing and not choosing, vacillating, Love & Fame’s employment of “conversion... as plot and as craft”<sup>142</sup> could be described as a failure, yes, but a failure in the strictly religious sense. For, charting his speaker’s wayward movement towards an ethically and socially responsible mode of existence, Berryman had succeeded in becoming “almost another man”:<sup>143</sup> the author of short poems, free from The Dream Songs’ shadow.

### 5.3 “Almost Another Man”: Delusions, etc. of John Berryman

Whatever spiritual uncertainties Love & Fame’s concluding “Eleven Addresses to the Lord” might manifest, in the wake of the volume’s December 1970 publication Berryman was determined to co-opt their conversion narrative into his personal life. Despite the poet’s ongoing worries that his was an “inadequate concept of God... – hostile to [the] Trinity, dubious of [Christ]” he would “profess... a regular Catholicism” throughout the following year.<sup>144</sup> Buoyed in his literary standing by the award of an honorary doctorate from Drake University, Iowa, and embarked upon a course of treatment for his alcoholism, Berryman mustered a vigorous public defense of his Addresses in the face of “uncomprehending” (CP 290) initial reviews, declaring in an open letter to The Nation that their “religious event [was] localized... [with] the feeling with which a lover memorializes the date and place of his first kiss”.<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, his correspondence during this period with his editor, Robert Giroux, paints a very different picture of his private anxieties regarding Love & Fame’s reception. Stating as early as January 1971, “I hope to Christ

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<sup>140</sup> Michael Heffernan, “John Berryman: The Poetics of Martyrdom,” American Poetry Review 3 (1984): 7-13. Rpt. in Berryman’s Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston, MA: Northeastern UP: 1988) 232-48, at 245.

<sup>141</sup> Yeats, “The Choice,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works 130.

<sup>142</sup> Meredith, “Swan Songs” 100.

<sup>143</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

<sup>144</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 383.

<sup>145</sup> John Berryman, letter to the editors of The Nation, 25 Nov. 1970, JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 9. The letter, in fact, presents a specific riposte to Hayden Carruth’s pre-publication review of Love & Fame in The Nation three weeks earlier, which had decried the Addresses’ religious revelations as “half bluster and half sneering... [the poet] seems to be saying, ‘If you believe this you’ll believe anything’” (Carruth, “Love, Art, and Money” 437).

the first edition sells out quickly and you can reprint”,<sup>146</sup> Berryman was motivated, it seems, less by prospective financial gain than by a desire for further “reformation of the poet”:<sup>147</sup> “reformation” as a radical re-writing both of life and of work under the influence of a distinctly Catholic sensibility. His plans for a re-issued volume that would delete whole poems and replace “enemies” names with initials<sup>148</sup> provided a means of correcting critical perceptions of Love & Fame through covert elision of its enduring “[w]eaknesses”.<sup>149</sup> Yet Berryman opted instead to draw attention to his mistakes, observing in his “Scholia to Second Edition” “I have killed some of the [book’s] worst poems”: (CP 291) a decision that, in the context of his late spiritual awakening, must be attributed to a stronger urge still for self-correction. The six texts excised eventually from the work’s second and third sections were certainly among those most deserving of the poet’s vicious annotations to its pages: “UGH”, “v. unpleasant! What ever made me think it anything else?”<sup>150</sup> These verses, including “Thank You, Christine” and “Regents’ Professor Berryman’s Crack on Race”, exemplify the distasteful solipsism of Love & Fame’s early protagonist. They portray a figure who, seeking memories of love, settles for a punning description of one menstruating paramour who “did her bloody best”;<sup>151</sup> a figure who responds to “world-wide madness” (CP 206) with a flippant “sense of hopelessness”,<sup>152</sup> calling for the “fanatics” on both sides of America’s racial divide to “*have it out & good riddance*”.<sup>153</sup> Read in the light of the “Eleven Addresses” “alter[ation]” of all “for good”, (CP 218) this was evidently a persona with whom Berryman no longer wished to be associated, and the work of a poet whom he no longer wanted to be. It was, then, true to form (or is that reform?) that in the spring of 1971, with the revised galleys of Love & Fame moving through the press, he would send to Giroux a “[p]resent plan” for work on a bewildering number of prose projects, from his “vol. [of] essays/stories” The Freedom of the Poet to the novel Recovery, a critical study of Shakespeare and a children’s Life of

<sup>146</sup> John Berryman, letter to Robert Giroux, 25 Jan. 1971, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 24, Folder “1, 1971”.

<sup>147</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

<sup>148</sup> See Robert Giroux, letter to John Berryman, 4 Feb. 1971, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 24, Folder “1, 1971”. The Farrar, Straus & Giroux second edition of Love & Fame incorporating Berryman’s desired changes was eventually published on 15 November 1972.

<sup>149</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>150</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 78.

<sup>151</sup> John Berryman, Love & Fame (New York: Farrar, 1970) 48.

<sup>152</sup> Linebarger 135.

<sup>153</sup> Berryman, Love & Fame (New York: Farrar, 1970) 63. Alongside these texts, the poems cut from subsequent editions of Love & Fame also include “A Letter”, “The Minnesota 8 and the Letter-Writers”, “The Soviet Union” and “To B- E-”; that they continued to appear in periodicals until October 1970 is testament to the radical *volte-face* in Berryman’s confidence regarding their merits.

Christ.<sup>154</sup> As Berryman began once again to reflect upon “the poet’s quest for a subject”, however, it struck him that this endeavour might already be, as he noted, “both abandoned = fulfilled”.<sup>155</sup> abandoned because fulfilled, its fulfillment the surrender of the self to the higher power of God’s will. In the year that had followed God’s “rescue action”<sup>156</sup> in his life, he had, in fact, composed not just his “Eleven Addresses” but more than fifty poems for a further book that he considered titling, variously, Thou Art the Man and TRIPS TO THE INTERIOR.<sup>157</sup> These post-conversion texts (commencing with a sequence of Divine Offices, no less) offered the possibility of a verse finally “altered... for good” (CP 218) and purged of all uncertainty through pious submission to the Church. Taking in and responding to “what is sent into individuals from the universe”,<sup>158</sup> had Berryman been taken in by the closing stance of Love & Fame?

The answer, when it came with the posthumous publication of Berryman’s final volume in April 1972, was: not, perhaps, entirely. Whilst the unrhymed quatrains of its “Opus Dei” sequence may, like those of Love & Fame, have originated in study of Emily Dickinson’s “lyric form”, (CP 290) their effect was more analogous with her 1896 aphorism, “This World is not Conclusion.”<sup>159</sup> If the Divine Office traditionally signified “certain prayers to be recited at fixed hours of the day and night by monks, priests, and others of a religious vocation”,<sup>160</sup> the poet’s prefatory parentheses stressed that this “*winter mockup*” was the best a “*layman*” could do: (CP 225)

*(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) (CP 225)*

“[S]uch being the World”, that is, as an entity distinguished clearly from God’s Word. For, as Berryman’s subsequent works imply, permeability to “His lightning” (CP 219) commands has precipitated only further crisis for the speaker who must negotiate the contemporary landscape. The “Opus Dei” persona is less a man transfigured by faith than

<sup>154</sup> John Berryman, letter to Robert Giroux, 11 May 1971, cit. Robert Giroux, preface, TFOTP vii-x, at viii. Farrar, Straus & Giroux would publish posthumously The Freedom of the Poet and Recovery in 1976 and 1973 respectively.

<sup>155</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder “Proemio & Che”.

<sup>156</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 39.

<sup>157</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 3.

<sup>158</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 347.

<sup>159</sup> Emily Dickinson, “This World is not Conclusion,” 1896, The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al., 6<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. C (New York: Norton, 2003) 184-85, at 184. Berryman’s ongoing preoccupation with Dickinson’s verse is evidenced by his composition of “a personal poem” to her in December 1970; “Your Birthday in Wisconsin You Are 140” appears in the second section of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman (Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 384; see also CP 242).

<sup>160</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 125.

a man locked in a constant struggle to reconcile accounts of God’s “miracles / antique” with their “quotidian” twentieth-century equivalents: “Yuletide tie[s]” and the distant interstellar movements of “quasars”. (CP 225) Illuminated thus, the epigraphs affixed to the sequence – the first, significantly, the stranger’s plea in Matthew 17.15 that Christ have mercy on his “lunatick, / and sore vexed”<sup>161</sup> son (CP 225) – provide an uneasy intuition that the true conversion-as-cure has yet to be effected, and that Love & Fame’s professions of a “[u]nite[d]... soul” (CP 217) may have proved premature. Might it be possible, as in the case of 2 Chronicles’ King Rehoboam, to reign successfully in “the city which the Lord ha[s] chosen”, but still to do “evil” in “prepar[ing] not / [one’s] heart to seek the Lord”?<sup>162</sup> (CP 225) As Jonathan Galassi has observed, the enduring “double nature” (CP 219) of these texts of would-be religious surrender renders them convincing “emblem[s]” not of pious faith but “of the unfathomable paradox of the dualistic human constitution”.<sup>163</sup> The afflicted protagonist desirous of becoming “Your person” is, it seems, doomed to remain most “obedient to disobedience”, (CP 231) cherishing the free will that makes it “quite out of the question! / ... to love You *with my whole mind*”. (CP 233) The dilemma is epitomized in “Lauds”, the first “Opus Dei” poem, in which he reflects upon his meagre Christmas presents:

Maybe I only got a Yuletide tie  
(increasing sixty) & some writing-paper

but ha (*haha*) 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. (CP 225-26)

From a pre-ordained “position zero”, Berryman’s speaker has been permitted to go one better, to make his own superior gift to himself. The triumph he vaunts (“*haha*”), the sense of victory over providence, is relegated to parentheses but endures as testament to his all-too-worldly “silliness” nonetheless. However, the lacuna of “Lauds” final line, working to distance such human fallibility from God’s “permissive” gaze, also invites a secondary, more problematic reading. Could this “silliness” not just have necessitated divine “[b]enevolence” but have “forged” it, brought the very notion of a forgiving deity into being?

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<sup>161</sup> KJB, Matt. 17.15.

<sup>162</sup> KJB, 2 Chron. 12.13-14. It is interesting to note that Berryman’s choice of the story of King Rehoboam – “one and forty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem” – for his second “Opus Dei” epigraph demonstrates an eerie prescience in its parallels with the poet’s life and career; born in 1914, Berryman began The Dream Songs in his forty-first year, and would die by his own hand seventeen years later, in 1972.

<sup>163</sup> Galassi 121.

The “Opus Dei” sequence, then, from its outset, functions to cast sharp focus upon the title that the poet would eventually select for his last volume: Delusions, etc. of John Berryman. These works’ equivocating stanzas hold in tension their obverse visions of God both as lenient parent and as “hard” tyrant, (CP 226) both as the creator and as the product of a “sore vexed” (CP 225) mind. It is interesting to note, moreover, that this antithetical model of the Holy Father corresponds closely to that of the “State as Father” outlined in Berryman’s notes for a lecture on George Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four: a body which “punishes”, “protects” and “instructs > reality”.<sup>164</sup> If issuing “instruct[ions]” superior to, of greater value than reality, then the Supreme Being must be accepted as the only guide for the trials of the modern world. Yet for Berryman’s “pseudo-monk” (CP 229) persona, the doubt contained within the conditional “if” prevents the ultimate leap of faith. So long as the Lord’s mysteries remain “miracles / antique” (CP 225) to contemporary society, His Word remains subject to uncertainty. The result is an ongoing interrogation of just which course of action might prove more delusive for the speaker: as Delusions, etc.’s title insinuates slyly, were even the “horrible saints” (CP 233) the victims of mere “pseudo”-instructions, the fatal hallucinations of ailing minds?

Leaving open the question of “which part of the book, the religious or the secular, comprises the Delusions”<sup>165</sup> in this manner, Berryman was forced to confront the potential limitations of his project of spiritual and textual “reformation”.<sup>166</sup> Paul Mariani elaborates:

[I]s the real delusion... to accept the sorry self as one finds it, with all its manias, incessant hungers, egotifications, etc., or to try to radically alter that self by capitulating to an onomastic pegboard Other that may not, in fact, after all even exist?<sup>167</sup>

At first glance, “Matins”, representing the traditional sunrise office, suggests the poet to have adopted the second approach. Like in Love & Fame’s “Eleven Addresses to the Lord”, reform “from the standpoint of the crisis of the present”<sup>168</sup> is sought via recourse to Biblical allegory: specifically, Psalm 103’s call for man’s self-recognition as one of the “flower[s] of the field”.<sup>169</sup> The effect here, however, is not to impose “structure, discipline... [and] order”<sup>170</sup> but to usher in a dawning sense of abandonment:

Thou hard. I will be blunt: Like widening

<sup>164</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>165</sup> Stitt, “Berryman’s Last Poems” 12.

<sup>166</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

<sup>167</sup> Mariani, ““Lost Souls”” 230.

<sup>168</sup> Wolfe 15.

<sup>169</sup> KJB, Ps. 103.15. See also KJB, 1 Pet. 1.24: “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.”

<sup>170</sup> Mariani, ““Lost Souls”” 221.

blossoms again glad toward Your soothe of sun  
& solar drawing forth, I find meself  
little this bitter morning, Lord, tonight. (CP 226)

Standing before his Lord's "hard" presence, the twentieth-century protagonist "find[s] [him]self / little", diminished, for reasons beyond those of self-excoriating humility: the *volte-face* of the stanza's penultimate line-break serves to intimate that the simile itself contains "little" personal resonance. For, as "Matins" continues, it is evident that this poem's distinctly qualified revelation derives its agency less from God's Word than from its own anacoluthic lines:

'Behold, thou art taken in thy mischief,  
because thou art a bloody man' with horror  
loud down from Heaven did I not then hear,  
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.

I am like your sun, Dear, in a state of shear –  
parts of my surface are continually slipping past others... (CP 226)

The ringing accusations<sup>171</sup> levied "loud down from Heaven" at David were, we learn, inaudible to Berryman's contemporary speaker, "far here from Court". But as he muses upon the more worldly tones of "goodnatured Handel's Te Deum", he has nevertheless "devise[d]" his particular "appoint[ment]" as "scotographer": an instrument measuring the intensity both of sun- and of Christ-as-Son-shine in order to produce images upon its highly sensitised plates.<sup>172</sup> One might conclude that the "sorry self" with its desire for "egocratifications"<sup>173</sup> is "here" to stay. Like the sun in its "state of shear" – and, as Berryman implies rather grandiosely, like the mortal Son as one-third of the Holy Trinity – "Matins'" persona is condemned to disunity, a wholly inadequate image of the all-accepting and all-reconciling Supreme Being. If this figure has not been "radically alter[ed]",<sup>174</sup> though, his capacity to alter God's word, and thus to effect an "almost able service" in the form of the "Opus Dei" sequence, offers the volume's sole possibility of redemption. Interrogating the convert's fervour that had characterised *Love & Fame's* last works, these texts, significantly, introduce a comparatively informal mode of divine

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<sup>171</sup> Berryman is alluding in the poem's fifth stanza to *KJB*, 2 Sam. 16.8, a passage that describes King David's persecution by "the family of the house of Saul" in Bahurim.

<sup>172</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary* 127-28.

<sup>173</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 230.

<sup>174</sup> Mariani, "'Lost Souls'" 230.

address: the use of familiar pronouns (“You”, “Dear”) is coupled with a juxtaposition of Biblical symbolism against “quotidian” phenomena. Their portrait of a Catholicism less “hard” (CP 226) and “alter[ing]” than subject to alterations gestures towards a key redefinition of the “*layman*” poet’s task: to not submit blindly to the Father’s authority, but instead to strive to integrate Word and world, modern human existence and wider Church principles.<sup>175</sup>

However, Delusions, etc. of John Berryman makes clear that such an endeavour was not without intrinsic difficulties. The Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor had observed in her 1969 prose collection Mystery and Manners, “Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery”.<sup>176</sup> Yet, as he considered his own experiences, it was plain to Berryman that for the majority of US citizens the “antique” nature of the Lord’s mysteries (CP 225) was no match for the American Dream’s gospel of financial success via capitalist individualism.<sup>177</sup> “Sext”, the “Opus Dei” sequence’s “[h]igh noon” address, marks poet and protagonist’s confrontation with a world of pragmatic solipsism which has engendered “the subtler menace” of spiritual “decline”: (CP 230)

Who mentioned in his middle age ‘Great Death  
wars in us living which will have us all’  
caused choreographers to tinker maps  
pointing a new domestic capital

and put before Self-Preservation ‘I’.  
.....

I personally call it: outmoded biology,  
of even mutation ignorant,  
and in that, that a bare one in 100 is benevolent. (CP 230)

For as long as individuals continue to aspire to worldly significance, the inevitable prospect of death will ensure that the most valuable “domestic capital” remains “Self-Preservation” (the capital “I”). In the words of Berryman’s speaker, this is not an evolution but a devolution of man, a perpetuation of the “outmoded biology” that makes him analogous with the animals; God’s cartographers mapping the heavens have here been supplanted by “choreographers”, a *danse macabre* towards a society in which “a bare one

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<sup>175</sup> As Mary Jo Weaver notes in her essay “American Catholics in the Twentieth Century”, the post-war period was distinguished by the development of “Catholic theology [as a discipline studied] by lay men and women who [were] often critical of the church and [saw] the magisterium as an office... rather than as an authority over it” (Weaver 165).

<sup>176</sup> Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners (London: Faber, 1972) 178.

<sup>177</sup> Paula M. Kane, “American Catholic Culture in the Twentieth Century,” Perspectives on American Religion and Culture, ed. Peter W. Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 390-404, at 398.



in 100 is benevolent”. With its horrified call for a more ethically responsible framework for human existence, “Sext” belies Douglas Wilmes’ statement that Delusions, etc. represents “a concentration on... the phenomenon of survival itself”.<sup>178</sup> The volume’s earliest texts might be described more accurately as a meditation upon the challenge of how to survive their circumstances: how to make what The Dream Songs had termed an “unhopeful Kirkegardian (sic) leap” (DS 192) from objective contemplation to subjective faith.<sup>179</sup>

Philip Coleman has, in fact, proposed Berryman’s late poetry to culminate in “a form of earnest ethical and spiritual inquisitiveness”<sup>180</sup> modelled upon that of Kierkegaard’s 1843 work Either/Or: A Fragment of Life. Both authors, he argues, present

a single paradigmatic figure within the context of an ethical-existential aesthetics that stands in continuity with the religious, or Christian, alternative to the romantic mode of living poetically.<sup>181</sup>

Perhaps, as Berryman had commented in his “Scholia” to Love & Fame’s second edition, in the world of his final verses “The Romantic” is “[j]ust one more doomed oldfashioned type”. (CP 291) The Dream Songs’ fractured protagonist Henry, as the product of his oneiric textual terrain, had enabled the poet to experiment both with a Keatsian negative capability and with Whitman’s open-form poetics of the *demos* to create “a multiplicity of possible self-identities”.<sup>182</sup> By contrast, the conflicted persona of the “Opus Dei” sequence, as the product of the tensions between God’s unifying Word and the secular world’s “egocratifications”,<sup>183</sup> must remain unalterable in his “double nature”. (CP 219) For this figure emblematic of “the dualistic human constitution”,<sup>184</sup> the quest for a responsible mode of existence cannot be realised through the literary shape-shifting that had permitted Henry to “fill... other Bod[ies]”.<sup>185</sup> His “paradigmatic” status, furthermore, necessitates a crucial revision of Berryman’s previous attempts to emulate Whitman by presenting “[a] voice... for himself and others; for others *as himself*”.<sup>186</sup> In Delusions, etc. of John

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<sup>178</sup> Wilmes 80.

<sup>179</sup> In his 1846 Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard would observe, “Christianity is the precise opposite of speculation... the miraculous, the absurd, a challenge to the individual to exist in it, and not to waste his time by trying to understand it” (Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, 1846, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968) 338).

<sup>180</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 228.

<sup>181</sup> Sylvia Walsh, Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994) 99. Cit. Coleman, “Love & Fame” 235.

<sup>182</sup> Walsh 99. Cit. Coleman, “Love & Fame” 235.

<sup>183</sup> Mariani, ““Lost Souls”” 230.

<sup>184</sup> Galassi 121.

<sup>185</sup> John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, John Keats: Selected Letters, ed. Robert Gittings, rev. ed, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 147-49, at 148.

<sup>186</sup> John Berryman, ““Song of Myself”: Intention and Substance,” TFOTP 227-41, at 230.

Berryman, the “voic[ing]” of those “others” in a similar situation is achieved not through the projection of the speaker’s identity, but through the acknowledgment of the two “others” that comprise the divided self. Each half of the personality (Christian and secularist, pious man and sinner) works to render it strange to its own being; each insinuates that the opposite stance might be the ultimate delusion. It is thus that, as “Terce” highlights, if this protagonist is critical of American society, he reserves his severest criticism for himself:

Twice, thrice each day five weeks at ‘as we forgive  
those who trespass against us’ I have thought  
ah his envenomed & most insolent missive  
and I have *done* it! – and I damn him still

odd times & unawares catch myself at it:  
I’m not a good man, I won’t ever be,  
there’s no health in here. You expect too much.  
This pseudo-monk is all but at despair. (CP 229)

The words of the Lord’s Prayer are in these anguished quatrains less altered than deflated, revealed to be a temporary salve at best. The aggressive opening spondees denoting ritual repetition of the submissive gesture and the self-defeating anaphora of the line “and I have *done* it! – and I damn him still” drive home the impossibility of true reform when each “thought” of the “insolent missive”<sup>187</sup> in question precipitates the same “double nature[d]” (CP 219) response from “[t]his pseudo-monk”. On the one hand lies the wish both to receive and to bestow pious “[b]enevolence”; (CP 226) on the other, the bitter smart to the ego that continues to hunger for secular success.

What Philip Coleman has identified as the “ethical-existential”<sup>188</sup> framework of Berryman’s last works, then, is defined as such by an ongoing interrogation of the persona’s “freedom... that is to say, [his] subjectivity”.<sup>189</sup> Offering an obverse portrait of a man “created *and* concluded” yet “still enmeshed in his own agonized crisis”,<sup>190</sup> the “Opus Dei” poems’ panicked stanzas (“Shift! Shift!” (CP 233)) declare an independence that retains a desire for guidance in its desperate search for unforthcoming “virtue”. Indeed,

<sup>187</sup> “Terce” most likely refers here to a letter Berryman received from Allen Tate in January 1971, which criticised Love & Fame severely for “condescen[sion] to... superior[s]” and for “an idiom for which there is no traditional standard”. The poet’s incorporation of Tate’s “most insolent missive” (CP 229) into his “Opus Dei” sequence might, in this context, suggest both his ongoing permeability to his work’s reception and a profound desire for literary and spiritual correction (Allen Tate, letter to John Berryman, 21 Jan. 1971, JBPs, Correspondence, Box 24, Folder “1, 1971”).

<sup>188</sup> Walsh 99. Cit. Coleman, “Love & Fame” 235.

<sup>189</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 228. The reference is to Simon Critchley, Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity (London: Verso, 1999) 97.

<sup>190</sup> Wilmes 85.

though “Nones” may remind us, ““a man’s shaliach is as it were himself””,<sup>191</sup> (CP 232) the qualification implied by the phrase (as *if* it were?) functions simultaneously to raise our suspicions that the demands of subjective faith may ask “too much” (CP 229) of this speaker. Despite the fervour of his “micro-micro-minor / post-ministry”, (CP 232) he describes himself guiltily as one “who slither[s] in [his] garments”: (CP 232) his free will keeps alive his capacity to act as anti-agent to pious man, as a doubting serpent in Adam’s clothing. These complex texts require an interpretation that goes far beyond J. M. Linebarger’s casual observation of their “similar[ity] to earlier Berryman poems that express a belief in God and a disbelief in an eternal hell”.<sup>192</sup> Their quatrains can be viewed more profitably as the continuation of a pilgrimage through the uncertain post-war world begun in Berryman’s first full-length volume, 1948’s The Dispossessed. As an entity in and of this world, Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s protagonist is also the product of its self-destructive ambition, “content with towers / & traffic quashing thro’ my canyons wild”. (CP 234) Here the Lord’s ways are inscrutable, and the smallest “lapse” of faith in His agency threatens to summon “Compline”’s “engulphing” (CP 234) vista of the global horrors that surround “quotidian” (CP 225) domesticity:

Lord, long the day done – lapse, & by bootstraps,  
oaths & toads, tranquil microseconds,  
memory engulfing, odor of bacon burning  
again – phantasmagoria prolix –

a rapture, though, of the Kingdom here here now  
in the heart of a child – not far... (CP 234)

The “phantasmagori[c]” vision of the Holy Ghost might yet prove to be an illusion of “oaths & toads”. Nevertheless, this final poetic Office indicates that commitment to forthcoming heavenly “rapture” remains the only means of suppressing its nightmarish subtext of military jack- “boots” and the “odor of... burning” human flesh. The “ethical and spiritual inquisitiveness”<sup>193</sup> of Berryman’s “Opus Dei” works, and the dichotomy they emphasise between, as the poet would note, “revolt, vs. (in)justice (mine against Yours[])”,<sup>194</sup> has reached its terminus in the fear that necessitates the endurance of this speaker’s (still wintry, still “fireless”) house of the Lord. (CP 235) The prayer-template alone has failed to effect the desired personal “reformation”.<sup>195</sup> In fact, Berryman’s

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<sup>191</sup> “Shaliach” is the Hebrew word for “apostle”. The phrase Berryman cites in “Nones” recurs repeatedly in the Talmud; see for example Berakhot 5.5.

<sup>192</sup> Linebarger 140.

<sup>193</sup> Coleman, “Love & Fame” 228.

<sup>194</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>195</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

anguished reaction to the 1971 “Minnesota 8” trial, which saw a group of young men imprisoned for destroying Vietnam draft records, would prompt him to insert an additional “Interstitial Office” amid the fixed chronology of his sequence:<sup>196</sup> a poem not altering God’s word to accord Him secular praise, but questioning His permissiveness towards such a “[g]rim... prosecut[ion]” (CP 228) with the exclamation “Where slept then Your lightning?” (CP 229) All, it seems, need help to negotiate this world that cannot “speak peace”, (CP 228) more help than a mere “*layman*” (CP 225) can provide. Accordingly, cleaving to the barest possibility of the guiding light and the fire of eternal judgment indicated by Berryman’s epigraph to Delusions, etc. “*Feu! feu! feu!*” (CP 223) may well be the most responsible course of action. Was the poetic self’s reconciliation with the “madness” (CP 206) of wider society, the “Opus Dei” poems asked, only achievable through the grudging capitulation “Yes – yes – I kneel”? (CP 229)

The further epigraphs that the poet had by March 1971 affixed to Delusions, etc. of John Berryman would, however, preface those of the “Opus Dei” sequence with the suggestion that if this era of bloody Vietnam manoeuvres, space race triumphs and US arms sales abroad was a time, like Chaucer’s, when “longen folk to goon on pilgrimages”,<sup>197</sup> (CP 223) a successful outcome for the modern traveller was by no means assured. Whilst Berryman cites the French critic Paul Claudel’s insistence that “L’art *est* religious”, his juxtaposition of the quotation against Matthew 11.17’s account of “the Jews who will not yield to God’s suasion”<sup>198</sup> (CP 223) gestures concurrently towards the volume’s enduring reluctance to accept the Lord as ultimate “delicious author”. (CP 221) Moreover, one early draft contents page for Delusions, etc., which lists in its margin the prominent periodicals to which Berryman intended to offer his latest works, demonstrates that the poet had not quite renounced the temptations of secular success.<sup>199</sup> As he mused upon his “Opus Dei” texts, his private notes recorded a growing anxiety that he might “now *overvalue*” the spiritual.<sup>200</sup> did not the heroic individualism of the divided self confronting the world’s terrors also deserve some credit? Such concerns may feasibly have motivated Berryman’s composition of Delusions, etc.’s second section, which Gary

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<sup>196</sup> As John Haffenden notes, “Berryman seems to have invented this Office for the sake of giving utterance to a sudden upheaval of indignation” (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 130).

<sup>197</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “The General Prologue,” c. 1386-1400, The Canterbury Tales, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2000) 215-35, at 215.

<sup>198</sup> Haffenden, Critical Commentary 123.

<sup>199</sup> Berryman’s list included the Harvard Advocate, New Yorker, Times Literary Supplement and New York Review of Books, all of which had published selections of his previous work (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 3).

<sup>200</sup> John Berryman, cit. John Haffenden, “The beginning of the end: John Berryman, December 1970 to January 1971,” Critical Quarterly 18 (1976): 81-90, at 83.

Arpin has criticised for a lack of ideological cohesion with “[the book’s] thematic significance... that the goal of art is greater understanding of God”.<sup>201</sup> The poet’s five elegies to canonical Western artists from Beethoven to Emily Dickinson and his erstwhile drinking companion Dylan Thomas – an “evil” tempered genius, (CP 241) a recluse, an alcoholic casualty – offer a contradictory vision of art as the product of secular uncertainties, its immortality achieved both because of and in spite of distinctly *un*Godly deeds. Yet, cast in the light of the preceding “Opus Dei” poems’ quest to reconcile God’s commanding Word with human society, it is possible to read these works as proposing an alternative source of textual authority. Dickinson, who “wore only white [and] did not appear” publically, (CP 242) Georg Trakl, fatally “[s]urmounted” by the First World War’s “carrion” (CP 243) and Thomas, whose “talk... clung latterly to Eden” (CP 245) are figured here as martyrs not to faith but to art, the legacy of their great efforts enabling them to “transcend the time that means death”.<sup>202</sup> In an overt parallel to the relationship “Matins” had established with the Supreme Being, the modern poet who responds to these figures’ compositions posits himself as their interlocutor, effecting a “post-ministry” (CP 232) that grants them further permanence:

Scribbled me once, it’s around somewhere or other,  
word of their ‘Edna Millay cottage’ at Laugharne  
saying come down to and disarm a while  
and down a many few.

O down a many few, old friend,  
and down a many few. (CP 245)

Not a prayer but a secular litany, its refrain a glass raised to the “many few” rare ones willing to sacrifice life for art’s potential rewards. For whilst it is tempting to accede to Jonathan Galassi’s retrospective assessment of Thomas et al. as “versions of Berryman, fictive ways of nearing personal danger zones”,<sup>203</sup> “Beethoven Triumphant”, the longest poem of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman, cautions against the easy conflation. If the first-person voice of Berryman’s volume is distinguished by a tone of ethical and spiritual enquiry, asking constantly “How to conduct myself?”, (CP 234) it is evident that for this “Master” the act of conducting was all, and the self a mere conduit for its art:

If we take our head in our ears and listen  
Ears! Ears! the Devil paddled in you

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<sup>201</sup> Arpin 97.

<sup>202</sup> Wilmes 85.

<sup>203</sup> Galassi 122.

heard not a hill flute or a shepherd sing!  
tensing your vision onto an alarm  
of gravid measures, sequent to demure,  
all we fall, absently foreknowing . . .  
You force a blurt: Who was I?  
Am I these tutti, am I this rallentando?  
This entrance of the oboe?

I am all these  
the sane man makes reply on the locked ward.

Did ever you more than (clearly) cope odd women?  
save clumsy uncommitted overtures  
au moins à Joséphine? (CP 240)

“Beethoven Triumphant”’s clotted stanzas deviate frequently from their quatrain form to depict a man simultaneously composing and composed of “tutti”, “rallentando” and the “entrance of the oboe”; a man for whom every action has a musical analogy (failed romantic “overtures”, “blurt[s]”, visits to “dark bars” (CP 240)). It is, furthermore, significant that Beethoven’s privileging of art over the “[d]evil[ish]” notes he discerns in external phenomena has permitted him to put aside the questions of moral responsibility that torment the speaker of Berryman’s last works. “[T]ensing” his creative eye (or, indeed, “I”) onto “an alarm / of gravid measures, sequent to demure”, he is able to evade the “demure” flirtations that result in pregnancy. Small wonder that, revising his draft text, the poet would excise the line “Blacks militant! the Chinese! – were not your thing”,<sup>204</sup> for in the case of this famous figure who refused public engagements, declining even “to scribble a word of introduction”, (CP 241) the statement is implicit. As the poem’s complex punning implies, Beethoven’s “absent... foreknow[ledge]” of human fallibility (the fall for knowledge, for supremacy) is itself sufficient for him to “demur” such a fate, and to refuse the burden of children, marriage and wider sociopolitical involvement.

“[S]pared deep age”, then, spared “deception”, (CP 240) Beethoven’s desire to be “le[ft]... alone” (CP 237) with his art also spared him the anxieties of reception that would prompt Berryman in October 1971 to send copies of his new manuscript to Robert Fitzgerald and Richard Wilbur with the query, “[I]s it worth publishing? and if so, how much of it?” (CP 322) It is striking, however, that “Beethoven Triumphant”’s stanzas spare no criticism of their “enigma[ti]c” subject. (CP 236) The artist cherishing late hopes of “going above” is exposed as Haydn’s ungrateful pupil possessed of an “evil” temper, the “brother [who] charged the dying brother board & lodging”. (CP 241) Rather than viewing Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s second section as Berryman’s own “Diabelli varia” (CP 237) in which “the [original] theme has ceased to rule over its unruly offspring”,<sup>205</sup> we

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<sup>204</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>205</sup> Alfred Brendel, Alfred Brendel On Music: His Collected Essays (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2001) 114.

might instead interpret these works as a continued effort on the poet's part to grapple with what Roger Pooley has termed "the problems of... theodicy... of loss... and of inspiration":<sup>206</sup> a quest for "greater understanding"<sup>207</sup> of his world. Whilst pledging allegiance to the words not of God but of the struggling individuals they portray, the poems bear the unmistakable impact of Berryman's post-conversion doubts regarding "the autonomy of art from truth and morality".<sup>208</sup> The writer who, publishing his adulterous Sonnets to Chris just four years earlier, had cited in his defence Jacques Maritain's contention that "*wickedness / was soluble in art*", (CP 70) is now left pondering whether the Devil might, in fact, have "paddled" (CP 240) in Beethoven's refusal to exhibit compassion for his fellow men; whether Georg Trakl's suicide might constitute a blessing in its transcendence of a humanity "together in such pain / dumb apart". (CP 243) As the protagonist of Delusions, etc.'s first sections vacillates between an art of faith and a faith in art, his desire to reconcile words with world necessitates a renewed consideration of the free will underlying artistic "inspiration". "Gislebertus' Eve", the poem that opens the volume's third section, suggests the thinking man's very "passion for secrets" to stand as the legacy of the "ultimate human" crime: (CP 246)

Eve & her envy roving slammed me down  
 prone in discrepancy: I can't get things right:  
 the passion for secrets the passion worst of all,  
 the ultimate human, from Leonardo & Darwin

.....

So now we see where we are, which is all-over  
 we're nowhere, son, and suffering we know it,  
 rapt in delusion, where weird particles  
 frantic & Dithetic orbit our

revolutionary natures. She snaked out a soft  
 small willing hand, curved her ivory fingers on  
 a new taste sensation, in reverie over  
 something other,  
 sank her teeth in, and offered him a bite.

I too find it delicious. (CP 246)

The original sin of the mother is here begotten again on the son as he lies "prone in [the] discrepancy" of his doubting "double nature". (CP 219) History is doomed to repeat itself, for, engaged as he in mankind's futile crusade for knowledge of the "secrets" that study of the most elemental "particles" cannot unlock – "particles" themselves "Dithetic", holding

<sup>206</sup> Roger Pooley, "Berryman's Last Poems: Plain Style and Christian Style," Modern Language Review 76 (1981): 291-97, at 291-92.

<sup>207</sup> Arpin 97.

<sup>208</sup> Kane 398.

in tension the opposing belief systems of religion and science – this speaker is both born of Eve’s transgressive “envy” and compelled to sin again. “[R]apt in delusion”, desiring the moral and ontological autonomy he can neither prove nor fully possess, he remains vulnerable to every tempting apple proffered by the modern world: every “adman’s ‘new taste sensation’”<sup>209</sup> with its attendant movement away from the spiritual realm.

#### 5.4 “If I Could Hear of a Middle Ground, I’d Opt”: Delusions, etc. and the Problems of Reconciliation

In its recognition of the first Romanesque sculptor to sign his work rather than according the honour to God, the poem “Gislebertus’ Eve” represents the culmination of a shift in perspective on the part of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s speaker: a shift, that is, “from a paradigm of obedience to a paradigm of discernment”.<sup>210</sup> Written in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, which addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world, Berryman’s volume echoes the council members’ radical majority call for a Catholicism focused less upon scriptural literalism than upon a multifaceted lay participation in the liturgy that sought to locate God’s presence within everyday life.<sup>211</sup> Perhaps it was possible to transmute guilty “suffering” into a faith celebrating the American spirit’s “revolutionary nature”: (CP 246) a faith in which the achievements of even those individuals “obedient to disobedience” (CP 231) might serve as a vehicle for artistic dialogue with the Creator. Nevertheless, it was clear that, as both “Gislebertus’ Eve” and the subsequent poems of Delusions, etc.’s third section demonstrate, such faith requires a stronger belief still in the inherent goodness of the self as God’s product, its every action “work[ing]... for... the Lord”. (CP 232) If, to quote Peter Stitt, the first poems of this section “detail... the physical world in which man is immersed”,<sup>212</sup> they retain an overwhelming sense of sinfulness. As he attempts to reconcile God’s Word with twentieth-century society, the persona’s reaffirmed free will

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<sup>209</sup> Arpin 95.

<sup>210</sup> Weaver 164. The importance Berryman accorded to “Gislebertus’ Eve” is further suggested by his early draft contents pages for Delusions, etc.: the poet would consider using the motto “*Gislebertus hoc fecit*” (“Gislebertus made this”), carved by the 12<sup>th</sup> century sculptor upon the West Tympanum of Autun Cathedral, as both title and epigraph to his volume (JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 3).

<sup>211</sup> Weaver 165.

<sup>212</sup> Stitt, “Berryman’s Last Poems” 10.



has once again left him prey to the American Dream's gospel of secular success. The result is not further acts of divine service but "The Form"'s solipsistic whirlwind of adulation, tours and "[m]utinuous" (CP 250) self-destruction:

O torso hurled high in great 'planes from town  
down on convulsing town, brainsick applause  
thick to sick ear, thro' sixteen panicked nights  
a trail of tilted bottles. I had no gun,

and neither Wednesday nor Thursday did buy one  
but Friday and I put it in my bag  
and bought a wide-eyed & high-yaller whore  
for company of darkness. Deep in dream

I saw myself upreared like William the Silent  
over his tomb in Delft, armoured & impotent... (CP 251)

In the "Opus Dei" sequence, "Vespers" evasive syntax had "cast about abroad / for avenues of out" (CP 233) from religious submission. Here, however, the progressive simplification of Berryman's diction – from embodiment of percussive, retching nightmare ("brainsick applause / thick to sick ear, thro' sixteen panicked nights") to flat statement of unsightly fact – functions merely to suggest that, faced with the trials of the contemporary world, this pilgrim "ha[s] not done well".<sup>213</sup> (CP 233) Though God's Word might be altered to better reflect modern existence, it cannot alter the society that continues to tempt the speaker with its "brainsick applause" and "trail of tilted bottles". Cast in the light of these lines, "The Form"'s title implies both "the poet's quest for a subject"<sup>214</sup> (the text-as-quest) and the unregenerate poetic self to be "form[s]" as fixed as the statue of Catholic betrayer "William the Silent", unable to correct or to be corrected. Amid an environment that, Berryman had declared in 1970, "would drive anybody out of his skull, anybody who is at all responsive",<sup>215</sup> the Second Vatican Council's promotion of a more "discern[ing]"<sup>216</sup> Catholicism, it seems, also ran the risk of facilitating a dangerous drift away from wider Church principles. Was this merely the advent of an era in which, as "Tampa Stomp" expands, "We're running out / of time & fathers, sore, artless about it"? (CP 248)

One might, then, surmise the poems of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman's third section to represent not the triumph of heroic individualism but what one unpublished draft of the poet's from the period terms "The Wednesday Morning Tour of This Battlefield". As the protagonist confronts the slow death of a once-vaunted "ambition"<sup>217</sup> and "[g]all in

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<sup>213</sup> Pooley 296.

<sup>214</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 2, Folder "Proemio & Che".

<sup>215</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 344.

<sup>216</sup> Weaver 164.

<sup>217</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1.

every direction”, (CP 250) his crisis reaches its peak in “He Resigns”, the poem situated centrally within the section and the volume. The terse quatrains of this bleak “lament for the passing of inspiration”<sup>218</sup> reduce Berryman’s characteristic syntactic evasions and inversions to a shadow of even “The Form”’s style:

Age, and the deaths, and the ghosts.  
Her having gone away  
in spirit from me. Hosts  
of regrets come & find me empty.

I don’t feel this will change.  
I don’t want any thing  
or person, familiar or strange.  
I don’t think I will sing

any more just now;  
ever. I must start  
to sit with a blind brow  
above an empty heart. (CP 249-50)

Mourning the onset of “[a]ge, and the deaths, and the ghosts”, it is notable that the text contains the ghost of an allusion to Berryman’s old literary hero Yeats: specifically, his 1939 poem “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, which states that, all “dreams” broken, “I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”<sup>219</sup> Yet it is evident that for the persona of “He Resigns” the reference indicates no Bloomian anxiety of influence “come full circle”, no poem “held open to [its] precursor” in order to establish reciprocal dialogue with a past master.<sup>220</sup> This figure who, in full comprehension of his irredeemably sinful nature, defines himself anaphorically by what he is not – no longer “change[able]”, no longer possessed of a “passion for secrets”, (CP 245) barely human – is both artless and “heart”less, lacking the will to “sing” on. In this dark vision of lost faith in the abilities of God, literature and man to effect a further “rescue action”,<sup>221</sup> every enjambment can lead only “to an expectation and then immediately to the disappointment of that expectation” (“Hosts” not heavenly but “of regrets”, the “start” not of action but of its end, beginning “to sit”).<sup>222</sup> The comparison with Yeats’ text, summoned, must be discarded, because its overt acknowledgement would represent another vainglorious dead end: no “ladders”, Berryman’s lines imply, are available to elevate their speaker’s sufferings into high art, and there is nothing to “sing” about.

If “He Resigns” constitutes a flat denial of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s

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<sup>218</sup> Pooley 296.

<sup>219</sup> Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” W. B. Yeats: The Major Works 180-81, at 181.

<sup>220</sup> Bloom 16.

<sup>221</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 39.

<sup>222</sup> Arpin 99.

capacity for personal and spiritual “reformation”,<sup>223</sup> however, several works of the same section provide a striking counter to its despairs. In the wake of a post-conciliar drift away from notions of an objective moral order,<sup>224</sup> submission to external authority, whether that of the Holy Father or that of one’s artistic forefathers, presented the ultimate challenge to the “disobedien[t]” (CP 231) individual. Nonetheless, poems such as “Lines to Mr Frost” demonstrate that if unquestioning acquiescence was impossible, relief from suffering might still be obtained through ransacking these divine and secular others’ words for present-day significance. Where “He Resigns” had refused to enter into metatextual dialogue with Yeats, the protagonist rereading Robert Frost’s “The Draft Horse” experiences a fresh revelation regarding that text’s meaning:

Felled in my tracks by your tremendous horse  
 slain in its tracks by the angel of good God,  
 I wonder toward your marvellous tall art  
 warning away maybe in that same morning

you squandered afternoon of your great age  
 on my good gravid wife & me, with tales  
 gay of your cunning & colossal fame  
 & awful character, and – Christ – I see

I know & can do nothing, and don't mind –  
 you're talking about American power and how  
 somehow we've got to be got to give it up – (CP 249)

For Berryman – who, tellingly, in late 1971 would begin to draft his own prose treatise “On Interpretation”<sup>225</sup> – the act of interpreting Frost’s poem of a horse “deliberately stabbed [to] dea[th]” has become the vehicle for a verse of renewed faith in Christ’s presence behind the lines, in textual interstices (“– Christ –”). Despite Frost’s “awful character”, the elder writer’s description of “too frail a buggy... / Behind too heavy a horse”<sup>226</sup> prompts the contemporary speaker to discern not the actions of a murderer but those of a slaying “angel of good God”, and to locate a modern sociopolitical allegory in the “American power” that “somehow we’ve got to be got to give... up”. We might conclude that “Lines to Mr Frost” works to dispel both humanity’s “most dangerous delusion [of] self-righteousness”,<sup>227</sup> and, crucially, the concept of belief as a static entity

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<sup>223</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

<sup>224</sup> Kane 397.

<sup>225</sup> The surviving short manuscript of this work launches a specific and vicious attack upon Susan Sontag’s 1966 essay collection Against Interpretation. It is interesting to note that Berryman’s call in its pages for “the civilized and pre-technological peoples of the world... to liberate the Amer[icans] fr[om] their mad power” directly echoes the concerns of “Lines to Mr Frost” (JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder “SACRIFICE”).

<sup>226</sup> Robert Frost, “The Draft Horse,” The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Latham (London: Vintage, 2001) 443-44, at 444, 443.

<sup>227</sup> Berryman, cit. Haffenden, Life 388.

impermeable to “the impacts of experience”.<sup>228</sup> The vacillating lay participant of Delusions, etc. is subject to a faith that is constructed and deconstructed by its infinite interpretative possibilities in the world; even in “The Form”, having “felt [him]self deranged / and would be ever so”, he is at last motivated to “lean... upon” God by the “odd slight thought” that plans for tomorrow’s suicide may lead to tomorrow’s redemption. (CP 251) It is thus less surprising that the volume’s last sections, documenting this figure’s descent into existential crisis, also document his reawakening into a religious conviction affirmed by and through artistic inspiration. The protagonist of “A Prayer After All”, shocked to find his sinful adult “tongue” once again “feeling its way / thro’ the Hail Mary”, (CP 252)<sup>229</sup> has by “Minnesota Thanksgiving” resumed the position of divinely appointed “scotographer”, (CP 226) rewriting the Pilgrim Fathers’ praises of God from within his own “quotidian” environment: (CP 225)

For that free Grace bringing us past great risks  
 & thro’ great griefs surviving to this feast  
 sober & still, with the children unborn and born,  
 among brave friends, Lord, we stand again in debt  
 and find ourselves in the glad position: Gratitude. (CP 258)

From “Grace” to “great” to “griefs” to “feast[s]”, before “the children unborn and born”, the poem’s phrases must undergo a constant process of re-vision. Yet, his faith in mankind’s capacity to effect “Matins” “almost able service” (CP 226) to God strengthened by its emergence from crisis, Berryman’s speaker is now able to regard this disunified Thanksgiving gathering as analogous to the “gathered congregation who, themselves, constitute the body of Christ”.<sup>230</sup> All here are fallible, indebted, mortal, but “brave[ly]” determined to do better through everyday acts of responsible “[g]ratitude”; acts that might conceivably prevent them, as the poet would observe in one manuscript note, from “incurring the danger of Hell”.<sup>231</sup>

Perhaps, then, all we can state with certainty of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman is that its “mask that may not be a mask, which envelopes (sic) the personality of a famous poet”<sup>232</sup> is fundamentally Janus-faced: the product of a man who, declaring in an October 1970 interview, “Nobody can contradict me”, would append to its page proofs less than

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<sup>228</sup> Pascal 147.

<sup>229</sup> Perhaps not so shocking after all: the third period of the Second Vatican Council was closed on 21 November 1964 with the Pope’s formal reaffirmation of Mary as Mother of the Catholic Church, the bearer of its “mystery” (Catholic University of America, “Vatican Council II,” New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 14 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 566–67).

<sup>230</sup> Weaver 161.

<sup>231</sup> JBPs, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>232</sup> Wilmes 82.

five months later the terse corrective postscript “Delusion”.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, examination of the volume’s structure reveals its contradictions to operate beyond the level of the persona’s vacillations. Following the third section’s renewed professions of religious belief, we are confronted not by further “*layman*”’s (CP 225) prayers but by a short intermediary “Scherzo”. Whilst grouped under the Italian word for “joke”, denoting in musicology a movement excised from a larger work, these poems represent less “comic relief”, as Peter Stitt has proposed,<sup>234</sup> than a black joke upon the all-too-credulous reader. For it is clear that this section’s five texts – including the post-His Toy, His Dream, His Rest Songs “Henry by Night” and “Henry’s Understanding”, and a further dream of a dream in the blank verse piece “Damn You, Jim D., You Woke Me Up” – do not belong to the project of Delusions, etc.’s spiritual revelations. Celebrating not God but Berryman as “delicious author”, (CP 221) they function as a reminder of the poet’s past achievements and his celebrated oeuvre: a reminder, significantly, that the labours and the prizes have not benefited the Lord alone. In “Defensio in Extremis”, the speaker who found renewed faith in his contemporary interpretations of others’ words alters the translated Hebrew lines of the Dead Sea Scrolls to express his own unholy rage at the critics that dare to “question... / ... [his] sincerity.”<sup>235</sup> (CP 256)

I said: Mighty men have encamped against me,  
and they have questioned not only the depth of my defences  
but my sincerity.  
Now, Father, let them have it.

.....

Surely some spiritual life is not what it might be?  
Surely they are half-ful of it?  
Tell them to leave me damned well alone with my misunderstood orders. (CP 256)

The defence is spirited, but in its “double nature[d]” (CP 219) phrases and rhetorical questions condemned to enact the critical concerns it has absorbed. Reading the poem’s concluding lines, the possibility of its manifesting “some spiritual life” of which its detractors, full of barbs, are merely “half-ful” remains dubious at best; as “Defensio in

<sup>233</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 38.

<sup>234</sup> Stitt, “Berryman’s Last Poems” 9.

<sup>235</sup> As John Haffenden observes, the opening lines of “Defensio in Extremis” allude to “a part of the second column of the Hymns of Thanksgiving from Qumran 1 (QH 2:20-30)”, which translates: “For it is *Thy favour that maintains me*. // I said: Mighty men have encamped against me, / surrounding me with all their instruments of war” (Jan H. Negenman, New Atlas of The Bible, ed. Harold H. Rowley (London: Collins 1969) 16. Cit. Haffenden, Critical Commentary 151). Berryman employs a similar technique in the Delusions, etc. poems “Overseas Prayer” and “Amos”, which draw upon ancient Egyptian execration texts and the Biblical book of that name, respectively, to call down vengeance upon his poetic and political enemies (CP 259-61).

Extremis” syntax implies slyly, have not the “orders” that these “[m]ighty men” suspect also been “misunderstood” by the vengefully vindictive protagonist?

If Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s last sections and works advance a distinctly contradictory message regarding what might constitute success in art and in life, however, it is notable that the antitheses held in tension by texts such as “Defensio in Extremis” are those same antitheses characteristic of the volume as a whole: the struggle between evil and benevolence, human reality and divine mystery, individual agency and spiritual authority. Faced with these conflicts, one might do well to emulate Ralph Hodgson, quoted in the second of Love & Fame’s “Eleven Addresses to the Lord” as stating “I don’t try to reconcile anything... / [t]his is a damned strange world”. (CP 216) Berryman had alluded to the elder poet’s words, too, in The Dream Songs to underline the dilemma of that work’s protagonist Henry – a figure whose nature, dependent upon the dream-text’s privileging of co-existent alternatives, could ultimately permit no “middle ground between things and the soul”. (DS 385) Yet if Hodgson’s phrase offers an apt description of Henry’s fate, Delusions, etc.’s speaker is less willing to relinquish his quest for “reconcil[iation]”. The poem “Ecce Homo” situates this “middle ground” within the Louvre’s 12<sup>th</sup> century Crucifixion scene, in which, as Berryman recorded, Christ “in order to be wholly man... t[ook] upon himself the ultimate sin of despair”.<sup>236</sup>

a Pantocrator glares down, from San Clemente de Tahull,  
making me feel you probably were divine,  
*but* not human, thro’ that majestic image.  
Now I’ve come on something where you seem both –  
a photograph of it only –

Burgundian, of painted & gilt wood,  
life-size almost (not that we know your Semitic stature),  
attenuated, your dead head bent forward sideways,  
your long feet hanging, your thin long arms out  
in unconquerable beseeching – (CP 251-2)

In these lines, “unconquerable beseeching” has been made “life-size”. “Ecce Homo” suggests belief in Christ’s simultaneous “human[ity]” and “divin[ity]” to provide a means of integrating mortal sin into the Creator’s *ur*-template, and even of understanding the necessity of suffering to His heavenly design. Having become as man, the Son’s transformed manifestation in the world is transformative in its implications, raising the possibility of salvation for other “sinner[s] nailed dead-centre too”. (CP 262) According to such a model, Berryman enquires in “Unknowable? perhaps not altogether”, might we not “trans-act” with the Lord not just in our crimes but in our individual acts of service, and

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<sup>236</sup> JBPs, His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Box 1, Folder 2.

“young men young men in the paddies rescue”? (CP 258)

It is certainly appropriate that as the protagonist of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman pores with renewed fervour over the New Testament, he should interpret Christ, as representative of a potential “middle ground between things and the soul”, (DS 385) to be a constant presence within its texts. As “The Prayer of the Middle-Aged Man” observes, when not in the narrative foreground the Son is discernable “trans-acting” (CP 258) within interstices, “in the middle of disciples, the midst of the mob, / between the High Priest and the Procurator, / among the occupiers, // between the malefactors”. (CP 261) But therein, it seems, lies the rub: this speaker who remains suspicious of his own motives, seeking guidance upon “[h]ow to conduct [him]self” (CP 234) amid modern society’s “isometrics, barbells, & antiphons”, (CP 259) is also forced to reconcile himself to a lack of historical proof for Christ’s existence. Whilst Berryman would designate several of the works comprising his volume’s final section as “[p]rayer[s]”,<sup>237</sup> Ernest Stefanik notes perspicaciously, “the one being addressed is not like an audience inasmuch as there can be no direct response”.<sup>238</sup> However, although belief that prayer will supply “an answering material presence in the Deity”<sup>239</sup> may be naive, Delusions, etc. emphasises subsequently that any quest to physically substantiate a metaphysical being is still more so; man’s desire to unlock the mysteries of Creation through objective study merely confirms his pride in his rational faculties to be “eighteen-tenths deluded”. (CP 259) As Berryman would observe in an unpublished draft from the period, twentieth-century Americans as “scientists in the soul” must also be “metaphysicians in the affairs of the heart”.<sup>240</sup> For in a world of “[c]orpuscle[s]”, (CP 231) “parsecs” (CP 225) and “skew Wolf-Rayet star[s]”, (CP 227) a world in which, we are told, “Ninety percent of the mass of the Universe / (90%!) may be gone in collapsars, /... – if they exist”, (CP 261) it is, paradoxically, more evident than ever that true certainty requires “an unhopeful Kierkegardian (sic) leap” (DS 192) into subjective faith. The poem “Certainty Before Lunch” demonstrates man’s ongoing struggle to make the conditional “if” “counter the grip and force of circumstance”.<sup>241</sup>

My friends the probability man & I

& his wife the lawyer are taking a country walk  
in the flowerless April snow in exactly two hours  
and maybe won’t come back. Finite & unbounded

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<sup>237</sup> See “Somber Prayer”, “A Usual Prayer”, “Overseas Prayer” and “The Prayer of the Middle-Aged Man” (CP 257-62).

<sup>238</sup> Stefanik 126.

<sup>239</sup> Wilmes 81.

<sup>240</sup> JBPs, Miscellaneous Unpublished Poetry, Box 1, Folder 1A.

<sup>241</sup> Wilmes 81.

the massive spirals absolutely fly

distinctly apart, by math *and* observation,  
current math, this morning's telescopes  
& inference. My wife is six months gone  
so won't be coming. That mass must be somewhere!

or not? just barely possibly *may not*  
BE anywhere? My Lord, I'm glad we don't  
on x or y depend for Your being there.  
I know You are there. The sweat is, I am here. (CP 261)

It is unsurprising that this text's persona should "tak[e]... a country walk" not just with "the lawyer" but with "the probability man". The antithetical phrases he employs to meditate upon the black hole phenomenon ("[f]inite & unbounded", an entity that "may be" or "*may not* / BE") resist all efforts towards unity on the part of those who wield "current math, [and] this morning's telescopes"; the scientists, too, are reduced to "infer[ring]" the most likely conclusion from the circumstantial evidence. Comparing theirs to the theologian's dilemma, "Certainty Before Lunch"'s speaker declares himself "glad" to profess a faith predicated upon metaphysical convictions, and to submit to the glory that "doesn't seem hypothesis" (CP 262) nor "on x or y depend[s] for Your being there". Nevertheless, the two terse and "distinctly apart" phrases of the poem's final line serve ultimately to imply that if such spiritual "[c]ertainty", as Douglas Wilmes claims, "surmounts the necessities of... definitions and measurements",<sup>242</sup> it cannot surmount the lacuna between adjective and fact, "the soul" and "things", (DS 385) words and world. The Divine Presence intuited is not "here", "trans-acting" (CP 258) personally with His human agents, but up "there", as indeterminate as His "collapsars"; man is condemned to negotiate the "flowerless April snow"<sup>243</sup> alone.

Having begun as a "search for an inclusive reconciling style... a vital Christian language"<sup>244</sup> through which the individual might affirm God's Word within the modern world, it seems that Delusions, etc. of John Berryman must conclude both with poet and with protagonist's anguished recognition that some contradictions cannot be reconciled. In "How Do You Do, Dr Berryman, Sir?", the figure saluted thus can only reply, cryptically, "Each lacks something in some direction. I / am not entirely at the mercy of". (CP 262) Each choice (each delusion?) available to him is based in "lack", the uncertainty that fails to fully convince; each course of action, moreover, has the potential to render him

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<sup>242</sup> Wilmes 85.

<sup>243</sup> "Certainty before Lunch"'s setting amid "the flowerless April snow" may also offer a dark suggestion that this speaker's world has undergone a further decline from that of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land; compare the latter poem's opening lines, "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire" (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, 1922, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2000) 2369-83, at 2370).

<sup>244</sup> Pooley 293.



stranger still to his “double nature[d]” (CP 219) self, not “I” “entirely”. This text’s conscious appropriation of Berryman’s Dream Song style ensures that “Henry Pussycat”’s (CP 262) eventual appearance comes as no great shock to the reader. Yet the revelation contained within its nightmarish vision of students “tortured and detained” is striking:

Pickt up pre-dawn & tortured and detained,  
Mr Tan Mam and many other students  
sit tight but vocal in illegal cells  
and as for Henry Pussycat he’d just as soon be dead

(on the Promise of – I know it sounds incredible –  
if can he muster penitence enough –  
he can’t though –  
glory (CP 262)

For shape-shifting Henry, here performing the public voice of the famous poet, the prospect of following these students in their protest, “sit[ting] tight... in illegal cells” for years, is unbearable; better to martyr oneself for them as a suicide and submit to the “glory” that surpasses boundaries, parentheses and reason itself. However, as the final stanza’s dwindling line-lengths and hesitant dashes suggest, such a sacrifice is easy to propose but near impossible to achieve. In order to “muster penitence enough”, Henry is obliged to offer up both his sins and his own desire for “glory” through the posthumous recognition that this self-destructive act would bring: as long as he “can’t”, the poem’s last word will represent less of a “Promise” than an irreconcilable conflict between individual and spiritual authority.

Cast in this light, works such as “How Do You Do, Dr Berryman, Sir?” function to demonstrate that if we are to follow J. M. Linebarger and Robert Phillips in identifying Berryman’s last verses as “Confessional”, the definition must be broadened beyond the mere identification of “embarrassing self-revelation[s]”.<sup>245</sup> Whether observing Beethoven, Dickinson, Henry or himself, the speaker of these works is not, as Phillips insinuates, “striv[ing] for personalization”,<sup>246</sup> but subject to a poetics founded upon the interconnection of private and public matter.<sup>247</sup> Not just Berryman but Everyman, he is engaged in a constant ethical and spiritual interrogation of the universal problems of “theodicy... of loss... and of inspiration”.<sup>248</sup> Even “in a motor hotel in Wallace Stevens’

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<sup>245</sup> Linebarger 129.

<sup>246</sup> Phillips 17.

<sup>247</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod has argued convincingly for the central importance of this “interconnection” within the work of Robert Lowell (Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978) 78); its modern proponents in the field of Berryman studies include Brendan Cooper (Brendan Cooper, *Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry* (Oxford: Lang, 2009) 1-6) and Philip Coleman (Coleman, “*Love & Fame*” 226).

<sup>248</sup> Pooley 291-92.

town”, as “The Facts & Issues” details, he is moved to reflect upon the eschatological debate that spans “ages of our human time”: (CP 262)

– I feel *dubious* on Hell –  
it’s here, all right, but elsewhere, after? Screw that,  
I feel pretty sure that evil simply ends  
*for the doer* (having wiped him out,  
by the way, usually) where good goes on,  
or good *may* drop dead too: I don’t think so:  
I can’t say I have hopes in that department... (CP 263)

It remains crucial to note, though, that whilst Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s penultimate poem indicates the poet’s ongoing preoccupation with these central “[i]ssues”, it also evinces his volume’s enduring capacity for spiritual and textual “reformation”<sup>249</sup> in “response to the impacts of experience”.<sup>250</sup> Read alongside “How Do You Do...” and other preceding texts, it is understandable that the blank verse lines of “The Facts & Issues” can no longer claim their convictions to be certain, settling instead for the terms “*dubious*” and “pretty sure”. Yet where the former poem terminates in the hesitation that prevents affirmative action, this work’s protagonist has undergone a further revelation that prompts a leap of faith at any cost. He believes himself to have discerned “an irruption of the divine into the fallen [world]”,<sup>251</sup> a world that, containing Hell, may conceivably contain Heaven:

It is plain to me  
*Christ* underwent man & treachery & socks  
& lashes, thirst, exhaustion, the bit, for *my* pathetic & disgusting vices,  
to make this filthy fact of particular, long-after,  
far-away, five-foot-ten & moribund  
human being happy. Well, he has!  
I am so happy I could scream!  
It’s *enough!* I can’t BEAR ANY MORE.  
*Let this be it.* I’ve *had* it. I can’t wait. (CP 263)

Perhaps, then, the “tiny little secret hope” Berryman would reveal to Peter Stitt in October 1970 that “I will find myself in some almost impossible life situation and will respond to this with outcries of... rage and love”<sup>252</sup> has been realised through Delusions, etc.’s speaker. This figure full of self-loathing and unable to relinquish his “pathetic & disgusting vices” has acknowledged himself to be the recipient of Christ’s “far-away”, long-before mercy; the admission leaves him giddy with relief, “so happy I could scream!” As he pleads in “The Facts & Issues” italicized final phrases that “*this be it*” – a fixed

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<sup>249</sup> Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” TFOTP 312.

<sup>250</sup> Pascal 147.

<sup>251</sup> Wolfe 20.

<sup>252</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 43.

belief subjected no more to the flux of modern existence – it is impossible, however, to shake the suspicion that the unbearable torment of his ecstasy can signify no state of grace. In fact, for Berryman’s contemporary “scotographer” (CP 226) who, striving to better interpret God’s Word, has fastened upon the third-century theologian Origen’s assertion that “Hell is empty”,<sup>253</sup> (CP 235) such “happ[iness]”, as Roger Pooley expands, might lead to the ultimate heresy in which suicide becomes “a Christian act”:

If you carry on living you increase the amount of sin you commit; if you cannot work effectively any longer (literary judgements aside; if you *feel* you cannot) then how else will sin cease? And if hell is empty, or on this earth, then suicide does not carry the traditional sanction.<sup>254</sup>

Whilst Ezra the scribe had “stood between” his people “restoring the new Law” (CP 262) in the Biblical book of his name, this, we can conclude, is too much to expect from the “*layman*” (CP 225) persona of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s post-conciliar, post-war world. The desire for all to be “altered... for good” (CP 218) and for the perfection both of the life and of the work through subjective faith in God’s agency cannot be reconciled with the free will that in its quest for moral and ontological autonomy “identif[ies] with everybody, even the heresiarchs”. (CP 219) Holding in tension as it does the conflicting attractions of pious submission and public success, it is impossible to describe Delusions, etc. as an art of religious faith. Nevertheless, if the volume’s embattled speaker is unable to embrace the Father’s supreme authority, it seems that he might instead derive succour from the example of King David, given the final word in a poem Berryman had designated “to stand last”<sup>255</sup> following its May 1971 composition:

Aware to the dry throat of the wide hell in the world  
 O trampling empires, and mine one of them,  
 and mine one gross desire against His sight  
 slaughter devising there,  
 some good behind, ambiguous ahead,  
 revolted sons, a pierced son, bound to bear,  
 mid hypocrites amongst idolaters,  
 mocked in abysm by one shallow wife,  
 with the ponder both of priesthood & of State  
 heavy upon me, yea,  
 all the black same I dance my blue head off! (CP 264)

All-too-“[a]ware... of the wide hell in the world” as he attempts to integrate his and others’

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<sup>253</sup> The third-century Christian theologian Origen preached a doctrine of *apocatastasis* (or universal reconciliation), holding that “at the end of time everything and every person will be re-established in Christ”, including Satan (Haffenden, Critical Commentary 101). Berryman’s enthusiasm for the theory is evinced by its frequent paraphrase in his poetry; see also for example Dream Song 56 and Love & Fame’s Fifth Address to the Lord (CP 218).

<sup>254</sup> Pooley 292.

<sup>255</sup> JBPs, Published Poetry, Box 1, File 2.

sinfulness into a model of Church and “State”, the “abysm” of despair beckons for David. But how does he respond? He “dance[s] [his] blue head off!” The single sentence comprising Berryman’s text, which juxtaposes its subject’s mounting crimes against the impossibility of redemption, maintains its own verbal “dance”, its own semantic integrity: not an art of faith but a faith in art’s capacity to survive amidst uncertainty, and even to minister to those other souls lost amid the chaos of human existence.

In the wake of Delusions, etc. of John Berryman’s posthumous 1972 publication, the complex and contradictory nature of its search for a “middle ground between things and the soul” (DS 385) continues to present the reader with difficulties that far exceed those of parsing its lines. Shadowed from the outset by public knowledge of Berryman’s suicide,<sup>256</sup> the volume’s history of reception has served to foreground the poet’s question in one of his last prose pieces of “[w]hether unmediated, un-interpreted experience [of a text] is possible”.<sup>257</sup> The critical response to this final manuscript he would arrange has been distinguished above all by a tendency towards the biographical interpretations that transpose the poet’s final intentions from life to art; since Lowell’s declaration that Delusions, etc. “prepares for [Berryman’s] death”,<sup>258</sup> we have been informed, variously, by the others evaluating its works that “[t]hey are instruments of closure, not process”,<sup>259</sup> and that they “lead... inexorably and inevitably to the point of suicide”.<sup>260</sup> However, whilst Berryman may have stated in a late Paris Review interview, “among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal”,<sup>261</sup> abundant evidence remains to suggest that the “achievement” of these poems does not lie in their depiction of a man’s decline. If “He Resigns” announces “I don’t think I will sing / any more just now”, (CP 249-50) it is important to recall that, with the subsequent texts of the volume, the “sing[ing]” starts again. The “double nature[d]” (CP 219) speaker of Delusions, etc. – a voice that, as Gary Arpin observes, remains distinct from what the poet termed “the personal ‘I’, me with a social security number and a bank account”<sup>262</sup> – might instead be more aptly described with a phrase from Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness: a figure who “constitutes

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<sup>256</sup> Berryman leapt from a Minneapolis bridge on 7 January 1972, without having lived to proof the galleys of Delusions, etc.; his final volume of poetry was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux on 28 April of that year, with Robert Giroux overseeing the collection through final printing.

<sup>257</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Folder “SACRIFICE”.

<sup>258</sup> Robert Lowell, Collected Prose, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Faber, 1987) 116.

<sup>259</sup> Wilmes 81.

<sup>260</sup> Stitt, “John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet” 74.

<sup>261</sup> Berryman, interview with Peter Stitt 44.

<sup>262</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 345. See also Gary Q. Arpin’s statement, “[E]ven in Delusions, [e]tc. one must allow for the essential distinctions between the personality of the poet-in-the-poem and the personality of the poet. They are not completely discontinuous, but neither are they identical, and it is dangerous to argue across the barrier between them” (Arpin 99).

himself as what he is in order not to be it”.<sup>263</sup> Although his sins past and present are unalterable, his contemporary “ordeal” represents not a “closure” but an ongoing process in which belief and text are reformed repeatedly through responsive dialogue both with other afflicted souls and with God as the ultimate judge of man’s endeavours. As this Everyman’s quest for an ethical framework for twentieth-century American existence draws to a close, it seems that the lacuna between faith and uncertainty, salvation and delusion, Word and world, must prove too much for a “poor scotographer” (CP 226) to reconcile. Yet if Delusions, etc. cannot answer its insurmountable questions, nor make certain promises of heavenly resurrection, it concludes in “King David Dances” reaffirmation of the immortality granted by and through art’s transformative potential. This was not the “confident contemporary poetry”<sup>264</sup> Berryman had fifteen years earlier anticipated composing, but a verse commingling the exultant with the prosaic and subject to constant revision as an entity in and of the changing post-war world. Berryman’s last volume provides no means of reconciling the horrors and triumphs “sent into individuals from the universe”,<sup>265</sup> but it offers a compelling account nevertheless of just what it was like to be the American Everyman who suffered, and was there: its own measures, one could say, of terror and of comfort.

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<sup>263</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957) 65. Cit. Pascal 194.

<sup>264</sup> JBPs, Unpublished Prose, Box 1, Folder “Development of Modern American Poetry”.

<sup>265</sup> Berryman, interview with Richard Kostelanetz 346-47.

## AFTERWORD

### A Future for Berryman Studies?

As the centenary of John Berryman's birth approaches, what is the enduring value of his poetry to future generations of readers? In placing new emphasis upon the interdependence of poetic self and public world in Berryman's art, this thesis has sought to dispute his critical reputation as a traumatised solipsist whose work leads "inexorably and inevitably to the point of suicide".<sup>1</sup> Its examination of his oeuvre as a poetry permeable to the flux of mid-century experience<sup>2</sup> instead looks towards a scholarship that resists reductive arrogations of the final intentions of the man to a thirty-five year literary career. If Berryman's contemporary and friend Robert Lowell could describe their mutual acquaintance with personal turmoil and sociopolitical unrest as "the same life, / The generic one / our generation offered",<sup>3</sup> my research demonstrates conclusively that the same cannot be said for the life of Berryman's art. As a monument to what Stephen Matterson terms "survival achieved through artifice and image-making",<sup>4</sup> his poetry manifests a radical attempt to represent responsibly the "common human life"<sup>5</sup> of post-war America in its existential uncertainties, lost traditions and narrative fractures. The work emerges as both the product and the critique of its surroundings, an inherently social construction that renders poetic identity a constant process of reactive exchange with "other" selves negotiating the trials of contemporary existence. Cast in this light, Berryman's suicide, which brought the process to "a full stop", (DS 85) figures not as the culmination but as a betrayal of his efforts.

The "sustained tension... between the traditional and the experimental"<sup>6</sup> that characterises Berryman's verse continues to frustrate critical attempts to cement his position within a linear narrative of American poetic development. Those desiring to eulogise his achievement, however, might reach profitably for William Heyen's

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stitt, "John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet," *Ohio Review* 15 (1974): 66-74, at 74.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 39.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lowell, "For John Berryman," *Day by Day* (New York: Farrar, 1973) 27.

<sup>4</sup> Matterson 91.

<sup>5</sup> John Berryman, "Conversation with Berryman," interview with Richard Kostelanetz, *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 340-47, at 345.

<sup>6</sup> Brendan Cooper, *Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry* (Oxford: Lang, 2009) 195.

declaration, “He wanted to be of *use*”.<sup>7</sup> Following decades of near-neglect, recent years have seen the appearance of several publications asserting new possibilities for Berryman studies. Many of these works this thesis has referred to, including Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan’s volume After thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman and Brendan Cooper’s Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War American Poetry. Others, such as Tom Rogers’ God of Rescue: John Berryman and Christianity and Coleman’s forthcoming book “The Scene of Disorder”: John Berryman and the Public Sphere it has not, or cannot as yet. It is to be hoped that this development will contribute to the fuller understanding of the linguistic, metapoetic and thematic complexities of Berryman’s oeuvre that my research has aimed to promote. As Brendan Cooper suggests, its challenge to established accounts of Berryman’s breakthrough into a “Confessional” style opens the way for comparative considerations of his oeuvre that reach beyond notions of a transitional “middle generation” of American poets. Liberated from these reductive codifications, future studies might situate him fruitfully alongside not just Bishop, Jarrell and Lowell but “avant-garde” and “counter-cultural” contemporaries from Allen Ginsberg to Frank O’Hara.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever direction it takes, the persistence of scholarly interest in Berryman’s work relies upon the continued emergence of readings that are not circumscribed within diagnoses of psychological instability. Through examining Berryman’s construction of the poetic self as social entity, this thesis has striven to foreground his awareness that, as Tennyson said of In Memoriam, “I’ is not always the author speaking for himself, but the voice of the human race thro’ him.”<sup>9</sup> Ventriloquising the dispossessed identities comprising the mid-century American *demos*, his verse evinces a career-long interrogation of the agency and the limitations of the poetic act: its representations are always subject to the dual critique of poetic self and public world. I contend that this recognition of the central function of both self and sociopolitical critique within Berryman’s art will enable subsequent generations of scholars to cease the futile search of his texts for narrative unity. The true “*use*” of his poetry lies in its enduring presence as a discord beautiful and bewildering, and resistant to easy critical resolution: the polyvalent representation of a Promised Land that, as Berryman saw it, had broken all of its promises.

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<sup>7</sup> John Berryman, “John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview,” interview with William Heyen, Ohio Review 15 (1974): 46-65, at 49.

<sup>8</sup> See Cooper, Dark Airs 191-7.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Tennyson, cit. Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson: A Memoir, 1897 (New York: Greenwood, 1969) 304-5. Cit. Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) 11.

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